In 2007, I was awarded an MA degree from the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore. The occasion was a culmination of mixed sentiment, both pride and relief. Pursuing my MA while teaching full-time in two, K-5 elementary schools taught me a lot about multi-tasking, how to function on ridiculously small amounts of sleep and how sad it is when cigarettes and myspace become one’s study break “reward.”

After a mandatory recovery time (no less than 2 years in which I quit smoking and weaned myself off of social networks), I found myself back in the classroom as a participant in the UArts Inspiration program. Concentrating my focus on studio work through a Photoshop exploration and pedagogy through a look at mind/brain learning principles, I noted several links between my graduate thesis work and the content discussed in Philadelphia.

My graduate research focused on “holism” – an attitude towards teaching that celebrates each student as an individual with specific needs and considers the fact that all students can be successful in school when they are able to make meaningful connections between their life and their learning experiences. Stemming from the philosophies of John Dewey, Maria Montessori, and Howard Gardner, these holistic ideals are not a doctrine or prescription for teaching, but they do rely on the acknowledgement that learning is about the congruence of one’s body, mind, and soul and this unity’s quest to find and make meaning. This meaning making occurs in safe-learning environments that acknowledge each member of the class as an important part of the whole. I will spend the rest of this paper examining the twelve principles and commenting on how they support/contrast the ideals of holistic education. This is my attempt at connecting what I learned through my UArts experience with what I am incorporating/promoting within my classroom.

**Principle One: The brain is a complex adaptive system.**

Just as the learner is the result of different systems working harmoniously, so too is the brain. Further proof that our brains must be inherently female, the brain is a master
multi-tasker. If we fail to acknowledge all of the different sensory processes that are employed during learning and/or limit learning to an auditory, visual, or exclusively tactile experience than we are limiting the capabilities our students have to absorb information. In short, learning does not exist in a vacuum.

**Principle Two: The brain is a social brain.**

This principle notes the importance of social interaction in learning. Furthermore, it alludes to the role that our communities play on shaping our experiences – how we as teachers can facilitate a classroom that feels safe for our students to take “risks” in learning vs. a classroom that relegates risk-taking only to the intellectually precocious. Specifically in the arts classroom, where movement is encouraged as students collect materials, there is an opportunity for interpersonal exchange that enhances what is being offered in the curriculum. As a side-note, I am sitting in a library as I type this paper and it occurs to me that I find reading to be a social learning experience. Often times when reading fiction, I become the voyeur, the unseen third party, that feels the emotion of characters, sees their expressions, and learns from their experiences through the written word. These interaction, in turn, inform how I view/react to certain situations. I never thought about it like that before…

**Principle Three: The search for meaning in innate.**

Maslow’s queries: who am I, why am I here? fall into the realm of existential questioning that is a main tenet of holistic teaching. By promoting these inquiries in our students in art class, math, science, and by examining others’ attempts to do so, we are teaching our students on a humanistic level. This in turn, teaches kids (and adults) that it is important to examine the existential components of our existence. This element of teaching veers more towards the spiritual side of learning. In order to clarify, *spirituality* as I use it in reference to holistic education, is not associated exclusively with organized religion, but encompasses the much wider spectrum of personal meaning, life value, intrinsic beliefs and value systems, etc.

Interestingly, I do not remember a class in high school and through much of undergraduate college that really challenged me to examine my own personal beliefs and
philosophies towards education, let alone life. In fact, I think that I probably examined these concepts with the least amount of inhibition during the elementary years. I see my early observations and beliefs still in the short fiction that I wrote and in my journal entries.

**Principle Four: The search for meaning occurs through “patterning.”**

After learning about this principle, I think that I have experienced some of my most effective life education through my experiences of traveling within other cultures. By cross-comparing my values and what I know to be “normal” with the beliefs and patterns of the Greeks (Grad School Get Away ’07), the English (Geriatric Getaway ’02) and many Europeans (Sibling Survivor ’04), I was able to live in these different cultures for at least 8 weeks and create daily routines that were in contrast to what I knew. I came to understand American culture and myself in a new way. Just as learning about the chemical components of painting (the science of it), contributes to my understanding of how to use the medium, I then use that understanding to create a purposeful mood through texture or tone.

**Principle Five: Emotions are critical to patterning.**

Again, holistic education! Often times in the west, we celebrate the mind and disregard the body and the spirit. Emotion falls into the spiritual spectrum of experience and can also affect the physical sense of self. I have experienced depressed learners who are constantly asking to go to the nurse because their body is responding to the unrest of their mind. Again, learning does not exist in a vacuum – we need to foster the emotional/spiritual side of our learners, also.

**Principle Six: Every brain simultaneously perceives and creates parts and wholes.**

It is important to not think of the brain sections as black and white, but rather as shades of gray. That sounds very Zen, but my point is that specifying individuals as left-brain or right-brain learners may then actually serve to alienate them from developing and/or excelling in those areas that they see as challenging for them. I spent my whole
life thinking that my dislike of math and sciences was a result of my brain chemistry, which led to a general dislike of the subjects. In retrospect, I wish that I had pushed harder to understand those areas of the curriculum that were very challenging to me because I think the understanding and mastery of those subjects could have done a lot to boost my confidence at tackling tasks that do not come easy to me.

Principle Seven: Learning involves both focused attention and peripheral perception.

I thought that my graduate mentor hated me. She never came right out and said it, but all of the signs were there. She wrote all of her comments on my rough drafts in CAPS LOCKED, RED INK. She shook her head, impatiently, at me when I asked questions. She had this tendency to roll her eyes heavenward (as if in silent prayer) when she was pondering the results of my research. Her processing time was slow, but her mind was amazing, and my quick mind and quicker tongue took her slow processing time to mean that she was trying to correct my thousand wrongs in her head. Her negative comments were much more plentiful than her praises and I began to perspire just as the mention of her name. She was an excellent researcher, but not a good educator for me. At the end of my degree, she actually apologized to me. Imagine how taken aback I was when she expressed her regrets that “she had not been able to meet my needs as a learner.” I wanted to hug her and kill her – in equal measure. Her signs had led me to believe that I was somehow deficient, when in reality; I was misreading her subtleties through the lens of my own insecurities. Wow, I need to send this paragraph to my therapist.

Principle Eight: Learning always involves conscious and unconscious processes.

In the handout that you provided, you mention reflection as a method of processing for learners. Art making demands reflection in many ways; specifically, when it is art-making based on existential inquiry. By creating art making that is personal for learners, they utilize reflection and are forced to consider the obvious and subtle input of their worlds. In the literature review of my thesis, I dedicated a third of the section to reflection on teacher identity. I find that many teacher education programs promote the
concept of learners as individuals with individual needs, but fail to examine the role that the teacher’s perceptions of students, community, biases plays in the classroom. Teachers need to work to make visible for themselves, in order to help illuminate learning for students.

**Principle Nine: We have to least two ways of organizing memory.**

Thank goodness, because I have a hard time remembering what I ate for dinner last night, but I can recall emotional situations, involving loved ones, with frightening clarity – to the point that it makes me feel physically ill when I re-imagine certain bad memories. I think it is important that teachers educate students about how we organize memories and offer them this new awareness. It reminds both students and teacher that all memories are not automatic, that some of us need to make more efforts than others to learn certain things and that how we experience things vs. how we process those experiences can be altered by the meaning we attach to those experiences.

**Principle Ten: Learning is developmental.**

I am both a teacher and learner. I am still doing what my students are doing – just at a different age of development. I enjoy allowing students to play the role of the teacher when I discover that they have a skill that they can teach to their peers. Whether it is caricature drawing, origami, or computer skills, it is important to me that students don’t understand my role as one of superiority, but of peer authority. Kind of sounds like an oxymoron, but what I mean by that is that I am in charge; an overseer of our learning community that enforces and reminds its citizens of certain rules that exist for the good of the whole, but also open to what my students can teach me. Their experiences make me a better teacher and help them to recognize themselves as experts in their own interests, many times regardless of their age.

**Principle Eleven: Complex learning is enhanced by challenge and inhibited by threat.**

Back to the good ol’ graduate mentor… My learning was severely inhibited by what I perceived as her threats. In retrospect, what did I feel was at stake? My grades?
My pride? My intelligence? My sense of self worth? Probably a little bit of all of those things, but thankfully there was also safe challenge in the same program. My studio mentor was a charismatic, Ichabod Cranish-individual who encouraged and pushed me in my artistic pursuits. He offered advice and critique that was helpful and specific, not vague and critical. Additionally, being a part of a small community of twelve teachers led to a healthy competition between a group of minds/spirits who shared similar goals and values as educators. Although we all taught in different locations and to different populations, we had an instructor who helped us to find our commonalities and thus encouraged us to push each other, while also supporting one another.

**Principle Twelve: Every brain is uniquely organized.**

My learners’ genetic endowments are not their limits, but rather their starting assets. It is true that some will excel in an academic classroom better than others, but that is why it is the responsibility of teachers, psychologists, metacognitive theorists, and parents to demonstrate learning outside of the formal academy. The visual arts, music, dance, and theater are all arenas for students to demonstrate their intelligence and create purpose in their lives. The freedom that you gave us in organizing and writing this paper demonstrates your understanding that each of your students from the Inspiration program processed the information you shared with us differently and responded through his/her own experience-tinted lens.

By allowing me to make sense of your class’ content in my own way, I discussed the handout and principles with others, questioned how I felt about the information you presented, reread the notes that I had taken from the class, referenced two of my thesis sources for input, felt stressed about completing the paper, felt elated about typing this final paragraph. Most importantly, I spent some time reflecting on my own pedagogy and practice as I prepare to head back to the classroom in two weeks. Thank you.