

Cleansing the Palette / NAEA News Summer 2010

I'm not sure when the realization hit me.

It might have been right after Gayle Danley's slam poetry, where you didn't know where the poetry ended and her remarks started—and so much of her presentation seemed more a conversation *with* those gathered than a presentation *to* an audience.

It might have been each time when I walked past small and large clusters of our members walking in animated conversation across the flyway between the Hilton and the Convention Center.

It might have been looking at the 8-foot swaths of whiteboard in the Strategic Planning Studio, covered in scribbles and images and notes from art educators—and particularly notes *between* individuals, as one comment gave rise to another, and a conversation of sketches and collages and remarks stretched the length of the paper... and the next paper... and the next... and the next... yielding literally a mother lode of transcriptions.

It might have been at one of the open-forum “talk back” sessions, where the conversations ebbed and flowed between practitioner and theorist and between administrator and advocate, shedding light on some of the most provocative issues we all face today—as both art educators *and* American citizens.

It might have been hearing the eager buzz of conversation that coursed throughout the Delegates Assembly gathering of NAEA leaders on that Wednesday morning. Or the give-and-take that filtered out from behind the closed doors of the Concurrent Sessions. Or the countless impromptu huddles that gathered in the lobby or on the terrace... or in the bookstore... or at that table at the corner of Meeting Room 336... or to paint a public mural, leaving our footprint on downtown Baltimore.

But somewhere along the way, during our National Convention in Baltimore, it really clicked for me in an Aha! kind of way: This was no ordinary convention. In fact, it wasn't really a convention at all, in the most typical connotation of the term (a gathering of an interest group to hear speeches, attend workshops, and visit exhibitors).

No, it was something far more than that. It was a 4,200-person conversation... in which every voice had a chance to be heard, and the leaps in thinking—as one idea built on another—were positively breathtaking. We traveled farther in those 4 days than we often have a chance to do in the intervening year.

And the Aha! moment for me, built on all those multitudinous conversations, was that we experienced during those few April days in Baltimore was “Convention as Conversation”—that our true goal, our primary activity when we come together, is to engage with each other... play

notions and concepts and messages off of each other... reframe and reshape our thinking... absorb the experience of other minds—words and images dancing in the air between us—and transform them into new, recombinant ideas and approaches and strategies to advance our profession and the field of art education.

For isn't that our actual DNA as visual arts educators: the continued reinvention of a means of communication?

Of course, we've been talking about generating the richness of intra-membership conversation for almost 3 years now! I continue to hold up the idea of a true "community of practice" as an ideal, a noble objective. And we're making progress—Baltimore was a glowing example of what is possible at a meeting of many minds.

But our minds have to keep meeting. In fact, the very idea of a "community of practice" has to exist in our minds and our hearts. It should provide the framework for our very approach to art education: we are never in our classroom, or administrative office, or museum alone; we bring with us the assembled, multi-faceted intellects of our entire membership and our students.

Someone said to me during the Convention, "No one has ever asked about my vision for NAEA." That's how the community of practice begins—with the realization of possibility. By the creation of opportunity. By the *legitimization* of practice—in this case, the welcoming and solicitation of diverse opinions and ideas.

But to turn that vision of a true COMMUNITY of practice into a reality, far more channels of communication need to be created and embraced. Remember, while there were 4,200 art educators gathered in Baltimore—which seems like many, and actually *is*—that's still only about 25% of our membership. We have to bring many others into the conversation. More important, we have to give the conversation continuity, perpetuating it over time as well as distance.

Our website, of course, is a well of interaction—and will continue to be a primary channel for keeping the conversation going, especially as we explore emerging technologies and social media to support virtual discussions. And we will certainly be providing you with a great deal of grist for your conversations—especially as the NAEA Next! 2011-2014 Strategic Plan is developed over the next months and implemented beginning in January 2011.

But let me suggest a summer assignment—perhaps some beach thinking, if you will. How do we sustain these conversations over the days and weeks and months ahead and make them ever more inclusive, more encompassing of all service areas within our membership? What must everyone understand and believe about learning in the visual arts? What evidence do we have and what evidence do we need to make a compelling case for the essential value of art education? And who do we need as allies and partners to champion art education?

In short, how do we re-create the Convention and turn its dynamic into a year-long, virtual coming-together? That's the brass ring: the Perpetual Convention, generated through conversation among 20,000+ voices. Or to paraphrase the British cry at the transfer of the



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monarchical crown: “Baltimore is past. Long Live Baltimore!”—at least until Seattle, where our next evolution as a dynamic professional community awaits us!

Warm wishes for the remaining days of summer and for an exciting start to the new school year—I look forward to seeing many of you out in the fall conference spaces and places.

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