



# Becoming Self-Directed Learners

Student & Faculty *Memoirs* of an  
Experimenting High School 40 Years Later

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## AN IMPLAUSIBLE ENDING

DAN PERLMAN, 1978

I credit and blame my three years in the Center for ending up in a field of work that I would have laughed off as completely implausible when I was a high schooler. Still, at some point I got it in my head that nothing could be more challenging than being an artist and a teacher, especially if there's no one authority and no one community that ever has the last word on what "art" is.

There really aren't any rules to being an artist. The same goes for teaching art. You have to forge your own process and definitions in both the studio and the classroom. Every artwork becomes a unique definition or proposal about what art should be. Every instance of art has the potential to redirect what it is we even call art. If it weren't for my experience in the Center, I would never have come to such naive, wonderful, and open aspirations.

The Center for Self-Directed Learning was my first experience with taking responsibility for the meaning that I make of things. "Self-Directed Learning" meant just that: having a substantial say in what I was going to make learning mean was liberating and puzzling, like a thought-game. I could play with more personally engaging ways of delving into the subject at hand (like learning American History through studying its major rivers, or Architecture through actually re-designing the layout of the very rooms that the Center used at New Trier. To be forthright about my interests and have them validated as legitimate means to serious inquiry was mind-bendingly motivating to me. It was also intimidating in the best possible way.

The challenge of identifying oneself in high school didn't need to be a battle about how I did or didn't fit a standard. It could be an ongoing process. My interests could bear results beyond academics. Every teacher in the Center was a unique example of mindfulness; they each approached their pedagogy (and their very authority) as something always to watch and be present to. Though

I would never have been able to articulate it in high school, I was learning that criticality and responsibility begins with paying attention to process—to the means, never just the ends.

Without knowing it, I was learning from example that teaching was both a challenge to, and a result of, how intellectually open someone can be. To give artists a new road, either into or out of themselves, is about the most I can hope to do as an art teacher. Of course, there are a million ways to do that. Is there any other subject in the humanities that is given such profound freedom and elemental aspirations?

Maybe art has this unique permission because the stakes ultimately aren't all that high, at least not in any direct way. Art is an ongoing discussion about how things mean other things, and there's rarely any hurry, let alone finality, to those always-debatable determinations. Yes, money is exchanged furiously in the art world, but meaning seeps slowly. And making meaning isn't something you can teach, at least not directly.

I especially like to remind students that sitting around for a few hours with no other agenda other than to make meaning of whoever's work we're looking at is a rare occasion, maybe even a privilege. The indulgence of being with your work while others pour their brains into its interpretation isn't likely to happen at all once you are out of school, at least not out loud with a captive audience... unless you teach, that is.

If you told me 35 years ago that the self-directed learning in which I was newly immersed would turn into the self-directed learning I now try to do in the studio (and that I try to facilitate in my students' educations), I would have said, "No way, you are nuts." The studio and classroom are most rewarding when I end up somewhere I couldn't possibly have anticipated when I (or we) started. Landing in unanticipated territory is obviously not something you can force. It takes a certain amount of neutrality, but not too much, a certain amount of patience, but not too much, and even a certain amount of willful naiveté. And it certainly takes trust. I first experienced that alchemy at the Center—I've been practicing it ever since.

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