

Rick's Place
Notes, Thoughts, and Random Musings on the Online Experience
by Rick Hein, AMIS web master

The creative mind always walks with one foot in the dark. There's nothing in the world more frightening than sitting in front of that blank piece of paper. Every time you sit down to draw, the first step is overcoming that fear. I've been drawing Wile E. Coyote for over 30 years, but I still must overcome that fear of wondering if I can draw him.

Chuck Jones
Creator of Wile E. Coyote
Warner Bros. Cartoons animator and director

I am sure we all cherish many memories of Mr. Jones' work. Wile E. Coyote frantically painting the tunnel on the solid rock face that the Road Runner then speeds through. A confused look followed by our furry friend dashing straight into it and flattening himself against the solid rock. The look on his face as he finds himself standing in mid air, followed by the 'elastic gravity' effect that stretches him like a rubber band as he realizes that he is, indeed, going to fall. The long Swanee whistle as the coyote descends and the minuscule puff of dust as he hits the desert floor.

As one anonymous writer quipped, "Writing is easy. You just stare at a blank piece of paper until the drops of blood form on your forehead and form words as they drip on to the page." Of course composition has the same level of apprehension for many people. Sculpture is easy as well, isn't it? All that Michelangelo had to do to carve his David was to take a block of marble and chip away everything that didn't look like David. Many of us have the same feelings going into the classroom. At the start of a lesson have you ever said to yourself, "Can I go in there and get rid of everything except my target behaviours?"

Teachers have the same problem as writers and other artists, only it can appear more than each time they step into the classroom. Those with six or seven lessons a day, consisting of anywhere from five to ten sections involving differing learning styles, skills, and behaviours will understand. Of course that doesn't take into account the extra lessons we all carry with us, "just in case".

When we walk into a classroom we all have our Acme Swiss Army knife handy in case the goldfish has died, the students have never seen snow before, or it is the period before lunch and it is hot dog day today! Our repertoire of songs, stories and movement activities grows throughout our career. We plan and make sure that there is always plenty to do that is 'on task' so we don't find ourselves giving that wide-eyed pitiful look as the solid earth is no longer beneath our feet and the seductive pull of gravity begins to elongate our legs and we faintly hear the high, downward sliding call of the Swanee whistle.

As teachers of the arts, we know the feeling of walking with one foot in the dark. We also know that we are not alone in this feeling. Actors, singers, conductors, and orchestral musicians march with us on the border. The border is not a safe place; one is literally between. We ask our students to follow us to this zone where exploration of these boundaries can occur. There is often more than a little risk to the activities we undertake there.

So here we are in our new role as guides in the terrifying lands of the shadows. We teach our students to take risks, to project the skills and understandings we have helped develop onto new situations. Ascending scales; parallel motions; subito; accelerando; don't overbalance; relax into the high notes; tips of the fingers, not middle pads; loose wrists and bounce the sticks; Eb11 - which scale is best to move to Db13?; tip of the tongue; listen for the melody and balance; watch; don't watch! - read the music.

We remember our guides; we summon ancient procedures. There are rites and rituals as we prepare ourselves and our charges for performance. We look for the confidence we receive from our colleagues, our mentors, and those whom we lead. We know that the actual performance began that day in the classroom when the first rhythm was rehearsed. We know that the actual product has been the process that enabled the students to discover the thrill that comes from first one foot, then the other, moving into the shadows to explore.

What they find in there is priceless and rare. Whenever they go back to the boundaries they will find new treasures and experiences. They will find something else they didn't expect. They will also find courage, skills, and an attitude of success that would not exist if you had not ever led them to that edge.

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