

# The Ghost Writer

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**Amy Brook Snider**

## **Introduction**

Amy Brook Snider  
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The core of this article was originally published in an issue on “empowerment” in the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design [NSCAD] Papers in Halifax, Nova Scotia in 1988. Not surprisingly, the article is also related to the theme of this *Journal of Social Theory in Art Education*—“dialogue as empowering pedagogy,” describing as it does how a teacher and her student used the medium of letters as a space for communication and reflection.

Dialogue is a kind of conversation—spoken, written, or thought. But just what kind of conversation leads to empowerment? In the

correspondence that follows, it seems that it was the student's perception of the teacher's authority, experience, and knowledge that led to her personal insights and new connections. The teacher, myself, was a kind of ghostly presence. In my non-ghost persona, I occasionally broke the rules by speaking about some issue before a particular letter was sent. Thus, there were two dialogues acting in counterpoint—the one spoken and the other written. My written responses were not answers but merely assurances that I was still out there—patient, omnipresent, accepting of anything I might receive. It was the student herself who was able to become both speaker and listener in an imagined conversation.

This kind of conversation can be compared to the psychoanalytic dialogue where transference enables the analysand to listen to the workings of her own unconscious. In the same way, the student teaching conference can be the site for increased critical analysis by the student of her own teaching. The mere presence of the college supervisor at the rear of the classroom allows the student to be more conscious of her own teaching behavior. She can watch and listen to herself as if through her supervisor's eyes and ears.

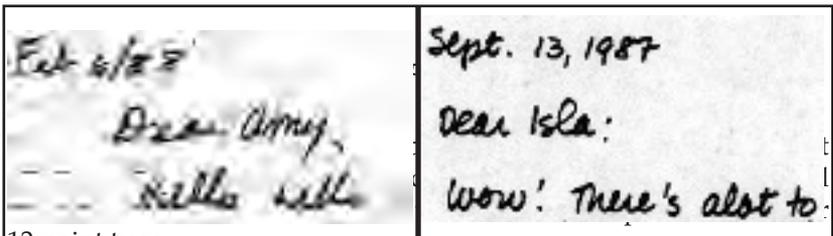
Isla McEachern was part of a group of Canadian and US students enrolled in a pilot art education course developed by Becky Wible and myself (Pratt Institute) and Harold Pearse (Nova Scotia College of Art and Design). Each student did one, three-week internship in New York City and one in Halifax in non-traditional educational settings such as museums, environmental programs, hospitals, and community centers. The program also included weekly seminars, individual conferences and observations, library research, studio visits, and plenty of time for touring and socializing.

The "final project" was a research paper exploring an issue raised during the first internship experience but relevant to the second placement as well. Several meetings with me, the faculty advisor in New York, helped the students identify the specific problem or area of research. When I finally realized that this predetermined structure was not right for Isla, I said, "Let's scratch the idea of a research paper and begin a correspondence on any or all of the following: your work with Tim Rollins and the Kids of Survival (K.O.S.) in the South Bronx, your mural project with the disturbed adolescents at the Nova Scotia Hospital in Dartmouth and your feelings about your past, present, and future in art education." It is clear from her letter of May 23, 1988

(part of this introduction to our correspondence), that Isla felt that I had chosen an appropriate form or vehicle for her “research.”

Isla had graduated from NSCAD and was seeing the world, as we all have seen it during comparable rites of passage, with a kind of stereoscopic vision—remembering and anticipating simultaneously. It is an anxious period which understandably breeds an even greater intolerance or weariness with those familiar school formats—the test, the paper, the “crit.” Then too, she had written that “any value to what I said exists because of that state of mind I was in—off balance, unsure of so much.”

I asked myself what form or structure could serve as a connector between all one has known or learned with all one is about to experience? And I thought, letters are such a form because they are not associated with the judgmental value system of school. Everyone writes letters; they are an intimate form of communication. They can be a vehicle for a student’s exploration and self-clarification rather than the usual *raison d’être* for writing in the schools—a tool for evaluation by the teacher. Their shape, rhythm, and texture are derived from the personality of their writers. (See *Figure 1* for an excerpt of our handwritten letters.)



12 point type.

I was also guided by my observations of Isla in the seminar and

with the other students in the group. I noticed her reluctance to join in some of the discussions or engage in private conversations with me. I wanted to find a way that Isla and I could communicate more freely.

There were probably other factors which led me to correspondence as an empowering form of dialogue; it was the sum total of various reasons and intuitions which informed my conception of just the right structure for this particular student, in this particular situation, in this particular course. My original conception of the form—a paper—had to be modified, and the parameters of the research content had to be expanded to allow room for an account of a personal search for meaning. In retrospect, it seems that I was able to allow Isla a measure of authority in the course, by giving up some of my own authority as a teacher. Ultimately Isla was able to find her own voice, raise her own questions, and feel a sense of her own personal power.

There are implications to be drawn from the correspondence between Isla and me. The idea of a pre-established curriculum, currently popular in the field of art education, may not be the best approach. My experience has shown that the best teaching plan is a sketch which can be adjusted or altered to suit the interests and abilities of a specific group of students. The plan, like the syllabus or curriculum, cannot be a template rigidly superimposed on an anonymous group of individuals. Rather, it has the flexibility of cloth assuming a shape as it is draped on the dressmaker's form.

### **Isla McEachern: Reflecting on the Correspondence Process**

I was enormously relieved I did not have to do another paper. I was sick of papers and their conventions. The idea of corresponding with you made me feel free. There was a lot on my mind; a lot of uncertainty about throwing myself into a completely new arena of art teaching, and a lot of questions fueled by just finishing my teacher training.

After we talked about my ideas for a research paper, you suggested I continue my "stock-taking," the inventory I had begun of what I thought, felt and understood about teaching art. The letters would be cathartic. In reflecting on teaching art and my experience in New York, I wrote

about what concerned me at the time with no consideration of an end product or an imposed format. I just wrote what I had to write. I did not edit myself; I did not pretend. It was completely refreshing to be so straight-forward and to the point. I gladly took the idea of “letters” literally and reveled in being able to write as I would talk, to say what was on my mind as it occurred to me, to express things I didn’t fully comprehend without carefully wording and structuring.

I surprised myself with discoveries of my attitudes because I did not know what was coming next. That is the really incredible thing about writing fluidly and probably why people write journals, diaries, and letters.

Knowing it was a correspondence, a two-way thing, encouraged my openness. My writing was not delivered to be graded; it was to be answered. YOU would respond and, I trusted, reflect my own candidness and seriousness.

## **The Correspondence**

The following are excerpts from Isla’s two letters, and my responses. We have made slight editorial revisions on our own and each other’s letters for the purposes of publication.

July 23, 1987

Dear Amy,

After graduating, the world of teaching art has gotten more complex and larger, not smaller and more focussed. I feel like my last months at college were artificial because of the pressure to come to conclusions and resolutions or to have “answers to the big questions.” The pressure was partially my own for believing in the system, and partially from the system itself. When I was in school I felt as if the time frame for my germinating, blossoming, and maturing as a student and as a person would be the same as the time frame of the program. My growth has been outwardly measured and punctuated by the intervals and terms of the school year.

Here in New York, doing yet another practicum, my struggle hasn't changed. I'm just as unsure about the nature of teaching art as ever; probably, because of new influences from *A Pedagogy for Liberation: Dialogues on Transforming Education* by Ira Shor and Paulo Freire, your colleague Herb Perr from Hunter College, my internship supervisor Tim Rollins, and yourself.

Herb, in his attitude toward teaching, rebels against the "depositing into the bank account" style of education. He says we are all victims of it. Go to the kids for direction and use their culture and environment as our primary teaching resource. Be their student! Relearn and hopefully remake knowledge with students. Fine! But what about what I have to give? I thought I had something to give and that's why I wanted to teach. No, not quite. I like the giving and the exchange. Anyhow, I spent a lot of time at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design under the guidance of my instructors, trying to find out how to give what comes from me and is truly mine. In my experience so far, teachers bring to and pass on much more than just the subject matter they are teaching. Shouldn't this be attended to consciously rather than accidentally?

Herb also talked about empowering students by validating their experience, histories, and culture. The word empower surprised me. I never thought about teaching art in order to give people power. That's probably the notion that really moved me into thinking harder while I've been in New York.

Tim speaks of empowerment too. But unlike Herb, he brings a degree of knowledge and experience to the kids that they would never have had access to ordinarily. In fact, mature artists don't have access to some of these experiences. I'm talking about the gallery openings, the best equipment, the library of art books, the patrons and collections, the critical attention to their work, museum visits, and on and on.

Where does this put me? Well, after being with Tim Rollins and the K.O.S. Workshop for three weeks, I am tangled up in many impressions of what teaching art is about. Tim believes he and the kids work collectively, although, he is, of course, the teacher or the director on the set. Is this possible? He says he has something to give. He certainly brings in ideas he thinks have a relevant connection to the kids. It takes him and the kids a long time (in the sense of school time) to work through the

themes in classic literature to decide if they are relevant. Tim says art is the hub of the wheel and the spokes are all the other subject areas like religion, politics, sociology, economics . . . whatever. It sounds very similar to you, Amy, when you said “art is the connector” or was it “teachers are the connectors”? Probably both. Though the themes that surface in the books Tim uses are large and universal—war, survival, power, racism, entrapment, evil in the guise of goodness, the kids are able to find personal connections because their lives are already scarred from the battle torn experience of living in the Bronx. The finished work or the solutions they reach, reflect sophisticated social and political thought and opinion on those themes, not just superficial feelings and glimmerings of understandings. Tim wants to empower his students by giving them opportunities and channels through which to think, choose, criticize, judge, and change.

Is teaching art teaching curiosity or politics or philosophy, or life skills? Is it teaching confrontation?

The K.O.S. workshop now takes place outside of the school system; it is completely extracurricular. In a large way, art isn’t being taught there, it’s being done. I’ve never seen anything like this before. Art isn’t something way off in the future to the students. It is a studio in production, a work that is sold to internationally famous art collectors and reviewed in art magazines of the same caliber. The kids are using the best professional materials and constructing well-crafted objects. They are artists in an apprenticeship just as I was while I was there. They are learning a kind of discipline which will enable them to apprentice with other artists, get paid and continue to develop in the fashion of 19th century artists, if they choose.

Tim has told high school students, “Don’t wait to be given permission to be an artist. Go and find the empty room in your school; put your work up, get real art materials and start doing it.” Should art classrooms be art studios? What are they now? They are something else. Why did I wait until the end of my college years to work in a studio situation? Was it for the best? Why wasn’t I dealing seriously with art in high school with issues that were serious to me then, as I am now in my studio? What was the subject of art then? I think it was art. It was the form something takes; line, shape, color, tone, composition . . . design, I guess, or how something’s put together. I don’t recall the “something.” There was a project with a matchbox; one on a baby

carriage; there were bottles and cloth and a self-portrait. It didn't matter too much. An important "something" would appear later, on its own, if you were really artistic.

Well, something appears in my painting now but not magically or instantaneously. It is the result of reading, writing, thinking and judging in my world and that's taken me a long time to learn to do. I've been learning to perceive the layers of meaning in what takes place around me for the last three or four years at the college but before that, connections were coincidental. In this regard, I can relate to Tim's and Herb's conviction that the 21st century model of teaching art should be to teach people to perceive/judge how their world works. Tim also says, "Art is the representation of something you know without a doubt." Given that, a charcoal drawing of a coffee mug doesn't get much applause. As Bertoldt Brecht writes in his essay on truth, it's easy to spout truths you can see with the naked eye but perceiving truths that aren't obvious is a different matter and a more noble task.

Here's my "Who am I?" [A phrase I introduced to the group to suggest the anxiety with which novice teachers question their authority in the classroom]: Who am I to talk with kids in a classroom about the state of the world, or sexism or racism or whatever they need to find out about when my training is in art education? An administrator would have a fit if the art teacher was doing the social studies teacher's job or doing anything beyond line, shape, and color. Maybe that's why Tim and K.O.S. are outside the school now. Art couldn't be called art anymore, it would have to be "visual politics" or "seeing self and world" or something to broaden the scope. I don't know. I've heard the term visual literacy come up a lot. It makes art sound like one of the three R's. That's why people use it but I think it only describes reading visual images but not about responding or thinking critically. Here's one, I've got it: "critical vision." Imagine saying I am an art teacher—I teach critical vision?

Isla

July 27, 1987

Dear Isla:

Your letter gives me confidence in my “way” of allowing the students the opportunity to create the course with me. Although I myself had envisioned a more scholarly research approach for the paper, this response of yours seems so right for your needs at the present time. I think I have probably always had an inflated idea of academic or scholarly research but your struggle to find meaning in your work, and your questioning is perhaps, the most basic kind of research there is.

Most of the issues you raise in your letter we discussed together last week. It seems that you are looking for a way to bring yourself into the teaching of art which connects you, the students, and your life worlds. But you can't really do that until you are in the situation (perhaps your current internship at the hospital in Dartmouth). Then you almost sit back and allow it to happen in the same way that I had to allow you to speak to me about your concerns and let what I heard change my original conception. It's as if you are the artist working with pieces of a collage—only you can direct the final assemblage. What Tim has done can only work for Tim. The only way it can be a model is to demonstrate the uniqueness of the process or idea that is K.O.S.

Have to go now. See you soon. Write to me c/o Cynthia Taylor. I love this beginning!

Best, Amy

August 19, 1987

Dear Amy,

As in the first letter I wrote you, I have questions and few resolutions. As you said in your response to my writing, I can't do much more to come to terms with my queries until I'm in a real situation. Theorizing is theorizing, much as I love it, although I could devour any reading on art education and art therapy right now.

I say that because although my degree training has given me

ample opportunity to experiment and wrestle with teaching styles and approaches, it hasn't been completely real. It was as real as is possible. Sunday last, as we sat on Val's sofa, we were talking about how teachers feel when someone is in their classroom watching. The fear of being judged by an experienced teacher sometimes creates a palpable tension. I recall saying that when I was a student teacher and an art student, I was used to being criticized, I didn't feel insecure when my instructor came to visit. In fact, sometimes I felt relieved that someone who knew what I was going through was present. Also, because I was in agreement with my instructor, the visit was an essential part of my growth as a teacher; I welcomed it. Anyhow, I do think I acted differently and with a certain consciousness that I was being watched.

I'm not even sure this is an important thing to write about but all I keep thinking about these days is that I now feel about teaching the same way I felt about getting the chance to be myself in the studio. This I can talk about quite clearly. I always felt watched on the other side of the college (the Studio Department as opposed to the Art Education Department); it took a long time to build up a wall of privacy so I could feel like I was by myself when I was working. My last two turns of studio painting accomplished this and there was a remarkable outward change in my work. It was like coming home; it was a revelation. I did two paintings that felt like I'd known them all my life. I mean, they really felt like old friends I hadn't heard from for years. It was like when you run into someone on the street you haven't seen for a long time and it's stunning because although you have been through so much and changed and the other has been through so much and changed, you still know each other.

I painted those paintings when I felt like no one in the whole world was watching me, not even me. And so, in teaching, that moment is yet to come when I can see myself whom I've always known—and dance.

There is the shadow of where I'm at. Speaking more intellectually, I don't know what is happening to the questions that arose out of Tim's workshop, New York and Herb. They are hanging. At first, when I got back and read what I'd written to you and looked around at where I was, my first response was that I could just forget it. I could push it away and pretend it never happened. No one around here cares about that stuff. It was so vital in New York where I met people who are pushing and testing the boundaries of art teaching as I knew them. My God, it

would be easy to forget it and slip into the familiar modes of teaching here. That's why I said to you my writing was "unwound," Amy. I wondered if I had gone overboard because no one here is asking about teaching politics, criticism, empowerment, and freeing students from the chains of the educational system through art. It's all "art concepts" here; a phrase that comes up in N's Art Process class. I'd always thought it was appropriate but now I wonder if it isn't just the same or just as bad as teaching "design principles." Both phrases objectify teaching art by removing it from real life so that it can be dissected and taught. In other words, things can be learned and content can be stuffed into those things later, when students suddenly and miraculously, have something to say.

I suppose, N's influence was balanced by C's commitment to the idea of releasing a student's subjective experiences in art class. I just don't know what I'm going to do with all this stuff—I want to make a difference, at least I know that.

The studio in a hospital—the arts studio Joan Erikson and Helen Kivnick describe in "The Arts as Healing" is just that—a studio where patients come and work and because they partake in arts activities they benefit from any combination of the seven healing properties of the arts they outlined. I don't see this as very encouraging for my predicament because the person in charge, be they artist, teacher or whatever the title, isn't carrying all that much responsibility. Nobody needs me. No one needs a teacher or therapist in this situation. They just need the space, the materials, and an artist with a lot of patience (ha! ha! pun).

But still, I found more importantly, that the article is missing in its analysis the essential eighth inherent healing property in arts experiences and that is "the meeting place principle," at least, the meeting place for two people or more or a person with herself—the exchange and communication, the togetherness with oneself or with others that artmaking provides. I would say that this is the most unique and specific quality of art. The article concludes emphatically, as if spitting the distasteful thought out, that "we do not see art as a vehicle." . . . Well, I do.

I would really love it if you could give me a reading list you think would help, or just suggestions of people to look up. Of course, I look forward to your response. You can see around corners. I'm hoping you

can see things that are just outside my field of vision and bring them closer.

I take this as a really special opportunity—this correspondence with you—to work out with someone knowledgeable and sympathetic—the issue I would otherwise run over in my head alone. Thanks, and thanks for New York.

Isla

September 13, 1987

Dear Isla:

Wow! There's a lot to respond to. I will read and write (reread actually) so I can keep track. Firstly, about the "reality" of your work as an undergraduate—I wonder if you think of KOS as being more real, and if you do, is that because Tim connects so much with the NYC Art World. Perhaps that was an atypical experience. Or—is it about the artificiality of the practice-teaching situation? Perhaps the artificiality of school in general as preparation for life. Read Paul Goodman (in an anthology, I think) on informal learning.

What you say about doing your painting only for yourself relates to this too! Painting for studio instructors, peers, etc. who use the structures of crits and exhibits is very similar to teaching with someone who is the real teacher. Does this mean the system needs to be reconsidered or would you not have been able to find your own vision as a painter or voice as a teacher if you had not participated in the process? You say that you painted the paintings when you felt like no one in the world was watching—not even you. That reminds me of something Lawrence Durrell wrote in *The Alexandrian Quartets* (I can't remember which book but it might have been "Justine") about being in love. For love to be really authentic, there has to be a forgetting of self/the past but it is only possible with a certain kind of experience and knowing.

As for what you say about Art Education at NSCAD, I can't answer that although I think Harold does in his letter to you. Each program has a different emphasis and it should because that is what gives the curriculum its character. You were drawn to the "political" internship and to the kind of things Herbie was talking about. It would probably be impossible to leave that interest in New York since it lies in yourself. But it may manifest itself in different ways in Halifax—keep your eyes open for the signs—you will find your own branch to explore and or nurture. It certainly is a worthwhile pursuit. Apparently in Germany that is all art education is about. I don't think it would be productive to think about N's teaching and how it falls short of a political attitude. Rather think about what it did do for you now.

Take notes on Freire and you can talk to Herb when he comes up in November. Also, you can write to Tim. I'd be interested in your opinion of Freire although I am not an avid reader of his work. I really think he has borrowed quite a lot (as I told you) but I am in agreement with the basic premise anyway.

For some reason I can't find the "The Arts as Healing" article so I cannot read it again but using your reading of her text as my guide I would say that you are correct in your interpretation of what she says. My own opinion might be summed up in my essay in "The Images of Experience" catalogue which Harold has. I think I feel (just to restate the case here succinctly) that having people engage in the art process is not enough—they need someone to steer the ship but not in a heavy-handed way. Erikson was just using the artmaking process as a substitute for therapy. If people are healed they don't need therapy. She may not really deal with the question you are asking since that's not her concern. I'll look for the article so I can reread it.

It's really a wonderful insight you have about the unique quality of the arts—that is, "the meeting place principle." Duchamp has an essay (very short) in an anthology by Gregory Battcock where he talks about the necessity for an audience to complete the creative process. I think the distaste the authors project at the end of the article is not about the fact that art is a vehicle in art therapy but what it is used as a vehicle for. There is self-reflection and there is self-diagnosis—I prefer the former.

I'm not sure about what sort of books to recommend—perhaps I'd start with the sort that were an inspiration to me. How about *Twenty Teachers* by Ken Macrorie and *Artful Scribbles* by Howard Gardner? Let me know what you're interested in.

Well—it's been stimulating thinking with you—You write well and ask good questions. By the way, did it ever occur to you that you may be attracted to the idea of using art as a vehicle because you don't like to confront certain issues directly though dialogue? Just a thought. I look forward to hearing from you and seeing you in November.

Best, Amy

January, 1999

Dear Amy,

Wow! 10 years after, indeed. What a rush it's been re-reading and revising my memory of where my thinking was back then and where I was emotionally. It is helpful, still, to be asked to re-consider and reflect. Gosh, I can walk right through these letters and check off, "Yes, no, maybe; that's changed, that hasn't . . ." I have a feeling akin to the experience of hauling out old paintings and drawings I've kept and being surprised by all sorts of things in them.

Most of all, I know now what my "angst," my confusion was really about and yes, I've come to terms with it. I was born on an astrological cusp—the exact point when the constellation positions are moved from one house to another. My post-secondary education coincided with the cusp of modernist and post-modernist art education theory. When I re-read my letters, I see I was experiencing the slamming up against each other of polarizing attitudes. It's so clear in the criticism I had of my courses, which generally focussed on art concepts and design principles. I felt they were in direct opposition to the politicized art teaching I experienced in New York and was reading about. I was struggling to view many approaches under one lens and to hold two powerful constellations in position. The clash hadn't been labeled yet. It was a time of an extraordinary meeting of ideas in art education and one filled with debate and conflict. Looking back, there was far too

much emphasis on resolving contradiction. Now it is the order of the day, more or less, to discuss the butting up of modernist/post-modernist approaches in art education theory and to come away with a more relativistic attitude. Anyway, that's what I've done.

So, I was in the first "student art teacher cohort" to be confronted with the modernist/post-modernist ideological collision. Where did that get me? I was completely wrong about how I thought "the system" or administrators would respond to bringing a more critical and issues base to an art program. I was clearly expecting to have to teach art the way I'd been taught in high school in 1978-79, which was solely in the visual literacy-formalist way. In short, I learned art from a modernist standpoint. I didn't know what to do with all that new and incredible stimulus of art programs I saw modeled by Tim or Herb.

It's a happy ending. My system, the one I teach in now, didn't have any expectations for art. Plus, the schools have consistently, over ten years, pushed teachers of all subjects to deal with many more issues in the classroom, to cross-over content and be more holistic practitioners. "More is more," has been my experience. I have developed a program with what I believe are the best attributes of the approaches I've been exposed to. My opinion of what is best, like my program, is not permanent, fixed or exclusive. Every flavor can be tasted in it at one stage or another from learning to mix paint colors to my latest incorporation, that of service-learning. My grade 12 students are taking their art strengths out into the community to serve community needs. I have learned that the "fit" of style, place, theory, philosophy to school, community, kid, teacher, space, and timetable is the most important thing—the best predictor of learner success, if you will. Hand in hand with that goes the fact that success is defined in many, sometimes contradictory ways. Flexibility is the ticket.

The art teaching arena is too big for singularity of purpose. It is a meeting place, a term I used in one of my letters of long ago. Art educators should not waste time pitting ideologies against each other when what is called for in practice is a large repertoire of rationales and methodologies to suit the variety of student and school outcomes. My skill as an art teacher is in choosing the right direction in a given context to achieve a desired goal and accepting flux as the natural state of education in my time.

If this sounds too non-committal for some, I liken the situation to the predicament of 20th century physicists. The great minds have been arguing to prove a “unifying theory of the universe”—a theory in which all the universal forces known (time, light, mass, gravity . . .) will be explained or make sense in an interlocking, mutually supportive way. They haven’t done it.

Finally, the subject of empowering dialogue. It is the quality of the listening, the skill of the listener that makes a conversation empowering. A really good listener allows one to hear oneself, doesn’t judge and acknowledges the conversation. Amy, you have described this well in your introduction. What I want to add is that our professor/student relationship back then, was not as much a motivating factor in keeping me true and honest and focussed on the subject as the fact that I respected and trusted your viewpoint and your commitment to the conversation as a process. Our dialogue was and is a testament to your professional skill and personal integrity (if the two can be separated). You did inspire trust and candidness but not because you were professor. Not all teachers, professors, and psychoanalysts can do that and for the same token, there are individuals of no titled status who can.

University art education professors, teachers anywhere who read this and are thinking about engaging in conversation with their students in order to empower them and encourage insight, consider not your academic authority on whatever subject starts the dialogue, but consider your ability to be led by the “other,” the student. Consider your ability to actively listen and to suspend judgment for empowering dialogue is a personal quest. It’s the quest you are supporting and the quest that is of value.

Thank you for this opportunity.

Isla

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