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Remembering Michael: inspired conversations

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'How would my life be different if I had never met Michael?' I wondered to myself as I drove along Route 93 to Boston. Michael's ideas and curiosity had such an impact that I could not begin to explain how important he was to me. I looked at the clock on the dashboard: 12:05 and his train arrived at 12:00. Oh well, I'm almost there. I took the South Station exit, parked and ran through the revolving doors and into the crowds. In the middle of the station near the Au Bon Pain I found him looking around to find me. I gave him a hug and took his suitcase.

'Hello Michael.'

'Hello.'

'Sorry I'm late.'

'No worries', he said. 'I think that I've been looking quite pathetic.' Michael winked as he spoke. 'Two South Station employees offered to help me. I informed them that my ride would arrive soon.'

'Are you hungry?' I said.

'Yes. There was no food on the train. I ate a small snack that I brought for the trip.'

'Would you like to go to Bertucci's?'

'Sounds good.'

On the way back to Lawrence we spoke about our families. He asked me about my work and my writing. I concentrated most of my attention on the road and traffic but I was content to hear his voice.

Once at Bertucci's I felt more relaxed. The driving was behind me; I was close to home. The hostess seated us quickly. Within minutes we had each ordered a glass of Chianti. I ordered my favorite at Bertucci's, salmon with baby spinach, and Michael asked for a mozzarella pizza. As soon as we had our drinks, I asked Michael to tell me about his work. He explained that he had

been working on a study of the education system in the United Kingdom. 'The educational practices are being questioned, and rightly so.' As Michael talked I had a thousand questions buzzing through my head like bees. Michael lifted his glass of wine to his mouth, slowly because of the shaking caused by Parkinson's disease. Just as he was about to take a sip I asked: 'Are you saying that we have to move away from standards which are limiting and move towards questioning and meaningful dialogue between students and teachers?' Michael put his glass down without taking a sip and looked up from under his eyebrows with a childlike smile: 'Exactly. Quite right. That is what my presentation will be about at the conference'. Michael explained, 'In a school which takes children's work as seriously as art, education is embedded in creative practice. Its method is not instruction but conversations around the work itself'.

Conversations

Now as I look back I think about that conversation, and so many others. Over the years when Michael visited the town of Lawrence, Massachusetts (where I taught) for a three-week span of time, he met in the evening with teachers to look closely at student work, and during the day he joined our classes to talk to students about their writing: their thoughts, works and worlds. These conversations with students and teachers caused quiet but powerful revolutions as Michael practiced his pedagogy of the imagination.

In my class, Michael made it look easy. He grabbed the old teacher chair with extra padding, and his pen and notebook, and together with the students he would look at the work, the child's attempt to make sense of the world. Michael, my students, and the subject at hand, became the interwoven fabric of our classroom's creative practice. Michael spoke of the power of this creative practice in a lecture he gave in Lawrence for a teacher conference offered under the auspices of the Andover Bread Loaf course. He said, 'To acquire knowledge through creative practice is to appropriate knowledge, so that learning is not so much a matter of assimilating received wisdom as of reconstructing it, putting it to new uses, re-describing reality'. We all partook of this construction, and our class became a studio of observers and creators.

Each time Michael visited my class I had students who loved to write and students who would put barely a word on the page. But when Michael arrived and took the time to look closely at their work, our community of learners changed. When the reluctant writers eavesdropped on Michael's initial conversations, the once-uninterested would come to school with pages of thoughts, poems and stories, asking for time to talk about their work with Michael. It was as if all they wanted was a conversation with Michael.

Michael's published essays and books show us his thoughts, the reasons he did what he did, his argument against standards-based educational policy. But to see his true genius was to observe him side by side with children in 1st grade or any grade or age. He observed and shared. He looked closely at their work: poems, stories, mathematical equations and scientific observations. He

questioned and wondered with them, finding interesting thoughts and ideas in their work. When Michael spoke to students of all ages everyone had an idea, a thought to share. In turn our class worked together creating a new vision of community. Soon, with Michael's modeling, the students discussed with each other, scribbling notes and continuing their conversations.

Each conversation started in the classroom but didn't end there. Michael would often ask students for a copy of their work so that he could think about it more that evening. The next day Michael would come back to the class as excited as the students with his black Moleskin journal filled with pages of tiny handwritten notes. He would share his excitement with me, anxious for students to arrive and talk about their work. His close readings of their thoughts, the same close reading process used in the study of great fiction, always yielded a new understanding, an understanding of the world from an angle Michael didn't quite expect. The beauty of taking the work seriously was that nothing surprised him. He had a great appreciation for what students brought to the table when they were given the freedom to consider the subjects and weigh in with their own musing, questions, and opinions.

Figure 1. Michael listens to Nathen during a discussion of the photography exhibition created by these 4th grade students.

Home and City 2005

One morning Michael began, 'I've been thinking about the conversation we had yesterday and it occurs to me that …' On this day he was concerned with the action figure doll my fourth-grade student, Nathen, had brought in the day before. We were working on a project called *Home and City* with the Addison Gallery education director Julie Bernson, and artist in residence, photographer Oscar Palacio. For part of the project adults and students worked together gathering visual and written interpretations of our community. Students took photographs to represent home. There were photographs of trophies, helmets, dolls, bibles and more. We collected and curated these photographs as we discussed the ways in which they represented our homes and lives.

As we looked at the photographs Oscar Palacio questioned if the dolls we were looking at were only for girls. Nathen pointed out that there are dolls that boys use but they go by a different name – action figures. The discussion got heated as students took sides. Were the action figures really dolls? Do boys play with dolls? Are dolls only for girls? Michael listened to the conversation with his pen at his lips, concentrating.

Nathen made a note of the discussion in his notebook. Michael wrote Nathen's observation in his notes: 'Oscar asked how does an action figure connect to a boy. Then how does a doll connect to a girl. It really doesn't matter. Because the Poly [*sic*] Pocket (doll) is fun for me because it moves and an action figure doesn't move'.

The next day, when Nathen brought in a headless doll-like figure, Michael wrote: 'He wanted to demonstrate, or so it seemed to me, that boys could play with dolls just as readily as girls ... The discussion of gender which took place on the carpet was provoked by Oscar's sense of the gendered bias in the children's photographs. I felt that the issue of gender was not seen in the same way by many of the children as it was by we adults'. Later in the week Michael continued to reflect on that particular conversation. He wrote the following observation:

> This whole discussion raised for me a large question. Culture determines how children think and act, but culture is also redefined by children's individual and independent thought and action. As Ricoeur puts it in his book *Time and Narrative*, tradition is always made up of the interaction between culture and individuality. I suspect we might best evaluate schools by the extent to which they foster children's originality in regard to culture. Keats said something like this – I'm quoting from memory: 'Many have original minds that do not think so. They are led away by custom.'

While working on the *Home and City* project students could choose photographs they had taken themselves, or a photograph by a peer, as a prompt for their writing. Michael would sit in his chair and converse with students – giving each particular student all of his attention. In one of those moments Michael met again with Nathen. Nathen had chosen a photograph taken by a peer of a

comic video-game placed on a dark blue carpet. Nathen wrote the following poem, which I found in Michael's notes:

> Colorful and bright
> no stripes.
> In good light
> not too bright
> but just right
> trying to fight
> out of the light
> cool night
> no light
> you shine at night
> so bright
> you look like a growing light
> at night.
>
> fin

Later that night Michael reflected on their conversation. Here are his notes:

> More on Nathen's poem. He read it to me almost exactly as I've set out the poem but it doesn't, as I remember, look exactly like that in his book. (I should check.) What's he up to in this poem? The photograph was of the cover of a comic – at least it looked like a comic – placed on a dark blue carpet, probably in Blockbusters or perhaps it was in the library. The comic cover, of fantasy creatures, is predominantly yellow (I should check), the carpet nocturnal. The poem opens with description. Its first five lines seem tied straightforwardly to the comic on the carpet in the photograph, its colours, its appearance against its background. But these five lines also establish the poem's rhyme structure after the assonance of the second line and at the fifth line, 'but just right' we can sense Nathen's interest, or more strictly the poem's interest, shifting from the descriptive to the fanciful as the rhyme takes over and moves the poem into a nocturnal meditation, suggested by the rhymed words, light, bright, night. It would be easy to claim that Nathen is merely selecting rhymes with no concern for meaning but this would be an injustice. It's rather that his attention to rhyme draws him and his poem into new avenues of thought, a play on words, images, associations: the moon, its rise and fall, the night, its darkness and fearfulness, its sense of an ending. Nathen was very deliberate about the word 'fin' at the end. He insisted that this was what he wanted. It's the very word the poem has been leading up to. The words 'at night' occur twice. Repeated and standing alone on the final line, they make a definitive ending. The afterword 'fin' confirms it. Dewey writes that 'Art expresses, it does not state' (Ch. 7, p. 134).

> Nathen's poem is an instance. He wouldn't put it as I have done. But the meaning is there in the poem for a reader to draw out. And I want to say it is also intentional, deliberate, no accident. All we have to do to see this is to presume that Nathen's work should be taken as art. So it should.

On 1 November 2005 Nathen wrote in his journal, 'Writing, this day I'm writing with Michael Armstrong. It's very difficult because Michael is intelligent and I'm just a little boy in fourth grade'. Nathen, who had often been in trouble for not following school rules, began to take his own writing seriously, taking the time to express his own feelings. Nathen, like Tolstoy's students, knew that he had a special teacher. Nathen could sense Michael's intelligence from the very beginning even as they both focused on Nathen's work.

Michael's thoughts about Nathen's poem bring us back to Tolstoy's convictions about teaching peasant children. Tolstoy stumbled upon an authentic course for teaching writing to young children and stood in awe of their talent. He also pointed out that the work of his pupils was, 'not chance, but conscious creativity'. To read Tolstoy's excitement is to hear Michael as he spoke to me about my students, their thoughts, their attempts to understand the world. Michael's joy was a contagious delight with students and their discoveries of the world around them. It made teaching each day into something more than a set of standards to jump through; rather it was an exciting journey we all shared, as we learned from each other. Tolstoy wrote about his observations of the students' narrative journey: 'For a long time I could not account for this impression which I had received, although I felt that this was one of those impressions which educate a man in his mature years, which raise him to a new level of life and force him to renounce the old and devote himself entirely to the new'. [1] Michael was that man who 'renounced the old and devoted himself entirely to the new'. Michael in the classroom was joyous. The children rushed in from home or recess eager to talk to him.

Recently Michael wrote a review of Marion Richardson's book, *Art and the Child*.[2] In Richardson's work he found another educator who had discovered, as did Tolstoy, the 'conscious creativity' of students. Richardson also worked with the same back and forth between the teacher, student and work at hand. Michael quoted Marion Richardson and her description of how to encourage the power to create: 'I could free it, but I could not teach it; and my whole purpose was now directed to this end, as I set out to learn with and from the children' (pp. 104-105). This interaction with students that leads the adult to learn along with the child is what made Michael's work so special and important. Michael didn't collect senseless data or work on stifling research in order to pigeonhole a child's ability level. Michael honestly learned with the children. He brought his knowledge to them by understanding their journey as learners, by talking to them about their interpretations and understandings. Michael was always young again when he worked with students because he could hear and appreciate their search for their own understanding of the

world. In turn, the children perceived his sincere interest, his integrity, his willingness to really hear them. So, like myself and so many others, my students sought him out – as if they knew that he was their one chance at really being heard.

When Michael ended his stay that year and traveled home, my students and I were missing more than the writer, teacher and professor. We were missing the man who talked to us, the man who became part of our community of artists and thinkers. But, his quiet revolution had a lasting impact as we spoke about him, his writing, his thoughts. We continued the conversations and reflected on our work together.

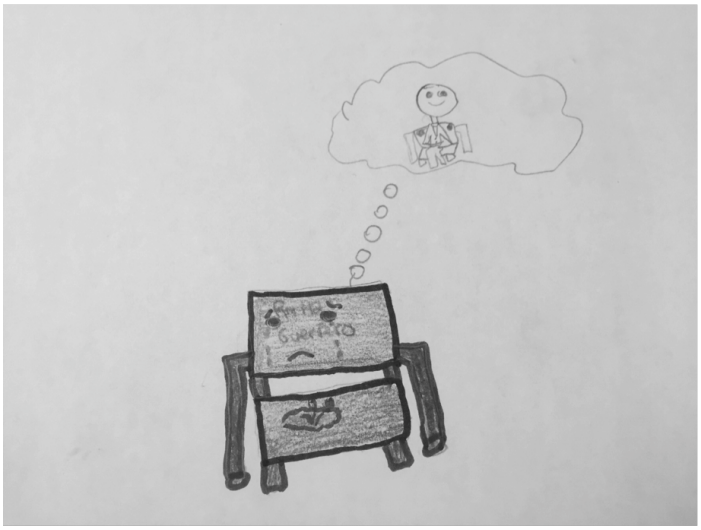

Figure 2. The chair Michael used when he visited our classroom for three weeks. The ten-year-old student artist has shown the chair crying and missing Michael.

Alberto, a very reluctant writer when Michael first arrived, called out one day after Michael left, 'Look, I think his chair is sad'. Students decided at that moment to dedicate poems to his chair and placed a paper title on the back so that everyone who visited our class would know that it was Michael's chair.

Nathen wrote a letter to Michael:

> Dear Michael,
> We all miss you so much that I sit in your chair so it's not lonely. How was the flight and how are you doing? It's been tough with out you because you've been gone and when you were here it was easy because when Mis Guerrero was busy you would help us one at a time. So hope you come back soon. But can I ask you something? How did it feel when you left home? Because you seemed happy but on the inside you were sad. No one noticed but I did. How come

you didn't tell us? Is it because you thought we'd be sad? Well I was sad at first, but then I know if you didn't leave your wife would be sad.
Love,
Nathen
p.s. be safe.

Notes

[1] A. Pinch & M. Armstrong (Eds) (1982) Should we Teach the Peasant Children to Write, or Should They Teach Us?, in *Tolstoy on Education: Tolstoy's educational writings 1861-62*, p. 229, trans. Alan Pinch. Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press and Associated University Presses.

[2] *FORUM*, 57(1), 2015, 105-113.

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