

In a Brueghel

Dr. Steven Van Zoost



So there I was at the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, lost in a Brueghel and thinking of you, gentle reader. Well, not only you, I admit. I was thinking of us, the collective group of educators in the teaching profession. The painting inspired thoughts of rejuvenation, despite its frozen winter scene.

Pieter Brueghel the Elder's work tends to provide wide views and slightly high angle landscapes that depict scenes of everyday life riddled with allusions. This combination produced works such as *Return of the Hunters*, *Census at Bethlehem*, and *Tower of Babel*. The peasant genre painting that enchanted me at the Hermitage Museum in Russia was Brueghel's *The Adoration of the Magi in the Snow*. It was painted 443 years ago in 1569. The subject is less about the three Magi, who are marginalized into the bottom left corner of the canvas, and more about the busy everyday lives of people in the village. In the painting I counted roughly 85 figures who are engaged

in various tasks such as breaking the ice on the river to fetch pails of water, carrying sacks over their shoulders, or simply trying to keep their hands warm.

Let me be clear: I have no formal training in visual art or art history, but that is not to suggest that I haven't been around art. Why, a print of Brueghel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* is on display in my classroom. W.H. Auden, W.C. Williams, and others have written poetry about this painting. Brueghel's work appeals to me (and I suspect to many others) because he seemed to be a master of re-contextualization: he painted old stories in the setting of new realities.

This is when I thought of you, gentle reader of *Aviso*. Teaching and learning is nothing new, but we are constantly faced with new realities: new literacies, new economies, new technologies, new societal expectations of schooling, and new kinds of learners. We, like Brueghel, have to become masters at telling an ancient story in new ways. We have to tell the unchanging story of teaching and learning in new languages and in new contexts.

Now, more than a decade into the twenty-first century, our new language of education should be familiar: Web 2.0, online classroom environments such as Moodle, disruptive technologies such as asynchronous wiki-writing, online social learning, online open learning, QR codes for learning, and 21st century literacies. Our vocabulary includes concepts such as assessment *for* learning, feed-forward, and student engagement, as well as acronyms such as GSA (Gay-Straight Alliance) and SIS (School Information System for PowerTeacher). This is not a definitive list of vocabulary for educating in these times—it is only a glimpse into our evolving repertoire. I offer this list to point out how concepts and vocabulary continue to change how we tell the story of education.

So too are the ways in which we educate ourselves about new educational language. Professional “reading” options now include TED Talks, RSS in education, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), and blogs such as Stephen Downe’s “OLDaily.” Our face-to-face meetings at conferences and workshops now also occur through video conferencing and online courses. Part of being a professional means to take responsibility for our own continued professional learning. How exciting to be teaching at a time when professional learning is so readily available and allows for relatively easy connection with educators in other places and with diverse backgrounds. Our profession-

al learning—and how we think of ourselves as educators—has new language and contexts.

The story of education, however, seems to remain largely unchanged—at least in my experience as a mid-career teacher. Each of us has a “MyStory” of education—a personal meta-narrative that explain why we teach. I am called to educate by a passion to learn about others and the world, an infatuation of seeing others experience those learning “light bulb moments,” and a belief that educating, as a career, is a means of participating in shaping our society. Regardless of the evolving educational vocabulary that helps to transform my craft, the story of education is the same for me, day after day, and season after season.

If he were alive today, I imagine that Brueghel would offer us paintings such as *Landscape with Digital Immigrants* or *The Ship-Builders in the Snow*. That’s the merit of imagination, and of engaging with art—we are called to re-imagine and re-contextualize the stories of our lives. Now, in winter, like Brueghel’s scene, we carry on with our daily lives in the village. While we too, like the figures in Brueghel’s painting, struggle to keep our hands warm in winter, we recommit to the story and to the art of teaching and learning.

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