

INTERGENERATIONAL NARRATIVES: THE PERSONAL IS PROFESSIONAL

*“The bridges we create
between people, places
or border crossings can
be thought of as space
where creativity lies.”*

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ABSTRACT

What began as a teacher-student relationship between educators Amy Brook Snider and Jodi Kushins has developed into a friendship and working partnership. At first, they did not consider their continuing long-distance connection as intergenerational. They shared experiences and exchanged ideas oblivious to the great difference in their ages. But as online tools, research, and communication emerged as a central focus of Jodi's life and teaching, they became aware that this development might lead to an intergenerational digital divide between them. To explore their different responses to what has been called screen culture, they brought back their puppet alter egos for a presentation-cum-puppet show at the National Art Education Association conference in Chicago in 2016. This paper traces the history of the shifting relationship of two art educators, along with an extended excerpt from the script for their second puppet show.

KEYWORDS

Art and Design Education, Arts-based research, Intergenerational, Reflective practice, Professional Identity, Presentation and Performance, Narrative Research

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From Mentorship to Friendship

Jodi Kushins and Amy Brook Snider, twice Jodi's age, are friends. They first met in 1998 while Amy was Chair of the Art and Design Education Department at Pratt Institute. Jodi will never forget that meeting. She took the day off from her job at a SoHo gallery and visited Amy in her sunny, plant-filled office in the college's historic Main Building where the conversation flowed easily from life and love to architecture and movies, and the Jewish tradition of lifelong learning. Before she left, Jodi had completed an application for graduate study. During her time at Pratt, she took courses with Amy and came to appreciate her as an artist's art educator.

After receiving her degree, Jodi lived in Connecticut, teaching art in a public high school and, subsequently, moving to the Midwest to begin doctoral studies. She and Amy kept in touch all the while. They reunited each year at National Art Education Association (NAEA) conferences, studying the catalog together, exchanging advice on which sessions they thought would be most interesting, and introducing each other to their friends, colleagues, and students in lively hallway conversations and lobby sessions. In between, they talked on the telephone, comparing notes about Amy's ongoing work at Pratt and other cultural institutions across New York City and Jodi's experiences with her courses, classmates, advisors, and the dissertation process.

Exploring Professional Identity

After Jodi received her doctorate and began teaching, she and Amy found common ground in their view of themselves as "outsider art educators." These feelings were not a result of their professional preparation, status, or achievements in the field, but in their experiences with the politics of and research in higher education. In particular, they each felt that most of the publications in the field of art education bore little resemblance to their own professional interests and narrative style. Both still believe that greater consideration to what counts as scholarship in the field of art education is needed.

For Jodi and Amy, many of the professional texts in the field suffer from a kind of tunnel vision. They prefer to cast a wider net, allowing their work, individually and together to blur the genres (Geertz, 1983). In fact, interdisciplinarity has become a battle cry in academia. Maxine Greene was blurring the genres early on when she "managed to secure a permanent place for imaginative writing at the table of educational discourse, insisting on its equal seating beside the more familiar genres of the social sciences, history, philosophy, and educational theory" (Barone, 1998, p. 137). As categories that historically defined the disciplines are relaxing their boundaries and making space for subjectivity, experience and anecdote have assumed a larger role in scholarly research (Buffington & Wilson McKay, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2004; Nash, 2004; Witherell & Noddings, 1991).

Personal stories, told in many memoirs, convey truths that expand upon what is known as history. Noted historian, Carlos Eire who wrote a memoir about his childhood in Castro's Cuba (2009), pointed out that,

My readers let me know that there is more than one way to do history, that a poetic approach to the past written from memory draws the reader into other worlds more immediately and intensely. I've tapped into the truth, much more

convincingly than I ever thought possible . . . I'm simply saying that there are different ways to write about the past . . . By focusing on images in my memory, I can bring the reader into the world I experienced, with an emotional dimension of the sort that professional historians are trained to avoid like the plague. (p. 175)

The value of personal stories, including recognition of the first-person perspective in a number of disciplines, was also the inspiration for the John and Betty Michael Distinguished Lecturer in Art Education series at Miami University. These invited talks are organized around the assumption that autobiographies can "preserve the life histories and narratives of art educators, perceived as historical documents and records that would not only reveal personal experience, but which also could point to certain actions that may affect education theory, practice, and leadership" (Raunft, 2001, p. vii). The stories told in these lectures are an important contribution to our professional history.

Personal stories have often been the focus of Amy's work (1987, 1989) and are currently at the heart of Amy and Jodi's projects together. Over the course of their friendship, digital communication and online sites for social interaction gained prominence in society. Talking on the telephone, however, continued to serve them as a mutually accessible space for sharing and building ideas together in real time (Turkle, 2015). They captured the process and spirit of those conversations in a NAEA presentation, *Autobiographical Narratives: Teaching and Learning on the Telephone* (2006).

Using the dialogic format of a puppet show, the two friends wrote a script that served as a wire-tap on their frequent long-distance get-togethers. The puppets, their alter egos, were made by a professional puppeteer, Jane Catherine Shaw, who worked in Amy's program (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. The puppets in repose.

Aware of the increasing use of puppetry in American theater, opera, and performance (Bell, Posner, and Orenstein, 2014), as well as its efficacy as an educational tool, Amy and

Theodora Skipitares, a performance artist teaching in the department, submitted a proposal to establish a *Puppetry in Education Center* at Pratt. Their project proposal included the following description of the diversity within the medium of puppetry.

In many cultures, puppetry is a medium that can be didactic, purely aesthetic, or both. It can serve to convey the spirit of the Ramayana in India while, at the same time, it can present information about subjects such as HIV, drug use, and domestic violence, as well as the relationships between art educators. The medium includes a variety of styles: shadow figures, Bunraku and other rod puppets, large-scale outdoor parade puppets, and Toy Theater, that make possible a unique language of object, gesture, and story, and often conveys the complexity of human emotions in a more compelling and direct way than human actors. (Personal communication, n.d.)

Other art educators also found the medium an excellent tool for teaching and learning. Whiteland (2016), for example, used puppets to examine young people's attitudes towards older adults. Amy and Jodi's choice of puppets reflected their belief in an art education grounded in artistic practice. By introducing a puppet show to NAEA convention attendees, they provided an alternative to the ubiquity of the PowerPoint presentations, panels, and materials workshops at the annual meeting. This new presentation format was, in itself, a blurring of genres. It was reminiscent of Amy's ongoing efforts to break free of "the prison of 9 X 12," her metaphor for the prevalence of the rectangle in the structures of schools, classrooms, and school art projects. Jodi, who teaches online, professes a similar impulse to step outside the screen, a re-interpretation of London's (1994) call for art educators to take their students beyond the walls of their classrooms.

Intergenerational Histories

Amy's interest in intergenerational relationships and programs was rooted in her long history working with seniors, beginning with art classes and field trips sponsored by the Jewish Association of Services for the Aged (JASA), after she lost her job teaching art in the New York City public schools in 1975. The JASA workshop was followed by a traveling exhibition she co-curated called, *Images of Experience: Untutored Older Artists* (1982), a project which led to her research centering on three self-taught artists and what they learned from life experience.

Between 1986 and 1989, she supervised and developed a New York Foundation for the Arts (NYFA) funded program called *Shared Visions, Young Artists and Old Masters Collaborate* (see Figure 2). Two older self-taught artists, Isidore Tolep (Izzy) and Clarine Edwards, each worked with three, 4th-grade classes in two public schools in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. That project represented widely accepted ideas, circulating at the time about the term intergenerational, particularly as related to educational partnerships between young learners and the elderly.

Similarly, *Elders Share the Arts* (1979-2018), which began as a living history project in the Hodson Senior Center in the South Bronx, expanded its mission over the past 40 years to include several programs bringing older adults together with children and adolescents. Thus, the seniors were given a sense of usefulness after retirement and young students a sense of history and respect for the older members of our society.



Figure 2. Izzy Tolep and a class of 4th graders.

Jodi grew up in a family, where older relatives were often around. In fact, she and Amy both were raised in families where everyone, including children, was often part of the conversation of adults, and all opinions were valued. After leaving home, Jodi served as a friendly visitor to older adults in the communities where she has lived. Though she never formally worked with senior citizens as an art educator, she advised a number of graduate students whose work has taken them into nursing homes and senior recreation centers.

Bridging the Intergenerational Digital Divide

For a long time, the two friends were not aware of the considerable difference in their ages. However, in recent years they realized that their perspectives on a variety of subjects were the result of the very different periods in which they grew up and studied. It became clear that in their current intergenerational relationship, differences enriched rather than divided them, unlike mentors and protégés, where differences define the hierarchical nature of the relationship.

Their second NAEA puppet presentation in 2016, *What Do We Mean When We Talk about Intergenerational?* explored the changing associations with the term. They were privileged to have three experienced puppeteers, Kate Thomas, Megan Pahmire, and Anne Tolson bring their puppets to life in Chicago (see Figure 3).

The following is an excerpt from the script for that presentation which is quoted at length to illustrate the way Amy and Jodi flow from personal to professional dialogue and navigate the liminal spaces that enrich their relationship.

Hopefully, this brief approximation of the conversations they had, over the several months they prepared for the presentation, illustrates why Turkle (2015) asked us all to reclaim conversation in this digital age. For Turkle,

This new mediated life has gotten us into trouble. Face-to-face conversation is the most human—and humanizing—thing we do. Fully present to one another, we learn to listen. It's where we develop the capacity for empathy. It's where we experience the joy of being heard, of being understood. And conversation advances self-reflection, the

conversations with ourselves that are the cornerstone of early development and continue throughout life (p. 3).



Figure 3. Still image from a film of the puppets in action.

The Puppets Speak

Amy/Puppet:

My relationships with friends like you, who have a better handle on digital technology than I do, caused me to reconsider the associations we have with the term intergenerational. For some, technology seems to be driving a wedge, a digital divide (Van Volkom, Stapley, & Amaturio, 2014) between my generation and young people with whom I've spent my entire working life. For example, sometimes, I feel left out of professional discussions and interactions because I'm not tweeting, using Facebook, posting to Instagram, and sending text messages every other second. Remember last spring, I asked you to explain hashtags to me?

Jodi/Puppet:

How could I forget? I sent you that blog post about how to explain hashtags to your grandmas. Of course, I laughed as I hit send. I knew you would be a bit miffed by being referred to as a grandma, but that you would also find it more than a little hilarious. I really wish my connection between hashtags and footnotes made more sense to you. It seems ironic to me that you don't get hashtags because I see them like shorthand for tangents which, as our conversations often demonstrate—are our forte.

Amy/Puppet:

It's true. We move easily from our central topics. One of us will say, "That's just like in that book I read, radio program I heard, children's book I shared with my daughter, or in my case, old movies and songs." Often, we both know the reference and compare notes excitedly.

Jodi/Puppet:

And sometimes I don't know whom or what you are talking about because I didn't experience the same things as you did growing up. Amy, remember you're like, 35 years older than me!

Amy/Puppet:

Hey, don't rub it in Jodi. I don't think it's about age; it's about interests. I'm into films like you're into farms. But our combined references move us forward in our planning. Remember my surprise at your ignorance of Sergei Eisenstein and the famous montage scene in *The Battleship Potemkin*? I knew I respected your intelligence and wide-ranging interests and realized, through that example, that the difference in our interests is, in large part, due to our life experiences rather than the difference in our ages, although the later can sometimes affect the former.

Things that stood out for me from our planning over the phone—the first was the *inter* part of intergenerational. That prefix, meaning *between* serves as a connector and becomes a liminal space. And that place or situation has always attracted me, as in inter-disciplinary and inter-personal. Through those references reflecting our individual interests, we embody a kind of bridge between our two generations, or are there other factors as well? In other words, it's not a digital divide but just one of many subjects we can introduce to each other.

Jodi/Puppet:

Labeling anything generational suggests people have different interests and preferences based on their age and the time and culture in which they spent key parts of their lives, doesn't it? While we know that's not universally true, it has been documented that as the population gets older, the audience for certain things like the symphony, for example, is shrinking.

But on the other hand, so many young people today, myself included, are interested in reconnecting with the past. As a parent, I feel that way about communication. I want to teach my kids to be human, to be a mensch, to be able to look people in the eye and have a conversation with them that isn't mediated by a screen.

Amy/Puppet:

Remember that *New York Review of Books* article by Jacob Weisberg (2016, February 25) I shared with you in which he cites a study that found, “Nearly half of eighteen-to-twenty-nine-year-olds said they used their phones to “avoid others around...[them]”?”

Jodi/Puppet:

Yes, it relates to our growing realization that in some ways, I am part of your generation as well my own. When I was a kid we had three options—face-to-face communication, phone, and pen and paper. I loved writing and receiving letters as a young woman. And I'm passing that on to my daughter through various pen pals.

Amy/Puppet:

There now seems to be an infinite number of ways to be in touch. All of the above, plus email, texting (and sexting), video chatting, discussion boards, instant messaging, Instagram, social media-based dialogue like on Facebook and Twitter threads, comment sections of news sites, blogs...

Jodi/Puppet:

The number of choices can seem either like—so many distractions or a palette of options for communication that artists (and grandmas) can use to their advantage. The key is knowing the features of each tool and which one to use in a particular situation. I use a number of digital technologies to communicate specific things to different individuals and

groups of people, and each has its particular function and value, including my exchanges with older friends and family.

You are one of the only people outside my immediate family that I still talk to on the phone regularly and I can't imagine connecting with you any other way aside from in person. Our relationship wouldn't work asynchronously; it's too dynamic. We need to bounce ideas off each other.

Amy/Puppet:

I did wonder how we were able to remain friends and learn from each other despite the difference in our situations. Is it because of the way we are together—listening to one another as we go off track—interrupting, exaggerating, loudly exclaiming, and laughing at each other's jokes? Is it because we know that deep down, we are each an amalgam of both sides of that presumed divide? I'm not totally anti-technology; you are not unilaterally pro-tech.

As I look back, I seem to have been caught between technological advances my whole life—radio and television, movies and television, the typewriter and computer, and the telephone and email and texting.

Jodi/Puppet:

It takes time to navigate these changes wisely. I think that's something educators could be helping people of all ages think more about—to consciously alter the way that we communicate rather than because it's what everyone else is doing.

Amy/Puppet:

Amen to that! Did I tell you I finally got a smartphone? I pretty much use it just as a phone and a camera. I don't know if I'll ever want to tweet or post photos on Instagram.

Jodi/Puppet:

But we can't let you become a statistic! As Weisberg said, "today, not carrying a smartphone indicates eccentricity, social marginalization, or *old age*." I couldn't believe it when I read that! I think this stereotype limits participation, causing older people to doubt whether they can hack it digitally.

Amy/Puppet:

I think that right now I feel eccentric, socially marginalized, although not yet old. For some reason, Weisberg's quote reminds me of my mom, in her nineties, at Isabella, an assisted living residence, the day she reported proudly that she was taking a computer class. So, I decided to see what she was learning. I entered the room where she and a few other female residents were crowded around a computer. The "teacher," one of the few males at the Residence, began by asking the group what they were interested in seeing that day? First, to respond, my mother cried out, "cats," and he quickly used a search engine to find a page filled with images of cats. I waited for some explanation of the way the Internet works but that was the substance of the class. The ladies, however, oohed over the pictures and were thrilled by the "magic" their teacher continued to perform.

Jodi/Puppet:

I love the idea of those old ladies gathered around a computer screen sharing an aha moment where they saw the power of the computer as a tool for exploration and discovery.

And it's hilarious that they picked cats, consistently one of the top Google search terms in the United States. I can't imagine how much time people have lost looking at cats on the computer.

But that's the benefit as well as the downside of the internet. The whole world is open to us for investigation. But while there is so much to learn, it can sometimes be overwhelming, and people can lose themselves in a million photographs of cats.

Amy/Puppet:

Remember when we were both coincidentally, listening to Manoush Zomorodi's (2015), *Infomagical* podcast series? It helped us acknowledge and talk about our own information addictions, although I am not suffering from the digital information overload that the series addressed. I regularly listen to National Public Radio and read the print version of *The New Yorker*, *The NY Times*, and the *NY Review of Books* as well as articles related to art and education in our journals—only the print publications rather than their online versions.

Jodi/Puppet:

And I think Zomorodi (2015) would say reading a hard copy is qualitatively different than reading that same text on the screen. When we read online, it's easy to get distracted. After listening to *Infomagical*, I'm more focused on reading one thing at a time and not allowing myself to jump on Facebook in the middle of a reading to tell someone about it before I've even finished it. But I do love the sharing. With you in particular because, as you suggest, our different interests lead us to new understandings and discoveries as we interact.

Amy/Puppet:

And we make time for each other. We have to since our collaborative process is pretty slow. And that relates to the Rebecca Solnit (2005) book we both liked, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*. Neither of us is afraid to debate ideas and don't feel the need to race to a conclusion or, reach one for that matter.

Jodi/Puppet:

Which is what I love and it's so different from the way I communicate and work with many of my peers as well as my online students. It makes me wonder what I'm missing by not being in the classroom anymore. But I think there are gains as well. Remember that metaphor from an old article by Elliot Eisner's (1983), "The Art and Craft of Teaching?" Just as Eisner compared the teacher to a conductor, I think this technology can enable the piccolos to play a bit louder and more frequently, while giving the brass plenty of room to play as they like. So, in addition to the benefit of learning from the experiences of fellow students across the country, in some instances, the online discussion board is less intimidating than talking in class, and more voices get heard, although I miss having real-time conversations with students. That being said, not all students can express their ideas through writing as well as orally so it's different in that way. Just as our conversations would be different if they were all online too. Something would be lost.

Amy/Puppet:

Turkle also suggested that students are fearful of the messiness of conversation and want to craft the perfect comment or question for their professors, so they choose writing an email rather than in-person office hours in order to be the best they can be. Then they

expect the same from us. This is just one example she offers of how our addiction to our devices is causing us to lose the essence of our humanity.

Jodi/Puppet:

In a sense the idea of the ability to be lost in conversation takes us back to that liminal space of the “inter” in words like, inter-generational, inter-disciplinary, inter-sections, etc.—that we were talking about. The bridges we create between people, places or border crossings can be thought of as space where creativity lies.

When I was in graduate school in Columbus, I was responsible for organizing an alumni award sponsored by Ken and Sylvia Marantz. As you know, Ken was professor emeritus and former chair of the Department of Art Education at Ohio State. I went to their home where they served tea and cookies and told me about their life in art education and picture books. I continued to visit with them until Ken passed away. Our meetings introduced me to the idea of picture books as a primary space in which children engage with art. It also served as a precious time to be with people much older than I am and learn about the experiences they had at my age. I often thought about those meetings later; what we shared and how our lives were different. I valued that time and those conversations for they keep me connected to the history of our field, and history more generally.

I don't know how many art educators have those kinds of opportunities as part of their training. I teach about the history of art education, but I think it's different to speak to people directly who were there and hear their stories. I recommend Miami University's distinguished figures in art education lectures to my students and hope that in the future, we can find more ways to capture the voices of our elders—as invited guests, as columnists in the journals, and through interviews posted online through NAEA webinars. They, you, have so much to offer us—things that can't be learned through *Google* or *Wikipedia*.

Conclusion

Jodi and Amy's intergenerational dialogue and narrative research continue. In a 2017 NAEA presentation, *The Disappeared: Exploring the Erasures of Our History*, they resurrected the work of influential art educators Jodi had studied in school and with whom Amy worked or knew. And this year, they focused on the perfect marriage of image and text in picture books throughout history, with Amy reminding Jodi of classics she's forgotten and Jodi introducing Amy to new authors and illustrators she hasn't yet encountered. They look forward to many more years of collaboration and encourage others to find a friend or colleague to help them explore the past in the present, and the present through the past.

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