Creativity, Concept, and Collaboration: Conversations in Artistic Investigation
A Narrative Inquiry by Elizabeth Eagle

Observational Notes
The following excerpts are from observational notes I took during my Advanced Art 2D classes, reflecting on student actions, conversations, and other insights.

Observational Notes 3/7/16
Began class with presentation and opportunity to explore with the exquisite corpse group project today. Student expressions, along with a few giggles, during presentation offered excitement and intrigue. Students asked questions of what was "okay" or "right"; some questions had to do with logistics of size, etc. I presented and offered complete artistic liberty, without limitations. Students seem to perceive limitations immediately, even when directed otherwise. How can I encourage exploration more? Asked students to journal about creativity, concept, and exploration (provided a sheet). Interested to see what they said. I walked around providing comments and engaged in conversations.

After cutting out metallic shapes (a lot!) L. says, "I might want to paint instead. To give it more depth. This might look too flat". I respond with: "Go for it; you can always combine, too". At the same table P. replies enthusiastically, "There are no limitations!" and a moment later after contemplating her watercolor pencils, "I really like this project. And watercolor pencils..." Me: "Yeah...it's a great combination of drawing and painting".

Observational Notes 3/8/16
First full day of exquisite corpse work; students are working on their individual parts. I engage students in conversations on what they might do for mediums. I remind some students that they can always use a combination of materials, too. Most are currently drawing out their part in pencil first. Some students are referencing images on the internet to use as resources, as well as to look for ideas. For example, M. who has the head in one group, is looking at several head images of animals. During 4th hour, students are fairly quiet in their work, carrying on some conversations, but working individually without much input from others.

In 5th hour, some really great exquisite corpse parts are happening. From walking around I am seeing a combination of animal heads, clock heads, ginger root feet, fish bowl heads. Very
exciting! I had a discussion with a student about what materials he might want to use; he drew a "bulky" duck foot next to a Lego foot. Students are using a variety of materials from acrylic paint, illustration markers, pencil, watercolor, color pencil. K. gets really excited after adding some blue watercolor pencil and wash to her graphite drawing. I suggest the possibility of a combination between the two. Students seem excited about this group project, which is apparent from conversations, attitude, and work being put into each part.

(Conversation with students)
C: "Ms. Eagle, look" *(motions me over to look at his anatomically detailed thigh part)*
Me: "Awesome! Looks good! Are you sticking with pencil, or..."
C: "Oh, I'll probably color it in. But I was thinking I would do collage on this one *(gestures to the other half of the paper)*. You know, I want it to be more creative."
Me: "Yeah! Definitely. That's a great idea. That'll be nice contrast."

L: "Ms. Eagle, what do you think about this?" *(Gestures to her torso part that has been drawn to look ripped and show interior)*
Me: "Oh, yeah. That looks great. What was your question about it?"
L: "I just thought it looked kinda weird. Sometimes I have to stop myself from doing really creepy stuff."
Me: "What? Why? Don't feel like you have to limit yourself."
*(At the same table, M. says with amusement): "Yeah, L. As long as its school appropriate."
Me: "Well, maybe, to a point...hmmm. But it's okay to push boundaries!"

Observational Notes 3/9/16
Missing several students due to a state basketball tournament. Some students are working on their exquisite corpse parts, others are finishing their self-portrait--writing an artist statement and/or matting the drawing. Fairly quiet class today. Tomorrow I will be absent due to a school symposium; students have been directed to either complete the exquisite corpse part and/or finish self-portrait, artist statement, etc. I remind them that they need to be complete by Friday, and we will put them together at the beginning of class.

(Conversations with students)
C: "I'm not sure what to do with the legs..." *(Has drawn the outline of two thighs in pencil)*
Me: "Well, you could look up the muscles and..."
C: "My phone just died. Plus I tried putting in a muscle and it just looked weird."
Me: *(walks over to book shelf with art books)* "Hmmm, let's see..." *(I flip through several books)* "Well, you know, C, you don't necessarily have to have the legs look like legs."
C: "What do you mean?"
Me: *(Walking over to table and turning to a page in C's sketchbook)* "Well, for example, you could take the idea of the shape of a muscle and repeat it, filling the leg *(I sketch the idea as I talk).* Or, create pattern. There you go! Just like your sketches..."
C: "Oh, like my doodles?"
Me: "Yeah, exactly. Just fill the leg with your patterns."
C: "Yes, okay. I really like that idea. Thanks".
*(C is one student who struggles with both ideas and technical ability. She's always very open to suggestions and wants to do well. There seems to be a block with thinking more conceptually, as well as creating a visual representation).*

S *(disgruntled)*: "I started over again. I ripped up the other one. I'm not sure what to draw..."
Me *(excitedly)*: "Remember you can always do collage!"
S: "Okay, yeah." *(Grabs an old art school catalogue and starts cutting out images)*
S: "I'm going to make a collage out of legs".
*(Several minutes later)*
S: "What am I doing? Why am I doing this? What's the point?"
Me: "Of the legs *(his part)*, or the game altogether?"
*(A at the same table chimes in quietly)*: "To be creative..."
S: "I'm just not feeling this."
Me *(I start speaking as I walk over to the table)*: "Well, it's about collaboration, pushing creativity; also as a precursor to the painting project. So what are you doing? You're cutting out legs to make legs."
S: "Yes. But I don't know why. I thought this would be a funny idea but now I'm doing it and I don't like it."
Me: "Okay, then stop and change it. You know, it doesn't have to look like "legs"; think of it as just knowing what part of the figure your part will go. Do whatever."
S *(still frustrated)*: "Okay, yeah".
*(S. eventually gets up and leafs through another magazine at the counter. I look up in his direction, and he looks back, smiling)*
Me *(slightly laughing)*: "How's it going...."
S: "Fine, I'm fine, it's fine."
Me: "What are you thinking?"
S: "I'm thinking I'm going to write all over how much I don't like legs."
Me *(smiling)*: "Okay, do it. What you were saying, describing about legs before, write it."
S *(smiling with contemplation)*: "How far can I take it? I'm good, I'm good. I've got an idea."
*(S. is very much a deep thinker, always contemplating reason; pulling in philosophical pondering into the class, his work, why he does what he does; needs to really "feel" what and why he's doing something)*

Observational Notes 3/11/16
Today we put together the exquisite corpse! Started by placing students into pre-assigned groups *(they did not know what group ahead of time)*. Students were directed to start by putting their parts together, and then assess what could be done to create a collaborative, cohesive figure. At first, some students seemed a bit hesitant and almost discouraged at how they connected. Once groups started to make decisions together, cutting parts out, adding other elements, etc. students seemed a bit more invested in the group figure. Overall the class *(4th hour)* seemed somewhat subdued, and I asked if people were tired, and most said yes. Student groups discussed names/titles for their piece and wrote these down. One group could not come to a decision and decided to wait until Monday. I asked students if they liked the project, and responses were positive. Results of the exquisite corpse figures spoke for themselves as well demonstrating the collaborative and creative aspect, even if some students were a bit disengaged.

Overall more excited attitudes in 5th hour as we began. One group discovered that three of the five parts were all the same theme, "fish/aquatic", which was a complete accidental surprise. Everyone thought that was pretty amusing. One student in a group hadn't quite finished, so as the others cut out parts and started to combine, he glued down his collaged area, in collaboration with the others. Some groups decided to vary from the head to toe scenario, and adjusted parts to different areas, i.e. the ginger foot became a hand. Students collaborated very well; discussing ideas, providing suggestions, and applying each. Students also peeked at other groups corpses, too, providing constructive comments. As students finished they took the initiative to hang the pieces on the board alongside the 4th hour exquisite corpses. I was very pleased with the visual results, the group collaborations, and immense creativity that took place. Students seemed to enjoy the project *(and the outcome)* and working together.
Collaborative Inquiry

The following writing is a theoretical conversation that has taken place between my Advanced Art 2D students and myself. The commentary is pulled from written reflections that students wrote in response to ideas of creativity and conceptual understanding.

Me: How would you define creativity? What does being creative mean to you?
S: Creativity is the ability to think independently and to develop new ideas. Being creative means being you.
C: Being creative means expressing yourself whether it be your thoughts, your ideas, your surroundings; it all exposes yourself in a way. For me, being creative means I get to draw what I’m feeling about that I don’t get to express physically and verbally. Sometimes I can’t word things, so it helps to with art.
K: I define creativity as where you let your mind take you artistically. Creativity means to me the things that branch off of what I originally thinking of. And building off more and more ideas.
A: I think creativity is one’s ability to express their most original and independent thoughts. Being creative is being original, not following patterns, and finding new ways to do things.
E: Creativity to me isn’t going with the most obvious. It’s taking the familiar and making it into something strange or different. I think being creative is doing or being anything that’s true to yourself, but is against the conventional way of thinking or doing.
L: It’s exploring ideas fully and thinking outside of the realm of what’s expected. To me, creativity is approaching a problem from many different angles.
B: I think everyone is creative in their own way, creativity can be how you see things or your imagination.
L: I think it’s the ability to define yourself in several different ways. It will show your thought process and provoke the audience to become inspired. Being creative is yet another way to get yourself out there, to explain yourself.
S: Creativity is contributing your imagination and originality into whatever you may be working on or doing.
C: I would define creativity as wild thoughts, using your imagination and just using a gift given. Being creative means taking a bunch of thoughts and combining them into one.
**M:** To me it means that you are able to use your mind, body, hands, and the objects around you, to create something cool or something very detailed or something many people wouldn’t think of.

**J:** Being creative to me means expressing yourself in many unique ways. You give us a lot of inspiration and freedom which is all the push we need to be creative.

**D:** Creativity means individuality and doing things different than you’ve ever seen it done before. I get to choose my own idea around a basic concept which is cool. I think it motivates me knowing I’m doing what I choose to do.

**Me:** Do you feel that there is artistic freedom in this class? Not only with materials, but ideas, too.

**S:** I feel like I have 100% artistic freedom. Class has no limitations on my creativity or my creative process. Artistic freedom is a good thing—to an extent.

**A:** I think we do because there are so many ways to explore a prompt. I think this is a good thing because it gives us opportunities to express ourselves.

**E:** We have artistic freedom in art class, because while it’s true we can’t just make any projects that we want, we are encouraged to explore anything in a certain area. It’s more like guided artistic freedom I guess, because we are given a project with a few requirements but from there we can go in any direction we want.

**G:** Having artistic freedom is mostly a good thing because it allows individuality, but a little structure is good for staying true to the goal.

**S:** There should always be some sort of artistic freedom, but I agree that some structure is okay, especially when discussing standards for a project.

**L:** We usually can do what we want with the projects with a few guidelines, which is good because it lets us be more creative; coming up with ideas, thinking of something different. It can make your art more interesting and personal.

**C:** I feel like we have artistic freedom because we are given a concept but how we interpret that is our decision. It’s a good thing because it helps us to figure out the kind of artists we are and every drawing is unique.

**Me:** What struggles does everyone have with building a concept? Do you find artistic investigation difficult?

**S:** I think that I’m really good at creating concepts. The downside is that I have trouble executing my concepts.
L: I’m the total opposite. I think finding a concept is really challenging because there are so many ideas to choose from. I find the execution of ideas to be much easier.

A: I struggle with having too many ideas and focusing them into one specific concept. I find it easy to generate ideas in artistic investigation, but more difficult to come up with one specific direction.

L: I think it’s difficult to think of an original idea, but once I have one, I find it fairly easy to execute.

B: I think more broad topics are hard when doing an artistic investigation. I think I should definitely push myself harder to think more creatively about a subject.

A: Artistic investigation can sometimes be difficult if you can’t find exactly what is in your head that you’re looking for.

C: I struggle with coming up with the ideas. It may take some time, it’s the hardest part of creating art. It forces you to think of ways you didn’t know that existed to express yourself. Brainstorming is the hardest because it is the actual process of gathering your ideas so you need to have an open mind. I don’t think there really is an “easy” part to it, because of how challenging it is. It forces yourself to look at the picture in a new viewpoint.

M: Making the concepts flow together can be a struggle.

D: Sometimes finding inspiration is hard because of the concept. I think I could take meanings and themes a little deeper and give them more significant roles in projects.

Journal Entries

The following excerpts are from journal entries written after my Advanced Art 2D courses, reflecting on interactions and conversations with students.

Journal Entry 1 (3/7/16)

My central concern in my Advanced Art 2D classroom deals with creativity and conceptual understanding by students. How can students be encouraged to push their ideas further? In preparing a written reflection for my students to share their thoughts, I wonder: How do they feel about creativity and concept? Having more artistic freedom in class? What do they think about having more open ideas to explore? How do they feel about pushing themselves to think fuller about a subject or idea? What do students struggle with in terms of conceptual understanding and what aspects of artistic investigation is difficult? Easy?
Last week we finished our self-portrait project. This project was based on "identity" and we worked through journaling, reflecting, and sketches to form ideas. We watched videos based on ideas of identity to help generate the beginnings of a conceptual understanding. I didn't read the journals, as I wanted it to be more personal and not restrictive. Student ideas, via sketched imagery, varied greatly in concept, weak to strong. I wonder if I skipped too fast, and didn't help students form strong enough connections to their journaling, before starting sketches of actual compositions. Some students already have the conceptual capability to build from. Others seem to struggle.

Today we've started the game of exquisite corpse. This is a precursor to the painting project they will begin exploring next week. I presented on the ideas behind exquisite corpse and showed examples. I handed out paper with assigned parts (will be put into three groups) and encouraged complete exploration without limitation, from idea to material. Definitely a contrast between my two classes; fifth hour seemed more excited, whereas fourth hour was more neutral. This also has to do with the dynamic of the class, which makes me wonder if group dynamic also has to do with how students view conceptual understanding, artistic investigation, and creativity. I am intrigued to see the progress of the exquisite corpse; Friday is the day groups will construct the figures, and also make possible adjustments and additions if need be. It will be interesting to see how groups collaborate creatively.

Journal Entry 2 (3/8/16)
This was the first full day of the exquisite corpse collaboration activity. Overall students seem to be pushing their creativity buttons which is exciting to see. There are some that seem to be lacking in detail or imagination, but this could still change as there is still two more class periods that they can work. Friday, no matter what, I plan to split students into their assigned groups and have them construct the corpse, make any adjustments as needed, and include a title/name for their figure. I also plan to have students write a brief reflection on how they felt about the collaboration, working together in general, and the prospects of more collaborative inquiry during the project stage of artistic investigation/brainstorming. I feel that this is where true creativity is born, and I wonder if focusing in on various ways to collaborate to generate ideas will be helpful in the long run; encouraging students to take initiative in more creative and self-explored endeavors. I decided to use exquisite corpse as a group activity as a pre-cursor to the painting project, where students will create a collaged abstract and/or surreal figure as a source for a painting.
One aspect of creativity and concept I am trying to encourage as teacher-guide is to demonstrate the many possibilities of generating ideas. During the painting project I would like to consider more ways to use collaborative inquiry throughout, similar to critique; one such example might include randomly pairing students together and swapping work to write a narrative based on what they see. Each student then shows the other what they interpreted, and go from there. I think (and I hope) more ongoing collaborations such as these might encourage greater creativity and conceptual understanding among students.

**Journal Entry 3 (3/9/16)**
This was overall a quieter day due to a lot of students being gone. The students in class were working on their exquisite corpses; some matting their self-portrait projects. Students overall have their ideas drawn out for their part and are now detailing and/or adding other medium. I look forward to the conversations that will happen on Friday when students are put into their groups (4-5 students per group), and begin to put together the figure. Students will also need to decide together what adjustments or additions might need to happen to create a cohesive, creative figure. Overall, through my reflections this week, and observations of students, I feel that I am pinpointing more of a direction I want to go with my students in understanding and creating art; with my action research; defining and re-defining, realizing what it is that my major concerns within my classroom are and considering activities, conversations, and collaborations to challenge and engage students.

**Journal Entry 4 (3/11/16)**
Focus on collaboration via exquisite corpse today. I really felt that students took ownership of their collaborations. Six groups over two different classes (4th and 5th hour) and I felt that everyone seemed to enjoy what they were doing. I asked some students what they thought of the exquisite corpse and responses had to do with it being fun, different, and creative. I felt that students hit each of my targets: creativity, collaboration, and exploring concept. I could tell this from the way they worked together and the final construction of the exquisite corpse figures. The final constructions showed immense creativity from deciding how the parts should be placed (possibly changed even) and what to do to achieve this. Groups in 4th hour seemed to need more prompts/open suggestions from me to start looking at the bigger picture, but the end results and collaboration throughout I felt was successful. 5th hour delved in right away after my
instructions of deciding what needs to be added or changed to make a cohesive figure. The room was buzzing with creativity.

The collaboration piece worked well, too. Having students individually create a part with the prior knowledge of knowing it would become a part of a bigger piece was probably helpful in the larger group work aspect. Students collaborated well to put their exquisite corpse parts together. I myself was very excited to see what would happen; some apprehension of it not working out, and excitement at the possibilities.

Once groups began working together I was immediately floored by the results. My hopes are that this will encourage a more creative mindset and exploration of content for students the rest of the semester. In terms of collaboration, I would like to do more collaborative inquiry among students throughout units to encourage and reignite what I felt was accomplished this week.