

# A Review of *The Artistry of Teaching in Higher Education: Practical Ideas for Developing Creative Academic Practice*

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## **Abstract**

*The Artistry of Teaching in Higher Education: Practical Ideas for Developing Creative Academic Practice* presents a definition of artistry and the characteristics of artistry in higher education. This review offers an overview of the book, including a summary of the chapters, which highlights the breadth and variety of topics covered. The reviewer analyzes how the book relates to her practice, both as an artist and educational developer, and outlines its strengths and shortcomings. The broader implications for higher education in a Canadian context are discussed, and the reviewer raises further questions for consideration with respect to artistry and its implications for educational development and SoTL.

Keywords: reflective practice, artistry, teaching, educational development

## **Introduction**

*The Artistry of Teaching in Higher Education: Practical Ideas for Developing Creative Academic Practice*, edited by Helen King, is an anthology of 15 chapters from various disciplines that explore a wide range of topics related to artistry and provide examples of how artistry can be realized in higher education. King defines the artistry of teaching as “the ways of thinking and practicing as a teacher that particularly set apart the expert from the experienced non-expert” (2025, p. 3). According to King (2025), artistry goes beyond competency in professional content knowledge and professional learning (scholarly teaching) and includes qualities such as authenticity, intuition, creativity, improvisation, curiosity, play, care, empathy (relational pedagogies), community, and collaboration. Overall, the book effectively opens a space for dialogue about what constitutes artistry in higher education and how educators can embrace these qualities in the classroom and their professional practice. However, the sheer breadth and number of educational initiatives profiled, along with the varying calibre and expertise of contributors, raises questions about who is truly qualified to define what constitutes artistry.

## **Overview**

The text is structured according to three sections:

### *PART 1. Creativity, improvisation and context (Chapters 1–5)*

Chapters 1–5 explore the theoretical basis for artistry in higher education and how it manifests in everyday teaching. In Chapter 1, Bryant poses the question, “What if teaching were not artistry, but art?” and examines Dewey’s view of artistry, which critiques the limitations of a technocratic approach to teacher development (p. 17). He then presents an alternative, an arts-based theory of teaching expertise called Responsible Enquiry. In Chapter 2, Elkington explores how creativity manifests in the everyday, the qualities people embrace when most creative (openness, perseverance, curiosity, proactivity), the creative constraints instructors face, and the challenge of managing imposter syndrome. In Chapter 3, Scott delves into the embodied nature of teaching and the use of drawing to bring a calming presence, teach mindfulness, and reduce anxiety. In Chapter 4, educational developers Mills, Carr, Taylor, and Cunningham reflect on their ability to improvise during the COVID-19 pandemic, describing the experience as akin to encountering an active learning murder scene. Finally, in Chapter 5, Santucci argues that the artistry of teaching is culturally self-aware, learner-centred, involves imaginative co-creation, and requires instructors to deeply reflect on their identities and teaching practices.

### *PART 2. Authenticity and professional identity (Chapters 6–10)*

In Chapters 6–10, each chapter is devoted to exploring how artistry is inextricably linked to the formation of professional identities that are both authentic to the discipline and the individual instructor. Each chapter examines a unique discipline. In Chapter 6, Arabo discusses their experience teaching cybersecurity and using real-world problems in authentic contexts. In Chapter 7, Layton reflects on the challenges of teaching drama online during COVID while embracing relational pedagogy. In Chapter 8, Groves discusses their experience implementing a reflective model of professional development that requires dance instructors to interrogate the *why* behind the *what* and *how* of their teaching through discussion. In Chapter 9, Lawrence discusses the development of a professional development initiative specifically designed to nurture the artistry of program leaders. Finally, in Chapter 10, Dickerson reflects on their role as a learning technologist, where the ability to collaborate across disciplines is a key ingredient in their professional artistry.

### *PART 3. Developing the artistry of teaching (Chapters 11–15)*

In Part 3 of the text, each chapter delves into what we can learn about the artistry of teaching from a particular discipline and context. In Chapter 11, Petrova, Mudd, Palmer, and Brown explore the skills we can learn from theatre improv. In Chapter 12, Wilson-Medhurst and Childs discuss the struggles instructors faced moving to online learning during COVID. In Chapter 13, Costantino examines the world of language instruction and the professional identity development of preservice teachers. In Chapter 14, Nicholson, Spencer, and Wellhöfer explore the world of dance and what it means to be fully aware and physically present both to yourself

and the class. Chapter 15 alone provides six mini-chapters, each summarizing a unique educational initiative and making connections to the artistry of teaching.

### **Analysis and Evaluation**

*How does the selection relate to my own practice?*

Many of the values and practices that I espouse in my own professional practice are echoed in the pages of *The Artistry of Teaching Higher Education*. As an artist and an educational developer, I am deeply aware of how my experience in the arts (drama, dance, and visual arts) continues to inform my work as an educational developer. I believe deeply that we can learn so much from the arts and that these ways of knowing can infuse all other areas of our lives, including our teaching lives.

As an educational developer, my goal is to enable instructors so that they may show up wholly present and engage with students as their authentic selves. I work with instructors to uncover their own discipline specific way of knowing and deeply held beliefs about teaching and learning. I fiercely encourage them to make a conscious choice on who they want to be as an instructor, reflect on their core beliefs about how students learn, and I instruct them not to be afraid to embrace and embody those beliefs and values in the classroom. I encourage instructors to find ways to make learning accessible, relevant, meaningful, and engaging—to care about their students and to let students know that they care. And finally, I encourage instructors to make learning come alive and try new pedagogical approaches like throwing spaghetti against a wall to see what sticks. This all requires a certain degree of vulnerability and risk-taking, so creating safe spaces that encourage reflection, play, and making mistakes is a must.

### **Strengths**

It is in the reading of this text that I am reminded that the inherent ways of knowing and being that I embody in my professional practice are shaped from my experience in the arts. These are consistent with the qualities of artistry as defined within the text. The text, therefore, serves to reinforce and validate my current professional practices and provides additional practical ideas about how to best support faculty. For my own professional practice, I found the lessons from authors writing from arts-based disciplines perhaps the most intriguing as they illuminated the potential of fostering interdisciplinary collaborations.

Faculty at Canadian institutes of higher learning can also gain valuable insights from the wide range of international perspectives presented, broadening their understanding of teaching and learning while applying practical examples to their own contexts. Chapter 5, which focuses on cultural awareness and the importance of instructors reflecting on their identities within the teaching and learning process, would be particularly beneficial for Canadian instructors working with a diverse and multicultural student body.

## **Shortcomings**

The sheer breadth and number of topics explored, with examples provided and the diverse range of viewpoints and contexts in which they are situated, presents two challenges. Firstly, the reader will need to be adept at pulling out the lessons, the pearls of wisdom, that best suit their specific context. For some chapters, the connections and relevance to my own context were obvious; for others, it was less so. Rather than reading this text from start to finish, I recommend selecting those chapters most relevant to your given context.

Secondly, if every educational initiative in the text meets the broad definition of artistry and its characteristics as outlined at the onset, the sheer number and diversity of initiatives made me question the criteria for inclusion. As the calibre of international teaching and learning experts or contributors also varies, it is difficult to discern who is indeed qualified to determine what constitutes artistry. As I learned about each initiative, I wondered how it went beyond professional competency and SoTL to truly merit being considered artistry.

## **Implications for Higher Education in a Canadian Context**

Despite these shortcomings, King's efforts to define artistry have potential implications for how teaching is recognized and rewarded in higher education. In the introduction, King discusses the considerable efforts that higher education institutions worldwide are making to recognize and reward teaching excellence. Canadian institutions of higher learning are no exception. As a result, an increasing number of instructors are applying for teaching awards, such as the 3M National Teaching Fellowship (explicitly cited by King), each presenting compelling evidence of their teaching expertise. Consequently, it becomes more difficult to distinguish those instructors who go above and beyond scholarly teaching to warrant recognition at the institutional, national, and international levels. In my role, I have reviewed 3M National Teaching Fellowship applications and coached applicants. As such, I am acutely aware of how faculty must explicitly highlight their artistry to stand out from the crowd. The defining characteristics of artistry, as outlined by King, provide a framework for distinguishing truly exceptional teachers as well as a beacon for others.

## **Going Forward**

This text begins to address and raises the following questions that warrant further research related to the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning:

- What does it mean to get to a point where we are as artists within our own professional discipline? What does it mean to get to a point where we are as artists within our teaching practice?
- What can we learn from artists and their ways of knowing/being and their art that can be applied to teaching practices? What wisdom can we garner? What is the impact on student learning?

- How can we explore potential partnerships between the arts and centres for teaching and learning? What are some practical tools we can use/adapt to different contexts?
- How can educational developers foster the artistry of instructors in higher education?

Ultimately, embracing artistry in teaching and learning, regardless of career stage, is crucial for instructors to find meaning and fulfillment in their work. As an educational developer, I witness the increasing demands placed on faculty at Canadian higher education institutions and the impact this has on instructors who are at risk of burnout. Focusing on the qualities of artistry—including authenticity, intuition, creativity, improvisation, curiosity, play, care, empathy, community, and collaboration—is essential in helping all instructors find joy and fulfillment in their teaching practices.

### **Reference**

King, H. (Ed.). (2025). *The artistry of teaching in higher education: Practical ideas for developing creative academic practice*. Routledge.