

## **Learning Art Project: Cultivating Learning Sensibilities**

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### **Summary:**

When and how do people fully demonstrate one's creativity? In this paper, we would like to propose a new way to view creativity as an emergent process and illustrate it with an example from many workshops we have organized.

According to Dweck (2006), a person learns better when s/he views oneself as not someone with a fixed set of abilities but as someone whose potential can be expanded by her/his own actions. We would like to extend this concept and argue that it is useful to view creativity as an emergent process in which people and objects interact with each other to discover new meanings rather than as an ability of a person. We have created many workshops as environments in which one can view oneself, other people and objects as flexible and expandable, focusing on their potentials and possibilities, on what they can be, rather than what they are. Experience in such an environment would stimulate what we have called "playful spirit" which tries to connect oneself, other people, space and objects, in order to find new meanings in any situation.

Our interest is in how to design learning environments that foster such a playful spirit. In this paper, we will present an example of our innovative workshop "Learning Art 2005" where we attempted to expose the participants to a creative process as an emergent, constructive and relational play.

## **Introduction:**

We have argued that a creative process emerges when people can express themselves openly so that individual experiences can be connected with each other and their meanings are discovered at deeper levels (2004). We have proposed a stage model of trans-cultural learning. Central in this framework is what might be called “personal theories”, how a person views various aspects of learning, such as oneself, relation with others, one’s and other cultures.

In her detailed studies on personal theories, Dweck (2006) compared people with “fixed mindset”, viewing one’s abilities as fixed, and people with “growth mindset”, viewing one’s abilities as expandable. She found that someone with a fixed mindset tends to focus on how others evaluate oneself, on “looking smart” and try to avoid failures, whereas someone with a growth mindset tends to focus on how one can learn from an experience and is willing to face difficult challenges.

We believe that this concept of “fixed vs. growth mindset” can be usefully extended to many other aspects of human activities including creativity.

If one views oneself as not someone with a fixed set of properties but as someone whose potentials can be expanded by his/her own actions, then it is likely that one would also view other people and objects in one’s environment as equally flexible and expandable. One would try to see potentials and possibilities in other people and objects, what they can be, rather than what they are. With such a view, one would focus on how one could connect between oneself, other people, space and objects, in order to create something new.

We have called such a view a “playful mindset”, or “playful spirit” (Mudpie Unlimited, 1999) to emphasize its dynamic nature. From a playful mindset, creativity is no longer viewed as a personal ability which one has or does not have. Though the study of creativity has been traditionally concerned with individual entities such as one’s ability or its development, here we mean creativity as an emergent process in which people and objects interact with each other to discover new meanings. A creative process is viewed as emergent, constructive and relational, a play in which one plays a role. One’s attention would no longer be wasted in focusing on one’s own ability to behave creatively, or to “look” creative.

## **Learning Art Project:**

In order to realize the idea of “playful spirit,” we conducted “Learning Art 2005” as an innovative workshop, where the participants could be exposed to an emergent, constructive and relational process. The workshop/exhibition “Learning Art 2005” was held at Okawa center in Kyoto, Japan, on December 3 – 4, 2005. A total of 150 people participated, including children and researchers in education and art fields. The theme “Learning Art” is a new concept for learning in which we view learning as a dynamic and artistic process. We believe that the idea about “playful spirit” is tightly linked with the idea about learning.

In “Learning Art 2005,” we viewed learning as emergent: rather than making explicit goals of learning as in traditional instructional approach. We tried to let a situation emerge where everyone involved experiences mutual transformation. For this end, we emphasized interactions at the bodily and emotional levels, as well as the intellectual levels, trying to

connect all psychological levels from body and emotion, to conceptual and abstract. Also, we set a context in which everyone will try to understand each other in the process of working together on concrete materials and ideas, so that they are connected to create new ideas.

We designed the workshop as a space and opportunity for people to redesign their view of the self, so that they can re-design the relations with other people and objects in their own daily environment thereby re-discovering their potentials. In this sense, learning is an artistic process to awaken the potential for learning, by viewing one's own environment from new perspectives to discover the boundless potentials hidden there, and create new meanings by making best use of the potentials. Thus, we try to encourage the participants to design their own space for learning. For example, we explicitly treat participating children as workshop designers for younger children. At the same time, we view learning as an open-ended process embedded within, and connecting between many social contexts. So, in this project, we tried to involve the communities surrounding the workshop so that people can appreciate and evaluate the learning that happens in the workshop.

Figure 1 shows how we designed the Learning Art workshop environment.

[footnotes on Figure 1.]

1. We invited comments from every participant, who are the main players in this event, while videotaping. Video is a tool for facilitating the active involvement of the participants.
2. After leaving bags and coats at the reception, you will join the Learning Art session.
3. To begin with, find a place for yourself. Make a chair from white corrugated cardboard.  
-Atelier 1(\*1)
4. After finishing the chair, everyone takes a playful shot of it. A digital camera is one of the tools for Learning Art.
5. You can put your name, a picture, or whatever you feel, on the chair – playfully and freely. The chair is then no longer a chair; it becomes a medium for communication.
6. Participants drink coffee at the cafe until the opening. We set up the café as a place to meet and talk with others. -Atelier 3
7. We liberally use resources outside the building. The opening ceremony is held outside, in order to sharpen the five senses.
8. An outdoor workshop begins, huddling around a prepared bonfire.
9. Nobuyuki Ueda explains what Hi! Movie Team is shooting for.
10. Forty-eight T-shirts (Vitamin-T) are displayed on the wall. These T-shirts, with variation in color and number, are intended for use in the communication workshop. -Atelier3, Atelier 5
11. Here, the meaning and uses of the chair as a communication medium, and the designer's intention, is explained.
12. What is the role of the cafe setting in Learning Art? It provides a place for talking. -Atelier 3
13. Toshibumi Kariyado talks about the concept of the Kids Workshop that soon follows. -Atelier 4

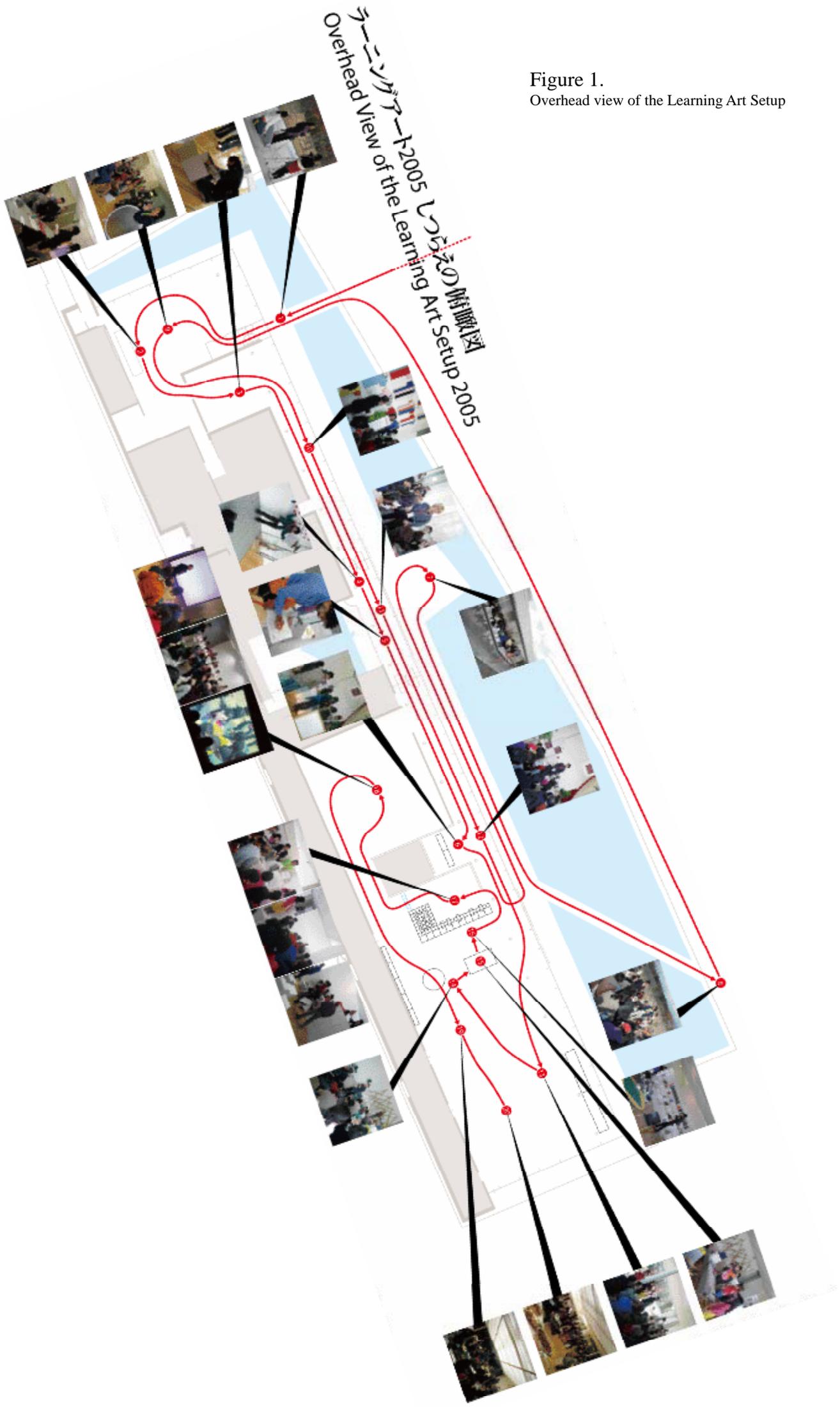
14. Diane Willow gives commentary on her own monument (“ReFresh”). ReFresh is a gate with a “Cricket” sensor, which is triggered every time someone goes through the gate. This installation is for facilitating new experiences and a change of pace. -Atelier 3
15. Photos taken today are printed and displayed in this area. Photos facilitate reflection, and interaction between people.
16. A library with a hundred documents on Learning Art is a device for arousing the participants’ desire for knowledge. -Atelier 2
17. Display of Nobuyuki Ueda’s past 30 years of experience, titled “Building Blocks of Experience.” -Atelier 2
18. Children (kid-staff) made a presentation for visitors on the preparation process of the workshop, which was planned by themselves. A real Kids Workshop (\*2) took place on the second day of Learning Art. -Atelier 4
19. Cricket Workshop by the inventor of Cricket himself – Mitchel Resnick -Atelier 3
20. The Learning Art dinner: antipasto, primo, second, dolce, etc ...

The design of the workshop is modeled on how an Italian meal is served in steps. -Atelier3

(\*1) In Learning Art, small workshop is called “atelier”, means activity.

(\*2) Kids Workshop is the workshop that was run by elementary school fifth and sixth graders, for third and fourth graders, and all the planning and operation was undertaken by children. The objectives of the workshop were to learn programming on a small computer called “Cricket,” and to create a robot.

Figure 1.  
Overhead view of the Learning Art Setup



In the following sections, we will describe more about how the “Learning Art” environment worked for the participants to encourage their playful spirits. In describing the workshop environment, we cite texts and pictures from a booklet “Learning Art –Cultivating Learning Sensibilities” (2005) considering that it would help to understand the atmosphere of “Learning Art.”

### Atelier 1: Find a place for yourself

*Complete your entry procedure, leaving your luggage in the cloakroom, and you will arrive on the promenade in the Learning Art venue. You are given white corrugated cardboard, with the instruction: “make a chair for yourself.” Fold the cardboard along the creases, and you will get a cube-like chair of 35 cm each side. “The chair is your place in this workshop. Put your photos that you take here on it, and write your name. Express how you feel today, playfully, or however you like.” The chair becomes a medium for learning through action, and you can write down what you feel, anytime, while you are here.*



Making and designing a chair.

We designed this activity as an informal icebreaker to get the participants involved in the workshop right after they arrive. This activity, using their bodies in order to make their own chair, worked as a warm-up exercise, and they immediately engaged in this activity. What is interesting was that it served not only as a chair but also as a communication media tool.

Media often, the terminology used today, refers to media as having something to do with high technology, machines and electronics. However, media can be any toy or tool that helps them to understand their self and the world, in addition to helping them to express and reflect their feelings. The participants could carry the chair and establish instant communities all over the place.



Playful shot with their own chairs

## Atelier 2: Building Blocks of Experience

*Here is the story about Nobuyuki Ueda's milestones and encounters before he came up with Learning Art.*

*"In 1972, he saw that the Sesame Street studio was a workshop."*

*"In 1981, Seymour Papert on Logo ~ Can computer really change education?"*

*"In 1990, "neoMuseum"; 'let's make a museum for displaying activities.'"*

*And in 2005, he made a breakthrough with Learning Art.*

*On the reverse side of the building blocks, there is a list of a hundred books selected by a "sommelier." The books help us think about Learning Art. You can insert colorful bookmarks when you encounter inspiring words and phrases.*



We used 500 cubes to exhibit a history of Learning Art. The cubes conceptualize building blocks of experiences. We encouraged the participants to break a part of the wall in order to move on, which was a metaphor for making a breakthrough in experience. We designed this environment as a flexibly transformable space so that it could change or become altered from the original form as a result of the participants coming inside.



Making a breakthrough

## Atelier 3: Coexistence of many kinds of learning

*Right before your eyes is a display of various scenes of learning: the Cafe where you can stop by at anytime, the Construction Zone made of bamboo and Crickets, the workshop on the Cricket, and the open kitchen for sharing creative processes, for those who are making things, talking, reading books, or focusing on work.*



left: *ReFresh*

Coexistence of many kinds of learning

The visiting artist, Diane Willow, created *ReFresh, Gateways of Experience*. This site-specific installation made of bamboo and Crickets was a metaphor for the transformational ideas at the heart of the Learning Art experience. *ReFresh* engaged the participants with a physical embodiment of the idea that they both effect and are affected by the environments and social contexts in which they participate. The sculptural gateways invited the participants to pass from one area to another and in the process, their passage was mirrored in the delicate movements of feathers and the call of bells. This experience leads people to reflection, reconsideration and perhaps transformation of ways of being and ideas of being that we have acclimated to in our daily lives and what we have come to consider as the experience of learning. These are also essential concepts highlighted “Learning Art 2005.”

Also, we had an open kitchen in this environment since we consider cooking as a metaphor for the creative workshop process. We believe that both learning and cooking have the potential to utilize many different kinds of senses and be playful, collaborative and constructionist. Any environment can be transformed into a kitchen with four main elements: space, activities, tools, and people. These elements stimulate our playful and improvisational spirit for learning. We can begin to see learning activities as processes, just like food preparation is a creative process, which is embedded in actual situations, waiting to emerge through our interaction and connections with our surroundings.

#### **Atelier 4: Kids Workshop**

*Nine kids took part as staff, and twelve as participants. Fifth and sixth graders as facilitators teach participants in the third and fourth grade about the Cricket. At the same time, presenters, who are also fifth and sixth graders, introduce the facilitators and themselves as kid-staff and do an interview with guests, while looking back on their one-month preparation process through films and discussion with the audience. After the participants have created*

their own Cricket-robots with support of the facilitators, team presentations start.

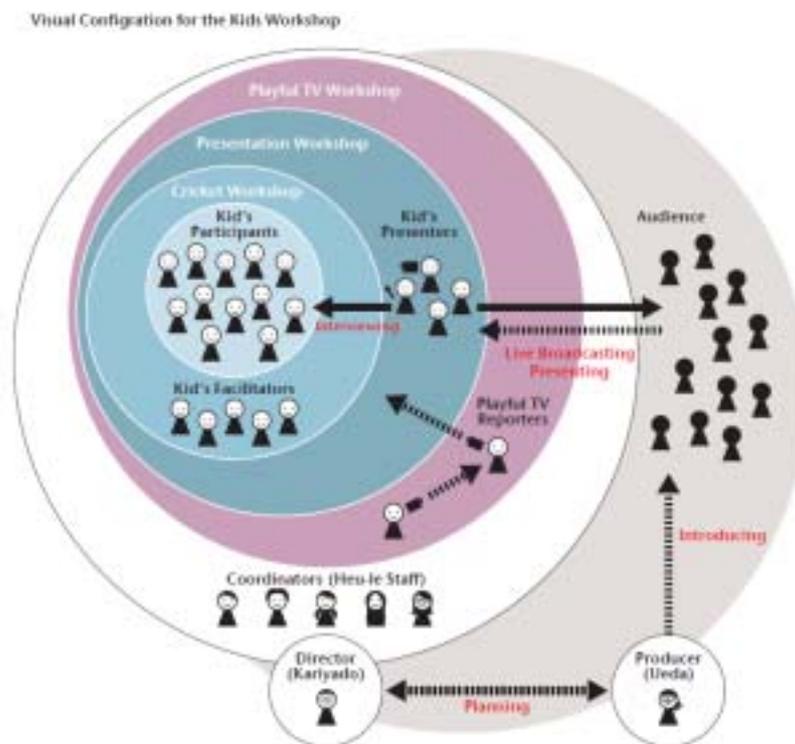
“What is the name of the robot?” – “Its name is Usagi (Rabbit).”

“What kind of personality does it have?” – “Violent – and everyone is scared of it.”

“What is it good at?” – “Punching.”

“Let’s get it going, then!”

In our project “Learning Art”, we have organized many workshops for emergent learning in which people can re-invent their own view of the self, re-design their own learning environment, and discover new potentials in themselves and the environments. “Kids Workshop” is an example of such emergent learning. In this workshop, we explicitly treat participating children as workshop designers for younger children. It took about one month for the children to design and prepare for the Kids Workshop, and they were changing over the preparation process.



Kids Workshop consists of three-tiered workshops; Cricket workshop, Presentation workshop, and Playful TV workshop. Cricket workshop, the focus of the Kids Workshop, was designed and conducted by five kid-facilitators, for the benefit of twelve children. Four kid-presenters are reporting live from the scene for the audience, in collaboration with two kid-reporters. Five staff members from NPO Heu-LE have supported the efforts of these kids since the initial stages. Having three tiers in the workshop gave the children various perspectives about themselves, others, and the meanings of learning. Toshibumi Kariyado, the instigator of the Kids Workshop, gives a perspective on the activity as a whole, and comments on it for the visitors, together with Nobuyuki Ueda.



Kids Workshop

Looking back on the preparation process of the workshop, one kid-facilitator reflected as follows:

*“What I experienced here was very different from what I experience in school. When I’m in school, I wouldn’t feel like doing this so actively, but here, I see myself more active and motivated. Here I enjoy creating workshop, seeing various people in different roles, and communicating with other people.”*

Her comment suggests that one’s mindset could change depending on the environment.

### **Atelier 5: Playful TV and Communication Game**

*A live program titled “Playful TV” starts, and participants wearing Vitamin-T enjoy a communication game.*

*“Communication Game starts! To begin with, get into a group of people who have a collar of the same color as yours.” “In your group, take turns calling out your favorite color.” The forty-eight T-shirts serve as a communication tool for anticipated meetings between various people, through their combinations of colors and figures.*



Vitamin-T



Communication game

“Vitamin-T” is a T-shirt which is designed as a media tool that amplifies communication, relationships and connections among people. We held a communication game after the Kids

Workshop so that the children and adults could share their feelings and thoughts about the workshop. In the communication game, the “Vitamin-T” served as a media, with its variation in color and number, to bring encounters with various people. The game encouraged them to find a number of new aspects of themselves and new meanings among people and objects in the emergent process.

**For Learning Art :**

We have presented our attempt in designing learning environment to foster a playful spirit. At the end of “Learning Art 2005,” Mitchel Resnick, professor of MIT Media Laboratory, had these comments.

*“I view Learning Art as a special form of art that conveys ideas about learning, and gets people thinking about learning in new ways. The goal is not just to help people learn, but to help people learn about learning. This conference, itself, can be seen as a piece of Learning Art. Nobuyuki Ueda and the other organizers created the conference as a way to convey their ideas of learning.*

*Being a Learning Artist isn’t easy. You can’t just tell people how to think about learning. You need to set up a context in which they experience it. Learning Art is always dynamic: it engages people in exploring, experimenting, trying new things – and, in the process, rethinking their assumptions about learning. A Learning Artist is always designing and experimenting, and also provoking others to design and experiment.”*

Our interest is in designing learning environment in which people fully demonstrate their playful spirit. As workshop designers, we will continue to explore this evolving concept of “Learning Art.” We hope our attempt in “Learning Art 2005” will be the start of ongoing conversation among people who see creativity as an emergent, constructive and relational thinking and acting process. We would like to experiment these ideas through a mini-workshop during our keynote presentation. We are looking forward to creating a playful and creative moment together with the participants in Hong Kong!



Playfully yours,  
Ueda,  
Miyata,  
Mori,  
Harada,  
Sato,  
Matsumoto

Learning Artists  
who support the workshop

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## **Acknowledgements**

We would like to thank Hillel Weintraub, Diane Willow, Mitchel Resnick and CAMP for their contributing ideas of this paper.