



Reflections on the Experience of the *Ateliers* at the Seventh NAREEA Summer Conference, “Dialogues for Quality in Education – Valuing Early Childhood: An Invitation for Community Dialogue”

This year, the NAREEA Summer Conference took place at Asilomar Conference Grounds in Pacific Grove, California, a rustic retreat setting on the shores of the beautiful Pacific Ocean in Monterey County. Keynote speakers, Elena Giacopini, pedagoga, and Anna Orlandini, atelierista, shared multiple presentations from the experience of the municipal infant-toddler centers and preschools in Reggio Emilia, Italy. In addition, conference participants had the opportunity to tour “The Wonder of Learning - The Hundred Languages of Children” exhibit, visit two programs for migrant children and families, and participate in multiple small group discussions.

There were also ateliers during the conference, facilitated by North American studio teachers and educators experienced in studio work with children. These experiences focused on a sense of place in connection with Asilomar's history and context as well as the participants' educational and community contexts. The ateliers took place in different indoor and outdoor locations at Asilomar Conference Grounds.

In this NAREEA Column, we would like to share with you an introduction to the atelier experience, which was given by Jennifer Azzariti, atelierista and consultant, NAREEA board member and coordinator of the ateliers at the NAREEA Summer Conference. We would also like to share reflections from some of the atelier facilitators on the value of the experience from their point of view.

Introduction to ateliers

Jennifer Azzariti

A few weeks ago, I was listening to “Science Friday” on NPR and I heard a story about biologists, who had created a new field called “soundscape ecology.” In the past, biologists had focused on the vibrant sounds made by a single healthy species. But they realized that in order for a species to be healthy, the *landscape* of sounds has to be healthy. There must be – and I will use a term from Reggio Emilia – a “rich normality” of sounds. They went on to explain how, within these soundscapes, creatures learn to sing at

different frequencies, yet sing in relationship to each other so they can be heard.

Yesterday, Anna gave us a metaphor of “The Wonder of Learning” exhibit as interconnected archipelagos, which offer a plurality of possibilities. Children investigating the Malaguzzi International Center had the idea to “give to each of the columns their own originality as if they were a community of columns.”

If you look at the table of stones, which you brought from your contexts, each one is unique. The stones are dull, sparkly, smooth, gray, white or black. Each

The experiences you will encounter in a moment are organized to reflect the relationship between the individual and the community, to elevate the importance of context in creating a sense of well being, and to encourage deeper connections to materials as languages.

–Jennifer Azzariti



one has its own personality, history and origin but, as a whole and in relation to each other, the stones become something else entirely, and create new relationships and new possibilities.

I am using these examples as metaphors for the premise of the *ateliers* in the context of Asilomar. In April, Roxanne (Jacobus, California State Parks Ranger) and I had a phone conference. She touched on many aspects of the history and significance of Asilomar, as she did earlier today. In particular, she said, “Asilomar is about networking, exchanging and sharing information. The history is of women coming here to empower themselves and gain self-reliance and autonomy, and the energy today is still about improving ourselves but within a community... through collaboration and team work.”

The experiences you will encounter in a moment are organized to reflect the relationship between the

individual and the community, to elevate the importance of context in creating a sense of well being, and to encourage deeper connections to materials as languages. As we enter into the *ateliers* today, we come as ourselves with our own contexts and experiences. What we will generate through our play, as Elena said, is “a sense of belonging, pleasure and passion.”

I would now like to introduce the *atelier* facilitators, who worked with me to conceive and organize the experiences we have prepared for you today:

Pauline Baker, Ochoa Elementary School, Tucson, Arizona

Kristi Cameron, The Nest School, Atlanta, Georgia

Juan Felipe Calle, L’Atelier, Miami, Florida

Simonetta Cittadini-Medina, L’Atelier, Miami, Florida

Kristen Edge, St Anne’s Day School, Atlanta, Georgia

Jennifer Kesserling, Riverfield Country Day School, Tulsa, Oklahoma



Sarah Liebold, St. Anne's Day School, Atlanta, Georgia

Monica Malley, MacDonald Montessori School, St. Paul, Minnesota

Lily Schwartzman, Google Child Care Center, Palo Alto, California

Shannon Welch, Google Child Care Center, Palo Alto, California

There are also volunteers from the local community, who will be supporting the *atelier* experience: Maria Allis, Melanie Allison, Susan Bates, Summerlynn Burlew, Sheri Hunt, Janice Martinez, Heather Morado, Jean Moranda-Torres, Susan Paul, Betty Rappaport and Evan Reeves-Fortney. Many thanks for your participation and collaboration.

Reflections on the *atelier* experience

Pauline Baker

You don't teach art, that's the last thing you'd ever teach – how to make art. All you have to do is set up the environment and it happens. –Dale Chihuhly

In looking back on my experience of facilitating an *atelier* at the 2011 NAREA Summer Conference, many

new questions have arisen and several old ones have returned to the forefront of my thinking:

- What is the role of the *atelier* in teaching and learning?
- How is creativity inspired and developed?
- What are the differences between adults and children when they work with materials and ideas?
- How well do my invitations to engage with new materials, new tools and new processes communicate openness to diverse possibilities?
- How does the display of materials and tools encourage encounters and risk-taking?
- How are the critical differences between teaching art and inviting research with materials incorporated into our dialogue?
- What impact does using music in the studio have on children and adults?
- Should I have incorporated time for reflections in the *atelier*?
- Will it be possible to offer more opportunities for *atelier* experiences at future NAREA conferences?
- How can we support an ongoing dialogue about the role of the *atelier* as a place of research?

I am so grateful for the unexpected opportunity to be a facilitator of an *atelier* at the NAREA Summer Conference this year. I thank Jen Azzariti, the other atelier facilitators and local volunteers for gathering all the materials and tools, and for providing such beautiful and open *atelier* invitations. I especially appreciate NAREA for providing a most amazing and totally wonderful conference.

Most of all, I would like to thank all those who shared in the experience of “The World in a Grain of Sand” *atelier* with me. I hope you will stay in touch and that we will see each other at another NAREA conference soon.

Kristen Edge

Taking pause to think back on our experiences during the *atelier* on light, I am aware of several strong memories of beauty and community. Being surrounded by the diffuse light of June fog seemed to allow for an opening up of meanings and interpretations perhaps not obvious at first, offering an invitation for closer examination. A small group’s search for luminous light opened a window onto a new way of seeing forms in nature through the “eyes” of reflective surfaces. Another group’s response to the day’s diffuse light unveiled a “strong-willed” light residing in a single water drop on the sand. While sharing images of a multilayered bed of grass, another group was struck by the rich diversity of texture and color made visible by the light; “each” (blade) having “a unique identity” and yet “more alike than not.”

As small groups shared photo images within the larger group context, many other traces of light were lifted out of anonymity and given interpretation, meaning and identity. What seemed to emerge was a strong sense of relationship and reciprocity, between the light and the surroundings, the individual and light, and among each other. New interpretations took shape as participants shared impressions. I am reminded of a child’s words in one of Elena’s presentations: “Connected ideas make a lot of other ones be born...”

Not least of all, I also recall a strong sense of metaphor and poetic presence that occupied this *atelier* space. Reflecting on this sharing of experiences and meanings, I wonder: How will we go forward from here? What new ways of seeing will we take with us? What new ways of encountering light with



children will we open up to within our own contexts? Will we be willing to “suspend the obvious” (a quote by Remo Bodei that Elena shared during one of her presentations), together with children, just as we did in this setting?

I would like to extend a sincere thanks to all of the participants in this *atelier*, as it was each of you, through your exchange of meanings with each other, who created a beautiful experience.

Jennifer Kesselring

The experience of the *ateliers* was fabulous and ranks in the top 5% of professional development experiences for me. The opportunity to connect and collaborate with other *atelieristi* was invaluable and energizing. The whole experience was multi-layered and experiential and, therefore, very meaningful. I left invigorated, inspired and compelled to continue to question and to build understanding around the varying affordances of an *atelier*. It was a beautiful encounter and I hope we continue to include this type of experience in NAREA initiatives in an ongoing way. Many, many thanks for including me in such an opportunity.



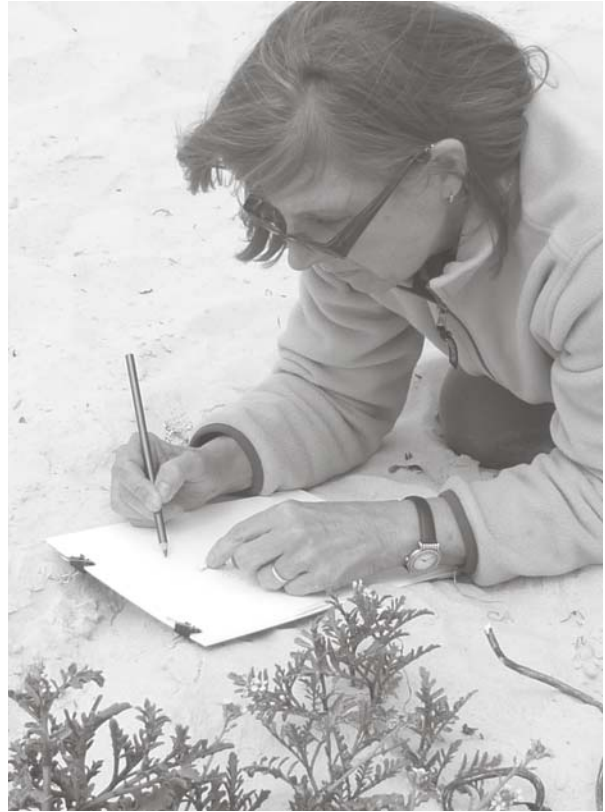
Monica Malley

I feel honored to have had the opportunity to be one of the facilitators for the *ateliers*. Planning and coordinating with Jennifer Azzariti, studio teachers and other educators was such a unique experience. Everyone’s creativity and deep thinking offered rich, complex experiences. It was exciting to see the many ways that ideas were expressed using the multiple environments and materials on the grounds of Asilomar. There were so many wonderful surprises that came out of these experiences as well as many new relationships. I look forward to many future opportunities working in collaboration.

Shannon Welch

It was a great pleasure to be involved in the *ateliers* of the 2011 NAREA Summer Conference. It was an exciting and unique proposal to collaborate with studio teachers from across the country in planning the *ateliers*, and it allowed me the opportunity to have access to perspectives, ideas and voices from fascinating people beyond my usual context.

During “The Dance of the Waves” *atelier*, I was honestly moved by how thoughtfully and openly the participants shared the poetic voices inside themselves. It was a time for investigating the elements around us, looking more closely at nature and building connections with each other. It was also an opportunity to be intentional about our decision to commit to playing. It was a time for rediscovering together the joy and wonder that one finds in play, that can so easily become lost in our everyday adult lives.



The Third NAREA Winter Conference

Mountain View, California

February 11-12, 2012

Log onto Winter Conference –

Current page of NAREA website

for more information as it becomes available:

www.reggioalliance.org/narea/winter_conference/current.php