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Hall, Kimberly Ellen ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5544-8764> (2021) Teaching/Not Teaching: A Community Oriented Process in the Classroom. In: 11th Illustration Research Symposium, 11-12 February 2021, Kingston University, London UK. (Submitted)

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Education and Illustration:

Models, Methods, Paradigms

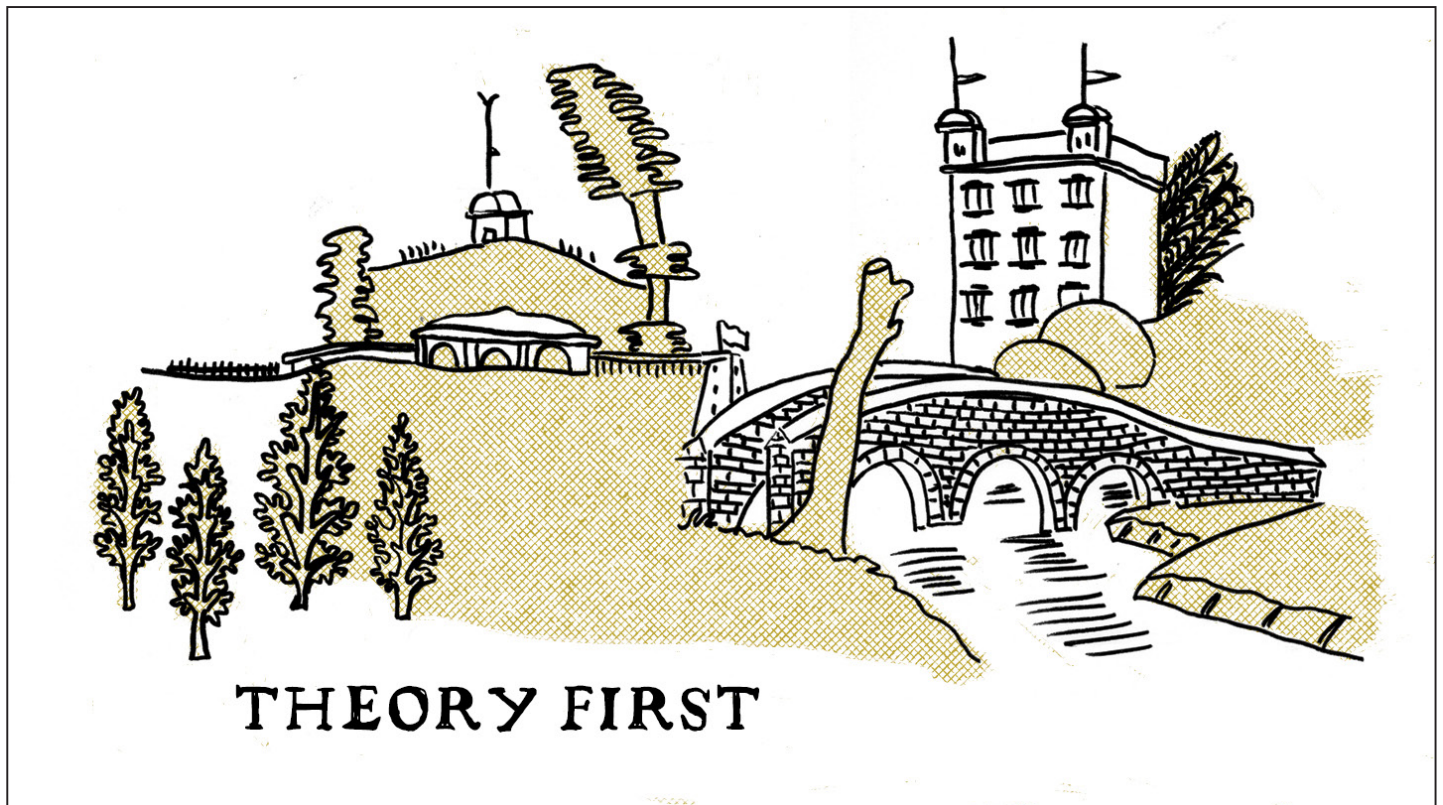
11th Illustration Research Symposium

11-12 February 2021

Kingston University, London UK

Teaching/Not Teaching: A Community-Oriented Practice in the Classroom

by Kimberly Ellen Hall, full time faculty, Maryland Institute College of Art/MICA, Baltimore MD



In this paper I am investigating the value of breaking the traditional role of teacher and student into something more collaborative. Historically, there is the format that posits the teacher at the head of the class, to whom students look up to find a path to success, but my own teaching experience has shown me that the nature of the student/teacher relationship is inherently reciprocal, whether we realize it or not.

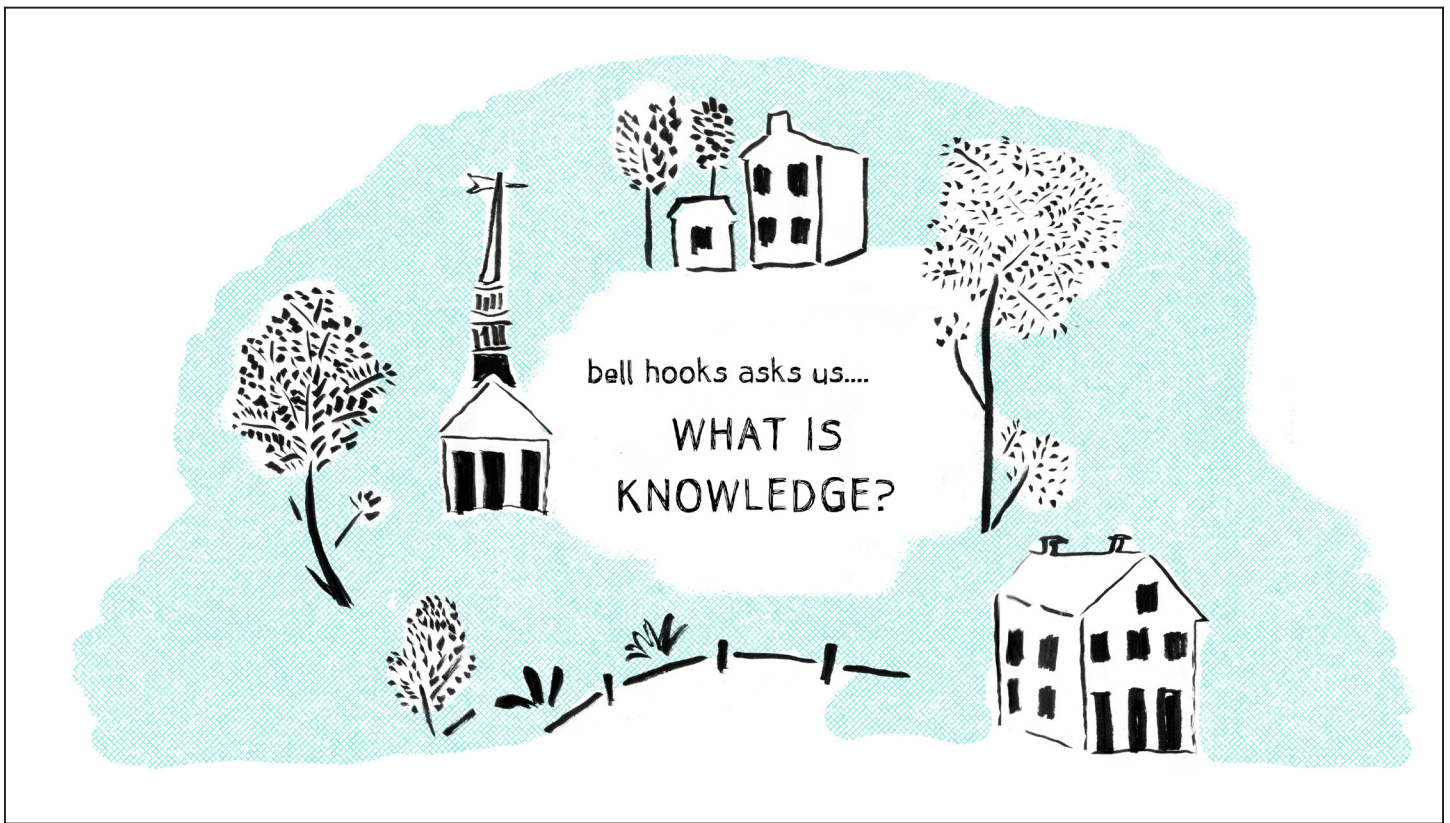
1/Starting Ground

To begin we need to find a starting ground. In my first attempts to discover what it means to teach others I looked to connect my experience as a student to my interests as a teacher.

Educator and philosopher Paolo Freire calls the system most of us have experienced in school "banking education." He describes this idea of education as the teachers are the active participant and the students are passive objects:

"Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat. This is the "banking" concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits." (p58)

I suspect we are all familiar with this form on



some level, even in an art school setting, probably having experienced both roles at some point, either depositing knowledge into students, or having knowledge deposited in us.

In retrospect we might be able to see some value there: the skills we were taught, the techniques we were led to master. But consider too, the paths we abandoned because someone else said they were not worth pursuing. Could we return to them eventually? Do we dream of returning to them sometime? And consider other memories of studentship. Were there painful critiques? Did we feel alone sometimes?

Now that we are at the head of the classroom, how do we want to proceed? What is worth fixing or improving? How do we decide what is valuable to us?

2/What Is Knowledge?

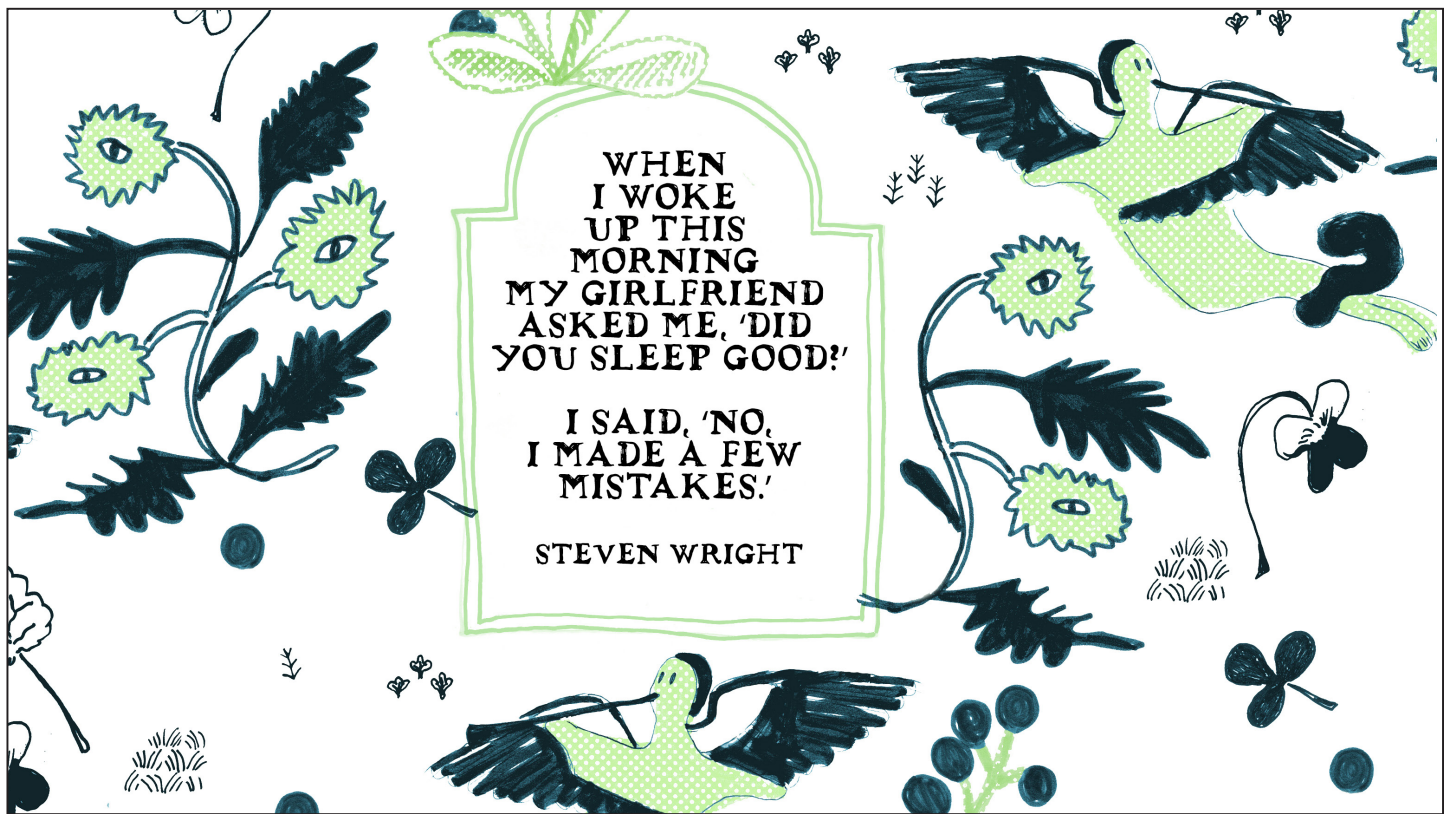
Let's continue by examining author and educator bell hooks insights into engaged pedagogy. hooks considered Freire's work is one of her biggest influences, and one of the things I'm interested in that she talks about is the idea of the value we give knowledge and how to objectively consider what is important when we come to the

classroom and our students.

Researcher & professor Namulundah Florence writes about bell hooks and says, "hooks disputes the fallacy of a value-free knowledge, and critiques the image of passive students, the privileged voice of professors, hierarchy of knowledge fields, and the cultural reproduction in schools of norms and practices. She also critiques the notion of static knowledge and standardized pedagogical orientations." (p80)

What stands out to me here is the disputation of "value-free knowledge" and "static knowledge." As we consider what we think is important, how do we consider the variety of possibilities of knowledge we can choose to present? For example, if there is no such thing as knowledge that is impartial, then our viewpoint, our experience, colors all the knowledge we are imparting to students.

In light of this, how do students deal with being the passive receptacles? I have seen students wiggle and work their way around these pedagogical systems to realize their own way of thinking and their own intellectual development. To me this suggests that whatever we provide to stu-



dents, they will not necessarily take it. Students will not always form the passive receptacles to receive what we have to offer. I'm sure you can think of students like this; ones who couldn't or wouldn't accept something that might have felt necessary for us to learn the subject.

In my experience as the "dispenser of knowledge" I have found this is a role very hard to play. It's a difficult charade to keep up. How can we expect students to learn just as we have? Those memories of our own past experiences as students are our own, and considering hooks' views on the subjectivity of knowledge, we must conclude that students may need something different than us.

Even if we can easily see how it's not useful to approach teaching as dispensing knowledge to "unknowing" students, we must go further to figure out how all of us in the classroom can become active participants.

3/Community

In her experimental teaching journal *Syllabus: Notes from an Accidental Professor*, Lynda Barry asks if "creative concentration is contagious" (p2).

Is creativity something we can pass on to our students just by being around them? How much of what we really teach comes from the smaller acts of the classroom as much as the actual planned curriculum?

Barry shares this quote from Rumi early in her book: "Every Craftsman searches for what is not there to practice his craft. A builder looks for the rotten hole where the roof caved in. A water-carrier picks up the empty pot. A carpenter stops at the house with no door." (p4)

I can see this idea fit in with my own work. As an illustrator I put patterns in empty spaces, I look for the blank wall to fill with shapes and colors and stories. I feel there is truth to this idea, but what is not there when we set out to work with students?

If we consider Barry's concept that "creative concentration is contagious" in relationship to the idea that we are attracted to the empty spaces, where do we land? I suspect it is not on empty minds that we can fill with our teacher-knowledge. Perhaps the missing thing is the relationships between makers, the community,

the connections. Part of being an artist, and especially an illustrator, is a connection to an audience or a reader.

How can we have this connected community role if we are only the dispensers of knowledge? The truth is, we cannot. We cannot simultaneously be the keepers of the key and also build community with our students. Connecting to students from a

IS CREATIVE CONCENTRATION CONTAGIOUS?

position of privilege is difficult, because in order to maintain it we must protect it. We are not easily able to be wrong from up there. To be able to do that we must figure out how to take apart the privilege of the teacher's role.

hooks confirms this when she “advocates mutuality between teacher and students as opposed to the traditional hierarchical relationships.” (Florence p83) Mutuality is an interesting word because it means a back and forth, a give and take. hooks implies here that we the teachers have something to gain from students as they have something to gain from us. She does not suggest that the relationship is peer-to-peer, but the idea of mutuality allows for sharing in a way that also allows difference.

4/The Having of Wonderful Ideas

While I felt I was starting to understand how the theory and ideas connected to my own teaching experience in the classroom, I felt unsure how to move forward.

Luckily I discovered Eleanor Duckworth's *The Having of Wonderful Ideas*. It's really an education book for teaching small children, but I was intrigued in the first chapter when Duckworth talks about a children's activity she conducted about ordering straws by length. One kid who walked in to the room, saw the pile of straws and said to the teacher, “I know what I'm going to do!” And proceeded to put them in length order before he

was even asked to do it.

I think this is deep down what we want all of our students to do. To see the possibility in the tools around them and dig in with their own ideas.

She goes on to say that “The having of wonderful ideas, which I consider the essence of intellectual development, would depend [instead] to an overwhelming extent on the occasions for having them” (p13) This finally started my thinking to move away from the why to the how. How can we create occasions for students to have wonderful ideas?

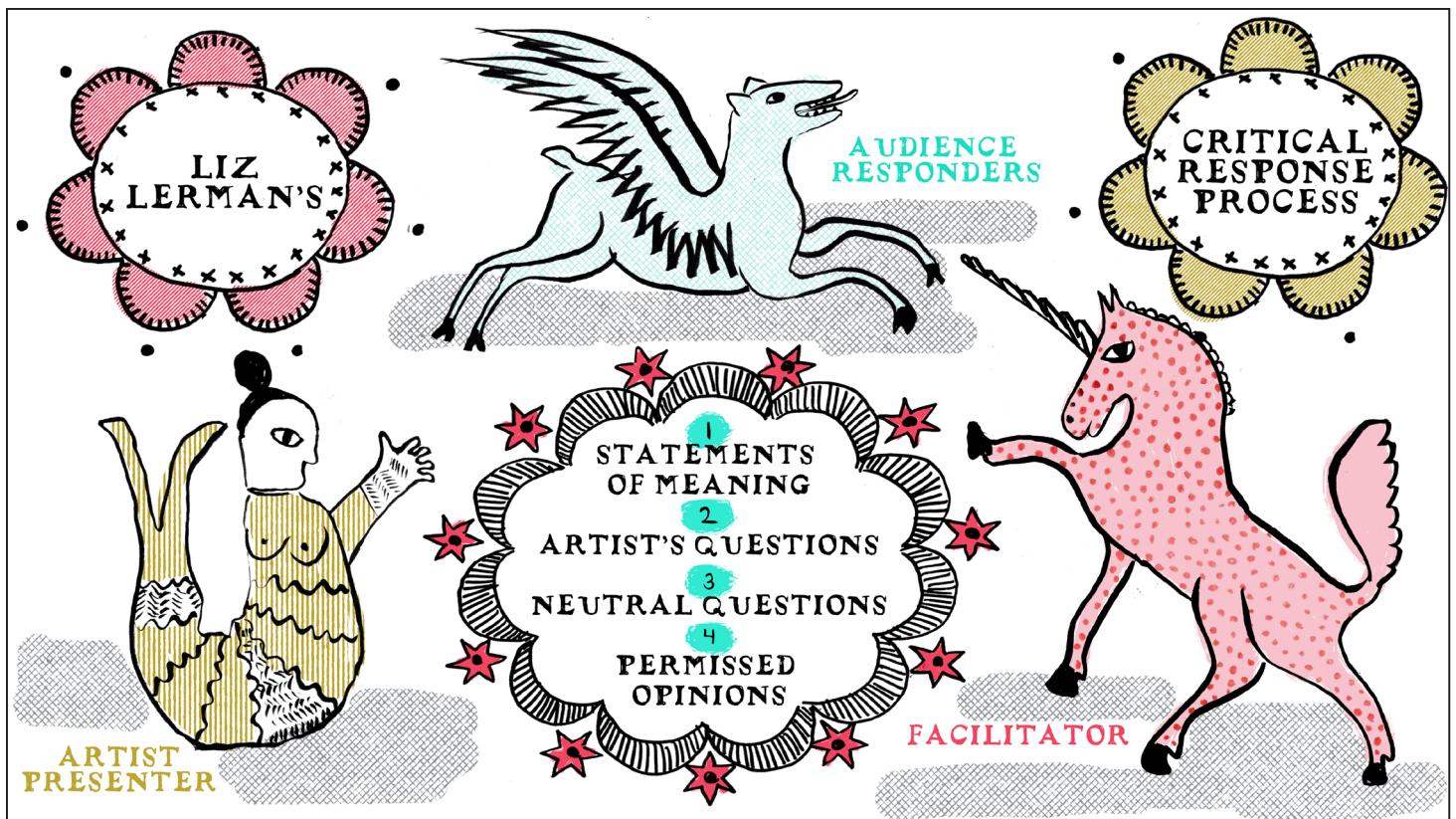
Duckworth continues, “The way to move a person's thoughts and feelings is not by trying to excise them and replace them with other thoughts and feelings. Rather, it is to try and understand the person's thoughts and feelings and work from there. It means having the person articulate his or her own thoughts in different areas and in different ways and see where they run into conflict with themselves. That usually means acknowledging complexity rather than replacing one simple way of looking at things with another way of looking at things—acknowledging the complexity and seeing where that leads.” (p116)

5/Together in Class

The idea of complexity and letting it lead, brings me to a quote in *Syllabus* from Jenny Browne that says, “What every teacher is doing is teaching someone how to love something.” (p192) Loving something is complex and there are many ways to do it. We all love in our own way.

EVERY TEACHER IS TEACHING SOMEONE TO LOVE SOMETHING

This also feels like an inkling of an answer to my worry about the emptiness we are looking to fill as teachers. I am not looking to fill passive students with my knowledge, but I am looking to share with them what I love, so they may learn to love as well.



When I started teaching I thought it was me giving information and tools to my students, but watching them and sitting alongside them as they struggle or fight or wait through projects, and then seeing them....succeed! Get through to the end! Make better work than what they started with!

That gave me a new kind of feeling about my own work. They taught me the value of what I loved. Barry says she didn't expect that her students' work would have such an influence on her own work, but that they do, and it surprised her. It has surprised me as well.

6/Critique

Lastly I want to talk about a real practical tool for creating collaborative growth in the classroom.

The Critical Response Process is a method of critique developed by the dancer and choreographer Liz Lerman. She says it developed casually at first, as a way to try and get better feedback when she started noticing that sometimes the artist being critiqued would be defensive over feedback or couldn't parse the response in a useful way. She does this by formalizing 3 roles and 4 steps.

The roles are:

- Artist/presenter
- Audience/responders
- Facilitator

And the 4 steps are:

- 1/ Statements of meaning (where the audience gives their first impression of a piece)
- 2/ Artist asks questions (where the presenter has a chance to ask of the audience)
- 3/ Responders neutral questions (where the audience can ask back to the presenter)
- 4/ Permitted opinions (where the artist can decide if they want to hear the audience's opinions)

The obvious roles would seem that one student is the artist presenting work, the rest of the students are the audience/responders and the teacher is the facilitator, and certainly when I was first trying out this practice that was the set up. But very quickly students found the need to rein me back in when I was facilitating. Sometimes I struggled to form neutral questions or I veered off track from the process when I thought it was important. And my students, usually gently, asked me if I was off track....I realized they too needed to practice facilitating, it made them more com-

fortable as responders (knowing how difficult it is to gently pull a responder back on track as facilitator), and it made them more confident as presenters, knowing how much the facilitator is in the presenter's corner.

What seems most powerful in these steps to me, is not just the formal structure (although that can certainly lend support and security to students), it's the way that the structure is meant to guide the artist through the experience of the audience. To be able to absorb what the audience has to say, but also to allow the artist to find their own way through it so that their "having of wonderful ideas" is still possible.

This process enables us, the instructors, to reverse the hierarchical model inherent in teaching. As much as we might hope to create community and collaboration as central to our classroom, it is unavoidable to find ourselves on some level the leader in the class. Using CRP, allowing other students to facilitate, and learning how to formulate neutral questions, are all tools to lower the pedestal we sometimes find ourselves on in the classroom.

Of course as you absorb this paper and think about your own classroom experience, I imagine you will have even more wonderful ideas about how you might approach your students with mutuality, how you might open up to learn from them (consciously!), and of course how you might share what you love with them.

I would love to hear updates, experiments, and developments on collaborative coursework. Please email brella@nottene.net to share.

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