During the 2006-07 academic year, we came together in a doctoral seminar intended to support and analyze art education practice in the context of higher education. Our primary focus was our common teaching of M333, Art Methods for Elementary Teachers, a required course for undergraduate students training to be elementary school classroom generalists. In spite of best efforts over the years, M333 has proven challenging to teach and instructors often felt less than successful at the course’s end. One goal of the doctoral seminar, therefore, was to foster systematic reflection about the underlying assumptions on which we were basing instruction in M333 and to consider how the course might be transformed.

Although we explored a number of readings in the seminar, Ken Bain’s *What the Best College Teachers Do* (2004) became an interesting and useful starting point for discussion. It challenged our thinking and provided the impetus for revisions to the M333 syllabus in the second semester. As such, we wish to share some emerging insights through a collaborative book review of the Bain text. We summarize its content and then reflect on the extent to which it may be usefully applied to the design of art methods courses for preservice elementary teacher generalists.

In Chapter 1 and the Appendix, Bain describes the study on which his book is based and how he determined what would count as the ‘best’ of college teaching. He began by interviewing hundreds of students and teachers across multiple types of institutions, ultimately selecting 63 teachers for more in-depth study. Bain notes his goal of trying to understand not merely the strategies that these individuals use but also how they conceptualize their practices. Key criteria for selecting participants were both high satisfaction among students and evidence of the quality of learning. In the courses of the most remarkable teachers, students described learning as deeply engaging and often intellectually transformative, having a sustained impact beyond the end of the course.
In Chapter 2, Bain identifies the problem that even students who receive high grades in a course may not by its end have given up misconceptions that block important learning. He introduces the principles on which his research participants base their instruction, including the assumption that knowledge is constructed rather than received; and that it either builds on or must confront and unravel beliefs that students already have. He notes that mental models change slowly and that rejecting deeply ingrained beliefs may be emotionally traumatic, requiring a particular context that he refers to as a safe, yet critical, learning environment. Such a milieu provides fascinating, personally compelling experiences, but also supports trying, failing, and trying again.

In Chapters 3-7, Bain expands on how the best college teachers prepare for their classes, what they expect of and how they treat their students, how they conduct class, and how they evaluate students and themselves. Among the key points are that these special teachers:

1. View their teaching—and the evaluation of their teaching—as serious intellectual endeavors, of equal importance to research;
2. Design courses not around tasks to be completed but around big significant questions that the course will address, as well as the reasoning abilities that students need to develop, and pre-conceptions that students may need to challenge;
3. Frequently present syllabi as enticing and personally meaningful invitations rather than a set of requirements and seek students’ personal commitment to learning in the course;
4. Begin from students’ interests rather than the assumptions of the discipline;
5. Expect ‘more’ of their students, not in the quantity of assignments but in assuming that all are capable of understanding sophisticated concepts;
6. Often go to extraordinary lengths to help students succeed in learning; and
7. Consistently seek evidence about the quality and nature of students’ learning.

Among the most significant ideas to arise from our discussions was an understanding that success in M333 may require a transformative learning experience for many of our students. Achieving success could necessitate that our students throw off old comfortable patterns of thinking about the value and the purposes of visual art in the context of the elementary classroom to take on new models with which they did not have previous experience. Accomplishing this intellectual transformation, especially in a way that might be sustained, would likely require more than a series of positive experiences involving the exploration of media and exemplary lesson plans. Instead, it would need the kind of deep and critical, yet safe, learning environment that Bain describes. Moreover, we needed to begin
to think about class experiences as ways to systematically challenge preconceptions and demonstrate transformative learning.

A starting point was Bain’s proposal that courses should be designed around a series of ‘big’ questions that address the reservations and misconceptions with which students arrive in the class and also situate the course in the students’ real-world interests and needs. An early discussion in our seminar, therefore, considered what such questions might be for preservice elementary generalist teachers. For Gabriele Abowd and Lara Lackey, the questions generated in this discussion became the focus for M333 instruction. On the first day of class, the questions were introduced and students were asked to write their responses from current knowledge. Throughout the course, readings and assignments were analyzed for the extent to which they were useful in answering the opening course questions. The final take-home exam consisted of three of the questions, exactly as stated at the outset. Students were asked to re-answer the questions and reflect on gaps between their first-day and final answers, making their learning evident.

Rasim Basak argued that learning is about making bridges between what is known and new experiences. Moreover, because M333 students work with materials, processes, and domains that are often perceived as alien, they need assistance in recognizing and being able to articulate their learning. He employed a strategy of asking students to build a conceptual map that made connections between and across M333 class assignments and concepts with other school subjects. Similarly, Pei-Lan Hsu considered the difficulty of evaluating student learning in courses in which students lack comfort and skill with visual materials and suggested the use of a portfolio approach. Both of these ideas offer strategies through which students can present their learning in a visual form, making it more evident for teacher and student alike.

Roy Reynolds and Moxie Stoermer grappled with Bain’s suggestion to begin from student, rather than disciplinary, perspectives. They introduced a series of activities that used the visual as a vehicle for learning about a social studies theme, the Great Depression. A number of M333 instructors emphasized ‘real life’ assignments involving integrated lesson planning and peer teaching.

Mary Soylu argued that the studio model of instruction is already an example of the critical learning environment that Bain describes. Learning through visual media is active, involves many senses, encourages exploration and the need to work through problems, yet is highly motivating and conducive to sustained learning. Tingting Wang argued that studio experiences may be essential entry points when introducing cultures to which we do not belong. Referring to examples like the touch and smell of Chinese paper or the stance and attitude of Chinese brush stroke, the aesthetic can provide an embodied introduction to culture that may be more likely to have a transformative impact than talk or reading alone.

Although Bain’s work offers us a compelling jumping off point for re-visioning M333, he does not address some significant issues. Among
these, according to Karen Danielson, are power issues related to the current structure and economics of academic work. Most of the authors of this review are Associate Instructors, teaching as a means of support for their doctoral studies. The consensus among us is that such instructors are much more vulnerable than many of the college teachers about whom Bain wrote and simply have greater difficulty inspiring or requiring rigorous sustained effort from students. For an interesting discussion related to this topic, therefore, we recommend *Office Hours: Activism and Change in the Academy* by Cary Nelson and Stephen Watt (2004).

A second point, raised by Moxie Stoermer, is that teaching M333 is uniquely layered and complex due to its focus on professional development. We are not merely teaching undergraduates, but teaching undergraduate students to teach elementary-age children as well. We suspect that the critical learning environment about which Bain speaks exists for our students in the form of field experiences with ‘live’ children. Although creating these kinds of real world learning environments for our students is often challenging, we know that they are powerful and do have the potential to transform. We leave, therefore, the last word to Jimmy Chou, who argues that it is the responsibility of all higher educators not only to strive to be the best kind of college teachers they can be but also to relay suggestions related to best policy and practice to administrators on an ongoing basis.

We acknowledge that at the outset of our seminar, many of us had doubts that Bain’s work could be applied to teaching M333. We assumed that our discipline, the course, and its problems were so unique that generic principles or practices would not apply. We could not imagine that teaching Art Methods for Elementary Teachers would have much in common with courses across campus dealing with science, mathematics, or anthropology. We were mistaken, and found that Bain’s work helped shake us out of rather myopic disciplinary thinking that ultimately caused us to repeat the same mistakes again and again. Bain’s work challenged us to think more deeply about how ‘success’ in M333 might be defined, what might be needed to achieve it, and therefore, how to proceed. Beyond the brief comments here, we think it offers potential for the ongoing transformation of art education courses in Higher Education.

References

