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## What Michael Knew: reflections on a conversation

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### **One Continuous Conversation**

I had heard people describe particular long friendships as consisting of essentially one continuous conversation held over many years and countless locations. Intuitively, I felt I understood that possibility, but, on the whole, my old friends and I talk about lots of things – politics, art, relationships, health, and, when we aren't celebrating life's wonders, we engage in complaining about just about everything else.

Shortly after Michael Armstrong's death on 7 March 2016, it occurred to me for the first time that our relationship was perhaps the only one in my life that could be said to have been essentially one long conversation. It was carried on over nearly twenty years on both sides of the Atlantic, in our kitchens, countless restaurants, classrooms, cars, often standing in front of works of art, often with pieces of student work on the table in front of us, many times via email, and often on slow walks in the USA, the United Kingdom, and Italy. No matter how long between visits, within seconds we had picked up essentially where we'd left off. Yes, for sure, we talked of health, our families, and friends. Interestingly, with Michael, there was almost no complaining at all – except for bitter complaint about education policy in our respective countries. But it always came, quite quickly, back to our mutual obsessions.

Broadly, this was a conversation about teaching, learning, and schooling. More specifically, though, we focused in on a set of concerns (or were they convictions?) we shared – that if one took the time to look closely enough at anything, though in our case it was children, art, and, most often, children's art, one could be rewarded with intriguing insights and new understandings. That is, if one's practice was steady and disciplined enough. On especially good days, one might even discover powerful ways of seeing and making sense of the world. The nature of that practice was perhaps the central concern of our conversations.

The start of our conversation was – and wasn't – quick. I remember my instant fascination with the first chapter I read from *Closely Observed Children* (Armstrong, 1980). While only beginning to develop my capacity for the kind of observation, interpretation, and reflection that Michael practiced in that book, I felt immediately that his was a voice from a world that made perfect sense to me and yet might as well have been another planet light years away from the high school I was teaching in at that time and the education reform movement that was exploding in the USA. Michael seemed to come from a world where time had completely different dimensions. It certainly seemed to move more slowly. In Michael's world, people took serious time to watch and wonder about children – what they do, what they are working on, what they know, and how they come to that knowledge. That was 1986.

It was 10 years before I met Michael in person. I had just completed doctoral studies at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, which I had undertaken after nearly 18 years teaching in high schools. Michael came to give a talk and for meetings with a group of us, mostly students of Eleanor Duckworth and Courtney Cazden, who were deeply interested in his work. I was thrilled to meet Michael. In these sessions, Michael read us several children's stories and engaged us in considering these young authors 'as writers or artists or philosophers in their own right'. He asked us to engage with their stories as he did in *Closely Observed Children*, which he described in an interview in 1992 in *Bread Loaf News*: 'The more closely I looked at children's stories or painting or speculations, the surer I grew that what children were doing was not radically different from what mature artists and thinkers do. They were engaged in the same enterprise, only at an early point in development' (Armstrong, 1992, pp. 2-4).

At the end of his too-brief time with us, I awkwardly offered Michael two essays I'd written about my own work engaging classroom teachers in studying student work. In making this gift, I expected little and was only grateful to have had that time with this man whose work had already lit my path and supported my instincts that the things children made – notably their literary and visual art, but their music, dance, and theater, as well – were incalculably rich sources of information about children, childhood, learning, and teaching. That was 1996.

I was surprised then, two years later, when I received four handwritten pages and an additional two typed pages in an envelope from Southampton. I share the opening of that letter perhaps out of some sentimentality, but also because it captures something I think important about the pace of Michael's thought, work, and, in our case at least, relationships. (It is hard for me to avoid sentiment in writing about Michael. I miss him, but since many months and sometimes a year could pass between our visits, it seems that, deep in my mind, I believe we will get together again. As I write, it is just over a year since our last dinner together in London and eight months since his death. I can't get past the feeling that our next visit isn't far off.)

Here is the opening of his letter:

Dear Steve,

I guess it was more than two years ago now that I came to Cambridge. While I was there you gave me two pieces of yours, *Learning from Looking* and *Wondering To Be Done*, I remember reading them on the plane back to England and thinking I must read them again and respond. And then, as they do, events ran away with me – teaching, administering, preparing for inspection, meeting deadlines, whatever. And now two years have gone while your essays have sat on my desk awaiting a response.

He went on in that letter to compliment my essays and point out various alignments in our purposes and approaches. And then he laid down his gauntlet. Perhaps it was this moment that established the focus of our long conversation and set it in motion:

My one doubt, but quite a large one, concerns your separation of description from interpretation. My own view would be that all description is necessarily interpretation and that to restrict ourselves, initially, to a supposedly neutral amount of what we see is logically impossible. I've for a long time assumed as a given Goethe's remarks in the introduction to his *Theory of Colours*: 'For merely looking at an object cannot be of any use to us. All looking goes over into an observing, all observing into a reflecting, all reflecting into a connecting, and so one can say that with every attentive look we cast into the world we are already theorizing.' The implication is that interpretation is part of what looking consists of. I see the task not as moving from description to interpretation but rather as a progressive revising, reconstructing, refining of interpretation as one identifies – in collaboration with others – more and more closely with the work.

I was one of the principal architects of the Collaborative Assessment Protocol, a method for examining children's work, created at Project Zero, an education research group, in the late 1980s (Seidel, 1998). This method, as I have explained countless times, *starts from* description and *moves on* to interpretation. So his doubt was, as Michael noted, 'quite a large' one for me to consider. Why I didn't immediately accept Michael's (and Goethe's!) premise and change the protocol to reflect the obvious truth of his argument is a good question, perhaps a topic for another essay.

But I didn't immediately change the protocol and still haven't, though I constantly experiment with the meaning and role of interpretation in this method of studying student work. I continue to 'start from description', even though I will often note that some people, notably Michael, consider this step a 'logical impossibility'.

In that letter, Michael went on to share, as he has with so many others, the rest of Goethe's argument:

The whole process for me is best summed up in a second quotation from Goethe (I've used these quotes so often you've probably heard them from me or from something I've written already) when he describes 'a delicate form of the empirical which identifies so intimately with its object that it thereby becomes theory.' That, at any rate, is the quality which I feel we should all strive for in interpreting a child's work. I'm not at all sure of its implications. I guess I'm still trying to make sense of them.

**'as one identifies – in collaboration with others – more and more closely with the work'**

In one of his visits to Harvard, Michael came, as he often did, to my class. Of course, he read a child's story, as he often did, and then we all engaged in considering it – sharing observations, associations, interpretations, and so on. At one point, he said something close to this: 'Interpretation is the point at which teaching begins'. Now, almost twenty years later, I'm still working on what he meant. How does the moment of sharing an interpretation catalyze learning and constitute the genesis of the act of teaching? Why that moment? Is he arguing that all the other components of teaching – designing lessons and spaces, setting them up, welcoming children into a classroom – without an interpretation is merely setting the stage. That the play doesn't really begin until the teacher has 'the courage to make an interpretation', as Carla Rinaldi described her take on a critical responsibility of a teacher (Rinaldi, personal communication).

Here's as close as I can get at this point. Goethe argued that looking becomes observing, observing becomes reflecting, reflecting leads to connecting, and connecting is a form of identifying with that which one is looking at. Let's return to what Michael wrote in his letter to me:

The implication is that interpretation is part of what looking consists of. I see the task not as moving from description to interpretation but rather as a progressive revising, reconstructing, refining of interpretation as one identifies – in collaboration with others – more and more closely with the work.

This is the 'delicate form of the empirical' that defined the particular educational practice Michael engaged in, refined throughout his career, and of which he was a master. The goal, as Michael sees it, is to identify 'more and more closely with the work'.

I wonder now whether that identification with the work is also an identification with the child, the maker of the work. In his remarkable interpretation of Chris's story, 'New Kid,' Michael does seem to identify with Chris. I remember conversations with Michael at the time when he knew Chris and they discussed Chris's story. I had the strong sense that there was a bond and mutual affection between them.

But I also know of Michael's connection to David Hawkins and his respect for Hawkins' essay, 'I, Thou, and It' and the idea of subject matter, particularly observable phenomena in the world, as a meeting ground for the teacher and student – a starting point and touchstone for the study of particular phenomena (Hawkins, 1975). In Michael's world, the 'it' in Hawkins' formulation also, and importantly, included the things children make, their creative work. For Michael, meeting a child at and through her work was an essential element of teaching. The work becomes a nexus of many elements – child, teacher, other students, subject matter, imagination, understanding, curiosity, creativity, learning, teaching. Interpretation, then, is the catalyst of a process of meaning making with the child that has the potential to extend her original efforts into a far more protracted engagement with the world.

Goethe doesn't make an explicit connection between his method and teaching; that was Michael's move, a connection he explored, practiced, and argued for over half a century, day after day in schools, year after year in essays, books, and countless conversations. The writings in which he discusses and demonstrates that practice, notably his three major books, are education masterpieces, though so far outside the standard educational lexicon in the late twentieth/early twenty-first century that his work is hardly known beyond a small set of devoted followers.

### *'What Children Know'*

Recently, in October 2016, in the same room where I first met Michael, a group of local educators gathered for a monthly meeting I have been convening for 20 years. We call it ROUNDS and it is modeled on one form of medical 'rounds' in which medical professionals come together to solve 'mystery' cases and receive briefs on current and incomplete research studies. Approximately 25 educators come each month to discuss questions of educational practice, study student work, and reflect on what it means to teach. It's like a floating crap game – most people on our mailing list come periodically; a few are almost always there. The educators who come to ROUNDS share a passion for practicing the close examination of children's creative endeavors and participate in using the Collaborative Assessment Protocol to study pictures, stories, and other schoolwork by children (Seidel, 2010).

Whenever Michael came to ROUNDS, he shared stories and drawings that he had collected and was working on. People who were at those sessions remember them vividly, many still holding onto notes from those sessions, notes taken many years ago. There was much to remember, though perhaps the highlight of any session with Michael was his readings of the stories he brought.

Those readings revealed more than I can possibly articulate about Michael's intimate exploration of their meaning and his identification with the stories. Only now have I come to think of Michael's readings as a manifestation of Goethe's 'delicate form of the empirical which identifies so intimately with its

object'. In those readings, both charming and exciting in the most profound sense of each of those words, Michael visibly and audibly practiced the art of interpretation, bringing in all of his extraordinary imaginative, analytic, empathetic, and aesthetic capacities. The extraordinary expression of love at the core of Michael's remarkable readings of the stories he brought may be what lodged these moments in our memories.

Before and after each session of ROUNDS he attended, Michael and I debated the advantages and the absurdity of my insistence, as noted above, on *starting from* description and *moving on* to interpretation. I believe I have held onto this 'logical impossibility' because asking for description as the first step in the protocol works. It is a wonderfully open entry point – anyone and everyone can notice something that is visible in the work, that draws their attention, and they can name it for others. Hearing many voices early in the process democratizes the session and establishes from the start the value of each person's contribution. It also helps the group ground their interpretations in what is actually visible in the work – what the child put there. I also kept 'starting from description' because Michael, himself, would happily admit when other people's descriptions of the work helped him see aspects and qualities that he had not noticed – even, as he sometimes noted, when he'd been spending exhaustive energy on his readings of particular stories or drawings.

The protocol has other steps as well, including a period for raising questions about the work and a time for speculating on what the child was working on. The protocol concludes with a time for stepping back from the work to consider any broader implications for teaching and learning. Michael seemed to find all of the steps provocative and often found delight in what came up in a session.

In our most recent meeting, Jay Featherstone, author of one of the other essays on Michael in this volume, brought the story 'Poorly Mouse' to the group for consideration. Usually participants bring a child's work from their own classroom or program and then, at a specified moment in the protocol, provide extensive contextual background on the piece we've been examining. Jay offered contextual background based on his reading of Michael's writings about this story with drawings by a six-year-old girl. In this process, Jay also shared some of his reflections on the extraordinary qualities of Michael's work. He noted Michael's last collection of essays, *What Children Know: essays on children's literary and visual art* (Armstrong, 2010), as a remarkable exploration of one of Michael's basic beliefs – that children, even young children, have tremendous knowledge of what it means to be human, knowledge well worth taking seriously and studying. As Jay spoke, I had vivid memories of conversations with Michael in which he talked at length about his respect for Henry James's novel, *What Maisie Knew*, the story of a five-year-old girl's experience of her parent's divorce in London around the turn of the twentieth century. Michael admired not only the novel, but also James's introduction to it. In addition to much more, the introduction is an account of how James reckoned with 'what children know' and how it can and can't be expressed.

Just one line from James's introduction gives some feeling of his serious consideration of children's knowledge. 'Small children have many more perceptions than they have terms to translate them; their vision is at any moment much richer, their apprehension even constantly stronger, than their prompt, their at all producible, vocabulary' (James, 1840/2010). It is pleasing to imagine the dialogue with James that must have taken place in Michael's mind as he read – and, I'm quite sure, re-read many times – this introduction and the novel. I've no doubt Michael was taking him on – agreeing, arguing, and considering James's insights into childhood, adulthood, his society, and the art of writing. Of course, the title of Michael's last collection of essays pays homage to James and this particular novel.

In discussing the significance of Michael's focus on 'what children know', Jay noted the part of the Collaborative Assessment Protocol that asks participants to speculate on what the child is working on. Acknowledging the importance and richness of those speculations, Jay suggested that perhaps we should consider another question for the protocol based on Michael's argument and obsession – based on our observations, descriptions, reflections, connections, and interpretations of the work, what can we say about what the child knows? Or, more simply, what does the child know? Jay's suggestion was so obviously right that I knew immediately we would add this question to the protocol at our next meeting. It is a profound addition and a homage to Michael, but more than a symbolic expression of respect, it is a very specific manifestation of how Michael has influenced and inspired our work. It is also, as so much of Michael's work was, an antidote to the prevailing and relentlessly stubborn view of children as without deep and unique insight, perspective, or expressive capacities.

In his introduction to *What Children Know*, Michael identifies seven criteria he believes children's works must be held to if they are to be considered works of art, a condition he argues children's works often approach. The final criterion is that the work addresses in some serious way what it means to be human:

7. Reference to the human condition: to the question of how we live and who we are. As Tolstoy puts it in respect of literature, to understand art is to understand 'the beauty of expressing life in words.' So understood, art becomes a source of knowledge, the exchange of experience between the writer, the reader, and the work. It is this construction of knowledge through word and image that has provoked the title of this collection of essays: what children know. (Armstrong, 2010, p. viii)

### *'art and life'*

One night in London, Michael and I met for an early dinner at the restaurant on the top floor of Tate Modern, where I was doing some work and where he had spent the afternoon in an exhibition. Even with the striking view of the dome of St Paul's Cathedral, we were hardly distracted from jumping into conversation.

We had so little time. Michael's train back to Southampton was in just a few hours. And I was anxious to share a conversation I'd had earlier that afternoon with a member of the Tate's Learning Department about the art made by young children in the early childhood and family programs at the Tate. Having received various requests for accounts of what was happening in her programs from funders, she was concerned about how to assess the work of the children who made art in their family rooms. Her questions centered on what to look for in their work, what conclusions might be drawn, and how to share any findings with those wanting to understand the value of the programs. I shared these concerns with Michael.

I think he misunderstood some of what I was saying. He seemed to think I was implying that my Tate colleague was interested in gleaning – and reporting – some sort of psychological conclusions about the children or childhood. I don't think that was her intent at all, but that was what Michael heard and it provoked him to say, 'I don't look at children's stories for that at all. *I study them to see what I can learn about art and life*'.

I was stunned. Though I've had years now to reflect on that moment, I'm still stunned. I had never heard Michael make such a simple and declarative statement of his own purposes in studying children's works. I had long struggled with my own reasons for studying children's work. My answers were always firmly tied to the context of education and goals of professional development. I argued that the purpose of this kind of deep study, utilizing observation, description, and interpretation – the kind of 'delicate empiricism' that Goethe described and Michael practiced – is to surface generative questions about learning and teaching and to deepen our understanding of children and childhood. And I still do. But I have never been able to make such a clear and assured statement as Michael had made that evening at dinner.

With that almost offhand comment, Michael tore a hole in my thinking about the purposes of our aligned work. I heard this as a very personal declaration from Michael. I felt he was lifting the question of purposes out of a strictly professional context. He challenged my need to justify this work in the languages of education. Certainly, for Michael, personal purposes were also political statements, as well as declarations of educational philosophy, but at that moment, he didn't seem to be sounding an educational manifesto or even a call for funding or policy support for this work. He simply stated why *he* did this work.

Michael was hardly an isolationist. He gave talks and published essays and books over 40 years. He taught and was a school leader for well over a half century. He didn't hold back, but, in that statement, I felt, at least, an acknowledgement that he would do this work even if he had no way to share it with anyone. He would do it because spending serious time in 'attentive looking' at children's art was a powerful way into insights into 'art and life', insights that could enrich his work as an educator, for sure, but, even more broadly, his experience as a human being and his own search for meaning and purpose.



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It is hard to end this essay, as it is hard to accept an end to our long conversation. Perhaps it is best to end with an image.

About six years ago, my wife and I visited Michael in Arezzo, Italy, where he and Isobel, his wife, had an apartment and where his daughter, Ursula, lives with her family. Arezzo's steep cobblestone streets seemed almost fiendishly difficult for Michael to manage, but he was delighted and exuberant as he took us all over the town. The highlight of Michael's role as tour guide – after a beautiful dinner with his family and playing with his grandchildren – was taking us to see the great frescoes, *The History of the True Cross*, painted by Piero della Francesca in the Basilica of San Francesco around 1447. Michael had been going to see these masterpieces by Piero since he was quite young. Over and over, he returned to them through the many decades of his life. He had been telling me about them for years.

When we finally stood under them, the frescoes were, as Michael had suggested, stunning. They were also quite overwhelming. Their complexity was far beyond my capacity to really comprehend, at least on first viewing. Standing in the basilica, I spent much more time looking at Michael looking at those remarkable images high above our heads than I did looking at the frescoes themselves. This was Michael doing what I think he was most deeply compelled to do in this world – looking, observing, reflecting, connecting, theorizing, and identifying with the object.

And what was the purpose of all this effort? I suppose it was to see what he could learn about art and life.

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