**[On Teaching (Elliot Eisner)](https://larrycuban.wordpress.com/2013/06/18/on-teaching-elliot-eisner/)**

***Too few policymakers have ever taught in public schools. Even fewer can articulate what it is about teaching young children, youth, and adults that binds teachers and students together and makes the experience of learning memorable, satisfying, and long-lasting. A non-policymaker I know well has expressed that bond between teacher and student in a fluent and thoughtful way. If only policy elites would create and sustain the conditions that further the connection between teachers and students.***

***Elliot Eisner  is Professor Emeritus of Education and Art at Stanford University. This is an abridged version of his 2006 Commencement talk to School of Education graduates and their families. I posted this initially February 15, 2010.***

Among the many satisfactions in teaching there are six I would like to describe. The first pertains to the opportunity to introduce students to ideas that they can chew on for the rest of their lives. Great teaching traffics in enduring puzzlements and persistent dilemmas. Certainties are closed streets, not locations that interest the mind. Great ideas have legs. They take you somewhere.

Ideas can also provide a natural high. With them you can raise questions that can’t be answered. But why do puzzlements provide satisfactions? I believe because they invite that most precious of human abilities-imagination–an opportunity to take wing. Imagination is the neglected stepchild of American education. Questions invite you in. They stimulate the production of possibilities. They give you a ride. And the best ones are those that tickle the intellect and resist resolution.

Second, the satisfactions of teaching provide opportunities to reach out to students in ways that ensure your own immortality. The images of teachers past populate our minds and memories. They sit on our shoulders ready to identify infractions of one kind or another and to offer praise for work well done. Their lives live in yours and your life lives in theirs.

The immortality I speak of is the private, rather than the public immortality that is garnered by only a very few. Yet living through the memories of the great and not so great teachers we have known is no meager accomplishment; you don’t have to be a Mahata Ghandi to be remembered or to be loved.

Third, teaching makes it possible to play your own cello. Despite the beliefs of some well intended technocrats, there are no recipes for performance, no teacher proof scripts to follow. Teaching well requires improvisation within constraints. Constraints there will always be but in the end teaching is a custom job within which the teacher becomes an inseparable part of what is taught.

The inseparability of what is learned from the manner in which it was taught is a lesson best taught by the arts. The arts teach us that form and content cannot be divided; how something is described effects what is described. Curriculum once enacted cannot be separated from the way it was taught because how it was taught influences how it is learned.

Fourth, teaching provides ample opportunities for both artistry and for memorable forms of aesthetic experience. After forty years in the classroom I still have vivid recollections of my sophomore high school art class in which I taught thirty-five eager and some not so eager adolescents. Those memories, in many ways, are among the most aesthetically satisfying and vivid I own.

Teaching well also depends upon artistry. Artistry is the ability to craft a performance, to influence its pace, to shape its rhythms and to modulate its tone so that its parts merge into a coherent whole. You come to feel a process that often exceeds the capacity of language to describe.

Why are these memories so vivid? The nature of long term memory might have something to do with it, but I think there is more to it. I still remember my third grade teacher, Miss Eva Smith calling my name from one end of the classroom to the other to tell me, in a voice that the whole class could hear, “Elliot, Your work is getting better!” Oh how I needed to hear that; I did not do well in school. Or Miss Purtle who gave me a one person show of my paintings on the walls of her classroom when I was in the fourth grade. These were memorable events given to a nine year-old boy not knowing he would carry them with him for the rest of his life.

Fifth, teaching provides occasions to share with others your deep affection for what you teach. There is a sense of contagion when your eyes twinkle with delight at the prospect of introducing students to what you love. Your love of what you teach is conveyed to them; it is the sincerest and most powerful invitation you can extend.

Finally, teaching provides the opportunity to discover that something you once said in class that you cannot now remember made a difference to a former student who you happen to encounter twenty years later. Teaching is filled with such surprises. They reassure us that our contributions sometimes exceed what we can recall.

But the satisfactions of teaching extend beyond the academic. Indeed, the most lasting contributions come from rescuing a child from despair, restoring a sense of hope, soothing a discomfort. These are the occasions whose memories last longest because they are often the occasions that matter most. They are the occasions whose importance transcends academic interests. They address the human needs that all of us share.

It is especially important today at a time when schools are buffeted by performance standards and high stakes testing to remember that the student is a whole person who has an emotional and social life, not just an intellectual one. And this is as true for graduate students in the grandest citadels of higher education as it is for students in elementary school. The more we stress in school only what we can measure the more we need to remember that not everything that is measurable matters and not everything that matters is measurable. As the old progressives used to say, we need to pay attention to the whole child. This is accomplished by how we teach. How we teach is related to the deep satisfactions of teaching I described today.

I have had the moments that I have described-and you will too. I envy you the journey. Oh, to be able to begin that journey once again today!  
No such luck!