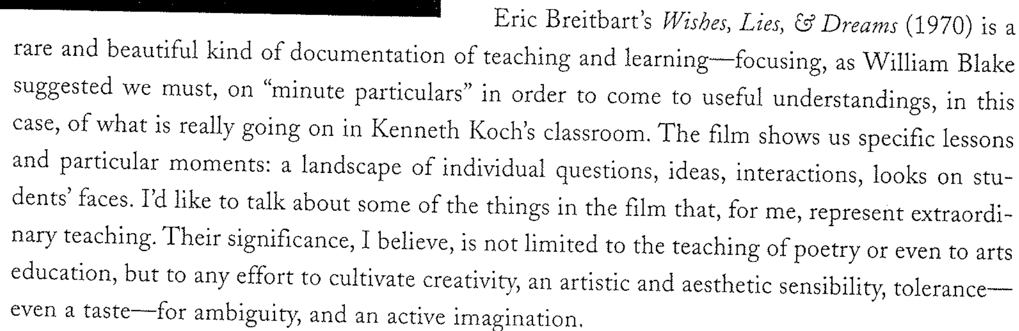
Notes Toward an Extraordinary Teaching



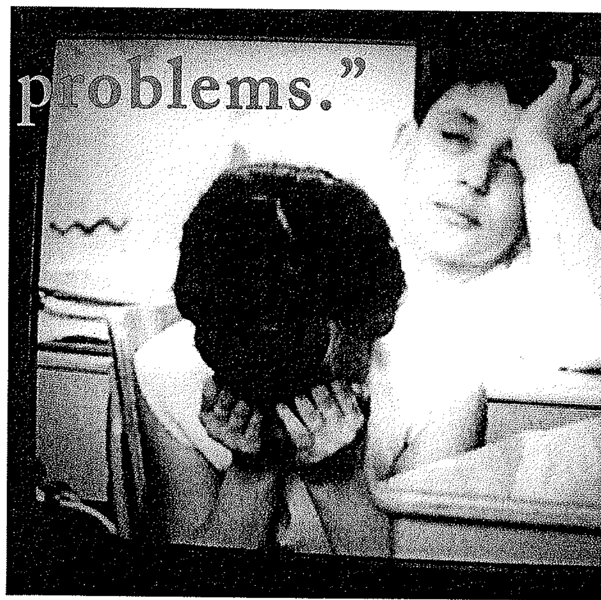
STEVE SEIDEL

As a part of its 35th anniversary celebration last fall, Teachers & Writers held a screening and discussion of Eric Breitbart's 1970 documentary film on Kenneth Koch's teaching at P.S. 61. The event culminated with the following commentary by Steve Seidel, Director of Project Zero. His remarks helped to put the film in a larger pedagogical context and to extract from Koch's classroom a few lessons for us all.

Eric Breitbart's *Wishes, Lies, & Dreams* (1970) is a rare and beautiful kind of documentation of teaching and learning—focusing, as William Blake suggested we must, on "minute particulars" in order to come to useful understandings, in this case, of what is really going on in Kenneth Koch's classroom. The film shows us specific lessons and particular moments: a landscape of individual questions, ideas, interactions, looks on students' faces. I'd like to talk about some of the things in the film that, for me, represent extraordinary teaching. Their significance, I believe, is not limited to the teaching of poetry or even to arts education, but to any effort to cultivate creativity, an artistic and aesthetic sensibility, tolerance—even a taste—for ambiguity, and an active imagination.

In my work at Project Zero, I am deeply influenced by the legacy of Koch's teaching. Project Zero was founded 35 years ago by the philosopher Nelson Goodman, who was interested in how young children learn to use symbols to represent the world and to make sense of their experiences in the world. He considered this a distinctively human capacity and, in many ways, the cognitive foundation for making art. When asked early on what was known already about this, he answered, "Practically nothing, so let's call this Project Zero." The name represents the humility at the core of our origin. Whatever the contributions my colleagues and many others have made in the last three decades, our understandings of the extraordinary phenomenon of learning is still much closer to zero than we might at times want to believe.

"Give them harder problems."



Photographs © Eric Breitbart

One of the subjects that fascinates us at Project Zero is creativity. There is a story that in the 1960s Goodman was asked whether children could be made more creative and Goodman said he thought they could. He was then asked how. And he said, "Give them harder problems."

In Breitbart's film, Koch presents his class with the kinds of "harder problems" Goodman was advocating. I'd like to take a moment to reflect on just two of those tantalizing "problems."

The First Hard Problem: In the film, we witness Koch playing two pieces of classical music for his students. I couldn't tell you who the composers are, but the first piece (with its echoes of Debussy) is soothing and accessible. He asks his students to make their own Fantasia of images in accord with the music. And he gets responses that are consistent with the music, such as: "I saw one palm tree and one lovebird."

He could easily have stopped there, but Koch presses on, asking his students to settle themselves down for another round of music: this time, a stark, dissonant piece akin to Schoenberg. Tell me what images come to you, he says. One student responds with "I saw the world blowing up," another with "fear and chaos." Then, as if that weren't enough, he pushes still further, in the gentlest of ways and with that magnificent smile. He asks them to try to come up with "nice images" inspired by that dark music. Slowly but surely a girl in the class raises her hand: "I saw a flower trying to pull itself open."

Another Hard Problem: Later in the film, Koch accompanies his students through an analysis of a poem by sixth grader Jeff Morley. He gathers impressions and guides them to the line he himself is drawn to—"I am stacked up right against a bird." Then he challenges them to make sense of the title of the poem ("The Dawn of Me"), and, in one of the many remarkable moments in the film, he asks the students to consider the physical experience of childbirth and its possible connection to Jeff's poem.

What a "hard problem!" What an invitation to their minds and their creativity. Who else has ever read them John Ashbery, expounded on Keats, asked them what they can imagine of childbirth, or made a connection between childbirth and the imagery in a work of art? Who else has asked them to consider someone just one year older as a writer worthy of serious attention? No wonder they cheer when this man walks in the room.

This invitation to their minds—to think, to imagine, to feel—is repeated over and over in the class sessions we see in the film. I counted at least four times that Koch says, "I want you to think," or "I want to know what you think." It is like a musical theme, heard running through his teaching.

"I want to know what you think."

In Koch's approach to teaching poetry, nothing is simplified or, at least, nothing is reduced to the simplistic. Obviously, he is convinced that children can and will want to enter and explore even very difficult poetry. He embraces the complexity of the poems he teaches and of his students' own poems. In doing so, he helps his students find what can be so deeply compelling about poetry—what there is to wonder about and come back to time and again.

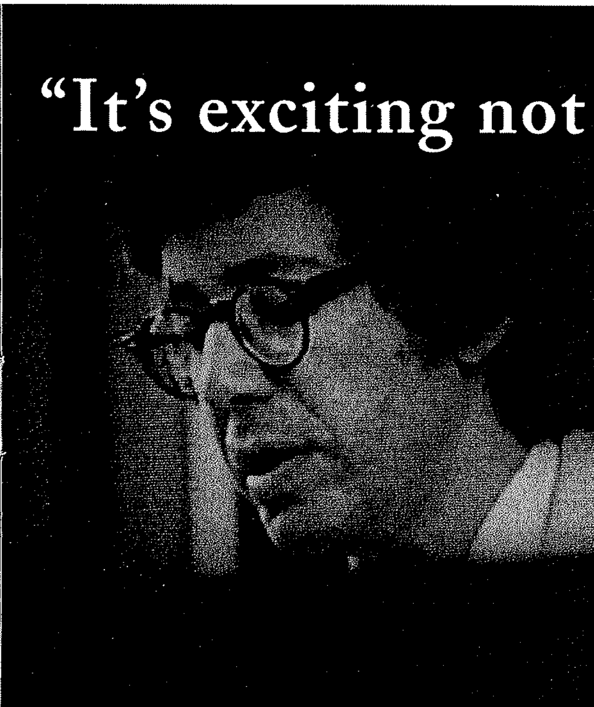
In *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red?*, Koch considers an elementary school language arts text and the approach to reading and writing poetry found in it. "Nothing," he writes of this text, "was connected to any serious emotion or to any complex way of looking at things. Everything was reassuring and simplified, and also rather limited and dull." A bit further on he continues, "There is a condescension toward children's minds and abilities in regard to poetry in almost every elementary text I've seen." Watching him in this film, it is not hard to imagine how deeply offended he must have been by the standard approach to teaching poetry to young children—offended by what it suggested about poetry and what it assumed about children.

If any question remains about why his students cheer as he enters the room in the early moments of the film, I believe we have another clue here. He is not condescending toward them. His deep respect for their capacities seems to guide him at every moment. He seems to believe that his students are capable of wonderful work—by which I mean both terrific, high-quality reading and writing, quite literally, full of wonder.

But he also seems, implicitly, to recognize a kind of deal that must be made with students. In order to get them to give their best, they must be given the best—in this case, the best poetry, the best thoughts and insights we have about those poems, and the best atmosphere to work in. In this we find a model not only for the teaching of poetry or for arts education, but for any classroom in which the goal is to help students learn to use their minds well—flexibly, imaginatively, and rigorously—on matters of significance.

"I don't know what you mean."

"It's exciting not to know the meaning."



Finally, I'd like to return to one moment in the film that I find particularly stunning. This moment pretty much passed me by the first time I watched the film. But, on my second viewing of the film, I found that I was quite taken aback by an almost offhand comment Koch makes.

Early in the discussion, fifth grader Liza after saying of the line, "I am stacked up right against a bird" that she doesn't really know what it means, adds, "I always remember that line." She explains that she has heard the poem before and the line has clearly caught her attention. Several minutes later, Koch, talking about the first line of Jeff's poem ("I was born nowhere") asks, "What does that mean? Do you like that?" Then he quickly qualifies his question, saying: "You don't have to know what it means to like it. I don't know what *you* mean, but I like you." And then they move on to further considerations of the meaning of the line.

"I don't know what you mean, but I like you." That's what stunned and also moved me. It seemed odd and counterintuitive, but also touching. He used his feelings for his students to help explain one of the mysteries of reading poetry—how you can like a line in a poem without fully understanding it—and he used this observation about poetry as an opportunity to tell his students of his feelings for them. It goes by quickly and is spectacularly underplayed, but it is explicit.

In a recent article in *Teachers & Writers* Magazine, Rachel DeWoskin helps explain this bit of counterintuitive logic when she quotes Koch as saying, "The meaning isn't exciting; it's exciting not to know the meaning." This man was addicted to the mysterious, to the pursuit of meaning, to questions, and he seemed to want his students to get hooked right along with him.

"I don't know what you mean, but I like you"—the comment made me sad, and I was curous about that. Why sad? I suppose I was also identifying with those children sitting in that classroom—perhaps wishing that I was there, sharing in that experience. Perhaps wishing that I, too, could absorb the great kindness and generosity expressed so simply and straightforwardly by that man who, at the same moment, was clearly so serious and so much fun, that grown-up with the startling mind and the equally startling smile.

but I like you."

Vito Perrone, the education historian and teacher educator, said that in order to stimulate true innovation in educational practice, one must first teach brilliantly and then must write brilliantly about that teaching. If Perrone is right, any of us who have tried either teaching or writing about teaching can easily understand the difficulty of this challenge. Clearly, though, by this daunting criteria, Kenneth Koch was one of the true innovators—and provocateurs of further innovation—in American education.