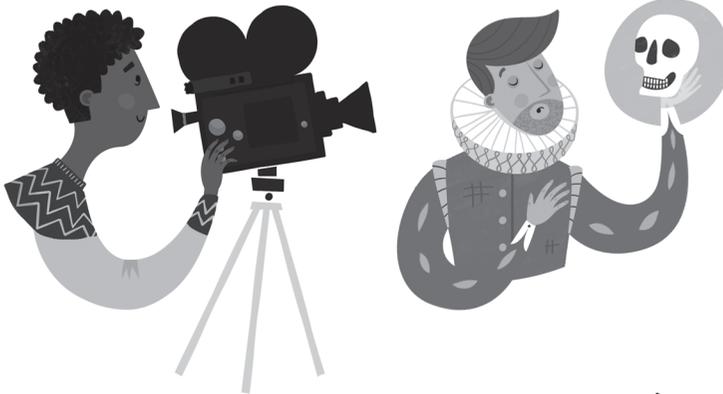


The

artful

Educator

Creative, Imaginative and
Innovative Approaches to Teaching



Sue Cowley



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Part One:

Artful Attitudes



Chapter 1

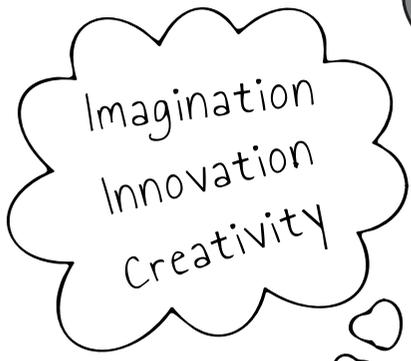
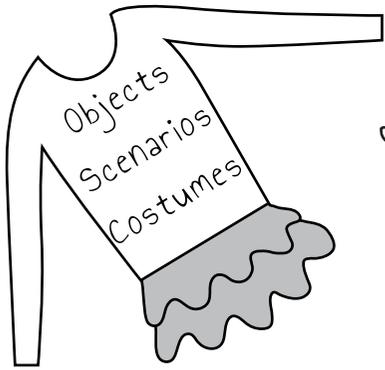
The Artful Philosophy

‘They tried to bury us, they didn’t know we were seeds.’

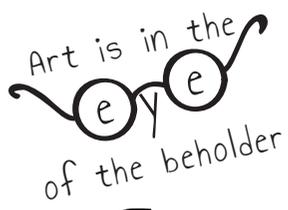
(attributed to) Dinos Christianopoulos

It is notoriously tricky to define what ‘art’ is, which is exactly how things should be. One of the defining features of art is that it is not about right or wrong; nor is it about certainty and standardisation. This can make artful approaches challenging for an education system that values binary answers. What then does it mean for an educator to be artful, in the context of this book? For me, the artful philosophy is about taking an imaginative, innovative and creative approach to what happens in your classroom. It is the antithesis to standardisation because it comes out of a creative relationship with the learners you teach. Art is in the eye of the beholder – it is an expression of our common humanity that arises from a unique and individual response to the world, and so being artful requires you to give your children a sense of personal agency. The process of making and exploring art will create an emotional reaction in your learners and it will allow them to express their own visions of their world. This makes it a powerful force for building children’s self-confidence and promoting their enjoyment of learning. Art is about the senses – it will elicit some kind of sensory response in the audience, and make them think or feel at a deeper level than usual. Artfulness is the antithesis of ‘there is only one way to teach (or indeed to learn) and this is how everyone must do it’. In the current educational climate, where success in high stakes testing is prioritised, artful, experimental, imaginative teaching may feel like an act of subversion. In this book I argue that the time for a principled and artful rebellion has arrived.

The artful educator believes that children are unique – that they have a unique set of talents and interests, and that each child learns best in a way that is individual to them. This means that it is nigh on impossible to standardise the process of education – to say ‘if you do it like this it will work’ or ‘research shows that method X is the best one



What is



Not About:
Right, Wrong, Certainty, Standardisation, One Best Way,
Teaching From A Script, Staying In A Box

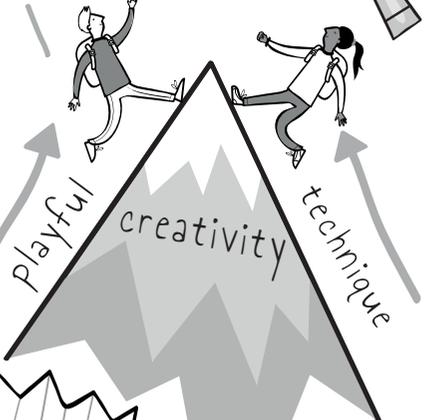
Within a relationship with learners



Curious?
Laughter!
Noise



EMPOWERING



Artful?



get to be

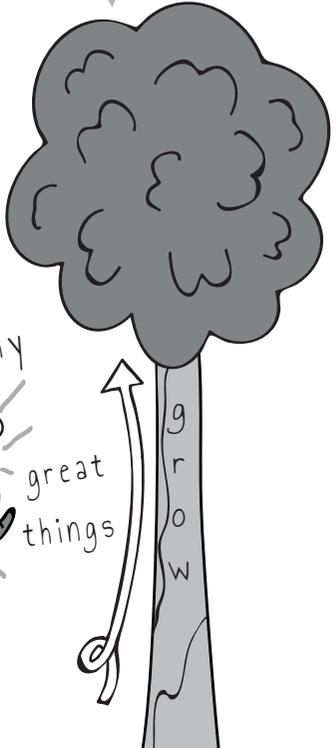
SUBVERSIVE

Think and feel more DEEPLY

builds confidence



from tiny great things



to use'. The artful educator keeps asking awkward questions like 'What you do you mean "it will work"?' and 'Who exactly will it be "best" for?' and 'But did you think about the impact of X on Y?' The artful educator believes that just as no two pieces of art are the same, nor are any two lessons. Perhaps, the artful educator wonders, the true measure of whether a lesson has 'worked' is if it gets children to think, to be curious, to laugh, to engage or to take a deep interest in a subject, not if it gets them to pass their SATs. The artful educator cannot countenance the idea that teachers could 'deliver' a scripted and standardised lesson to a waiting class of obedient children. An artful educator is there to perform creative magic with the children, not to read out a standardised script that someone else wrote for them to deliver. And although that magic might not always happen, the artful educator is going to give it a damn good try.

The artful educator understands that learning is a tricky, slippery, awkward thing – it is a bumpy ride along a rough and winding track. The journey is rarely straightforward, and it is highly unlikely to take a straight line from A to B. We might have to loop back on ourselves to get to where we wanted to go, or cover the same ground many times before we finally get close to being happy with what we have achieved. We will probably have to try and fail, over and over again, and suffer some bruises along the way. And then, just when we get to where we thought we were headed, we might suddenly realise that there is a whole lot more still left to learn, or that we had the wrong destination in mind all the time. This is the journey of a learner, whether it is a child in a classroom or an adult learning and developing as a teacher. But a bumpy journey is not a bad thing – you can't learn how to get it right in the end without getting it wrong en route.

What is Artful?

Being artful is not exactly the same thing as being artistic. The essence of the artful approach has been captured with all its components on pages 8–9.



Chapter 2

Artful Attitudes to Learning

‘I’m not afraid of storms for I’m learning how to sail my ship.’

Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women*

The skills that the artful educator must learn are not those of a surgeon – cutting and stitching. They are not those of an engineer – measuring and constructing. Nor are they those of a scientist – theorising and researching. Neither are they those of a businessperson – measuring and analysing. No, the skills that you must learn as you develop as an artful teacher are more akin to those of an artist – the attitudes you will need to adopt are more like those of a painter or a playwright. You need to learn how to weave magic with words, how to build relationships out of thin air and how to bring learning to life, in all its multisensory glory, in a classroom filled with the noise and energy that thirty learners create. You need to learn to dart around your room like a dancer, to incorporate sound and music into your learning like a DJ, and to paint the air with ideas, with concepts and with laughter as well. Basically, you need to take an artful attitude to learning. The artful educator builds a set of attitudes to learning and creativity that helps them to explore artful approaches with their learners, and that encourages the children to take artful attitudes in return.

Thinking Creatively: The Power of Play

One of the key attributes of an artful approach to learning is a willingness to play around – to experiment and to think creatively. We might be playing around with ideas, playing to see how different aspects of learning fit together, playing with an object to see what it can do, playing with language, or images, or sounds. If I were to describe the way that I work as a writer, it might sound a lot like I am playing. I try something one way, then another. I throw in a strange idea to see what happens, or experiment by doing something totally unexpected with the words or the form or the ideas. Children have a natural propensity to play, which tends to get lost as they grow up. When an educator is playful with the learning and with the children, this not only models artful and creative attitudes to learning, but it is also emotionally and intellectually satisfying for the teacher.

To encourage a playful attitude to learning in yourself, and in your children:

- » Remember that both adults and children love to play – it is a key part of how human beings work.
- » See what happens when you put random ideas together, rather than always taking a linear route.
- » Focus on the process (the playfulness) rather than the product or the outcome – don't worry if things don't go right first time – see that as a success and a learning opportunity.
- » Try to become comfortable with learning as a messy process – doodle, scribble, daydream, wander, mess around, especially during the planning stages.
- » Remember that play can be a bit noisy and chaotic, so try not to worry too much about what other people will think.
- » Incorporate lots of multisensory objects into your planning and your teaching, and be playful in what you do with them.
- » Put two things together that wouldn't normally be linked – break away from the expected and the normal.

- » Incorporate some fun into the learning because this will relax you and your children, and motivate you to continue, even when things get hard.

The Joy of Failure

One of the most important attitudes for learning is a willingness to give things a go, even if we feel sure that we might fail when we try. Both the teacher and the learners need to get comfortable with the fact that failure is about learning, and that learning is about failure. Progress is about getting it wrong at first, so we can learn how to do it better. We will only learn to speak a new language if we are willing to try to speak it (and most likely speak it badly, at first). We can only learn how to write by putting pen to paper, even though what we write looks like a scrawl to begin with. This is the journey that every child takes at school. But the more the child tries, the better they become at it. Any fear of failure can put the brakes on learning, and so the artful educator needs to encourage the learners to know how to fail and then just try again with courage and confidence.

While high expectations are useful for encouraging us to reach for our best, life is stressful for perfectionists. Perfectionism is not always a useful trait if we hope to be creative, because a desire to be perfect all the time tends to stop us from getting on with it and giving things a go. As an artful educator you need to model a willingness to have a go, to try, to fail and try again, and encourage your learners to do the same.

To help make this happen:

- » Be careful in the way that you speak about your mistakes, and the mistakes that your learners make. Try not to be negative about yourself or to do your own attempts down. Think about the language you use around your own learning.
- » At the same time, don't be afraid to make a fool of yourself and to laugh at yourself when you do something daft. Show that it is possible to fail with good humour and good grace.
- » Allow your learners to do plenty of rapid, quick-fire first attempts at a task, and sometimes let them throw these attempts away.

- » Make some deliberate mistakes, and get your children to try to spot them.
- » Do some things that you find really difficult in front of the children – juggle, speak a foreign language, draw a human figure. Show them how trying things you find difficult leads to you learning in the end.
- » Take care not to mistake neat writing for good ideas, and messy writing for bad ones. Let your children scribble and doodle, as well as getting them to practise their neatest handwriting.

Role Modelling

If we want children to develop a particular skill or attribute, then one of the key things we have to do is model it for them. As Mahatma Gandhi may have said, ‘We must be the change we wish to see in the world.’ When we are artful as educators, we model a number of important attitudes for the children, including creativity, lateral thinking, risk taking and experimentation. We become a living, breathing example of creative thinking and courage. Every single day, the children see their teacher taking risks, making mistakes, having a go, having another go and refusing to give up when things don’t go right. The best way to model enthusiasm and passion for learning is to genuinely feel enthusiastic and passionate about learning.

To role model as an artful educator, make sure that you:

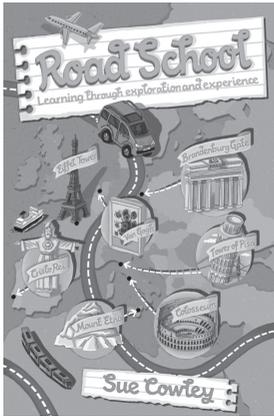
- » Talk about your mistakes – when something doesn’t go as well as you had hoped, be explicit about what it was. What could you have done better and how will you do things differently next time around?
- » Model the process that you take when you are correcting your own mistakes and developing a piece of work – for instance, by showing the children a draft piece of your writing with scribbles and corrections all over it. Talk about your thinking as they watch you edit your own writing or refine your ideas.

- » Encourage the students to watch for your mistakes and to correct you if they spot any – give them the confidence to speak out and to understand that adults don't always get it right.
- » Show that you are willing to move laterally from the original plan for your lesson, especially if a child suggests a good idea or asks an interesting question.
- » Make your classroom a creative place to spend time in – think carefully about the environment and how it feeds into the modelling of creative and artful approaches. What does the space say about your attitude to artfulness?
- » Be willing to make a bit of a fool of yourself – try not to worry too much about how you appear to other adults (the children mostly won't mind at all). Model bravery even in the face of self-doubt.
- » Don't let what other people might think narrow the decisions you make in your teaching. Refuse to allow a nervous internal voice to stifle your creativity.
- » Offer the children a selection of resources and materials to learn from and experiment with – open up their eyes to diverse possibilities, rather than just offering them a single option.
- » Talk about how hard you have had to work in your life to be successful and to build your knowledge and your creativity.
- » Surround yourself and your children with samples and examples of living, breathing art: by the children, by yourself and by professional artists too.
- » Talk about your opinions, ideas, experiments and those of your children – visit the subjective world of the imagination as often as you visit the objective world of facts and reason.
- » Share examples of your own creative works – even if you are not that confident about them, this will teach your children valuable lessons about self-expression.

About the Author

Sue Cowley is a writer, presenter and teacher trainer, and the author of more than 25 books on education, including *How to Survive your First Year in Teaching*. Her international bestseller, *Getting the Buggers to Behave*, is a fixture on university reading lists, and has been translated into ten different languages. After training as an early years teacher, Sue taught English and drama in secondary schools in the UK and overseas, and she also worked as a supply teacher. She now spends her time writing educational books and articles and is a columnist for *Teach Nursery*, *Teach Primary* and *Nursery World* magazines. Sue works internationally as a teacher trainer, as well as volunteering in primary classrooms and helping to run her local preschool.

www.suecowley.co.uk



Also available:

Road School

Learning through Exploration and Experience

ISBN: 978-178583114-0

Frustrated by a regime of statutory testing, and keen for a midlife adventure, Sue Cowley and her partner decided to step out of the system, and set off on the educational journey of a lifetime with their children. *Road School* is the story of their family's adventures around Europe and across China, and what they learned along the way. Part comedy travelogue, part parenting guide, part guide to educational philosophy, *Road School* asks you to consider what 'an education' really means and offers tips for anyone planning their own learning odyssey.

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Dr Pooky Knightsmith, Director of the Children, Young People and Schools Programme, Charlie Waller Memorial Trust, Vice Chair, Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition

Cowley's call for teacher creativity in the classroom sits perfectly comfortably alongside the idea of education being research-informed: practitioners guided by academic journals and their artistic instincts.

Duncan Partridge, Director of Education, English-Speaking Union

The Artful Educator understands that there is an important distinction between pointlessly sugar-coating work with a superficial 'fun' activity and actually inspiring intrigue and engagement in a topic or skill.

Isabella Wallace, education consultant, author and presenter

Sue Cowley is a writer, presenter and teacher trainer. She is the author of more than 25 books on education, including *How to Survive your First Year in Teaching*. Her international bestseller, *Getting the Buggers to Behave*, is a fixture on university reading lists and has been translated into ten different languages. She is a columnist for *Teach Nursery*, *Teach Primary* and *Nursery World* magazines. Sue has taught English and drama in schools in the UK and overseas. She now works internationally as a teacher trainer, as well as volunteering in primary classrooms and helping to run her local preschool.

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