



Talking about art with young people: Conversational strategies for aesthetic learning in early childhood settings

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, curriculum constructs for primary and secondary schools arts learning have complemented conventional art making practices with skills for appreciating, contextualizing and talking about art. This paper argues the value of conversational learning strategies for enhancing art engagements with younger children. It discusses two related examples to demonstrate accessible pedagogies for facilitating rich, value laden, transferable and lasting learning. It also demonstrates ways art appreciation can develop in mutually informing partnership with art making. It then relates these examples to broader paradigms for learning about art in early childhood settings.

Arts talk as value learning

Learning in the arts is high value learning. It has the potential to enrich children's broader educational experiences. In his 2008 Lowenfeld Lecture, Elliot Eisner celebrated the ways art engagements could enhance the holistic experience of learning, promote attention to nuance and subtlety, facilitate the dimensions of surprise, invention, and insight, enhance the measured and qualitative experience of things, promote extension and diversity of knowing, value dimensions of sensibility and intuition, and recognize the necessary exercise of imagination as one of the most important of human aptitudes (Eisner, 2008).

Early childhood teachers have long been aware of the capacity of practical experiences in visual art media for enhancing these kinds of value learning. Learning about art, through aesthetic engagements and conversations about artworks has the potential for enriching learning in comprehensive ways (Herz, 2010). Accessible aesthetic engagements inform sophisticated thinking, in observing, selecting, discriminating, visualizing, hypothesizing, validating, adapting, refining and intuiting, reviewing, criticizing, reflecting, comparing, analyzing, synthesizing, contextualizing, assessing and appraising art experiences (Wilks, 2003). These engagements can enrich children's personal responses

and expand transcultural understandings of their worlds (Smith, 2010). Effective, transferable strategies for engaging knowing about art learning with younger children (Annals, Cunnane & Cunnane, 2009; Eckhoff, 2008; Herz, 2010), and extending art conversations to inform childrens' art practice in these ways are readily accessible.

Looking at art can be an absorbing, internalized, a-social experience. This is often as things should be; but it is not how they have to be, and there are more sociable ways to enjoy the experiences of artworks. Children are less inhibited than many adults in their engagements with artworks. They may be surprised, entertained, puzzled or challenged by what they see. They are also likely to express their various responses to the works (and the gallery, and its furniture, or the security staff, who are as much a part of the experience as the pictures on the wall) in exclamations, comments or conversations. Those conversations are a sensible strategy for learning about art. Conversational modes enhance shared understanding and learning, and embrace knowing contributions of children and teachers. Teachers can acknowledge children's responses to artworks, engaging them in conversations, building on them, provoking them, guiding them, or informing them, but most importantly encouraging, developing and using young peoples' own powers of observation, analysis, or explanation to enrich their engagements with art.

The immediate outcome of talking about art is an enrichment of children's appreciation of the artworks, their teachers and their friends. But regular engagements with art, in a range of environments including the center or classroom, nurtured through carefully developed conversations that encourage young participants to interact fully in the exchange, can be very empowering. They can equip young people with the skills or resources necessary to enrich and explain their art experiences. They can enhance and extend their language and communication skills, deepen their understandings of the world, and enhance their social skills. Engaging with art can become not just a self-absorptive experience (which remains a valuable one), but a social, shared experience, where knowledge is exchanged, and differences valued and explained.

These holistic, sharing, co-constructive learning models are endorsed within New Zealand curriculum guidelines in both The Early Childhood Curriculum Te Whāriki (Ministry, 1996) and The New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry, 2007). Within the Arts content of the latter document, talking about art is promoted explicitly in the achievement objectives for the strands of 'Communication and Interpreting in the Arts' and 'Understanding the Arts in Context'. These two strands aim to equip students with the currency, skills or procedures needed to engage with the art experiences that they may encounter in any part of their lives in critically competent, profitable and enriching ways. For many, however, the skills and language needed to engage in 'art criticism' or to voice an 'aesthetic response' may seem obtuse and distant – practices dominated by those who use complex language to impress, confuse or exclude.

These difficulties are not necessary. Conversations about art can be – and should be – clear, transparent, inclusive and straightforward. They may need specialist terms, but often they don't. The language used to describe, analyze or make sense of artworks is often the same as that used in any other learning interaction. They may sometimes require a teacher to learn something new, or extra – but so does competent and interesting teaching and learning about any subject. Few teachers have extensive art historical,

critical or aesthetic knowledge. They can, however, have an interest in art, value art experiences for the young, and regularly embrace them into their programs. Equally, they can balance the formal requirements of curriculum documents against their attention to, and valuing of, the interests, curiosities, contexts and responses of the young people they enjoy teaching. In the end, the success of art learning is dependent not on special or exclusive knowledge, so much as on readily accessible general knowledge, engaging interactive and conversational skills, and teachers' profound enjoyment of, and respect for, the voices of the people they teach.

Early childhood conversations about art

The following sections introduce two conversations about art. Each investigation developed in a different setting and at a different time, but each involved the same teacher – Helen – and the same artwork, a large public sculpture by the New Zealand artist Peter Nicholls.

Helen is an early childhood teacher. She has worked in a range of early childhood education contexts, including childcare centers and home-based settings. She has a passionate commitment to encouraging the development of successful learning experiences of young people, both in visual art and through broader learning engagements. In her teaching, she embraces the experiences, interests and knowledge of her students into negotiated learning pathways – co-constructive strategies. These can facilitate in-depth investigations, to encourage children to extend their learning, to return, revisit and rethink their engagements with art. Helen is a reflective teacher who regularly re-examines the knowledge, skills and strategies she brings to various learning experiences. She recognizes the importance of language in visual art and all other learning, and actively encourages children to enhance, extend and apply their language in constructive verbal exchange about the objects of study. She uses language in straightforward, clear and articulate ways to encourage children's responses. She does recognize necessary technical language, but avoids confusing jargon or 'artspeak' that can exclude participation or engagement. Her teaching is founded on, and enhanced through, a rich fund of general knowledge. Her personal interest in visual art does, however, encourage her own engagements in this field. Her teaching is thus reliably informed, interesting and stimulating.

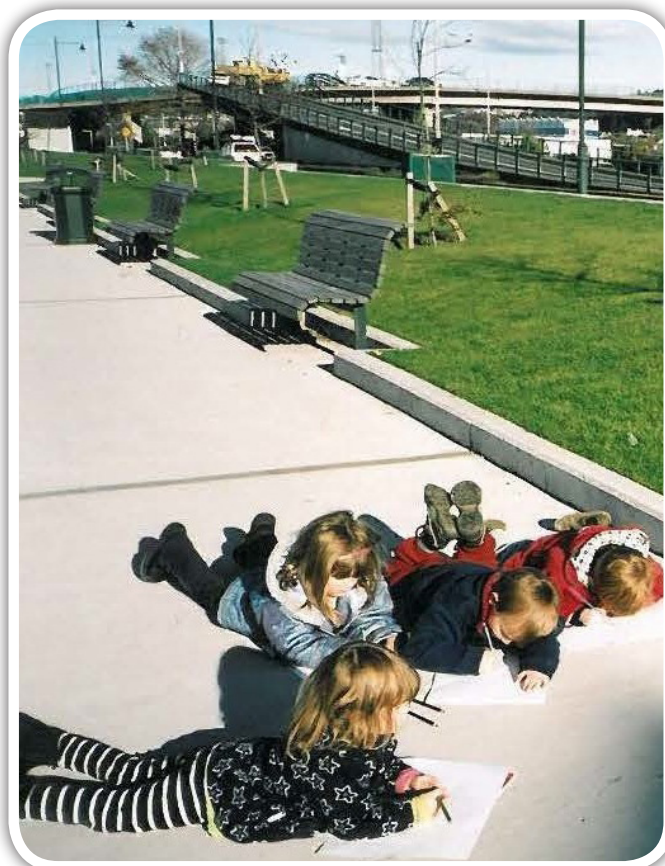
The accounts recorded below are not templates for other art conversations. All conversations are different. Differing pathways can take surprise directions or tangents, illuminate in different ways, and draw together and share from a wide range of knowledge, experience, questions and curiosity. Most importantly, they draw on and extend the knowledge, reflections, questions and observations of many different children. These conversations can, however, provide valid examples of how mutually profitable art conversations can be introduced and sustained. They offer transferable strategies for facilitating guided close observations, encouraging the sensual, physical experience of artworks, and revisiting and renegotiating through playing, drawing, measuring, comparing, responding, reacting or contextualizing. Looking here is an active, rather than a receptive, experience. Looking, and later understanding, explaining, interpreting or evaluating, involve talk. These conversations demonstrate some of the kinds of interac

tions that can encourage children to respond, the ways discussions might develop, and ways children return to the experiences, bringing new questions, issues or knowledge to renegotiate their bearings.

Early childhood conversations: Helen and children from a Dunedin early childhood education centre

This is Helen's account of a learning engagement with a group of 4 year old children from her learning group. The sculpture it centers on is a work by the artist Peter Nicholls, called *Toroa*. It was completed in 1989, in front of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery and is now resituated on the Dunedin waterfront.

During a discussion about art, I questioned a group of children to gain an understanding of their knowledge of sculpture. Their responses were varied. I asked if they would like to visit and view a sculpture. We walked down to the foreshore where the children were able to look at, study, touch, climb through and finally draw *Toroa*, by Peter Nicholls.





Figures 1 & 2: Children exploring and drawing Peter Nicholls' Toroa sculpture on the Dunedin waterfront.

The children made several observations. Firstly, the pieces were numbered – we wondered why? The children discussed a variety of possibilities for this. We looked at how the macrocarpa slabs were joined together. The children commented that some were joined by huge bolts. The ends of others were trimmed so the pieces fitted together like a giant puzzle.

The children were interested in looking at the sculpture from different views – each view presenting children with a 'different sculpture'. When the children completed their observational drawings, this reinforced the different use of space; their drawings and collages demonstrated this.

We discussed what the sculpture was made of. They responded with 'wood'. We discussed how he could have built it, what he would have needed. The children responded with a range of answers 'lots of strong men' – 'What about women?' – 'Cranes' – 'ladders' etc.

I gave the children some information about Peter Nicholls – how he lives in Dunedin and is a teacher at the School of Art. We discussed what we thought Toroa might mean. The children had several ideas of what the sculpture might represent, including tunnels, and stairs. I then explained that toroa is a Māori word for albatross. One child quickly replied: 'Yeah...I can see its wings.'

On returning to the center we filed the drawings away. We printed the photographs and displayed them. The children, using their observational drawings and the photographs, then created collages using black strips of paper on white paper. With constant reference to the drawings and photographs, they created their collages by overlapping the ends of black strips. Some of the children created collages from different angles. Once these were completed, the children used these as another reference point for the creation of their own sculptures.

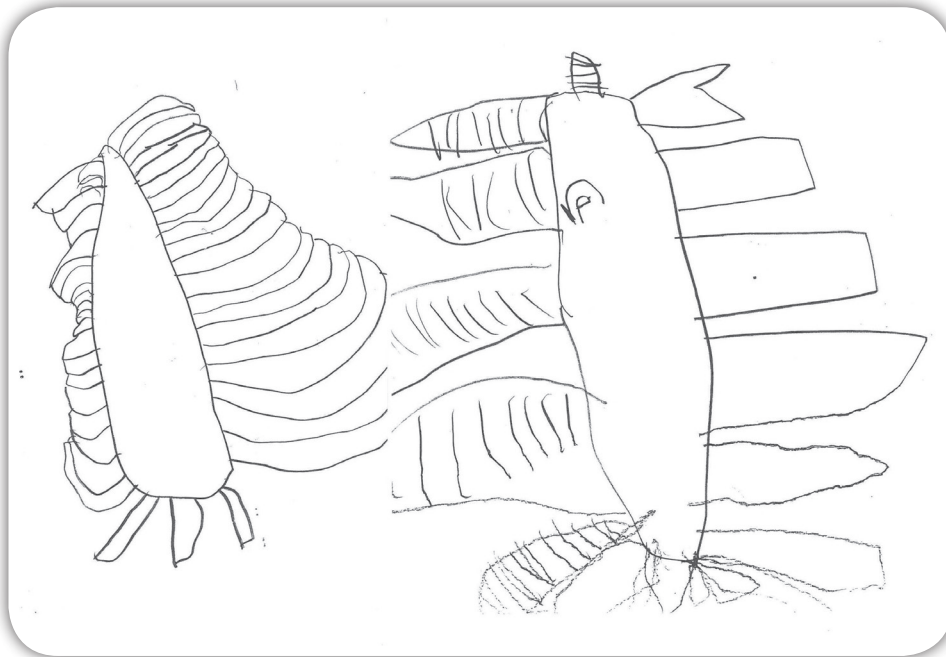


Fig. 3: Though each of the children's drawings of Toroa was quite unique, they all demonstrated a close analytical examination of its structure.

Using a block of wood for a base, the children used ice block sticks glued together with a glue gun. During this experience there were lots of decisions to be made, lots of problem solving. For example, how to achieve their original aim, how to prevent the sticks from falling when their sculptures became top-heavy. Discoveries were made, especially of ways of strengthening their sculptures. The children were pleased with their success and delighted in taking their sculptures home.

One of the many benefits of this small project was the interest and involvement of the parents. Driving past the sculpture and commenting on it each time was a daily event for one family. Another family visited the sculpture, sharing knowledge, ideas and information. Parents' involvement and interest in their children's learning reinforced this experience, making it more meaningful.

Early childhood conversations: Helen and Jack

This is an edited transcript from other conversations that took place about the same

work some time later, when Helen was working as a home-based carer. The work is clearly visible from passing cars. Jack (3 ½) had seen it daily for several months on his journeys to and from childcare, and had often asked about it. Jack was already exercising an aesthetic discrimination, in noticing the sculpture, and distinguishing it from the lively activities of the surrounding harbour-side. Helen took him to the wharf for a closer experience of the work, which she subsequently developed further in conversations there and at home through a range of drawing and building experiences. The conversation began with broadly framed looking and identifying talk as they wandered around the base of the sculpture looking upwards.

Helen ('Poppy'): It is quite big, isn't it?

Jack: Yeah.

Helen: Perhaps we can stand right back so we can see it all.

I wonder what it is constructed with.

Jack: Wood!

Helen: I wonder who made this sculpture.

Jack: I don't know.

Helen: Let's have a look around to see if we can find out. Can you see anything here that might tell us, Jack?

Jack: Here, here, Poppy!

Helen: Let's read what it says: Peter Nicholls, Toroa, 1989, macrocarpa. Do you know what macrocarpa is?

Jack: No.

Helen: It is a type of timber – that's what the artist Peter Nicholls has constructed this sculpture from...So we know this sculpture is made out of wood, I wonder what these things are here?(pointing at bolts)

Jack: Nails.

Helen: A special kind of nail called a bolt.

Jack: A bolt – they are very special.

Helen: Why are they special?

Jack: They are big.

Helen: Why do they need to be big?

Jack: So they can...Jack touches the top of the bolt and looks.

Helen: Jack, put your hand under there, tell me what you feel.

Jack: It's the end of the bolt.

Helen: Show me how long they are.

Jack holds his arms out to indicate the size.

Helen: Why do they have to be that long?

Jack: To stick the wood onto those pieces.

Helen: And they're not little pieces of wood are they?

Jack: They're giant bits.

From the outset these questions and responses develop through exploring and looking talk as Jack engaged in close examination of the work. Jack's exploration is sensible and physical also as he explores the work by touching it, climbing it, moving through it. Describing and identifying talk defined both the work and its parts – 'nails'...'bolts' – and explained qualities of structure and scale.

Jack climbs the sculpture.

Helen: Hey Jack, what does this sculpture remind you of?

Jack: ...a wing?

Helen: It is like a wing shape. A wing of what?

Jack: A kind of bird.

Helen: Lets look at it from this side, and then go round to the opposite side.

Helen: Hey Jack, you know you said it was a wing shape? There's a word up there, on the sculpture. Can you see the word: Engraved onto the wood. 'W-I-N-G' Wwwwing.

Jack: Wing!

Helen: Just like you said it looked like a wing, it's got the word 'WING' engraved on the timber.

Jack: That could make it a wing.

Helen: A very big wing. What kind of bird has a very, very big wing?

Jack: It could be an albatross.

Helen: It is an albatross. Wow!...This word – 'T-O-R-O-A' – it is the Māori word for albatross.

Jack: It is a big bird.

This sequence extended Jack's engagement into interpreting the work, understanding how abstract forms could be recognized as a real thing. Much of the subsequent conversation was analytical, describing qualities of shape or form and reading progressions of letters and numbers stamped into the timber: 'It's a circle shape...its sort of like an archway, isn't it?'

Helen: The sculpture looks different from this angle. I've noticed something else.

Jack: Where?

Helen: Can you see on the corners of the pieces of timber, the macrocarpa that he has used, can you see what is on the corners?

Jack: It's some letters.

Helen: D – E – F – G – H – I – J – K ...I wonder why he put in the different letters on the timber?

Jack: What's that one?

Helen: That's number 9. There are numbers round here – I wonder why he did that?

Let's find 1...I wonder why he put 1 on that one?

Jack: It goes one, two three...

Helen: You are right Jack. See, number 1 goes right across the face? So then it goes 1 – 2 – 3 ... like you said. What's this one?

Jack: 4, 5, 6.

Helen: 6. So he's used 6 numbered slabs of macrocarpa for the base. And the ones with the letters go...?

Jack: Up!

Helen: They are the pieces that go up. These are very heavy. Jack, can you see what he has done? How has he stuck them together so they don't fall down?

Jack: Not sellotape.

Helen: Not sellotape, no.

Jack: These...

Helen: Do you remember what they're called?

Jack: Bolts!

Helen: This is because they're very, very...

Jack: Strong.

Helen: Show me how long that bolt is – put your hands out and show me.

Jack measures the length with his arms.

Jack: So huge! It's huge!

Helen: It's very, very long. But these bolts are very strong, and look! He hasn't got one bolt. He's got...

Jack: Two...

Helen: I wonder if there's any more?

Let's count, 1, 2, 3...Three, he's got three on this plate.

Jack: Look Poppy!

Helen: Yes.

Jack: There's three, right?

Helen: Yes, and look, I've noticed something else – are the widths of the timbers all the same?

Jack: No.

Helen: So what's he done?

Jack: ...he sawed them.

Helen: He's sawn some of the width off, to fit it together. Great observation skills Jack!

These observations develop Jack's understanding of the artist's engagement with the medium, how he arranged and structured the work. Jack extends this conversation, describing qualities of shapes, materials and construction before returning to his interpretation of the structure as an albatross, and then moving into a drawing experience in front of the work:

Helen: Oh – what are these?

Jack: Circles.

Helen: There's one here – circles of what?

Jack: Wood.

Helen: These are called dowels; they are round tubes of wood used to make it strong... Let's see if we can find the other end Jack.

Jack: There – circles!

Helen: Oh yes, look – come round this side.

Jack: Circles.

Helen: He has, he's put circles or dowels through the timber.

I wonder why they are there?

Jack: To make it a bit stronger?

Helen: To make it stronger. You are right Jack.

Yes, they must be strong and you see he's sawn the timber to fit them together like a great big puzzle. It's amazing and it looks like the wing of a...

Jack: Albatross!

Helen: Albatross! You knew that.

Helen: Can you see how the sculpture is connected to the base?

Jack: Nails.

Helen: What kind of nails again, do you remember? What were they called?

Jack: Bolts.

Helen: Yes Jack. More bolts. But these are steel plates. And they're very strong. And they're bolted into the pavers to keep it strong.

Helen: OK, now Jack, shall we start to draw it? Which side are you going to draw it from?

Jack walks around the sculpture.

Jack: I might draw a, a...little one. Or a big one.

Helen: Let's start at the bottom. What shape does it look like? Do you remember what shape that is?

Jack: An oblong.

As Jack begins to draw from the sculpture, the conversation explores qualities of scale, angle and direction, shape and placement of the timber beams, and the ways Jack is translating these into qualities of line, contour, stepped or zig-zagging edges, and arranging these spatially on the large sheets of newsprint paper. The drawing goes through several versions before Jack begins to seem satisfied with his representation of the sculpture. The drawing process requires concentrated effort, analytical looking, and a mental translation from the three-dimensional structure of the sculpture to the flat surface of the paper.



Figure 4: Drawing of sculpture

Next day, at home, looking at photographs of the sculpture:

Helen: There are lots of pictures. Can you find one of your favourite drawings? Which angle do you like?

Jack: Well I think...what is an angle?

Helen: Your favourite view...which one do you like?

Jack selects one of his favourite angles. He has a large sheet of white paper and long strips of black paper.

Helen: So you're going to make a picture with your paper strips? These strips of black paper could be your bits of macrocarpa.

Jack begins to stick on his strips of black paper, referring to the photographs of the sculpture for clarification, and cutting and pasting until his collage is finished. Once Jack has completed his collage he is proud of his achievement.

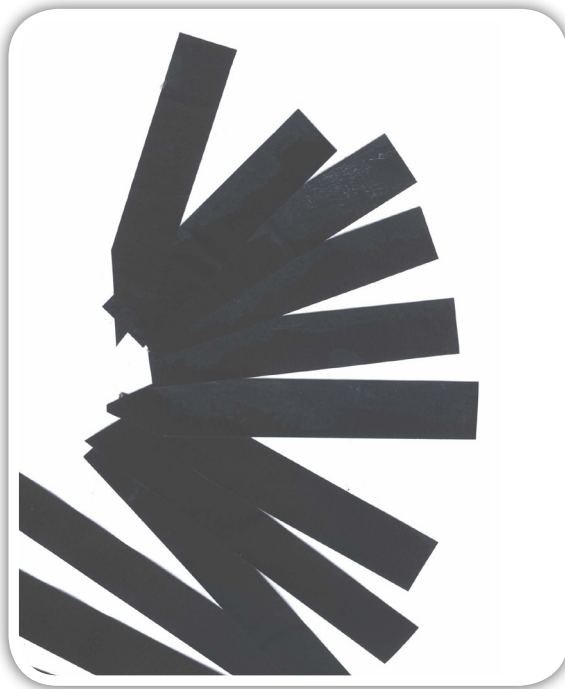


Figure 5: Black paper collage of sculpture piece

Jack: Now, I'm going to make a sculpture.

Helen: Wow! What are you going to make a sculpture from?

Jack: These ice-block sticks.

The next day Jack builds his sculpture using ice-block sticks and a hot glue gun. He constructs the base first, referring to the photos for guidance, counting the number of timbers and selecting the same number of ice-block sticks. He constructs the rising structure of the base, gluing them lying flat, then building the structure upwards. It is a challenging task but he persists with some help. He enjoys the challenge, singing as he works.



Figure 6: Sculpture out of wood pieces

Once the work was completed Jack decided to design his own sculpture, drawing a plan and constructing a 'monster.' Jack and Helen then reflected on the process Jack had followed – observing, exploring, talking, and drawing the sculpture, making a collage, designing and constructing the sculpture.

Kinds of talking

What kinds of thinking and learning were Jack experiencing through these conversations? In initiating the investigation, Jack had already exercised discriminating perceptions in his environment. He extended his engagement through looking and exploring; through describing and identifying, and into analytical explanations of the work. He appreciated how it had been designed and constructed, and he had synthesized his experiences into judgments. In expressing his liking for the work, in appreciating how its construction contributed to its stability as well as its appearance, and in expressing his satisfaction with the completion of his own works, Jack is engaging in evaluative talking.

Increasingly, as the conversation developed, Jack's responses became more fulsome, sometimes describing more than one feature of the work within a single statement. Jack was able to frame a clear and comprehensive explanation of the work's form and appearance, its construction, and its significance. There, and later, when he developed his own sculptures, he proved able to transfer the learning from the earlier conversation into other situations. The learning through this scaffolded sequence of experiences was cumulative as his knowledge increased and as he became more confident in articulating his experiences. In some instances, Jack was bringing his own knowledge

to bear on his appreciation of the work – in the identification of the wing, bird, and albatross for example. Equally however, the conversation benefitted from the knowing guidance provided by Helen's suggestions and responses. The success of these sequences reflects her rich experiences as an early childhood teacher, her own interest in art in children's learning, and the finely modulated communication skills she employed to encourage Jack's own growth through these experiences.

Conversations about art

Learning about art is not new in itself. Many years ago, Harry Broudy argued for the 'aesthetic appreciation' of the sensuous, formal, technical and expressive values of artworks (Broudy, 1971). What is new here is the way this learning is valued for younger children (Eckhoff, 2008); the ways it develops through accessible, inclusive, reflexive conversations rather than through formal inductive pathways; and the ways art talk and art making are mutually enriching. As in Jack's case, aesthetic experiences require an active engagement of skills or procedures be they observational, contemplative, analytical or explanatory. Like art making procedures, these things can be taught, and learned. Jack's conversations demonstrate the accessibility of these kinds of learning at any level. Aesthetic engagements may encourage the application and development of cognitive skills – recall and recognition, organization, classification or categorization, extending into explanatory and evaluative activities. Engaging with art involves intellectual skills or abilities – comprehension (translation, interpretation, and extrapolation) and application in new contexts. These skills provide sophisticated tools for informing the evaluative process that lies at the heart of aesthetic experience (Wheeler, 1971). Art learning thus involves knowledge and skills of broader value in other aspects of learning and life as well as providing pleasurable experiences in themselves.

These aesthetic experiences have been embraced into theoretical constructs for primary school arts learning for some years (Duncum, 1999; Eisner, 1988; Chalmers, 1987; Lanier, 1987). In New Zealand today, they are a requirement of the 'Communicating and Interpreting in the Arts' and 'Understanding the Arts in Context' strands of the Curriculum (Ministry, 2007). Recent pedagogies favour broadly inclusive and reflexive strategies, developing conversations through open-ended questioning strategies and programmes for promoting these critical literacies (Sandretto et al, 2006; Lloyd, 2009, 2010). These strategies seem appropriate and accessible for younger children.

As Jack's experiences demonstrate, the apparent sophistication of aesthetic engagements need not be a barrier to positive learning for younger children. Aesthetic conversations can embrace established 'guided dialogue' paradigms (Wilks, 2003). Teachers can negotiate narrative constructions around art works (Davis & Gardner, 2001), dramatic role play, or inquiry-pathway critical thinking and imaginative interpretation (Lloyd, 2010). However they negotiate their conversations, the multi-dimensional character of art engagements demands, and enhances, skills for the subtle and flexibly

articulate application of language to specialist purposes: making sense, meaning-making, knowing, expressing feeling, and communicating and sharing (Barroquero, 2010).

The conversations between Jack and Helen were co-constructive transactions that empowered Jack to engage in further art experiences and talk about these independently. Facilitating thoughtful conversations like these encourages a mutually beneficial interaction between young peoples' language development, social interactive skills and aesthetic experience. It provides entries into arts experiences that have the potential to extend well beyond those generated only through learning in arts practice:

By helping children grow from art producers to art appreciators, we deepen their understanding of the world and enrich their lives in the process. Few people continue to be art producers beyond childhood. But being an art appreciator is a pleasure that can last a lifetime. (Epstein, 2001, 43)

Postscript



Figure 7: Jack revisiting Toroa in 2010

Five years after Jack's earlier engagements with the Toroa sculpture, he and Helen returned to the work. Their initial conversation was tentative and thoughtful. Although Jack claimed that he didn't remember a great deal, the discussion revealed some interesting instances of depth retention. Jack could indicate specific things he remembered – the artist's name, the subject, how the artist joined the pieces, numerical sequences used to order them, the materials he had used. These observations generated discussions about the artist's problem solving methods, how he had arranged the different parts in separate sequences, interlocked, angled and stacked them, and how the work's

construction protected itself and ensured its stability. Jack was also able to revise his understandings – he now knew how the artist had run long bolts right through the stacked pieces to hold the work together. He was also able to identify changes the artist had made since his first visits – the work had been repainted and re-signed. He was able to make aesthetic evaluations – for example, the way the artist had achieved a sense of lightness despite the weighty bulk of the material forms. He could remember, after a time, his own earlier explorations in response to the work, and the difficulties and problem solving he had experienced as he developed his own drawings, collages and models. Most importantly, Jack still enjoyed the work – perhaps appreciating just a little more in hind-sight its significance for its artist.

In other words, in revisiting the work, Jack could demonstrate remembering, understanding process, appreciating concepts, revised thinking, distinguishing, evaluating, extending and translating, and enjoying. These memories, and the skills and sensibilities they embody, provide tangible evidence for the validity of engagements of this type, in enriching both cognitive stock and sensibilities, and transferable skills of observation, description, analysis, understanding and interpretation. They verify that these experiences can generate specific knowing – facts, details – conceptual knowing, and appreciation of abstract notions like process. Most importantly of all, they verify the acculturation and empowerment the engagement had encouraged: Jack retained the skills he had used, the attitudes of critical inquiry and analysis, and most importantly, he sustains a disposition of aesthetic curiosity and engagement. He still enjoys the work, and he continues to engage in independently motivated learning experiences. These dispositions have lifelong value – they provide the most powerful justification for learning through art.

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