



# Mastering Uniformity: A Constructivist Tale for Standardized Times

*Joanne Marie Robertson*

## ABSTRACT

### What if.....?

What if there was a kingdom in which the ordinary was perceived as extraordinary and mediocrity was the standard of excellence? In what ways might this society mold the mindset of its subjects? How might a creative and innovative newcomer respond to the intellectually numbing environment? Would she have the courage to defy conformity and make visible her thinking? Imagine if this fairytale were real.

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Robertson is an Assistant Professor at St. John's University. She teaches in the Graduate Literacy Program. Her current research explores students' perception of self-efficacy and early reading and writing development, and the integration of inquiry based instruction and action research projects to support students' critical thinking in the elementary grades.



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The icy, blue towers of King Bertram's castle sparkled in the morning mist. Situated atop a glacial mountain range in the Far, Far, Far East, his kingdom seemed to float above the clouds. The king and his subjects considered themselves to be master artisans who could fashion the most uniformly flawless porcelain in the entire world. In order to hide their crafting secrets, they carved their kingdom out of a glacier, creating an impenetrable domain. Over the years, crusaders attempted to scale the heights in hopes of discovering the magic formula. However, the icy cliffs, frigid winds, and fierce snowstorms proved formidable. They were never seen nor heard from again.

No one in the kingdom cared; there were enough of their own kind. There was satisfaction to be derived from solitary distinction, authority, and isolation. There were high standards of excellence to maintain. They believed themselves to be the most knowledgeable. They knew what worked and what didn't. They all agreed upon these truths. They were comfortable in this uniform mindset. That is, until Gwendolyn arrived. She was the first crusader to complete the quest. How she survived the treacherous climb and unyielding climate was a mystery, for she was delicate in stature and build. When the royal guards discovered her at the gates, they believed her to be an ice sculpture.

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After reviving her and providing nourishment, the king's courtiers quickly whisked her away to his private chambers for further interrogation. The king was surprised at how astute Gwendolyn was for an outsider. She seemed to know a lot about porcelain crafting. He agreed to let her begin her studies in the Royal Art Academy, but asked that she not disturb the work of his students, who were preparing for the "Grand Showing" of their work.

"Might I be of some help to them?" Gwendolyn asked. "I know how to blend some unusual colors to produce brilliant filigree. I have used this technique many times in my own country."

"No, my apprentices must not be confused with anything new right now," King Bertram replied. "It is critical that they follow proper, proven methods. It's how they've been trained. The patterns for Imperial Vases are all laid out in *The Royal Handbook* – very precise, purely scientific, totally reliable, and devoid of fluff and nonsense!" He handed Gwendolyn the 400-page book, and advised her to read it if she hoped to be successful.

Somewhat confused by the King's adamant demeanor, but possessing an open mind and hoping to learn more, Gwendolyn headed towards the royal studios. On the way, she skimmed through the pages of the *Handbook*. The rationale, rules, procedures, and proven methods for designing and constructing a vase of traditional, imperial quality and grace were simply and clearly outlined. However, she began to frown as she read several sections more completely. They did not seem to make sense, based upon her understandings about the nature of porcelain crafting.

True to her word, however, she did not disturb King Bertram's students as they diligently worked on their vases. Gwendolyn noted how carefully they attended to the methodology outlined in the handbook, and how they proceeded in a step-wise fashion to work the porcelain. She observed how every vase was identical in design and coloration. She learned a few of their names and a bit about their interests, but kept the conversation simple. Gwendolyn did ask, however, if there was an area where she might work on her own little vase.

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At the end of the week, Gwendolyn was summoned again by the king.

“My apprentices will soon be ready to present their vases,” King Bertram explained, “Would you like to come?” Gwendolyn accepted, for she was curious about their final pieces. “If they can prove to me,” the king continued, that they have properly followed the rules, as outlined in the Royal Handbook of Designs, and can answer some tough, artistic questions, I will confer the title of ‘Renowned Artisan’ upon them.”

“What types of questions?” Gwendolyn asked.

“They must state their reasons for choosing a particular color, style, or medium, and back their choices with references to the proven methods and research of the Old Masters. Really, it’s very simple, and by the time they’re ready to display their work, they’ve done all the hard work of following procedures. I will share one of my own original creations that day,” the King proudly stated. “Perhaps you would like to bring something you have made?”

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On the day of the “Grand Showing,” the apprentices were anxious to please King Bertram and earn their rewards. Along with their titles, was the promise of great wealth, prestige, and prominence in the Academy. In the center of the room upon a large pedestal stood King Bertram’s own impeccable and perfectly prepared vase. It was the only one he had ever created, but people didn’t really talk about that.

One by one, the apprentices began to share their work, systematically reviewing the steps of the process. King Bertram was visibly pleased. The vases were perfect in their uniformity and attention to small details. When all the titles had been officially conferred, the King invited Gwendolyn to share her work.

Gwendolyn placed two vases gingerly upon the floor. The onlookers became silent, for they were curious about her talents as well, and how they would compare to Perfectan standards. They were not to be disappointed, for Gwendolyn’s vase was truly beautiful, but not flawless.

“Please, Gwendolyn,” King Bertram directed smugly. “Share with us the steps you took to create this wonderful piece.”

“Oh, but I’m not finished,” said Gwendolyn. “This piece is still in process. I used handbook methods and procedures for this first part. However, when I am designing a truly significant piece of art, there is a crucial next step I must take.” She threw the vase to the ground, shattering it to smithereens.

Gasps of disbelief were heard. All eyes were upon the obviously deranged newcomer and the fractured porcelain shards lying at her feet. One young apprentice fainted from the tension of the moment, and needed to be revived. Another ran from the room, fearing the consequences. King Bertram clutched at his heart.

“What is the meaning of this?” he sputtered. “Do you seek to ridicule all that we have achieved here in Perfecta? Will you make a mockery of this serious occasion? Perhaps our standards are too high for you?”

“No, King Bertram. Your standards are too low for me,” she answered. Gwendolyn picked up a second vase and began to unwrap it.

“This is ridiculous!” screamed the king. “Guards! Seize her!” But when Gwendolyn unwrapped the second vase, it was clear that she had produced the most amazing piece of porcelain that anyone had ever seen.



“I want to know the meaning of this?” the king demanded. “This vase is certainly more wondrous than the first. Such form! Explain immediately!”

“Gladly, sire,” said Gwendolyn. “I’m hardly ever finished, or ever make anything I consider to be perfect the first time around. The materials here are different from those of my homeland. They did not lend themselves to the methods of the handbook or what I had hoped to create. The studio was crowded and the light sources were dim. I needed to adjust my thinking and methods to transform the piece into this. This vase seemed to create itself as I worked! What I have learned from my conversations with your students is that everything here can be made even better, if you break the original mold to recreate it.”

Gwendolyn rotated the second vase in her hands as she continued. “I learned from my mistakes in this piece. They become my teachers. I learned new techniques. But I must always break my pattern of thinking to arrive at this point.

The designs and colors of Gwendolyn’s vase ran seamlessly into one another. It was the most magnificent of all. “Sometimes I examine the broken pieces of the original vase, deciding what can be reintegrated into a new piece. I review in my mind what I had hoped to accomplish. Then, I cover all the seams and openings in the cracks with gold filigree to join them visually and conceptually. I don’t discard anything when I recreate. I never know when I will want to use something again. No two vases I make are ever the same, and that should be so, for they serve different purposes and represent different ideas. This one,” she pointed to the shards from the first vase that lay on the floor, “was really quite ordinary.” She held up the second vase, “This is better. After I broke a few vases, they became extraordinary.”

Perfectan meteorologists note that on this particular day, the ice began to melt.

### Author’s note

I conceive this fanciful story based upon an ancient tale to make the contemporary point that well-documented, classroom based analyses that illustrate and support a comprehensive view of teaching and learning have been abandoned for narrowly conceived, socially and “politically correct” notions about standards, accountability and “research-based” instruction. I refer to the use of “research-based” commercial reading programs endorsed and promoted by government agencies that manage the Reading First Initiatives (e.g. Yatvin, Papp, & Garan, 2003). The 400-page handbook of Perfecta was inspired by the much-misquoted *National Reading Panel Report* (NICHHD, 2000).

Teachers are increasingly asked to follow “scripts” as more and more districts adopt commercial programs. Educational policy in our nation’s schools is increasingly dictated by “far and distant others...whose purpose is not to promote thinking, much less the joy of discovery, but to raise test scores”(Kohn, 2004). Like Gwendolyn, I have been told “not to confuse” apprentice teachers with process oriented approaches to the teaching of reading and writing in the primary grades. For instance, I was asked to provide staff development workshops for teachers using Reading First approved literacy programs in grades kindergarten to three. However, the 90-minute block specified for explicit skills instruction was nonnegotiable. Any reading or writing workshop activities were to be “add ons” and could not be integrated into that time period. The either/or mindset was quite rigid.

In my teaching I often “story” the way to understanding with my students, for stories are powerful meaning making tools. Therefore, I hope teachers, teacher educators, and policy makers will share *Mastering Uniformity* to begin conversations about the impact of federal and state policies upon the



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standardization of curriculum and teachers' autonomy to make professional decisions in their own classrooms. I invite the reader to examine the unexamined power differentials embedded within prescriptive and school-centric reform initiatives, in the consideration of issues related to equity, social justice, and critical literacy development. I acknowledge the transactional nature of the reading process (Rosenblatt, 1978/1994), and expect that each reader will respond to this fairy tale in his or her own unique way.

## References

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