Art Education **for a Change:** Contemporary Issues and the Visual Arts

BY DAVID DARTS

It was the beginning of a new school year and our principal was busily reciting her "Welcome to your first day of high school" speech for the fresh batch of eighth graders. The students had spent their morning touring the school and were now sitting in the auditorium, waiting to be dismissed to their homeroom teachers. As the principal began a rather uninspired explanation of locker assignments and general hallway etiquette, a boy in the fifth row stood up and, with surprising intensity, yelled out **"CHINK"** at the top of his lungs. The eighth graders, clearly shocked by the interruption, responded by quickly turning their heads in search of the outburst. Almost immediately, a second student stood up near the back of the auditorium and yelled out **"FAGGOT"** with equal vigor. This initiated a succession of additional students, who each rose and expelled a series of different, but equally discriminatory, slurs. Just as the disruption reached a fevered pitch, a second group of 15 students stood up in unison and with arms outstretched, roared, **"STOP!"**

After an electrified pause, all 25 students then moved in silence to the front of the auditorium and joined the principal on the stage. As the individual student members of the group proceeded to introduce themselves by name, they also each symbolically removed large derogatory labels that had been affixed prominently to their clothing. The students explained they were part of a growing movement of students and teachers (including the principal[1]) at the high school who were choosing to stand up against hate and violence. They invited the eighth graders to join them up on the stage, where they then split up into small "focus groups" for an open discussion about discrimination, bullying, and violence.[2] The senior students recorded these conversations and later used them to inspire multimedia artworks displayed within the school.

This was the first of a series of artistic projects[3] initiated by the students of my Contemporary Issues and the Visual Arts class, an interdisciplinary course for high school juniors and seniors that I co-developed and taught[4] within the art department of a large Canadian suburban high school. Throughout the year, these students devised and created a number of individual and collective artistic investigations and creative cultural interventions,

both within the classroom and the larger school community, which addressed and examined contemporary social issues. These works included art installations exploring drinking and driving; static and performance pieces around issues of bullying, violence, and discrimination; photo displays about public space, power, and surveillance; video projects examining consumer culture; large eco-sculptures constructed with garbage; poster campaigns about landmines; and a community arts festival focusing on issues connected to poverty and homelessness. We developed the curriculum around the belief that the arts can facilitate the development of an ethic of care, thereby enabling participants to positively transform themselves, their communities and the world(s) in which they live. A number of art education theorists support this position (Blandy, 1987; Chalmers, 1987; 2001; Congdon, 1993; Darts, 2004; 2006; Desai, 2005; Freedman, 2000; 2003; Garoian, 1999; Garber, 2001; Greene, 1995; Hicks, 1994; Holloway & LeCompte, 2001; Lanier, 1991; Kincheloe, 2003a; 2003b; Krensky, 2001; Springgay, 2005; Stout, 1999; Stuhr, 2003; Tavin, 2005) and recognize the vital connections and possibilities that exist among art, education, culture, and society, and who acknowledge the importance of the arts in the development of thoughtful, creative, and engaged citizens.

Making "Things" Meaningful: Socially Engaged Art Education

Early into my high school teaching career, I recognized the need for art education to be about more than simply the production of artistic objects. In an effort to reflect shifts in the contemporary art world away from an emphasis on materials, techniques and objects and towards a focus on concepts, problems, and ideas (Danto, 1998; 2005), my curriculum shifted too. Though teaching formal skills of artistic production remained an important element of my program, it did not supersede instruction in the evaluation and interpretation of artistic and everyday objects and the exploration of related sociocultural issues. I began developing social issue-themed projects and introducing students to socially engaged

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artists like Steven Kurtz and the Critical Art Ensemble, Damien Hirst, the Chapman brothers, Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping, Zbigniew Libera, Bill Barminski, Karen Findley, Krzysztof Wodiczko, and others whose work is concerned with cultural examination and social transformation. I wanted my students to better understand the social power of art and to begin challenging disenfranchised notions of the social and political roles of artists in contemporary society.

In changing the focus of my curriculum, I was also attempting to address the evolving realities of living in a rapidly transforming and globalizing world. I wanted my students to look below the shiny surfaces of the many commercial images and objects that populate our daily lives (Mirzoeff, 1999). By concentrating on the visual culture of the everyday, I was able to help students make direct connections between themselves and a pair of running shoes or a car commercial or a fashion magazine or a music video and the interconnected issues surrounding multinational corporations, global finance, sweat shop labor, cultural and sexual representations, sustainable communities, environmental destruction, poverty, discrimination and so on (see Bigelow & Peterson, 2002). This in turn helped my students to better recognize and understand the struggles we each participate in as we establish identities and make meaning from the constant play of cultural materials (Kingwell, 2000). As evidenced by the increasing sophistication of work produced by my students in response to this curriculum, these investigations and analyses of cultural objects, symbols, signs, products, and styles helped them to understand how cultural processes and visual artifacts inform, cultivate, legitimate, normalize, glamorize, and communicate our evolving beliefs, values, understandings of ourselves and each other. And, as I soon discovered, connecting curriculum to the lives of students through art education is a natural fit—proponents of visual culture approaches to art education explain the production, evaluation, and distribution of cultural artifacts, and social meaning continues to be a vital component of our increasingly visual world today (Darts, 2004; 2006; Duncum, 1999; 2001a; 2001b; 2002; Freedman, 2003; Mitchell, 1998; Tavin, 2003; 2005).

Pedagogical Frameworks, Contemporary Artworks and Developing Social Networks

Like pedagogues and educational theorists before me, I also found that when students are personally invested in a topic, they are more inclined to engage with it in meaningful ways. As Greene (2001) explains, "[c]reation does not imply a making something owut of nothing. It has to do with reshaping, renewing the materials at hand, very often the materials of our own lives, our experiences, our memories" (p. 96). Thus, in designing the curriculum for the Contemporary Issues and the Visual Arts course, we recognized the need to connect the material covered in class with the experiences and interests of our students. One of the strategies we employed to accomplish this was to require students' participation in the daily teaching and lesson planning responsibilities. In fact, approximately two-thirds of the material studied in class was chosen, presented, and co-evaluated by the students themselves.[5]

During one set of emotionally charged lessons, tempers flared, arguments broke out, feelings were hurt, and the class verged on total chaos. From an instructional standpoint, there were times like these when it clearly would have been easier, saner, and more effective to have prepared and taught the material ourselves; and yet, this remained the most generative, engaging, and personally fulfilling high school class I ever facilitated.

Near the beginning of the semester, we generated an extensive list of sociocultural issues with the class and then asked the students to form small research/presentation groups around one of these topics. Groups were then assigned a series of three to six consecutive class periods, depending on the size and specific needs of the individual groups, in which they became the primary instructors for the class.

In order to facilitate student participation in the research, planning, teaching and evaluation processes, we developed a comprehensive curricular framework that outlined the students' responsibilities and delineated our expectations and criteria for success. We allotted class time at the beginning of the semester for groups to conduct research and do lesson planning. We worked with the students to ensure that groups were clear about the criteria, had equitably divided their responsibilities, and were making suitable progress in their research and planning. As appropriate, we shared resources and materials with the students, provided lesson planning suggestions, and offered teaching ideas and tips. We also spent time during these early class periods facilitating a number of creative group building exercises. These involved the entire class and included collective problem solving activities and a series of trust exercises, each of which were designed to establish and nurture a strong sense of community and trust amongst class members. Based on the collaborative nature of the course and the controversial material studied, these exercises were critical in maintaining a high level of respect and personal safety within the classroom.

Ten days before the start of each group presentation, members submitted a detailed instructional plan. These students then formally met with one or both of the course instructors during a lunchtime meeting for feedback and suggestions designed to further refine the content and delivery of their lessons. By following a specific lesson/unit plan template (described in more detail below), groups were expected to research, create, and co-teach a series of connected lessons based around their chosen topic. Lessons were to include reproductions of contemporary artworks and/or examples from popular culture (i.e. movie clips, television programs, music videos, song lyrics, etc.) that directly related to and extended students' understandings about their specific social issue. The students were also expected to incorporate hands-on arts-based explorations in their lessons and to include assignments designed to elicit reflection and inspire informed action.

The lesson template comprised three basic component parts. The introductory lesson or *hook* was intended for groups to introduce their social issue, capture the students' attention and inspire the class to begin thinking about the local implications and global significance of the topic at hand. Hook activities included role-play exercises, dramatic simulations, interactive games, and multimedia presentations. These activities usually took place over one entire class period. During the second or *foundation* segment of the presentations, groups were expected to convey basic information, provide important facts and statistics, and offer differing/opposing views about the topic. Groups were also expected to include examples of contemporary artwork and/or artifacts from popular culture that addressed and examined the social issue being explored. Students chose a number of instructional approaches and strategies for this segment of their presentations, including slide show lectures, interviews with guest speakers, local field trips, moderated debates, and video presentations. Groups were also expected during this segment of their presentations to provide the class members with a handout

outlining the key points and listing some key references and resources. The foundation segment of the presentations generally spanned one to two class periods. During the third and final *reflective action* portion of the unit, groups were expected to direct the class in an artistic activity that encouraged the students to reflect upon the information provided in the previous lessons and to extend this learning toward various modes of artistic/social action. These assignments regularly stretched over multiple class periods and often (but weren't required to) manifest in some type of artistic intervention or installation within the classroom or school.

To maintain a sense of unity during the many student-led presentations throughout the semester, groups were expected to incorporate short *opening* and *closure* activities at the beginning and end of every lesson. Designed as an opportunity to "renew, preview and review," these brief activities (2-5 minutes in length) were intended to focus the class members' energy, preview the upcoming lesson, and provide a brief review of the material being studied. These activities could be as elaborate as a preplanned interactive game or as simple as an exit slip activity or a quick preview or recap. As well as planning and implementing class lessons and assignments, each research/presentation group was also required to produce a large poster display that included general information about their topic, inspiring quotes, thoughtful questions, examples of related art works and images, links to further resources, and so on. Each of these posters was installed at the front of the classroom during the corresponding presentation week and then re-displayed along the back wall for the duration of the semester.

We designed assessment as a collaborative process between the students and instructors. Individual groups were responsible for developing assessment criteria for their reflective action assignment, with one or both of the course instructors usually assisting in the facilitation of class critiques. At the end of each unit, the students had to self-evaluate their projects and complete an evaluation of the presentation group's lessons. This evaluation involved completing an assessment rubric and providing written comments and constructive feedback about the unit and individual lessons. Students submitted this information to the instructors who then synthesized it into a report for the presentation group. Individual presentation group members were each required to complete a self-evaluation sheet and to also submit a brief reflective paper summarizing what they had learned during the project and outlining their responsibilities during the research, lesson planning and teaching phases of the unit. With few exceptions, the student assessments were insightful, thoughtful, and almost always corresponded with the evaluations made by the instructors.

Although the curricular framework we designed for the course ensured that the class generally ran smoothly, there were still some setbacks and struggles along the way. Some of the research/presentation groups, for instance, required considerably more mentoring and nurturing than others. And, while the majority of groups were motivated and enjoyed high levels of cooperation amongst members, a few individual students remained disengaged or even defiant during planning sessions and lessons. In a couple of instances, the more assertive students dominated the curricular and pedagogical direction of individual group presentations, obscuring the input of the more timid students.

Occasionally, groups failed to fully meet the presentation criteria or deadlines laid out in the course framework and, a few times, even well designed lessons fell considerably short of their planned objectives. During one set of emotionally charged lessons, tempers flared, arguments broke out, feelings were hurt, and the class verged on total chaos. From an instructional standpoint, there were times like these when it clearly would have been easier, saner, and more effective to have prepared and taught the material ourselves; and yet, this remained the most generative, engaging, and personally fulfilling high school class I ever facilitated. The classroom exuded an extraordinary energy throughout the semester and none of us knew exactly what was going to happen from moment to moment. I was genuinely excited to come to school each day, and based on the overwhelmingly positive feedback and obvious enthusiasm displayed in class, so were the students. Perhaps most importantly, a large majority of the students in the class were indisputably engaged in the curriculum and meaningfully participated in their own and each other's learning.

Art Education for Art Education's Sake: What Does it Mean?

Developing and implementing the curriculum for the Contemporary Issues and the Visual Arts class went against the grain of what I had experienced and formally been taught about teaching art. My own education as an art student and later as an art education student dictated that the mastery of materials and techniques was the key priority in the art classroom. In my previous experience, conceptual development or linking artwork and artists to larger issues and problems within society received limited attention. And while I still believe that teaching the foundational skills of artistic production remains a critical component of art education, facilitating this course helped me to understand the profound importance of also focusing on the production of meaning within the art classroom.

For many in the field even today, this approach would certainly be considered heresy—teaching students to discover and generate meaning has rarely been emphasized in art education (see Bersson, 1987; Freedman, 2000; 2003; Garoian, 1999; Tavin, 2005). Pedagogical and theoretical views about the fundamental connections between art education and the development of informed, creative, and mindful human beings, while supported by a number of prominent art education scholars, have not been widely adopted or supported by many mainstream art educators. Partly as a result, art education has often remained as a curricular outsider within the world of public education.

Focusing the curriculum around the visual cultures of students' everyday lives, engaging them directly in the planning, teaching and evaluation processes, and connecting visual culture and artists to larger social and cultural issues were all critical components of producing a meaningful art education for our students.

During the 1970s, for instance, Efland (1976) lamented that art education still remained only as a peripheral concern within general education. He wrote that art "is one of the last subjects to be added to the curriculum and the first to go when funds are short" (p. 39). A decade later, Bersson (1987) commented that if "art education is to be perceived as more than a curricular extra or program of cultural enrichment, it must focus on the 'basic stuff' of people's lives, as well as on our exceptional artistic and aesthetic possibilities" (p. 79). More recently, Stuhr (2003) has cautioned that art educators should resist classifying themselves as specialists, so as to prevent art education from being "marginalized and disenfranchised from the greater school curriculum" (pp. 302-303). As a former secondary school art teacher who worked in a school district that consistently slashed funding for the arts each year, I can certainly see the logic in these warnings.

Although there is a growing body of research indicating the arts and art education are fundamental to cognition, learning and citizenship, there is still a belief amongst many in the public, including educators and policy makers, that art education is expendable, a frill on the edges of schooling that can be eliminated in times of financial deficit. This mentality, in part, seems to be a result of the historical emphasis that has been placed on unconnected and uncritical forms of discipline-centered (see Bersson, 1987; Chalmers, 1987) and studio production-based models of art education—a curricular prominence that often still continues to this day. In writing about the "School Art Style," Efland (1976) questioned why schools had developed an art educational methodology that was only marginally related to the "knowledge, beliefs, values, and patterns of behavior that are prized by the society that established the school" (pp. 38-39). It seems that these forms of socially disconnected approaches to art education that emphasize technique over critique, and a mastery of mediums over an understanding of meanings, have a long history in art education. Whereas meaning has always been critical to art, it has not always been reflected in the art education curriculum where form and technical skill are emphasized (Freedman, 2000).

Freedman (2003) has identified the predominance of aesthetic formalism within the curriculum as a contributing factor to the separation of art education from sociocultural and historical issues. In fact, aesthetic formalism, which can be defined as the practice of reducing art objects into the basic elements and principles of design, has played a role in art education since the early 20th century. Although it serves to isolate form from context, this aesthetic model remains today as a staple curricular component of many art education programs. Freedman's description of aesthetic formalism reflects the modernist mantra—art for art's sake—which emerged out of Cartesian thinking and reductionist science—models which called for the complete autonomy of art and artists and the corresponding severing of bonds with society (Gablik, 1992). Within this disenfranchised archetype, the artist assumes no social role or political function and "individualism, freedom and self-expression are the great modernist buzz words" (p. 6). As Gablik explains, for individualistic artists who were trained to think in this way, "the idea that creative activity might be directed toward answering a collective cultural need rather than a personal desire for self-expression is likely to appear irrelevant, or even presumptuous" (p. 6). What becomes readily apparent is how, by accepting formalized aesthetics and disconnected notions of art into education, art educators have remained on the periphery of public school policy initiatives and significant educational reforms. It seems that, without finding meaningful ways to connect art educational curriculum to the larger concerns of education and society, art education (and art educators) will continue to be undervalued and thus, relegated to the curricular fringes and pedagogical margins of public education.

Conclusion

Like Chalmers (2001) and Freedman (2000; 2003), I too sometimes encounter those who believe that I am more interested in social and cultural studies than I am in art education. Whenever these types of questions or comments emerge, I approach them as opportunities to initiate discussions about issues I care deeply about—meaning-making and artistic expression, democracy and citizenship, mass media and popular culture, social responsibility and public education. I usually begin by suggesting that what I do as an art educator is not really any different from what other teachers do, which is to help my students to make sense of their experiences and themselves, to facilitate critical inquiry and creative problem solving, and to support the creation of meaningful interactions and interconnections between and within the world(s) around them. As Stuhr (2003) explains, art teachers "help students create meaning and understanding of their lives in the present and imagine possibilities for their lives in the future. Like all other teachers involved in public schooling, art teachers do this through their subject—cultural production and investigation of images and artifacts" (pp. 303).

Concentrating on the production of meaning alongside the production of artistic objects seems imperative if we as art educators are to help our students successfully negotiate the challenges of living in a rapidly transforming and globalizing world. Our Contemporary Issues and the Visual Arts course proved to be one successful approach in striving towards this goal. Focusing the curriculum around the visual cultures of students' everyday lives, engaging them directly in the planning, teaching and evaluation processes, and connecting visual culture and artists to larger social and cultural issues were all critical components of producing a meaningful art education for our students. And, by resisting the isolation from sociocultural meanings that aesthetic formalism and disenfranchised models of art education inevitably generate, I believe we were able to successfully reconnect art education with the larger purposes of public schooling.

Those of us working for meaningful social change within and beyond our art classrooms join a long and distinguished lineage of art educators who have recognized the transformative power of art and who have acknowledged the profound connections between art, education, and social change. Although the idea that contemporary art and art education are fundamentally connected to social and cultural issues may not yet be adequately acknowledged or accepted within the mainstream of art education, the concept itself is certainly not a new one. As June King McFee (1966) pointed out 40 years ago:

> If we believe that art is to be produced and enjoyed only by an aesthetic and intellectual elite or subculture of our total society, then we might have reason for believing in social isolation of the arts. If, on the other hand, we consider art as a phenomenon of human behavior to be found wherever form, line, color are used to create symbols for communication and to qualitatively change the nature of experience, then art is related in some degree to all of society. If we accept this definition we, as art educators, become involved in problems of society and social change; we recognize art as one of the major communication systems of social interaction and of society in transition. (p. 122)

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ENDNOTES

[1]Margaux Molson, our principal, was instrumental in planning and implementing this intervention. The Contemporary Issues and the Visual Arts course would not have been possible without her ongoing support and encouragement.

[2]Some of the students involved in this intervention later co-founded the PEACE (People Educating Accepting Celebrating Everyone) club, a student-led anti-discrimination group that I co-directed while a teacher at the school. The club sponsored a number of anti-discrimination events within the school, established a help line and student mediation program in conjunction with the advising department, and also developed and ran a series of interactive workshops for eighth and ninth graders.

[3]Students planned this artistic intervention during a two-day class retreat at the school before the beginning of the school year.

[4]This course was originally developed and taught by Art Teacher Shelly Shaffer. I had the pleasure of refining/redeveloping the curriculum and co-teaching the class with Shelly in the fall of 2000. Much of what I know and believe today about teaching art I owe to the years I worked with Shelly in the art department.

[5]The co-instructors taught the remaining material. This included facilitating student participation in the development and management of a student arts and culture festival at the school (Global Fringe Festival: A Night of Social Awareness and Personal Expression).