

Voicing a Mindful Pedagogy: A Teacher-Artist in Action

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Abstract

Historically, educators and philosophers have struggled with defining the role and the value of formal curriculum and its impact on classroom praxis. As the current accountability movement dominates discussions in education, educators are pressured to implement increasingly standardized curricula. The authors of this work consider these tensions, situated first within contrasting theories on teaching and learning. They then explore the concept of *phronesis* through an interpretive biography of one teacher-artist, Frieda, whose praxis also demonstrates the aesthetic and artistic side of the teaching-learning process. This ninety-year-old teacher-artist's experiences with implementing her curriculums suggest that it is always possible to implement one's praxis, despite any potential societal or legislative impediments. Frieda's story shows how a teacher's praxis can incorporate Eisner's artistic approach to curriculum as well as many of Dewey's principles of child-centered pedagogy.

Keywords: Dewey, Phronesis, Progressive education, Aesthetic, Art

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Introduction

Historically, educators and philosophers have struggled with defining the role and the value of formal curriculum and its impact on classroom praxis (McNeil, 1986). From the scripted lessons teachers are forced to administer in under-performing schools, to the lessons that develop spontaneously as the result of discrepant events in one's classroom; the intended curriculum and the curriculum which is enacted often look quite different. It is this tension that many philosophers, as far back as Plato, have grappled with from various perspectives. *What is it that guides the reflective educator in making conscious decisions-in-action for the good of their students? Is it merely the application of accumulated knowledge or learned technique? Or is it something more?*

As researchers, we consider these questions, situated first within contrasting theories on teaching and learning. We then explore the unique concept of *phronesis* as a virtue—contextualized within the life's work of one teacher-artist named Frieda, who taught in various capacities for over sixty years. Through this biographical inquiry we see Frieda's career as an educator illustrate how one's pedagogical, artistic and philosophical principles inform reflective practice.

Contrasting Theories

On one end of the continuum exist procedural approaches to curriculum, which are linear in nature and stem from a logical, positivist philosophy (Van Manen, 1977). First fully articulated by Ralph W. Tyler in the 1940s, his rational-linear theory for curriculum focuses methodology primarily on defining and organizing behavioral objectives and then evaluating behavioral outcomes (Marsh & Willis, 2007; Tyler, 2009). Marsh and Willis (2007) paraphrased Tyler's approach in the following manner, "When objectives are specific and clear, subsequent decisions about what the curriculum should be and how it should be organized become less chaotic and more rational" (p. 75). Rational-linear theory emphasizes the need for a calculated approach to the production of curriculum, relying heavily on one's *episteme* or scientific knowledge (Birmingham, 2004, p. 314). Furthermore, through Tyler's linear, ends-means approach; he argued that the most logical and effective instruction is also *efficient* and leads to measurable outcomes (Marsh & Willis, 2007). Similarities can be drawn between Tyler's notion of effective instruction and Aristotle's description of *techne* or "reason concerned with production" (Birmingham, 2004, p. 88).

On the opposite end of the continuum exist more existential perspectives on curriculum. As described by Magrini (2012), "Existentialism in education offers a corrective and alternative to behaviorism, [and] social efficiency..." (p. 3). It challenges us to overcome our tendency to favor "*analytic-logical-empirical* clusters of knowledge over more intangible forms of knowledge, those associated with the arts, which include the *intuitive-perceptual* model of knowledge" (Magrini, 2012, p. 3). Existentialist educational theory confronts prescribed, authoritarian models for education and asserts that curriculum should "develop and evolve autonomously as the learning unfolds" (Magrini, 2012, p. 4).

Progressivism

In contrast to the polarized perspectives described above, the work of philosopher and educational researcher John Dewey challenges theories on both ends of the continuum. His child-centered, artistic, and context-based, progressive philosophy on teaching and learning counters the strong framing of Tyler's model for curriculum; while still emphasizing the importance of "active, persistent, and careful consideration" (Dewey, 1934, p. 9) of beliefs and forms of knowledge. As a follower and supporter of Dewey, David Hawkins, in his book of compiled essays, *The Informed Vision* (1965/2002), describes the progressive perspective as uniquely different from either end of the continuum and that it therefore establishes a third

point off the axis, described above. According to Hawkins, while progressivism represents aspects of both ends of the continuum, it exists within a context unlike either one. Hawkins' description of progressivism as the third point to a triangle, adds the needed dimension to capture the complexity of teaching as a human, artistic, and moral act.

Dewey, in *Art as Experience* (Dewey, 1934), constructs the meaning of artistic experience. He describes the power and growth that results from the experience of artistic thinking. He argues that the act of thinking has its own aesthetic quality and that without the involvement of process and reflection on action or experience, it is devoid of this aesthetic. The procedures associated with the unaesthetic promotes two extremes, either "humdrum slackness" (Dewey, 1934, p. 40) with no emphasis placed on the interconnectedness or consequence that a single experience has on another, or it promotes "rigid abstinence, coerced submission, and tightness..." (Dewey, 1934, p. 40) on the part of the participant. Dewey considers these to be the *enemies* of aesthetic and the latter to be commonplace in our educational institutions (Dewey, 1934).

He challenges linear-rational thought when he argues that the production of genuine artifacts of creative expression requires more thoughtfulness and intellect than does much of the sterile exercises of most self-professed intellectuals (Dewey, 1934). He defines an *artist* as one who is "not only especially gifted in powers of execution but in unusual sensitivity to the qualities of things. This sensitivity also directs his doings and makings" (Dewey, 1934, p. 49). Developing one's skill in aesthetics and artistic sensibility has application and consequence for so many other areas because they "build up an experience that is coherent in perception" (Dewey, 1934, p. 51); perception being a powerful human phenomenon that can be developed and fine-tuned as an instrument for understanding the complexities of the world around us.

It is no wonder that Dewey's writing challenged the social consciousness of the existing educational institution of this time and later birthed the work of educators and researchers such as Elliot Eisner, David Hawkins, and Nel Noddings. The notion that the individual child has much to bring and to give to the process of learning undergirds all of these individuals' philosophies and each provides an important piece to the overall picture of an effective, child-centered classroom. Within such a progressive classroom, the framing of the curriculum is weakened (Sleeter & Stillman, 2009) and the role of the teacher is shifted from the knowledge giver to the astute facilitator who uses "observation, interpretation, wit, and strategy" (Hawkins, 1965/2002, p. 88) to support and reinforce children's self-directed learning.

Phronesis

This line of thinking relates well to the concept of *phronesis* that was first systematically described by Aristotle. He defined this term as "a state of grasping the truth, involving reason, concerned with action about things that are good or bad for a human being" (T. Irwin, trans., 1999, p. 89). Birmingham (2004), describes *phronesis* as "practical intelligence, practical wisdom, or prudence" (p. 314) that guides one's *praxis*. Similarly, in his book, *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action* (1983), Schön develops a robust model of reflection that moves beyond mere critical thinking and parallels *phronesis*. In this work, he emphasizes *reflection-in-action* and *reflection-on-action*. It is within this reflective practice that the educator critically evaluates instructional goals in the *context* of care for students, families and colleagues (Birmingham, 2004). It is the innately moral, organic, and recursive nature of reflective teaching that is fully articulated in the concept of *phronesis*.

Frieda: A Teacher-Artist

Despite the various restrictions that often limit educators' ability to fully engage in reflective teaching, one can argue that every educator possesses a degree of freedom that extends beyond the boundaries of any particular curricular mindset. In order to illustrate this point, the authors embarked on a biographical inquiry of a ninety-year-old former educator, who we refer to as Frieda and whose teaching career in the eastern United States spans decades. Frieda was a close relative of one of the authors and she frequently shared stories about her teaching career with friends and family members. Therefore, as anticipated, when asked if she would like to share her stories with a wider audience, she immediately accepted; expressing enthusiasm at this opportunity.

The interviews with Frieda consisted of three sessions, two phone interviews and one in-person interview at her home, spread out over approximately six weeks. While the phone interviews were partially transcribed, the face-to-face interview was digitally recorded and partially transcribed. Field notes were taken throughout the three interview sessions. At the conclusion of the write-up of this study, portions of the paper that included Frieda's direct quotations, along with our analysis of her quotations, were read aloud to her, giving her the opportunity to member check the accuracy of the retelling of her stories.

Right up until her recent passing, Frieda enjoyed painting, mixed-media art, and Chinese calligraphy, and had taken a special interest in Japanese origami. Although Frieda never taught art as a subject in public school, the examples that follow demonstrate how her passion for the arts infiltrated all that she did with her students. The excerpts shared from Frieda's life experiences as a teacher-artist illustrate how she interpreted the curriculum in ways that honored both the content she and her students were experiencing together and the students' curiosity and potentiality in the moment, on any given day.

The Normal School

Frieda attended the Plattsburgh Normal School in Plattsburgh, New York (near the US/Canadian border) in the late 1930s where she would begin her journey of becoming a classroom teacher. Frieda recalled her time spent at the normal school with great affection and nostalgia. She remembered being able to "try out" what she was learning in her classes with the students that she taught, since the normal school consisted of a school within a school. Although normal schools can be described as "a laboratory for learning, using model classrooms as a place to practice their new skills" (Cheek, 2009, para. 8), Frieda explained that she enjoyed a certain degree of freedom here. Even though the description of the normal school is rather clinical in nature, Frieda recalled her time here in a positive manner; she was encouraged to experiment with various pedagogical techniques and this very much suited the budding teacher-artist's personality. Even though Frieda was only in her late teens when she began studying at the normal school, she explained how she already saw the value in project-based learning, one of the features of an artistic approach to curriculum. Although she could not recall ever hearing the name John Dewey mentioned in her studies, her teaching and philosophy was very closely aligned with the aesthetic, progressive principles Dewey espoused.

Frieda's formal training was unique to her time in that the normal school had a primary school within in which provided the clinical experience she needed to shape her understandings about human learning and to develop her skills as a teacher. It is notable that in the 1930's not all students had access to such an education as the students did within the normal school. Frieda states, "Students were screened before they entered—they had [to have] a certain level of education. It was a privilege to be selected for this school" (personal communication, July 5, 2009). She recalls this influential time in her life this way:

In the normal school, it wasn't called a college. People from the town gave teachers a chance to work with children... so that we could practice what we were learning. They weren't telling us what to teach. We could try out what worked and what didn't. They had supervisors who would come around--once in awhile. The only thing that they objected to was sitting on the children's desk! Teachers used to sit sideways when teaching. They didn't like moving around the class. The supervisor didn't want you to stop moving. When there was math going on you had to make sure that every child was working. In order for them to do things, I always had a project. (personal communication July 5, 2009)

Frieda's statement illustrated her instructors' criticism of the didactic model for teaching, which relies on strong framing for instruction. She also referenced the freedom she had in her field experiences to try new things with the students within the normal school. She innately was drawn to a context-based, integrated approach to teaching and learning (Dewey, 1915/1902; Sleeter & Stillman, 2009) and understood the importance of active engagement and providing children opportunities to utilize their creativity to construct their own knowledge (Dewey, 1934; Eisner, 2002; Piaget, 1928).

Phronesis and the Enacted Curriculum

Upon graduating from the Plattsburgh Normal School in the late 1930s, Frieda accepted a job in rural Pennsylvania where she would teach students, ages seven to twelve years old, in a one-room country schoolhouse. Frieda recalls how the school bus driver would come to pick her up each morning from the boarding house where she lived, drop her off at work, and then return with the students an hour or so later. Frieda explained that at that time, books were provided for students, but no formal, written curriculum even existed. When asked to describe a typical day in the one-room schoolhouse, Frieda discussed the artistic principles that guided her pedagogy. While still adhering to some aspects of a structured curriculum (Marsh & Willis, 2007), parallels can be drawn between Frieda's description of her student-centered approach to teaching and the ideals of pedagogy put forth by Dewey in *The School and Society* (1969/1902). Here, Dewey borrows from the field of astronomy when he makes the case for a more child-centered pedagogy by stating, "... the child becomes the sun about which the appliances of education revolve; he is the center about which they are organized" (p. 34).

Frieda, the teacher-artist, understood this concept all too well—children were the center of her pedagogical universe. Although she did not possess the education terminology to describe why she made a certain instructional decision, she just knew that it was the right thing to do. This is an illustration of how her phronesis resulted in effective praxis (Schön, 1983). When asked about her methods, she responded this way:

When I was a little girl and I went to school, I said, if I become a teacher, I'm not gonna teach like this...[in an authoritative teacher's voice] 'Turn to page 30 and you read, you read, you read. Next we have arithmetic... I'm going to put subtraction on the board and I'm going to tell children to go up to the board to do it. No, you're not subtracting right! Someone else come up and do it.'... It was just reading, writing and arithmetic all day long. It was no fun, no fun! (personal communication July 5, 2009)

Frieda's passion to make education engaging served as motivation for her to develop as a progressive teacher. She always involved the children in project-based learning and hands-on experiences relevant to their lives and their interests (Ladson-Billings, 1997). It was evident that she truly cared for her students and understood them as learners (Noddings, 1988). Frieda described her rationale for developing and implementing an integrated, context-based curriculum in this way, "We wanted to live life. We didn't want to be stuck in the classroom all day. Do you understand me? We didn't want to *just* read books" (Frieda, personal

communication, July 5, 2009). This statement referred specifically to their frequent field trips to places such as the grocery store to learn arithmetic and measurement.

After many years teaching in rural schools, Frieda married a physician in the Army Medical Corps and they moved to a suburban town in the Northeast. As the impact of desegregation swept the country, Frieda described her students as “mostly black, from middle-class, good families” (Frieda, personal communication, July 5, 2009). It was during this time period, from the late 1960s and into the late 1970s, that Frieda proudly recalls her many performance-based, long-term projects that she implemented with her students.

According to Frieda, it was during this fourth teaching job that she was able to truly solidify her pedagogical techniques and fully realize her potential as a teacher-artist. When asked to describe some of the projects that she carried out with her students, she immediately recalled “the cow project” (Frieda, personal communication, July 9, 2009). It was 1964 and Frieda was teaching sixth grade. The social studies curriculum included the teaching of the state’s tercentenary. Always looking for novel ways to immerse students in the content that they were learning, Frieda decided that the student would first plan and then construct a papier maché cow. They would later name this cow *Emmy Lou* (personal communication, July 9, 2009).

The project took several weeks to complete and all students participated in its construction. Some students were the recorders—they were responsible for writing down the day’s events pertaining to the project, while others took part mostly in the physical construction of this large cow. The final project even caught the attention of the regional newspaper, which featured Frieda’s students with Emmy Lou (see *Figure 1*) (*Newark Evening News*, 1964, p. 23). Frieda recalls this event fondly, sharing that she simply could not have taught about the topic of the tercentenary in another way (personal communication, July 9, 2009). As this account illustrates, Frieda understood the power of individuals learning through shared activity (Feinberg, 2012).



Figure 1. Students with Emmy Lou. Cleveland St. Elementary School. (1964). From “Community News”, 1964, *Newark Evening News*, p.23. Reprinted with permission.

Teaching and art, for Frieda, were reciprocal, intertwined, and inextricable processes; this belief was so deeply ingrained in her being as a teacher that, for Frieda, teaching and art could not exist without the other. These processes, as Frieda described, closely align with

Dewey's views on art as a means for learning. As described by Feinberg (2012), Dewey believed that art should be seen *as* education, "For both, art teaches us how to experience the world of everyday life more fully" (Feinberg, 2012, p. 64). Dewey's (1902) emphasis on aesthetic experiences for learning is evident in this quote:

Now, keeping in mind these fourfold interests—the interest in conversation, or communication, in inquiry, or finding out things; in making things, or construction; and in artistic expression—we may say they are natural resources, the uninvested capital, upon the exercise of which depends the active growth of the child. (p. 48-49)

Clearly, as a teacher-artist, Frieda understood the value of investing in her students' abundant capital, that is, fostering their natural curiosity and tendency to want to participate in their learning, in order to teach content (Jackson, 2009).

Another example of Frieda's progressive pedagogical approach to learning was again featured in a local newspaper, the *Orange Transcript*, in June of 1969. To commemorate George Washington's birthday, Frieda decided to have her sixth-grade students put on a play about the making of the Betsy Ross colonial flag. Frieda emphasized, "I like dramatics; whenever there was something going on, we acted it out" (Frieda, personal communication, August 21, 2009). So, all of the students took part in the sewing of the flag, the creation of the costumes, and the researching of the creation of the colonial flag. Frieda allowed the students to choose the activity that they showed the most interest in working on for this project. She did not assign roles, but instead guided students towards the activity that she thought that they would most enjoy. At the conclusion of the class project, Frieda arranged a class trip to a flag-making factory in order to show her students how actual American flags were made (see *Figure 2*).



Figure 2. Flag Day and patriotism at Cleveland School. Class field trip to flag-making factory. From the *Orange Transcript* (June 1969). Reprinted with permission.

Frieda described other creative assignments that she had students do such as researching, designing and constructing a mosaic of a Roman soldier (see *Figure 3*).



Figure 3. Students with Roman soldier mosaic. (1970). Frieda's personal collection. Reprinted with permission

She said,

When we were studying Roman history...I went to a marble store and bought marble mosaic pieces. I like things that you can handle. Things that you handle you don't forget...paper gets thrown away. I had them draw first and then let them put the pieces in. I wanted them to feel it...(personal communication, July 5, 2009)

This statement is a prime example of her keen sensibility of aesthetics and the power of creative thinking for making meaning (Dewey, 1934). She, as an artist, understood the power of *process* (Hawkins, 1965/2002) as well as the need to encourage students to express him and herself creatively.

Amidst the many examples of project-based learning that Frieda and her students engaged in, the most touching pertains to one that had far-reaching effects for one student in particular. Always looking for novel ways to immerse her students in the learning processes, Frieda applied for and received a technology mini-grant through the State Department of Education that she entitled, *Innovative Teaching Techniques Involving the Class in Planning and Participation in the Learning Process through Motion Picture Sound Production* (State Department of Education Mini-Grant Application, July 1971). She and her students won \$876.73 and were once again featured in the regional newspaper.

When asked what she decided to do with the money, Frieda indicated that she purchased a video camera. She explained how she used to have her students document the learning process by taking still photos of one another as they were completing the projects, but she felt that this did not capture the events in their entirety. Also, the middle school where she was teaching did not have an auditorium, so Frieda would frequently have her students travel from class to class, putting on plays for other students and teachers about whatever they happened to be learning (see *Figure 4*). Having a movie camera allowed her to document these plays. In the proposal, Frieda stated "These films will be of great value as records of school achievement and activities...It is my belief that filmmaking will encourage student involvement and pupil cooperation" (Giventer, 1971, p. 3). She further indicated that textbook learning tended "to stifle discussion of subjects such as science and history" (Giventer, 1971, p. 3); therefore, she felt projects that involved drama and art were a critical augmentation to her curriculum. Frieda later shared that over the years she found that the filmmaking project developed "increased verbal expression in speech and discussion" among her students (personal communication, July 9, 2009).



Figure 4. Charlie and the video camera. Historical reenactment filmed with grant-funded video camera. (1971). Frieda's personal collection. Reprinted with permission.

However, there was another unanticipated outcome directly related to the winning of the video camera. Frieda recalls one of her students in the following description, "Charlie was lazy and didn't want to do anything. So I said to him, 'You're going to be a good boy, you're going to be a photographer and you're going to take care of it'" (personal communication, July 9, 2009). From that point on, Charlie was designated as class videographer and was subsequently put in charge of documenting all class projects (and there were many of them). Frieda describes how Charlie became more cooperative and engaged in school almost the instant he was assigned this position. Videotaping class plays, projects, and other events quickly became Charlie's passion. Frieda recalled that years later, after she had formally retired from teaching, she reconnected with Charlie by coincidence. Despite the more than fifteen years that had passed, he recognized Frieda as she was entering the town library. Dressed in military fatigues, Charlie stopped Frieda and re-introduced himself. Frieda describes the joy and shock that she experienced as this handsome, young, African-American man explained that he was Charlie, her former student. When she asked him if he finished high school and if he was working, he proudly detailed how the class videographer role had changed his life forever; he had become a videographer in the military and he acknowledged her instrumental role in this achievement (personal communication, July 7, 2009).

Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of Frieda's story is that she was implementing John Dewey's child-centered pedagogy and his philosophy of aesthetics, as well as components of Eisner's artistic approach to curriculum, even though she had never heard of either of these two prominent scholars. In fact, when asked if she knew who John Dewey was, Frieda replied, "Wasn't he vice president?" (personal communication, July 5, 2009).

Conclusions, Limitations, and Implications

Sadly, our nation's current trend toward ultra-standardized, test-driven curricula has done very little to move us towards increased critical reflection and creativity among students and educators (Fleener, 2002). Rather, the high-stakes nature of today's accountability movement has pushed us farther away from the aesthetics of teaching and learning, and ever closer to subject matter-oriented approaches guided by linear-rational thought (Robinson, 2011).

While this individual account is limited in scope, with only one voice shared, the depth of Frieda's narrative provides rich context for understanding how societal and philosophical factors shape both teacher practice and educational policy. Despite historic and current forces acting on the educator, often in negative ways, Frieda's unconventional and reflective practice over 21 years of formal teaching, demonstrates an almost anachronistic approach to teach in ways that break away from didactic and sterile methodologies. Her thoughtful accounts of how she enacted curriculum illustrate how one's phronesis shapes praxis.

Findings from the study documented in this interpretive biography, have further implications for policy and practice in education. When developing curricula at all levels, it is vital that educators, K-16, consider the potential in approaching educational endeavors from the third point of Hawkin's (1965/2002) triangle analogy—understanding that we need not be tied to one end or the other of the philosophical continuum. Regardless of the changing contexts in which we find ourselves, educators and policy makers should now strive to establish education as "...the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world" (Freire, 1970, p. 34).

Freida's teaching methodologies illustrate how an educator's free will and practice of reflection-in-action can be carried out despite any real or perceived challenges that exist within the education system or within a society. When an educator's practice is rooted in phronesis, it can potentially have far-reaching implications on what is taught and assessed in schools as one's praxis becomes more student-focused and less driven by standardized curricula. Mindful educators like Frieda, whose phronesis is deeply ingrained and manifested in their teaching practice, use curricula as an inspiration, but are not driven by it. These educators acknowledge and respond not only to a learner's academic needs, but to the student as a whole being.

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