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**AN INFORMAL CONVERSATION WITH MAXINE GREENE:
THE POWER OF AESTHETIC PARTNERSHIPS**

By Philip Taylor (Australia)

Abstract

An edited text based on Professor Greene's public conversation at the School Reform through the Arts Conference, Creative Arts Team, New York University, June, 1998. Those delegates who attended this forum were interested in the nature of arts partnerships in education and concerned with how recent New York funding initiatives on school reform were promoting effective partnerships between artists and educators. How do professional artists apply their craft in educational settings? What are the issues raised through these applications? These two questions guided the forum's deliberations.

Biography

Dr Maxine Greene is the William F. Russell Professor in the Foundations of Education (Emer.) and Professor of Philosophy and Education at Teachers College, where she still teaches courses in aesthetics, multiculturalism and philosophic inquiry. From 1976, she has served as "philosopher in residence" at the Lincoln Centre Institute for the Arts in Education; and she is a founder of the Centre for Social Imagination at Teachers College. She is past president of the Philosophy of Education Society, the American Education Studies Association and the American Educational Research Association. Her books include *Existential Encounters for Teachers*, *The Public School and the Private Vision*, *Teacher as Stranger*, *Landscapes of Learning*, *The Dialectic of Freedom*, and *Releasing the Imagination*. In 1998, Teachers College Press published *A Light in Dark Times: Maxine Greene and the Unfinished Conversation*, an anthology of Maxine's influence in arts and aesthetics, literature and literacy studies, cultural studies, women's studies, civil rights, and a range of other topics. In the same year, Falmer Press published *The Passionate Mind of Maxine Greene: 'I Am .. Not Yet'* by William Pinar.

THE POWER OF AESTHETIC PARTNERSHIPS

Philip Taylor:

When reflecting on the arts and their applications, you couldn't find a more knowledgeable person than Professor Maxine Greene, Professor Emeritus, Teachers College, Columbia University. Maxine has been instrumental in helping teachers understand how to use the arts, and to understand how the arts can operate more effectively in their curriculum. At Lincoln Center, she was instrumental in setting up a Center for Aesthetic Education over twenty years ago. Most recently a book has come out about Maxine Greene's lifetime achievements entitled, *A Light in Dark Times*. Maxine has been a light in my life in many dark times, and I am delighted to introduce her to you this evening: Maxine Greene.

Maxine Greene:

I am grateful to Philip. I talk out of experience which is not specifically the experience of art education. As I think many of you know, I do philosophy, or I try to do philosophy, and I have done philosophy under the influence of Dewey and a great number of existential thinkers. I think my ideas about art experience and aesthetic experience are in many ways dependent upon greater philosophers than I am.

I am also, as some of you know obsessive about imagination, and about the neglect of imagination in some of the reports that have come in the name of school reform. I think we need to be clear about what reform we are talking about when we talk about the relationship between the arts and school reform. And partly because of that obsession, and partly because of a long interest in social transformation, I have been trying to nurture a center for social imagination at Teachers' College . We have had a few conferences and as Philip knows, and maybe one or two of you others know, I think we have had some of our best experiences with partnership in an intimate way.

I have pretentiously or not, been having a salon at my house for teachers. We have had a variety of people interested in cultural institutions, talking about cultural and artistic life in New York, and the responsibility of the teachers . We have had people talk about the use of imagination in teaching other peoples' children. We have had the kind of conversation, the kind of dialogue, and even the kind of disagreement, that seems to me to be one of the most important aspects of what we call "partnership". Different people, different vantage points, different voices, the voices that come together, and Philip remembers one of these.

I guess both of us think, one of the more exciting examples of people coming together like that, was when one of the artists at Lincoln Center Institute agreed to do a performance of Krapp's Last Tape. We did it in the Little Theater at Lincoln Centre Institute. Later on, the actor and I, and other people like Philip, had a dialogue with fifty or sixty teachers who were there. The dialogue was on Krapp's Last Tape, on Beckett, but just as importantly on autobiography, on memory, on the ambiguities of memory, and on story, on the kinds of things that teachers are becoming interested in certain educational settings.

People were listening to each other's languages, and people I thought were beginning to reflect differently upon some of what they take for granted. So my experience with some form of partnership partly stems from those recent experiences.

My knowledge of partnerships between arts organisations and schools really comes from being at Lincoln Center Institute for about twenty-five years. I'm called, "The philosopher in residence", which means that I am the talking head, and for all of these years I have been trying to talk about imagination and perception, and the always shifting meanings of art. I feel a little obsessive about that too. I don't think art can be defined once and for all, but I think we ought to be very careful when we use the term, art. How do we classify art? How we think about art? Is there such a thing as children's art?

All you need to do is read The New York Times on Sunday or the New Yorker and look at the varying examples of what is today called, "ART". Whether it is Hedwig, or The Beauty Queen or the jazz festival, or Philip Glass now directing his own show, whether its Cirque du Soleil or it's Cymbeline, about which the directors can't even agree. All of these come under the rubric of art, and we need to think about that and not narrow it to marching bands!

Most of you know what we have been doing at the Lincoln Center Institute where artists work with teachers and teachers are awakened to the languages of art, and to the opening and this is what's so important to me of new perspectives and new possibilities and experience. I guess I have always

thought of the Lincoln Center Institute as involved with the awakening of teachers and the sort of stirring of teachers to move beyond the banal, often repetitive habit-ridden into which many of them have been forced to live.

I have hopes always that if teachers are awakened, if teachers become more imaginative, if teachers face the darkness and the ambiguities of their own lives, something about what they have become may become contagious when they are in the classroom, when they are working with artists, or when they are working with performances.

I suppose I know about what you would call "professional development", or teacher education, and I am most concerned with what happens with teachers, although obviously I know the test finally is with what happens with children in the classroom. The notion of partnership has always been sort of twofold, with direct encounters between teachers and professional artists.

Again, some of you know we have workshops for three weeks in the summer at Lincoln Centre. There, professional dancers, drama directors, actors, actresses, musicians, painters, and so on work with teachers, not with the idea of making dancers out of teachers, or painters out of teachers, but with the idea of familiarising them with the diverse languages of art. I always tell people this was my experience. I started loving dance by loving ballet, and I went to ballet for the story, waiting for Giselle to go mad, and waiting for the swan to die. It was only with some experience, that in moving with the Martha Graham Dance, say, or even a Balanchine dancer, that I became first of all aware of my own body in ways I had never been aware, and then became terribly interested in the neglect of the body in the ordinary educator.

[Missing words...] and more interested in the relationship between an acquaintance with the medium and the ability to encounter live works of arts. I think I got the idea as much from Dewey as from Louis Arnaud Reid who wrote a good deal about aesthetic education.

People were very afraid of that term. They don't like it. They never name their institutes using that dirty word, "aesthetic". And I tried very hard to say aesthetic education is simply any effort to make it a little more possible for people to attend discriminatorily, authentically with a variety of works of art. And it takes a lot of understanding.

At Lincoln Centre we have always tried to have performances more than once, because I always wanted to find out, and I think it is so, the more you know, the more you see, the more you hear, and it is sometimes phenomenal, when people begin to see and hear, after they have workshops. The most obvious example to me was some years ago we had a musical piece by George Crumb called Ancient Voices of Children which was a very contemporary piece. There was soprano singing and a piano, and a kind of bolero beat, and a little boy reciting a Lorca poem in Spanish. Well after it, many of the teachers went, "My God, is that art?" and I told them they were wearing spiritual plastic curlers. For the first time they didn't know what to make of it. You don't sing into a piano, the piano accompanies you.

But then they had the workshops, and the musicians who conducted the workshops along with dancers and other people worked in various ways. Some of them studied the score, which is full of notations or quotations from Mahler, from Bach, you know a circular score. The next time they heard it, it was almost a miracle to me, they were so taken over that I remember they were running to the music store to buy the score.

There was a wonderful example of the kind of awakesness that can be produced through a kind of integrated movement of note, of feeling, of exploring, of imagining, of moving beyond where people are. That to me is the most significant part of these partnerships. You know, the spaces they can open through this collaborative work between the artist and teacher.

I think, and you may argue this point, artists and teachers are very different. Their causes are different. The job of the artist, as Conrad said, and so many others, is to make us see, to make us feel, to make us understand. To make us penetrate something that we could not conceivably imagine without, say, the Ninth Symphony, without King Lear, without The Colour Purple. There was a marvellous article the other day in The New York Times talking about what art does is bring you in touch with something that otherwise would be forever submerged. And to me, that is the job of the arts. The job of the teacher is to release other people to learn to learn. To use whatever enriches her or his life in order to move them to reach out. To move them to go beyond where they are.. To move them as, Dewey said, "to become different".

And I think, you know, those differences should be clear as we work through our partnerships. I don't want teachers to become artists and I don't want artists to become public school teachers. I want the distinctiveness. I want the distinctiveness to remain.

Another thing I keep wanting to remind us of, remind myself of, is the question of standards and how talk about standards and the need for standards and the need to identify the standards has troubled so many people. One of the wonderful things about whatever partnership can mean, or collaboration can mean, at least for me and people who go to Lincoln Centre, is confronting people or coming to know people who always seem to say, "I am always trying to get it". "I am always trying to go beyond where I am". "I never quite make it." There was an interview with the young woman who first starred in *How I Learned to Drive* and she talked about, "I never reach it." That to me is what we want to nurture, the feeling of trying to in some way confine the norm and reach toward it. That's standards to me, a kind of internalised desire to be as good as one can possibly be.

I remember a Masterclass with a distinguished pianist, and there was a little boy, picture the little boy watching this pianist play, and in his face was, "What do you have to do to be like this"? It takes work, it takes discipline and nobody it seems to me, communicates that as well as the artist. The idea of standards to me has to do with overcoming, "Who cares?", "who gives a damn?" Hannah Arendt used to talk about excellence, how appearing before others as the best I can possibly be. That's how we communicate what standards are, as far as I am concerned.

Another thing that I guess bothers me and bothers many of you is the lurking question of assessment. And I know about portfolios, and I know about exhibits, and I am all for them But I am not for multiple choice tests, but I still keep reminding myself, and still keep reminding the teachers I have been teaching, that in the long run you really can't measure what happens. You know, I look at a philosophy class at the end, and I look at the tests I give them, and you never know... you never know. You know, some day in the back of some classroom somewhere somebody will say "You know she was right". Maybe it is a kind of tragic dimension of teaching, but you never know for sure if you have taught kids. We have to realise that if we are trying to release children to become what they are not yet, to be free, to explore, to discover, by releasing children to move into the unknown, and we can't tell them where to go we just have to rejoice that they are alive. And the more wide awake we are, the more wideawakeness we can develop through the partnership, the better chance that we have that children will wake up and rebel against dullness and boredom and repetitiveness and the mechanical life, and what Dewey called, "the opposite." I always like this, and I always say it, "The opposite of the aesthetic is the anaesthetic!"

Laughter

I like to spend my life fighting the anaesthetic. You know, the numbness, the dullness, the refusal to respond, the couch potato syndrome, you know. But that is what ought to come out of this. Of course, I am interested in children learning to work with media. I am very interested in the arts returning to the schools. The big reason is so that children can see more, and feel more, and hear more, and reach further and maybe become something more than what they call human resources for other people to mould. I had better shut up now.

Applause.

Philip:

Well, thank you very much, Maxine. There is so much there for us to think about, particularly in terms of the responsibility on artist educators. To what extent do they see themselves as people who are releasing the imagination, or as you put it creating experiences which help teachers to face the darkness and the ambiguities of their own lives? I wonder whether artist educators see that as their primary mission. Often, it seems as though teachers view themselves as delivering a kind of packaged program, and they really don't get to the heart of that dark side. I don't know. Maybe we can talk about that later.