

## Subjective Undercurrents: Humour and the NAEA

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The psychological climate of an NAEA conference is a highly variable one. Given the temporal and spatial restrictions, emotions tend to be intense and feelings concentrated. A good deal of what is felt is predictable - after all, conferences are called conventions. But beneath the surface veneer of officiousness, formality and collegiality, there are subjective undercurrents. The novices experience loneliness, insecurity and feelings of inadequacy being surrounded by "experts" - people whose publications they have read or with whose names they are familiar. The experts may experience anxiety and insecurity as their egos, careers and reputations are exposed to public scrutiny. On the other hand, given the freedom that can come from being "away from home," "in neutral territory," and with like-minded colleagues, inhibitions may be lost and feelings can soar. But they can also plummet. The feelings associated with being on a conference can be like my first experience on a ski hill - a curious mixture of expectation, exaltation, exhilaration . . . and terror.

Conferences are supposed to be serious business. Indeed, the intent is deadly serious - to acquire and share information that will expand and enhance one's professional competence. However, the circumstances under which most conferences occur are a prescription for fun - for dangerous fun. They are loaded with tremendous potential for guilt and sin - several days away from work (often with pay or at the employers expense) - maybe even on an expense account; away from family; in a strange city. Not only are there lectures, presentations, business meetings and study sessions, there are dinners, parties and more parties. One tends to eat too much, drink too much and sleep too little. And all this takes place in a hotel - that rhymes with motel - and everybody knows that in our culture motel is synonymous with illicit sex. At the outset the situation is loaded with tension, contradictions, and incongruity.

The aspect of the phenomenon of conferences that I want to focus on is humour. Humour at the NAEA. It won't take long. Nothing very funny happens at these conferences. Right? It might seem incongruous to speak of humour in relation to a conference of the folks who brought you the slogan "art means work" and who seem obsessed with discipline. But then, humour, like conferences, is based on incongruity. What kind of humour can one expect to find at an NAEA conference? In anticipation of that question, I plunged into last year's conference with my note pad and my

laugh-meter. There was little or no humour of an officially sanctioned nature or in the conference program - except for the odd witty session title or subtitle such as "Dancing with the Dean - When to Lead and When to Follow" or the obvious pun in "Enlarge your Program's Impact with an Opaque Projector." From time to time there were clever asides and even some witty repartee in sessions. Someone asked a Caucus on Social Theory presenter (Herb Perr) why he was standing in the shadows. He replied, "I'm part of a shadow group." There were empathetic titters at the comment that to many students "art is a foreign language." Outraged gasps and knowing guffaws greeted the remark - "Painting is a nineteenth century approach to art." A typically earnest Women's Caucus session on the problems of art being cut back and not being part of elementary teacher preparation was punctuated with the phrase, "bull doo doo." Someone interjected; "Is that a masculine-identified term?"

Most humour at sessions however, was in the form of chuckles, usually as the result of forgotten or upside-down slides or other embarrassing incidents. At a "Super Session" given by Elliot Eisner, things kept going wrong. The projector stopped working, lights went on or off at the wrong times, and external noise caused interruptions. Trying to retain his composure and the audience's attention, he remarked that being interrupted while presenting is "like when the telephone rings when you are having sex." Some laughter at the clever aside. Then he said, with an unintentional double *entendre*, "It's like when the principal comes on the PA." More laughter. Then he said, unintentionally continuing a theme, "Principals can really screw things up." The audience roared and the speaker blushed. Were they laughing with him or at him? One theory of humour attributes it to the subjective satisfaction with oneself over the misfortunes of others; another attributes it to incongruity, the wrong things or actions happening at the wrong time or place. Both factors were probably operating here. It is funny and a relief to see that our heroes have feet of clay and that our icons are fallible.

Speaking of icons, the breaking of icons, iconoclasm, is a source of an important kind of humour - satire. Last conference saw a rare but excellent example of a satirical performance. As part of a panel examining the arguments and implications of Ralph Smith's recent book, *Excellence in Art Education*, Jan Jagodzinski and Elleda Katan presented a dramatic performance in which aestheticians and art critics were portrayed as elitist fascistic dictators. The format allowed many voices and many texts to speak. It was daring, bitter, ironic, mocking humour that rallied some and offended others. It was in poor taste in that it was tough, crude and hurt feelings. It was totally appropriate in that it critically questioned the relevance of the notion of taste for a post-modern aesthetic.

As every good satirist and comedian will tell you, humour is extremely serious business. In fact, the title of one of Steve Martin's record albums tells it all - "Comedy is not Pretty." But humour still can be fun and can serve a useful purpose. The comedian and satirist in our culture play roles and serve functions much like those played and served by the medieval fool or clown. They were not only entertainers, but they were the society's conscience. Similarly in the culture of the North American Plains Indian, the visionary holy person or shaman is the earthly version of the

mythological Coyote trickster. The shaman-trickster is a kind of teacher whose aim is to open his people to new levels of spiritual consciousness. He uses the clowning techniques of humour, surprise and drama. The comic, the satirist, the fool, the shaman all provide us with a kind of mirror, often a fun-house or distorting mirror, to see ourselves in ways that might shock us into recognition. Our characteristics as individuals and as a society constantly need to be put to the humour test. If we cannot laugh at ourselves, we cannot improve. We cannot improve if we cannot learn. As we live this conference over the next few days, we should be looking for our comics, satirists, fools, clowns, shaman and tricksters. They can be valuable teachers. It is no coincidence that one of the traits most often mentioned when defining a good teacher is a sense of humour.

So why all the grimness and solemnness when we talk of conferences, education, and art? Why is the fun or the humour down-played or not mentioned at all? Apparently conferences, art and art education have image problems. I mentioned earlier why conferences may be suspect - how can one be serious when all the ingredients for fun are available? If something is fun how can it be respectable? Art and art education, by their very natures, are perceived by the general public as being frivolous indulgences or as not being relevant to society's interests or values. How can we think of art and art activities in "tight economic times?" Art in school, if it gets inside that bastion at all, is considered by many teachers, administrators and not a few parents as not being respectable or serious enough. Kids in art class have been seen with stains on their hands and smiles on their faces. Art outside of school is irrelevant, not understandable, or too serious, which amount to the same thing. Art in school is too much fun and in schooling terms, that amounts to being irrelevant. Many art educators feel they face a dilemma since one of the gods North American society worships is the work ethic; yet art, at least in elementary school has the reputation for being enjoyable. To make art more acceptable and respectable, some art educators feel that they have to convince the public that art is not fun (much like some groups tell us that sex is not fun). Therefore, in order to construct an image of art and art education that will be more acceptable, the NAEA has launched campaigns to put "art in the mainstream" with slogans and programs like "art is work" and "Discipline-Based Art Education."

At the risk of being branded an art educational grasshopper by the worker ants, let me try to make a case for putting fun back in art education and into conferences. Keep in mind the old maxim, "all work and no play make Jack and Jill dull people" - and I might add, under-educated ones. The aim (pun intended) of the "art is work" and the Discipline Based movements is to emphasize the value of hard work, diligence and discipline in the art making process. If art is work, the argument goes, it can be brought into line with decent American values. The artist is considered a "caring worker," after John Dewey's description of a work of art as "an object elaborated with every loving care of united thought and emotion" (Day, 1982, p. 8). "Real art" says Michael Day, "is not produced by uncaring individuals" (p. 8). I would add that real fun is not produced by uncaring individuals, and that caring individuals are those with "united thought and emotion" who can see both sides of situations and can recognize and come to terms with paradox and irony - in other words, those with a sense of humour.

Admittedly, the case for fun in art is not aided by the realization that except for the occasional work by Duchamp or Magritte and the odd art movement like pop or funk, there is not a great deal of humorous art around. There are, of course, comic books and *Mad Magazine* which represent major visual aesthetic experiences, for many junior high school students and there is a good reason why these images have a place in art class. However, outside of popular culture, fun art is scarce. There is, though, much joyous art which includes most of the paintings of Renior, Matisse, Calder and Chagall, some of Picasso's, and much of Miro's and Klee's. It may have brought joy and happiness to the creator but more importantly, it brings happiness to the viewer. It celebrates life. While the "Art is Workaholics" reluctantly acknowledge that there is often the joy of satisfaction in the creative act and that there may occasionally be an element of play involved, the point is down-played. I would place much greater emphasis on the role of play in art making and art education.

There is a large body of literature on the nature and role of play and its relation to art and to children's learning. The young child, like the artist, makes no distinction between play and work. Both are part of the process of discovery and both are enjoyable parts of the task at hand. And, indeed, both are enjoyable and pleasurable for their own sakes. In this regard, a play experience is very much like an aesthetic experience. Each is engaged in for its own sake - for the intrinsic pleasure and reward the activity brings. It is often acknowledged by psychologists and aestheticians that a spirit of playfulness is an essential element in the creative process. The ability to toy with new or even bizarre or silly ideas or interpretations can often lead to new, fresh and insightful solutions. This delight in representing things in new ways and taking things for what they are not is the essence of imagination and is present both in the aesthetic experience and the play experience. Indeed, these qualities are the essence of humour.

I would also place emphasis on the role of play in conferences. If a conference is regarded as a kind of creative learning experience, a kind of celebration, it would also require humour or fun as a component for success. The real fun, the real joy of creation, considered either from the perspective of the maker, the participant, or the viewer, comes when all the elements - the playful, the serious, the fun and the work are interacting. This process pertains to the play experience, the art experience and the conference experience - all forms of learning. I suggest we regard this conference as a learning experience and judge its success by the degree to which it is permeated by fun, joyfulness, humour and comedy.

## References

- Day, Michael. (1982). Art means work. *Art Education*, 35 (5), 7-9.