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Beyond This Point There Be Dragons: Pre-Service Elementary Teachers' Stories of Art and Education

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# Beyond This Point There Be Dragons: Pre-Service Elementary Teachers' Stories of Art and Education



## INTRODUCTION

*As he leaned over my desk I realized that he had the most amazing amount of chest hair I had ever seen — and his breath! And when he yelled at the other kids for not behaving, it seemed as if fire sprang from his throat. This definitely made me afraid to ask him any questions.* (Respondent reflection, 1990/91)

Reflections like these are not uncommon among pre-service elementary teachers, many of whom are not comfortable with art<sup>1</sup>. I've been talking with them about their early experiences with art, and often times their stories parallel traditional folk tales, with heroes and villains, helpers and dragons, quests and weapons, rewards and/or punishments, as they complete or fail in their quests for education in art. There are good stories with happy endings and sad stories with unhappy endings, but it's uncanny how often students can vividly bring to mind a teacher of art.

As an art teacher myself, I enjoy hearing stories that begin with "I

really loved, I mean I loved that art teacher.

My whole life turned around when ... ". "Dragon" art teachers, however, will be the focus of this paper.

A portrait of the Dragon is found in T.H. White's (1954/84) translation of a Latin bestiary of the 12th century:

*Draco the Dragon is the biggest of all serpents, in fact of all living things on earth ... its strength is not in its teeth but in its tail, and it inflicts injury by blows rather than by stinging ... Even the Elephant is not protected from it by the size of its body; for the dragon, lying in wait near the paths along which the elephants usually saunter, lassoes their legs in a knot with its tail and destroys them by suffocation.* (White, 1984, p. 165-167).

Dragon teachers, following the lead of their namesakes, inflict injury on their students, not by stinging, but by subtle and often unreflective blows. And

like the Elephant, even strong students are not exempt. Just as the townspeople tend to give the local Dragon a wide berth, the blows from Dragon teachers cause students to avoid not only the Dragon but the Dragon's lair — the art classroom. Students become anxious — and avoid getting close to the cause of their anxiety.

Before their encounters with Dragons, all children play with art (Gardner, 1982). But some time during the middle elementary years, many children leave art behind for other avenues of play and expression. And often it's not left behind gently. It is my contention that this move away from artistic expression is not an inevitable part of maturation, but a result, at least in part, of an encounter with Dragons. Snippets of stories about Dragons, written by pre-service elementary teachers, are often filled with anger:

*I had two art teachers who made me feel uncomfortable about and incapable of doing art. Is that what a student needs? Is this how we enrich our*

BY DEBORAH L. SMITH-SHANK

students' lives, by having them hate art? (Respondent reflection, 1990/91)

These Dragon stories are filled with perceived injustice:

*The teacher never put my pictures up on the wall; The teacher made me change my drawings to conform to her idea of beauty; I worked very hard and did my best, yet I got a B-* (Respondent reflection, 1990/91).

These stories are filled with fear:

*I was always trying to please the teacher, but was afraid I couldn't; I hated art class because I was afraid my work would never be as good as my friend's work; I didn't know where to start. At least in math class, there were rules to follow to get the right answer* (Respondent reflection, 1990/91).

And many times, students tell stories of jealousy:

*My art teacher in junior high was one I'd like to forget. She had favorites and she made no secret of it. Of course her favorites were the students who made perfect pictures and followed every little direction.* (Respondent reflection, 1990/91).

The stories pre-service teachers tell about art — about anger, fear, and jealousy — have become part of their educational history and will certainly influence their future relationship with art, both in and outside of the classroom. Grounded in past events, these stories have taken on the character of mythic accounts from people who are trying to deal with strong feelings that have helped shape their views of life. These are not just stories; they are personal fairy tales. As Bettelheim (1977) has noted, fairy tales

are important tools which enable children (and, by extension, the adults that these children grow into) to sort out their hidden fears, angers, and anxieties, and as a result, to cope with the world as stronger and more self-assured people. Personal fairy tales can serve to identify struggles with art, in and outside the classroom. The resolution or non-resolution of these struggles may also indicate what their future classroom involvement with art will be.

From the words, concerns, and ideas my students used to describe their Dragons, I will identify characteristics of art education pedagogy which tend to nurture Dragons. Then I will attempt to forge tools to keep the Dragons at bay.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF DRAGONS

Dragons have several unique characteristics. They are unreflectively critical. I say "unreflectively" because it is difficult to attribute to teachers who share so much of themselves for so many hours, with roomfuls of students, the villainy of purposeful sarcastic criticism. More likely, it parallels mindless blows of the Dragon's tail — quite apart from the Dragon's mind:

*I became turned off to art when I was twelve. My art teacher constantly criticized me, and I learned that I could not do art correctly no matter how hard I tried. When I would finally make something I was proud of it always seemed to come back with a grade in red ink that was a "C"!* (Respondent reflection, 1990/91).

Dragons show favoritism. They always have a cache of gold coins and other treasure stashed in their lair, as well as tokens of lesser value:

*To me art class was a nightmare that*

*was experienced once a week for an hour. Only those students who Miss Violet thought had talent, looked forward to art class. Those students she believed had talent received As on all their projects. Since I was not one of those privileged students, my artwork never received anything higher than a C+* (Respondent reflection, 1990/91).

Dragons live nearly forever and sleep most of the time, since they are very lazy by nature. However, when they are awake, they are very serious about meal time. They eat frequently, according to their own schedule, and care not for the schedules of mere mortals. Yet, Dragon teachers expect students to produce art on schedule. It's difficult to fault Dragons too much on this one, because of the constraints associated with institutional frameworks, but seemingly, Dragons can be identified by their overly rigid time tables:

*For someone who feels as frustrated with art as I do, project deadlines only make things worse. They add to my frustration and make it more likely that I will slop a project together quickly, just to get it done on time. We never really had enough time to work on stuff, it was always time to "move on" before we were ready* (Respondent reflection, 1990/91).

Dragons are very self-centered and are almost never known for their compassionate natures. One of the most important identifiers of Dragon teachers is their lack of support and encouragement:

*I am not "gifted" in the arts. As a matter of fact, I don't have much artistic ability at all! My art teacher didn't make even the tiniest effort to make me feel competent in my work* (Respondent reflection, 1990/91).



Drawing by Jui-Hsian Chou, art education student at Northern Illinois University.

Although the Sphinx taught using riddles, Dragons have no use for teaching games (or teaching content, for that matter). They expect unearned tribute from all whom they encounter. They expect quality artwork from their students, but they expect it without adequate instructions or any teaching on their part:

*My art teacher did not give us very good instructions or demonstrations, so I never knew what I was doing or when it was due* (Respondent reflection, 1990/91).

Dragons love to be mysterious. Along with their loose, or non-existent instructions, Dragon teachers prefer to leave their expectations unclear and unexplained:

*As an eighth grader I went into art class with a horrible attitude. I had already gone through left-handed scissors and laughter from the other students. But this class topped it off. I flunked my color wheel. How can anyone flunk a color wheel? I had all the colors on it and mixed them the right way, but I still flunked it* (Respondent reflection, 1990/91).

## INTERLUDE

Heroes and students alike are fitted with tools, weapons, and food for their journey. But they also come equipped with their own experiences, plans, and expectations. As the journey progresses, their lived experiences become part of their stories. They develop a sense of trust and danger. They start to identify the skills or the magic they perceive it takes to succeed in their quests. These constantly expanding personal stories guide their journey. Since Dragons signify danger, heroes tend to avoid them if their weapons or skills are not sufficiently

strong. Only the foolhardy will do battle with the menacing Dragon.

### DRAGON LAIRS

So where do teacher Dragons come from?

Like the sleeping Dragon, the art teacher has been isolated and left alone (usually in a damp basement room in the farthest reaches of the school). Like many medieval dragons, our teacher Dragons are born from chaos. Out of the many theories of education in general and of art education in particular, our Dragons have written their own stories, which have shaped their lives and their teaching.

As Maxine Greene (1973) has explained, there is a tension between tacit knowledge, stories, and

assumptions about art that students bring to class, and the knowledge, assumptions, and stories of their instructors. Out of this tension Dragons are born.

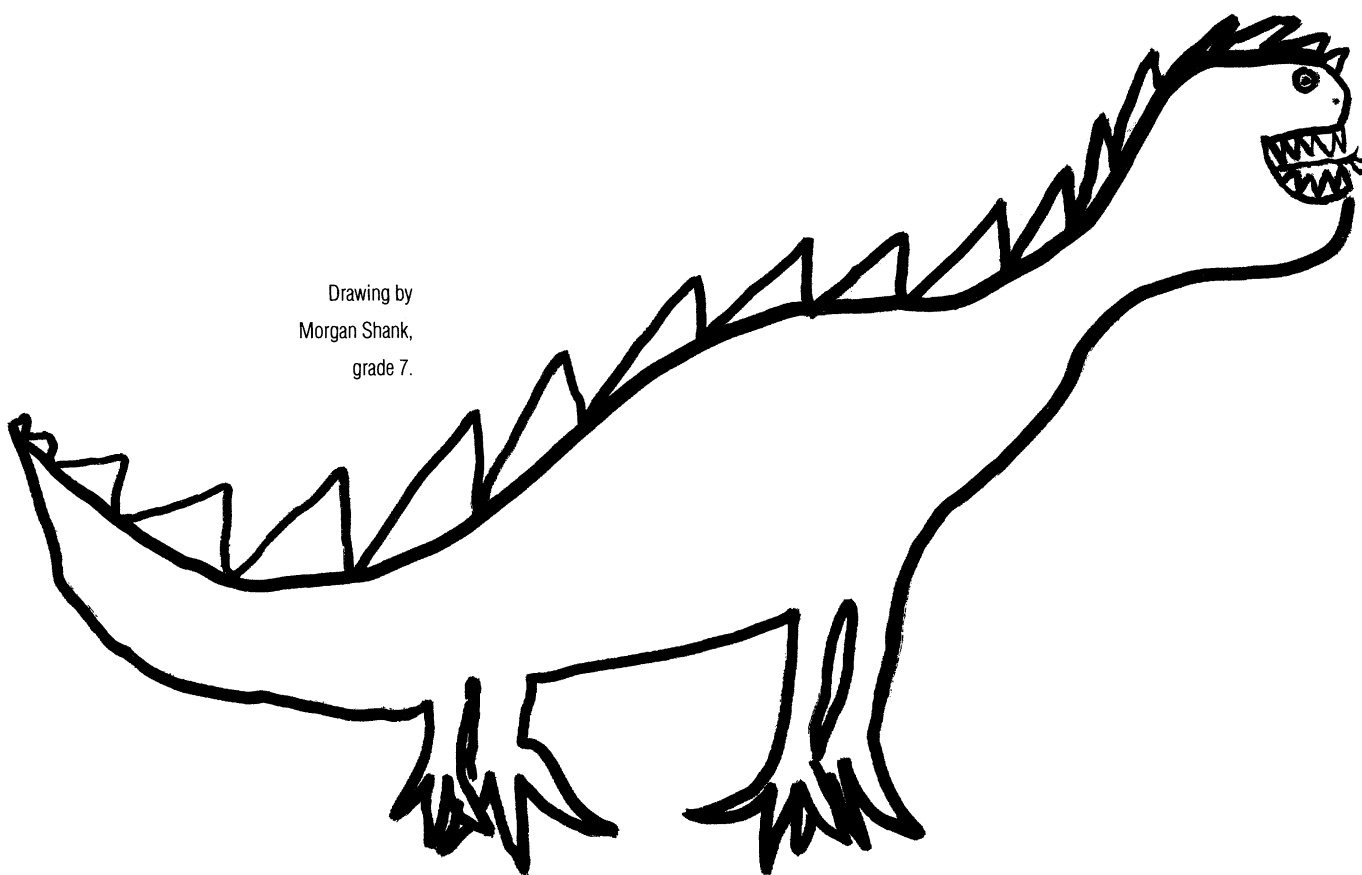
Knowledge of, and assumptions about art may be derived from traditions that emphasize skill development, formal design principles, psychological attributes, or the structure of the disciplines. But remember, Dragons are born of chaos and prefer to be left alone in their lairs. They effectively survive by instinct and habit. Although they prefer young virgins for dinner, they will eat anything that comes their way, and what is not digestible is passed whole. Dragon teachers ingest information in the same manner. If it is comfortable

and easily digested it becomes nutrition, if not ...

### DISEMPowering THE DRAGON

One way to disempower Dragons is to show contempt for them. In this era of budget cuts and emphasis on accountability, many school systems have cut the arts from their formal curriculum. If art is taught in elementary schools, it is often taught by a classroom teacher. Many of these teachers have had little formal training in art education. They have only the examples of teachers they themselves have had — and many of their teachers were Dragons. In order to avoid reproducing the anxiety that they had experienced from their own encounters with Dragons, many elementary

Drawing by  
Morgan Shank,  
grade 7.





teachers have proclaimed art-time, as fun time — as a relief from scholarly pursuits. By relegating art to irrelevance, they exorcise the ghosts of those old Dragons:

*As an elementary school student, art was not a top priority in the curriculum. Most of my art experiences took place on Friday afternoons as sort of recess before the weekend — if we finished everything else (Respondent reflection, 1990/91).*

*In third grade our teacher gave us a list of supplies to buy for art. I was so excited about this, so my mom took me out to buy the supplies. We spent hours looking for just the right crayons and pencils. To my great disappointment I wasn't allowed to do the art project because my teacher told me I hadn't finished my "important" work. This was my punishment (Respondent reflection, 1990/91).*

Yet some Dragons live on. In spite of attempts to erase the lingering anxieties created by Dragons, in spite of art's having been rendered impotent by its positioning and use within the curriculum, young students still know enough to fear the Dragon. Improbable though it seems, our Dragons have reproduced themselves. For an inside look at what nurtures this reproduction, let's take a look at Dragon lair classrooms.

Three major themes crop up when pre-service teachers describe Dragon classrooms: drawing, creativity, and grading. Even though literal drawing has not been the major focus of art education curricula for nearly one hundred years, the idea of "art" still conjures up the idea of drawing. Remember, Dragons are basically lazy creatures, and it makes sense to Dragons, that they should easily be able to identify the subject of a drawing. If a

drawing realistically and accurately portrays the thing it depicts, then the task of identifying good students (the treasures) becomes easier. And if Dragons can easily sort out "special" art students by their drawing ability, then so can the other students. Even very young students are able to understand that in Dragon teacher classrooms, being able to draw realistically is the indicator of talent:

*It is an interesting paradox that art was never a part of the curriculum and yet art has been a subject I've always feared. I have never considered myself capable of doing art. I am one of those who can't draw a straight line with a ruler (Respondent reflection, 1990/91).*

But if you can draw a line (with or without the ruler), then you can be labeled, graded, and in many cases ennobled by the Dragon. If you can't draw when you enter art class (ironically, before you've gotten any instruction in how to draw), you are not talented, you get bad grades, and you feel that you probably don't belong in an art class.

Another conception of art education is that art equals creativity: that if people are creative, they are likely to do well in art. My respondents seemed convinced that if a person was covered with the magic cloak of creativity, there was no problem with the Dragon:

*Art class is such a relief for some students. They get a chance to get away from "school work" and be creative (Respondent reflection, 1990/91).*

But, just what is creativity? And furthermore, how do you grade it? There seems to be some consensus among experts to indicate that creativity equals innovation in problem solving or thinking (Gardner, 1982). Most of my

respondents would agree that they value creativity. However, when they were asked about a hypothetical child who was rarely on-task and who generally pursued off-the-wall means of accomplishing assignments, they waffled: "No, that would be a child to keep in line." "That is a potential problem." "I'd sit down hard on that one."

*My elementary school teachers told me to "express myself," and I wanted to. Then, after I did express myself, they'd pull the rug from underneath me. (Respondent reflection, 1990/91).*

It is popular in teacher education circles to pay lip service to creativity. Most respondents indicated that they valued creativity and that creativity was valued in art class but, like learning to draw, they received little instruction from the Dragons in how to improve their creativity:

*I don't enjoy having to create art. I still feel that art is something that is separate from the rest of my classes. I guess I feel that art is separate because in my other classes I can study and improve. In art, I can't study and become more creative (Respondent reflection, 1990/91).*

Although "creativity" is valued in rhetoric, it appears to be less valued in practice. We have to look at both drawing and creativity to get a focus on Dragon grading. Not only are students confused about the mixed messages Dragons send, but I would guess the Dragons are, too! After all, we need to remember that Dragons are often teachers who have learned from their teachers how and what to teach.

## AVOIDING DRAGONS

How can we avoid Dragon-directed art classes? It would be easy to say that if we avoided drawing, creativity, and

grading, then there would be no Dragons. But if that happens, we mimic the teachers who have fallen into the trap of trivializing art in order to make it a safe activity.

Drawing is important. Gardner (1980) has pointed out that children want to learn to draw representationally, but in the United States as a rule, they do not receive systematic instruction in drawing. A Dragon expects representational drawing but does not teach it.

Creativity is important. We all know that, even if we can't define it exactly. Dragons preach creativity, but are not prepared to accept deviation from accepted patterns.

And grading; is it important? It seems as if it should certainly be possible to grade ourselves for the quality of the drawings our students produce — if we are indeed teaching drawing. If students don't draw well, they haven't been taught. Drawing is really not magic and actually can be taught (c.f. Edwards, 1979; Wilson, Hurwitz, & Wilson, 1987). And as for grading creativity, well, within the American educational system, isn't it time that we rewarded a bit of student eccentricity?

In order to avoid Dragons, in order to nurture positive attitudes toward art instead of art anxiety, in order to avoid reproducing and acting the Dragon, it is critical for teachers to address student needs. We need to make known the mysterious world of teacher expectations. What is it that we want students to learn in an art class? What do we expect the students to accomplish? To produce? Teachers can only answer these questions if they, themselves have answers. And many of them, especially the Dragons, do not. Teachers need to be encouraged to examine their own beliefs about art and art education. As O'Laughlin pointed out:

*One of the major obstacles we face in advancing a progressive or reformist agenda in teacher education may be teachers' and prospective teachers' unexamined beliefs about knowing, teaching and learning.* (1990, p. 3)

Typical Dragon teachers are not reflective. They haven't taken the energy to understand themselves or their students. Maxine Greene, April (1990) has spoken of the role art plays in our lives. She views artwork not only as a corpus of beautiful artifacts, but as objects which can and should disturb the status quo and force people to rethink their ideas of beauty, truth, justice, and humanity. In the context of an art classroom, as art is re-thought, so are student/teacher relationships. Rethinking can be a slippery and dangerous journey which opens doors to divergent viewpoints, experiences, and interests. It leaves behind orderliness and neatness. However, it may also lead to a new kind of magic for art education.

#### CONCLUSION

To close, let us make one last cautious pass towards the Dragon's lair. As I've noted, T.H. White's beast unreflectively suffocates all those who are unwary enough to pass too close to the Dragon's tail. It is tempting to arm ourselves, with all the magic and weapons at our disposal, to make short shrift of this beast who has caused so much pain and suffering for our students. To do this, however, may be premature and short-sighted.

What will be left when the Dragon is dead? In the *I Ching* or *Book of Changes*, Dragons signify wisdom (Borges, 1970) and, to quote Cohen (1970, p. 52, 53):

*Although Western dragons were known as evil misers, one rarely encountered an Oriental dragon without*

*coming away with a generous gift. [These] dragons could occasionally be capricious and even malevolent, but they were usually benevolent.*

Keeping Cohen's second type of Dragon in mind, perhaps we would be better off, as educators, if we wished for magic transformations instead of arming ourselves with weapons of Dragon destruction. If our wish were granted, we might see a shape crawling out of the belly of the evil Dragon; the shape of a teacher armed with Dragon

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wisdom and benevolence, just as a chastened but wiser Red Riding Hood emerged from the belly of the wolf.

Perhaps the legacy of the Dragon will be a fairy tale that serves as a tool for reflection about the power and importance of good art education in our schools. As Jorge Luis Borges pointed out (Borges, 1970):

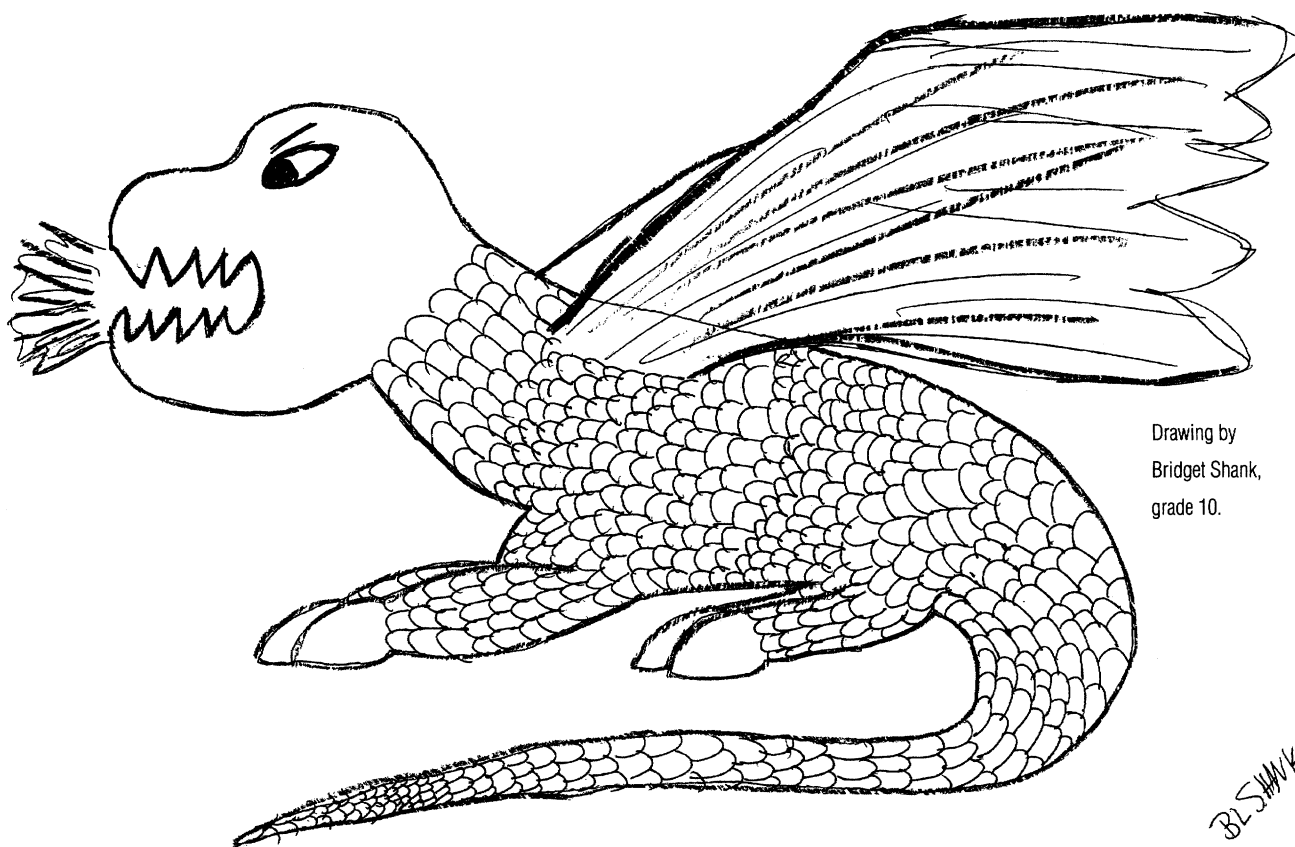
*We are as ignorant of the meaning of the dragon as we are of the meaning of the*

*universe, but there is something in the dragon's image that appeals to the human imagination, and so we find the dragon in quite distinct places and times. It is, so to speak, a necessary monster, not an ephemeral or accidental one. (pp. 16-17)*

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## NOTE

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Drawing by  
Bridget Shank,  
grade 10.

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