

# Interview with Ron Chironna

## Teaching Artist and Participant in the 2009-2010 Community-Word Project Training Program

*Ron Chironna has been a professional freelance illustrator for the past 32 years, providing artwork for books, magazines, advertisements, games, and private commissions. For the last three years he has been teaching illustration classes at a Staten Island nonprofit arts group called The Art Lab. He was interviewed by Charles Conley this spring, shortly before the end of the training program.*

*What brought you to Community-Word Project's training program?*

In the fall of 2009 I had my first teaching artist position for six weeks at a small private school. It was a humbling experience. I realized then that I needed some training in order to do a better job for the kids in that kind of setting.

When I started to seek out training, I first thought of going back to college to become a certified school teacher. However, the time and money needed for that was not affordable for me, and the colleges I contacted all said that there would probably be no art teacher jobs available when I graduated. Then I learned about becoming a teaching artist, and that seemed a better fit for me. And the name of the training program that kept popping up was the Community-Word Project. They have a sterling reputation, and their education process is thorough, diverse, and very practical.



Photo of Ron Chironna by Charles Conley.

*What was the most valuable thing you learned from the training?*

Adaptability. Community-Word Project provides its trainees with knowledge of all sorts—theories of learning and teaching, and practical real-life methods of forming lesson plans for the classroom and implementing them while managing the class. But once a teaching artist is actually in front of the class, Community-Word Project stresses that he or she has to have the skills to adapt to whatever occurs in the classroom, so that the students still get a valuable lesson, though it might not be the lesson that was

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intended when the class started that day.

*What does a practicing artist/writer bring to a classroom that is different from what a classroom teacher can bring?*

However well-trained a classroom teacher might be in implementing lessons in art or writing, that teacher is foremost a teacher, not an artist or writer. A teaching artist is foremost an artist, and brings to the classroom his own experience in his field of endeavor, which is certainly more up-to-date than what the school's curriculum can provide, and much more expansive in nature. In addition, some students accept knowledge more easily through visual means, others through the written word, others through music or dance, and so on. Teaching artists bring the ability to reach students through those various avenues.

*What has the program taught you about your own creative process?*

Mainly that I've been taking it for granted. I've been an illustrator for so long that I've been going through the creation of each illustration without really thinking about the creative process, and perhaps having my work suffer because of that. The program has taught me how important it is to consider my process all the time, so that I can not only benefit from everything I've learned, experienced, and done up to this point, but also consider incorporating new creative elements into what I do.

*How have you integrated this understanding with your teaching style?*

When I start to construct a teaching curriculum, I not only use the knowledge and practices I've been comfortable with for so many years, but I also look out of my comfort zone. So, though I'm a visual artist teaching visual art primarily, I try to construct lessons that bring in music, performance, the written word, and other creative disciplines. I hope that this

way of working also influences the students to think in a more expansive way when they go through their own processes of creation.

*How does teaching influence your art?*

Being an illustrator is a very solitary profession. I sit in my office studio and create my images with my only company being a radio and CD player. I only communicate with my clients by phone or e-mail. Now, I'm in classrooms full of vibrant, active, smart, interesting, and interested kids. It's an amazing difference. How can that interaction not influence me and what I do? How can hearing all those different thoughts, opinions, and experiences not get into my head and come out through my pencil point? When I start a job now, especially an illustration aimed at kids, I consider how my students would react to my images, and how they might want me to revise a visual idea or the way I drew an element in the illustration

*How does your art influence your teaching?*

As an illustrator, my job is to tell stories through the images I create, whether they're for a storybook, a magazine article, or an ad image for a brand of cooking oil. I've always felt that my job in the classroom is to help the students somehow tell their own stories, and I know that each one of them has a story that should be told. Now, my lesson plans might help them tell a very direct and obvious tale of how they live or think, or they might just lead them to reveal an interesting subtle aspect of their personality, or a hidden talent. I go into a classroom hoping that by using my own art, or by incorporating another art form such as music, I can teach a lesson that relates to the school's curriculum, and also aids in helping the students express their creativity and individuality, and tell the stories that are only their own, and that make them each very special. ☺