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Remembering Dr. Melanie Buffington: Three Reflections on Her Impact and Influence

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TRANSLATIONS

THEORY TO PRACTICE

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REMEMBERING DR. MELANIE BUFFINGTON: Three Reflections on Her Impact and Influence



Social Justice

DR. MELANIE BUFFINGTON'S INFLUENCE ON THE FIELD OF ART EDUCATION can be both acknowledged on a large scale through her history of scholarly publications, and felt on a more intimate scale through the countless emerging scholars and preservice teachers whose practices she shaped through her mentorship and pedagogy. In this piece, three emerging art education scholars and practitioners—a former student, a former mentee, and a former teaching assistant of Dr. Buffington's—reflect on the impact Dr. Buffington had on their own practices.

In articulating her scholarly and pedagogical practice, Dr. Buffington (2015) emphasized a feminist ethic of interdependent work that created transformational knowledges and practices through collaboration, mentorship, and care. The authors of this piece thus find it fitting to highlight the ways our individual relationships with Dr.

Buffington transformed our teaching and scholarship, as a means of illustrating her contributions to the field as a whole.



Luke Meeken's present research attends to the cultivation of critical sensitivities to the material qualities of digital and physical places of learning, and the ideologies these material qualities enact.

For his full bio, [click here](#).

Tools for Teaching and Research, Crafted With an Ethic of Care

LUKE MEEKEN | PhD Candidate in Art Education, Pennsylvania State University
Former Student of Dr. Buffington

PERHAPS THE PART OF MELANIE BUFFINGTON'S PRAXIS as a scholar and teacher that I carry most closely with me is a digital folder of loose, heavily highlighted, digitally dog-eared Word documents she shared in her Research in Art Education course in which I was a student. These were a collection of manuscripts by art education scholars, addressing concerns such as developing relevant research questions (Hochtritt, 2013) and meaningfully distinguishing between method and methodology in research design (Cera, 2013), and which described clear, exemplary cases of art education research illustrating a variety of methodologies. These prepress

manuscripts were eventually published as chapters in the volume *Practice Theory* (2013), coedited with Sara Wilson McKay, and are still a resource I draw upon when considering methodological questions in my own research, or when recommending reading for students and colleagues beginning their own journeys as art education researchers. *Practice Theory*, and its utility in my practice, reflects a strain I see running through Dr. Buffington's work: the development of practical, accessible tools for emerging teachers and researchers.

In searching for tools to help my Art Education 101 students craft their first teaching philosophies this fall, I was struck—but not surprised—to see that Dr. Buffington had created clear, accessible (but nonetheless infused with rigor and criticality) guides for first-time writers of teaching philosophies (Buffington, 2011a) and portfolios (Buffington, 2011b). I find that I am as likely to encounter her name attached to scholarly research in *Studies in Art Education and Visual Arts Research* (e.g., Buffington & Lai, 2011; Patton & Buffington, 2016) as to instructional resources (Buffington, 2007; Lentz & Buffington, 2020) and guides for critically addressing significant contemporary issues and practices (e.g., Buffington, 2010; Buffington, 2019a) in *Art Education*.

Within the contemporary neoliberal academic system, devoting a sizable portion of one's academic work to the development of resources supporting emerging practitioners in one's field, as Dr. Buffington did, is a brave gesture. The systems that underpin contemporary academia value the production and claiming of new theoretical territories and profitable structures for a discipline over the nurturing, support, and care for members of that discipline. In her essay *Why I Am Not a Maker*, engineering professor Debbie Chachra (2015) observed the following:

Walk through a museum. Look around a city. Almost all the artifacts that we value as a society were made by or at the order of men. But behind everyone is an invisible infrastructure of labor—primarily caregiving, in its various aspects—that is mostly performed by women. (para. 6)

Dr. Buffington (2015) herself articulated how the explicitly feminist values that informed her praxis—an emphasis on collaborative, fostering, and attentive modes alongside an academic rigor and

commitment to social justice—made it difficult for her work to be seen as valuable by tenure committees who valued more masculine-coded, individualistic, territory-claiming, money-making academic practices. To me, Dr. Buffington's scholarly and teaching practices reflected a feminist ethic of care (Gilligan, 1993; Noddings, 2013). This ethic was present in her valuing the needs of the students, colleagues, and emerging scholars, whose lives she could directly impact. An ethic of care is also manifested in her valuing those relational needs as much as—or more than—the extrinsic institutional values by which one performs as and is recognized as an academic.

Dr. Buffington's care-ful creation of resources for emerging practitioners has informed my own teaching and research practice. During my 4 years as a high school art teacher focusing on the critical and creative use of digital materials, I felt compelled to turn lessons on creative coding and game design into publicly available teaching resources. I am presently navigating the dissertation process and becoming more immersed in an academic system that embodies the individualistic, masculinist norms Buffington (2015) identified as presenting challenges to her work. My love of collaborative teaching and learning is in tension with the expectation that my dissertation be the personal research flag I plant in the field, and my love of creating open public learning resources with my work sits in tension with the pressure to build a publishing record in largely paywalled academic journals. As I navigate this system, I'm inspired by Dr. Buffington's deft ability to do so, and I'm finding that the online teaching resource I'm constructing through my dissertation research, and the potential life it may have in the practice of other teachers, carries a greater sense of intrinsic importance to me than the dissertation document itself, and whatever publications may precipitate from it in the future. ■

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Sharing your work helps the art education community as a whole by fostering a community of care and interdependence. For example:

- Classroom teachers can share experiences and teaching resources with other teachers on NAEA Collaborate, social media, and other web-based platforms, or they can do so in person at state and national conferences.
- Researchers can make their research available to scholars and teachers through publication in open-access journals.
- Teachers can open their classrooms to preservice teachers and researchers seeking insight into the living practices of art learners and teachers.
- Researchers can materialize their research as tools and resources relevant to the practices of emerging and present art educators.

Materializing research as resources for art emerging educators and scholars was a significant facet of Dr. Buffington's practice. Dr. Buffington's consideration of emerging scholars was also reflected in her mentorship, as Hannah Sions discusses below.

Hannah Sions's teaching and research focuses on diversity and intersectional pedagogy through a critical race lens. She spent much time during her graduate studies knitting, eating cake, and exploring yarn shops with Melanie.

For her full bio, [click here](#).

Multicultural Art Education and Research Practices

HANNAH SIONS | PhD, Assistant Professor of Art Education, James Madison University
Former Mentee of Dr. Buffington

I NEVER HAD THE PRIVILEGE OF HAVING DR. BUFFINGTON AS A PROFESSOR, but I did have the great honor of having her as a mentor, confidant, and friend. As a novice academic, I have utilized many of the tips and tricks she has shared with me through the years. Even as I write this reflection, I hear her voice telling me: "Do not write anything without an outline!"

I have learned so much from Dr. Buffington—I think anyone who had the privilege of getting to know her would say the same. There are many Melanie-isms that I share with my students—but what first caused our paths to cross, and continues to inspire me, was her passion for racial justice. My first exposure to Dr. Buffington's scholarship was an article discussing the impact of institutionalized racism and her efforts to foster a classroom environment that allows students to confront these topics (Buffington, 2016). As I spent more time with her, I slowly realized how much her scholarship was dedicated to equity pedagogy. Moreover, her scholarship addressed equity from multiple perspectives, addressing the roles of pedagogy, curriculum, resources, history, and community.



Melanie Buffington with the students. VCUQatar Student Affairs, Summer Art and Design Program, August 2010.

Dr. Buffington recognized that culturally relevant and sustaining practices require multiple approaches that should reflect the populations that she worked with. An extension of her research was service learning that connected multiple community partners to serve and support the local community. In one project, VCU's Department of Art Education, VCU's School of Social Work, and community partners collaborated with students and local youth to learn about food justice, cooking, and art (Buffington et al., 2015). In another project, Dr. Buffington, Courtnie Wolfgang, and Tesni Stephen collaborated to implement different service learning methods that connected university students with incarcerated residents to break stereotypes, increase mutual understanding, and bring awareness to implicit bias and privilege in the students (Buffington et al., 2017).

Dr. Buffington's commitment to equity was also reflected in her teaching; she advocated for a student-centered curriculum that was culturally relevant and challenged power dynamics between teachers and students (Buffington,

2014). To model practices reflective of her scholarship, Dr. Buffington's teaching consistently referenced diverse artists for curricular and pedagogical suggestions. For example, when discussing public art as a way to address social justice issues, Buffington (2007) introduced the public art work of Tyree Guyton—which addresses issues of race, gentrification, and oppression—as a resource to inspire dialogue and art from students. Buffington (2009) also demonstrated how Kehinde Wiley's paintings, which overtly confront issues of racism and culture, may help preservice teachers understand the complexities of social injustices through art. She also detailed how Ai Weiwei demonstrates the interconnection between art and activism (Lentz & Buffington, 2019).

Finally, I cannot speak of Dr. Buffington's equity scholarship without mentioning her work to challenge the frequently misrepresented legacy of the Confederacy (Buffington, 2017; Buffington, 2018; Buffington & Waldner, 2011; Buffington & Waldner, 2012). Recognizing the harmful intentions behind the creation of the Confederate monuments of Richmond, Virginia, Buffington and Waldner (2011) utilized

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

"Dr. Buffington's scholarship reflects the kind of person she was: It is thoughtful, intentional, intelligent, and compassionate."

—Hannah Sions

history to contradict the narrative that the monuments were created to celebrate Southern heritage and provided evidence of the intentional romanticization and false narrative that the monuments were created for. Further, Buffington and Waldner (2012) challenged readers to consider the role that monuments play in shaping our understanding of history and how they can purposefully subvert historical narratives. Dr. Buffington continued to confront the misinformation surrounding these monuments by providing ideas for art educators to address their history of hate (Buffington, 2018)

through artists who have resisted these false narratives in their artwork (Buffington, 2017).

Dr. Buffington's scholarship reflects the kind of person she was: It is thoughtful, intentional, intelligent, and compassionate. We have been lucky to have not only known her as a scholar but as an individual. The field of art education has lost an insightful scholar, mentor, educator, and colleague, but Dr. Buffington will continue to make an impact through her scholarship and our memories of her. ■

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Art education can readily shift to a more culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogy by engaging in dialogues about racism, inequality, and bias. Educators can do so by introducing the following:

- Because of the impact of institutionalized racism, it is vital for educators to understand the role of racial discrimination in institutions and society.
- Culturally relevant pedagogy can be practiced through a student-centered curriculum and teachers reconsidering their roles in the classroom.
- Art has always been political; we can introduce the work of artists to discuss current issues, art styles, identity, etc.
- Service learning is a great opportunity to partner with local community organizations to utilize the arts and art education as a means to serve the local community.
- Art lessons can be used to confront false narratives and engage students in meaningful dialogues about their communities, history, and legacy.

Dr. Buffington's focus on service learning and community engagement pervaded her scholarship and pedagogy. Below, Carlisle Kramer, a former teaching assistant for Dr. Buffington, describes a particular service learning engagement that had a lasting impact on Kramer's teaching philosophy.



Justin Sutters, Shyla Rao, Melanie Buffington, and Amy Pfeiler-Wunder collaborating on a research study as members of the NAEA Research Commission's Professional Learning through Research Working Group (PLR).

Carlisle Kramer received an AB in art history from the University of Georgia and a master's degree in art education from Virginia Commonwealth University. She worked for Belmont University as part of a scholarship program and college access initiative for students in Nashville, and she presently teaches high school studio art in northern Virginia.

Service Learning: Facilitating Opportunities for Expanding Empathy

CARLISLE KRAMER | Secondary Art Educator

Former Teaching Assistant of Dr. Buffington

I FIRST MET MELANIE BUFFINGTON WHEN I WAS HER GRADUATE ASSISTANT for the foundation-level courses for undergraduate art education majors. As part of the coursework, the undergraduate preservice art teachers participated in a yearlong service learning project, a mentorship program for elementary students. For the remainder of my time as a graduate student, I would continue to work with Dr. Buffington on her research with service learning as a part of preservice art education. This work soon had me reconsidering my preconceptions (and biases) of the teacher's role in a classroom.

Dr. Buffington's research on service learning projects for her students investigated opportunities for preservice educators to build relationships and develop empathy (the "understanding and acceptance of others"; Buffington et al., 2017, p. 52) for young learners through service learning, thereby resisting tendencies toward saviorism and deficit thinking (Buffington et al., 2017). Dr. Buffington's research has highlighted the distressing prevalence, among preservice teachers, of empathy for the ways racism impacts White people (Buffington, 2019b; Reich et al., 2015). However, her research has also illustrated how service learning may expand teacher empathy through the sharing of narratives and experiences between students and teachers of different backgrounds (Buffington et al., 2017). Dr. Buffington structured her course so that the preservice teachers recognized the differences between their backgrounds and those of the students they served and worked to look beyond stereotypes. Most preservice teachers enrolled in the university's art education program are from middle to upper socioeconomic class backgrounds, while their elementary mentees are primarily from lower socioeconomic class backgrounds. To look beyond stereotypes, Dr. Buffington emphasized that the preservice teachers get to know their mentees, and so the undergraduate students planned personal artmaking activities, led by mentee choice and interest. The mentees' art projects provided the foundation for the undergraduate students and the mentees to grow their relationships. As the undergraduate students formed relationships with their mentees and learned their stories, they were able to identify their own stereotypes and preconceived notions about their mentees' identities. This assisted the undergraduate students in approaching their mentees with empathy and viewing them as complex young people.

In conducting this research, Dr. Buffington saw the value that service learning had for students beyond the university classroom. I am no longer a preservice teacher; now I am a full-time high school art teacher with my own students. When I am planning lessons or leading conversations in my classroom, I often think back to Dr. Buffington's emphasis on approaching students with empathy and ask myself, as she did, "what else might be going on in this student's life?" when wondering about a student that might be struggling" (Buffington et al., 2017, p. 50). In observing and reflecting on the undergraduate preservice teachers' experience, I realized I was also becoming a more empathetic graduate assistant when interacting and aiding the preservice teachers. Now, as a secondary teacher, I try to place the students' identities and experiences at the forefront of my consideration in my curriculum and pedagogy and aim to reflect on both my successes and failures. Dr. Buffington's research and facilitation of service learning taught me how to be a teacher that approaches students with empathy and uses reflections to inform my future curriculum and pedagogy. I carry her influence, as well as her friendship, with me as I continue to grow as an art educator.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Service learning provides opportunities to connect with students from the community and build relationships by sharing stories and experiences. Service learning can be applied to various teaching contexts by considering:

- **When teachers come from backgrounds that are more privileged than their student population, saviorism and deficit thinking are common pitfalls. Service learning can contribute to preservice teachers' understanding of students from backgrounds that differ from their own, helping to resist saviorism and see their students as complex young people.**
- **Personal narratives are powerful tools in disrupting stereotypes.**
- **Students are more than their struggles or achievements in the classroom. Above all, always approach students with empathy and respect.**

CONCLUSION

ACROSS THE THREE ACCOUNTS SHARED ABOVE, certain themes pervade and paint a picture of Melanie Buffington's ethos as a pedagogue, mentor, and scholar. These stories illustrate the many ways Dr. Buffington's work intentionally reached outside of a traditionally academic framework to foster transformational connections to teachers, students, and communities. Dr. Buffington presented critical and relevant concerns for socially just teaching in the deliberately grounded and accessible way Hannah Sions noted. Dr. Buffington centered service learning as a means for preservice teachers to bodily engage with social and pedagogical realities outside their own experiences, as Carlisle Kramer discussed. And she authored pragmatic resources to aid emerging teachers and scholars in developing their practices, as Luke Meeken highlighted.

Across all of these accounts, Melanie Buffington consistently engaged in the difficult, necessary, and undervalued work of nurturing the field of art education—in the classroom, in the community, and in the academy. Needless to say, we all miss her presence in our lives and practices as teachers and scholars. But her influence persists in our own practices, in the practices of the countless teachers and scholars she has mentored, and in the countless emerging teachers and scholars still impacted by her scholarly and pedagogical work. ■

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

“Dr. Buffington’s research and facilitation of service learning taught me how to be a teacher that approaches students with empathy and uses reflections to inform my future curriculum and pedagogy.”

—Carlisle Kramer



“Within the contemporary neoliberal academic system, devoting a sizable portion of one’s academic work to the development of resources supporting emerging practitioners in one’s field, as Melanie did, is a brave gesture.”

—Luke Meeken

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Social Justice



Emerging Technology



Assessment + Evaluation



Demographic Data



New Ideas + Directions

Social Justice: Social justice is a broad topic that includes, but is not limited to, equity of access to and opportunity for quality visual arts education for all learners in school, museum, and community settings. In this context learners include diverse populations of students with regard to special needs, cultural identity, sexual orientation, religion, age, and socioeconomic status. Social justice issues also encompass a diversified teaching force and often focus on the development of ethics and appreciation for diversity in a global community.