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Considering the Past and Future of Art Education with Lorrie Blair

Amy Atkinson

This is an excerpt from the podcast from Creativ-tea, a podcast I am in the ever-evolving process of developing. Over the years of studying and teaching Visual Arts, I have observed that artist-teachers have the most fascinating stories. Through years of trial and error and creative explorations, artist-teachers have balanced their roles as artists, teachers and researchers and developed connections and strategies to inspire themselves and their students. Some of the best conversations that have impacted my life and inspired my art have happened nonchalantly, over a hot cup of tea. To me, there is nothing as soothing and enjoyable as a comfortable setting, with something delicious and a hot cup of tea to enable one to relax and sink into unpacking the ways of the world. I am partial to chocolate chip cookies and jasmine tea. What would you choose?

"The act of 'teaism' is "essentially a worship of the Imperfect, as it is a tender attempt to accomplish something possible in this impossible thing we know as life."

(Kakuzo Okakura, 1906)

Dr. Lorrie Blair is a Professor of Art Education at Concordia University in Montreal. Her teaching and research interests include artistic research and ethics, qualitative research methodologies, art teacher identity, and accessible photography as method and pedagogy. She has been a professor at Concordia supporting burgeoning Art Educators for the past thirty years. She is the author of 'Writing a Graduate Thesis or Dissertation', which I recommend everyone reads! Dr. Blair is active as a supervisor of M.A. and Ph.D. thesis students, many of whom are recognized for their excellence in Art Education research by CSEA/SCEA's annual academic awards. Dr. Blair was a recent recipient of the Concordia University Award for Graduate Mentorship. Dr. Blair is currently teaching a course entitled Speculative Pedagogies: Imagining Art Education Futures, which is what we sat down to talk about.

BLAIR

I brought a special tea, 'Constant Comment'. This was the tea we drank when I was an undergraduate student in photography. I don't know if cafes existed, but if they did, we couldn't afford them because all our money went into photography. Instead, we went to each other's houses, apartments, or dorms and we would serve each other tea. And my specialty was 'constant comment'. I would serve 'Constant Comment' with oranges because I was very taken with Leonard Cohen's song 'Suzanne'. We all wanted to be Suzanne who feeds you 'tea and oranges that come all the way from China'. So when I see this tea and when I'm sitting here in Montreal, it's such a moment for me.

ATKINSON

Where did you begin your art studies?

BLAIR

I went to Ohio University, which had a good photography department. What I remember most was that the dark rooms had water coming from pipes from the ceiling. Water ran constantly even when no one was in the dark room..

ATKINSON

I went to Sheridan College and in our photography dark room, they had a big trough where the water would run. We had little trays where we could put the chemicals in to create the prints.

BLAIR

And everything went down the drain. The waste! We even put all our chemistry from printmaking down the drain. This was in the 1970s, so things have changed, thankfully.

ATKINSON

At that time, photography was a specialized knowledge; to learn all about the dark room and the development process was really technical and really specific. If you bring that into today, where we are all walking around with our own little dark rooms on our mobile phones, we don't have to do anything like that whole process. It must be really interesting to watch the evolution of that.

BLAIR

I don't think it's the same art. To be honest, I wouldn't do photography if I had to go back in the dark room. I didn't enjoy it. I remember if your chemicals were off by a fourth of a degree, it could ruin the whole print. Some people would print all night just to get one usable print.

ATKINSON

I think of that all the time. When I take my students on field trips, usually one of their assignments is to take 200 photographs. Could you imagine back in the day when we had cameras and you had one roll of film, that was either 12 or 24 exposures, and that would have to last you for a whole trip. Or sometimes you got a double roll of 36 exposures, and that would last you like a month or two months. When you shot photos, you had to be so focused, 'this is my one shot here'. Now we just take photos all the time.

BLAIR

As I think about it, going back to how we created photography, or even how we create art now, it is based on the idea of abundance. We had to shoot three rolls of film. In 100 shots you are to get one lucky one. So it's about the abundance. So, you went through all that trouble to make a contact sheet, then your teaching assistant, usually not even your instructor would look at it, find one that they thought was OK, circle it and say "Go print that one".

ATKINSON

Abundance is a good word. Think of all the shots that we tried to print that didn't work or weren't successfully, or even the ones that were successful that didn't go anywhere. That happens all the time in art classrooms. A lot of students don't take their artworks home at the end of the school year. As art teachers, it feels like we are always cleaning out shelves. Just the amount of waste that we're throwing out from students' work because no one wants to take it home.

BLAIR

High school was notorious for this. Even students who would spend a semester working on an image, would leave it behind. It would break your heart, and so you couldn't throw it away. I was a high school art teacher for ten years. It was such a rewarding journey. You get to see student develop and change from that inquisitive grade nine student to that mature confident grade twelve student. But at the end, I had this pile of work that the students had left behind, that I had collected for years.

ATKINSON

I literally have a storage unit of artwork I have collected through the years that is students' work. And I can't bring myself to throw it out. When I look at it, it reminds me of a student or a process and then I think, oh, that was a good idea. Oh, that student did that so well.

BLAIR

So this is something that I think a lot about lately since I am nearing my retirement. What is going to happen to all this stuff? And how shall we change as artists?

ATKINSON

So you must have seen such an evolution in art education from the 1970s until now.

BLAIR

No. And I think I should have.

In 1979 when I started, I taught the color wheel. And we're still teaching color wheels. I remember one of my student teachers said one of her students asked, "Miss, why are we doing this? You can go to the hardware store, and you can get any color you want".

And why are we teaching what we teach? For what reason? And so, no, it hasn't changed as much as I think it should change.

I think we need to radically think differently about what we do.

If you think about the students that are in undergrad studies today, what will they need 40 years from now? Or 20 years?

How do you make art for a changing world?

And if we think even further back to a first grade student, the student who's starting first grade this year. We are teaching them for today. We talk about the future, but can we imagine a future? We are sort of still solving today's problems

ATKINSON

I see what you are saying. It's like we are looking from our lens of today, thinking it's going to be the same in the future. So how are we going to solve that?

BLAIR

Well, I'm currently teaching a class on Futures Pedagogy. I start with a clip of The Jetsons. The Jetsons was a TV show in 1962, but it was projected to be in 2022. They were an ideal family. Mom stayed home and had a robot maid. It was the vision the sixties had of 2022. But it was still projecting the mentality, the consciousness and social expectations of the sixties. Mom still stayed at home and had a robot maid.

ATKINSON

So, are we projecting our present into the future and thinking, okay, maybe we'll just have more technology, but it will still be the same? That's really fascinating! I wonder if we were able to ask the Jetsons, "Is this (our now) what you envisioned?" I wonder if they would think that. I was watching a youtube video discussing car technology. And although aesthetically there are a few upgrades, the current technology we are using is 100 years old. So, how do we do that? How can we visualize a future without thinking it will be similar to our time with perhaps smaller and shinier technological toys.

BLAIR

Barack Obama said you can make your own future. So, I ask, are we giving the first grader, the high schooler, the undergraduate student, the doctoral student, are we giving them the skills to imagine their own future?

ATKINSON

So instead of teaching pedantically; this is how you do a drawing or this is how you do a painting, are you proposing to teach students how to develop? How to learn how to create? Are you proposing we teach students the idea of creation, regardless of what the end result is?

BLAIR

I think teaching them how to learn might be the key, because things will change so quickly. When I was an undergraduate, I had a class on technology, and we learned to use Mimeograph machines and overhead projectors. We learned to thread projectors for film. But who even knows what a Mimeograph machine is today? How do we teach students to be flexible, to be curious, to want to know how to change, and to be able to do more, and how to create new tools?

ATKINSON

I think that's so important, engaging the student within that creative process, within the development, and to get them to understand it's not so much the end result, the painting or the artwork or the tool or the Mimeograph machine that you're learning. It's more understanding that it's going to be a process of learning. You're going to get an idea, you're going to develop it, you're going to experiment with it, you're going to do some testing and learn that process. So then the student can take that way of learning that they know works for them, and then they can learn something else, and then they can develop another tool.

I think in art education, to take that a step further, if we can teach the students not only to do that creative process and become comfortable in it, also become comfortable in the uncertainty, those moments when we aren't sure if what we are thinking or doing will actually materialize into our goals. I think that would be actually going on a tangent, but there is a lot of uncertainty and anxiety in education these days, and I think it is because there's a lot of emphasis on those final products. And so if we could take a step back and put more emphasis on the learning and visualizing, and on the process of learning; you've done this and you've learned this and you've experimented with this, as opposed to so much judgment on the final piece.

BLAIR

But coming back to something that you said, I think in addition to learning about the tools, imagine if art education could be part of the process of developing new tools. Rethinking how tools are used. Margaret Masters rethought pencils and drawing, how we draw. Do we need to know how to draw? These are questions. No wonder it's uncertain.

ATKINSON

It is so uncertain. But I think the uncertainty creates excitement. It's nice not to know the answers. It's nice to know, to explore, and to be safe in that process of experimentation and rethinking things. And what if we do it this way? And what if we try that way?

BLAIR

I think where I'm conflicted is on materials. What do we do with materiality? With photography, I can take a photo. I can run it through an app that makes a painting better than I can paint. Do I need to know how to paint? So, a question came up from a student compiling a portfolio for application to our program. They asked 'Can I put digital paintings in my portfolio to get into university?' There is no actual painting. No object exists. It's just a digital image stored with binary code. It's interesting to think that portfolios students will submit eventually may not exist in any form other than digital.

ATKINSON

I think that's interesting because I've done some work with students developing their portfolios, and I think this question is being discussed. I think that portfolio committees are starting to take that into consideration. And a lot of portfolios are now asking for evidence of process. They don't want to just

see the final work. They want to know as a student, what are you learning? What does your learning look like? How engaged are you with this idea? What is your early development? What is your work in process? So you have to include all of these examples of you creating your artwork. Not just that final work, because that final work. I mean, if a student takes a photo and then puts it into an app and that's it and there's no meaning and there's no background thought, it seems a little bit easy. And then you've got other students that are doing more traditional, time-consuming ways where they're sketching and then drawing.

We have those conversations all the time in the classroom with projectors because this is that debate between skill versus creativity. Some teachers feel that if the student wants to make a painting that's super large, they should draw it themselves and then paint it. And then there are other teachers who say, okay, well, they could just sketch it, take a photo, or use an app to combine photographs or digitally draw it, then project it and then paint it.

BLAIR

And what I am saying is why are we painting?

So if we are focused on high school, we are still asking for the finished products in a portfolio. It would be interesting if we switched that up and asked for the process. That would give students more options, since I see so many portfolios, and most of them show more of their teachers' assignments.

ATKINSON

That's so interesting. I think it's so difficult to evaluate a student's work on their end result. First of all, is it their idea? Is it their teacher's idea? Did they do it? Did someone sit and help them with it? There's so many variables that we're not aware of. So that's why I think making that process of creation visible and sharing, that just gives so much weight to what is being made or not made.

BLAIR

Well, we talk about the process and that's where we need to put the focus and the grades and the attention. I noticed a lot during COVID; a high school teacher would post an image and say, "my student turned this in, it looks awfully good. Is it my student's work?" Within five minutes, there would be six comments showing where the image came from. With online teaching, we only saw finished products. It was very unsatisfactory for me.

ATKINSON

And as a teacher, we also want to engage in that process. We are in education as a teacher, because we love what we do. There's a calling to do it. There is something innate that you really enjoy about teaching art. It's that process that is what teachers really gravitate towards, showing the students and then watching the student's develop, like you said earlier, being in the classroom and watching them develop from grade nine to grade twelve and seeing your ideas interpreted through their mind and their creative work. It's like an extended creative conversation.

BLAIR

Lately, especially during COVID, I found that students want to work on their own and bring the work in. And that's not for me. What I want to do, I want to engage with the students and the work while it's happening. And the conversations between students with students. When people reflect on what's happened during the past couple of years, they will remember not having someone to talk to, to turn to and say, oh, wow, you're doing that. That's exciting.

I recently taught a course in photography. I gave an assignment on digital photography. And I came into class, and it was absolute silence. Every student was on their cell phone editing their images. But they could have been alone. And as I walked around, I would have to say, "can I see what you're doing?" Which felt very invasive, like I was interrupting. It was absolute silence. That's what made me want to teach a course on craft. So that's why I say I'm conflicted with what we do with materials, what we leave behind, what we change. I should know the answers by now. I've been doing this long enough. I should have answers.

ATKINSON

But doesn't it just lead you to more questions?

BLAIR

It does. It leads me to question about environmental issues, social issues, with all of the things we make? What should we be doing as art teachers? How can we be more relevant than color wheels?

ATKINSON

Wow, that's a really profound question. It's true. But I am also in defense of color wheels. I actually really enjoy teaching color wheels. I like to challenge the students, whether we use pencil crayons or pastels, they can only choose 1 yellow, 1 blue and 1 red hue. And then they have to mix the depth and strength of the hues to create the actual colours they want on their wheel. And it's really interesting when you do it with the younger students, because even though all the colors are available, there's still a few students in each class that never figured out that colors make other colors. They just think those are all the colors that are available. So getting them to combine the colors, it's that idea of creation. It's always fun to be like, oh, I can take this and this and make this.

BLAIR

I think that's where the materials come in too. And when you can teach somebody that drawing isn't just talent. People come and say, well, "you're talented". No, it's because you figured it out. So if you can give somebody the skills to draw and then they draw – there is that magic.

ATKINSON

I think that's another thing that you just touched on right now, learning the skills. The idea that art is a talent and only some people possess it, I don't agree with. And I think that everybody has this creative something within them and how it comes out is unique to each individual. And so you're going to draw like this, and this person is going to do this way; everybody's going to do it differently, but that doesn't mean that one is better than the other.

BLAIR

I think the two things that hurt us as art teachers are "it's talent, therefore why are you teaching it?"

Because it's for those who already know how. And the second one is "there are no right answers, so anything goes". If anything goes, anybody can teach it. When I was student teaching, my co-operating teacher was a shop teacher. He had a couple of industrial accidents and wasn't allowed to use machinery anymore. So what do you do with him? Let him teach art; "Because anybody can do it".

ATKINSON

I think teaching art is very specialized, and it's not just creative learning. It's kind of personable learning. You have to reach out to each individual student and find their starting spot and find out what makes them comfortable. And so there's a lot of that individual attention paid to each student.

BLAIR

I've been teaching for 42 years and not a lot has changed in our field, but the world has changed dramatically.

It's time we start thinking about the future, about futures. Taking Barack Obama's idea, the future is not just going to happen to you. You can make it, you can influence it, you can imagine it. You have some control. Coming out of the pandemic, we feel...I feel, I'll speak for myself. There was a sense that the world is very unpredictable, it's very scary. Bring back some promise, particularly for children. Art can do that because we can visualize. If we can be leaders and stop feeling like we're in the margins as art educators, that would be great. We have to change our mindset to do that.

To listen to the complete podcast, you can find Creativ-tea on Spotify or <https://spotifyanchor-web.app.link/e/fSmbaURPjtb>

To learn more about Dr. Lorrie Blair and her research, visit <https://www.concordia.ca/faculty/lorrie-blair.html>

Or you can find her on Instagram @lorrie.blair

Dr. Blair told us her art practice is a daily practice that "I think teachers should do. Because one of the things from teaching for many years I know is that when you become an art teacher, the last thing you have time for is your art. So, years ago, what some students and I did, we said we would do daily practice, even if it's just a photo on Instagram. So I try to do that. I may not get to it every day, but most days, just make something."

Dr. Blair presented these photographs alongside ghostly stories of dead water, based on Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan, and Nils Bubandt's (2017) *Arts of Living on a Damaged planet: Ghosts Monsters of the Anthropocene*. Dr. Blair thought it was fitting to share them with us, as they relate back to the start of our conversation about the use (and and waste) of water in the darkroom.



Figure 1. *Sunday Creek, Ohio*. Digital photograph. 2023.



Figure 2. *Appalachian Apocalypse*. Mixed media, 2022.