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A Collaged Reflection on My Art Teaching: A Visual Autoethnography

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Abstract

In this article I begin to unravel some of the complexities of being a visual art educator who teaches in a public elementary school: while dealing with an increasing high-stakes testing environment, I write in *defense* of teaching that is based on social justice and visual culture theory. I take the theme of this issue, *de(fence)*, literally as a need to defend. To do this I use visual autoethnography, where I create a collaged work of art, then use that collage as a prompt for my reflection on my curriculum and teaching practice. My reflection is woven into the wider culture of art education, and distinctions between the cultural and the personal become blurred as I change focus from looking backwards and forwards, inwards and outwards. In creating this visual autoethnography, I hope that other art educators are inspired to find their own voices and provide their own additions to the creation of a rich, thick description of the professional lives of art educators as they increasingly have to *defend* even the basic need for art education in public schools.

A Collaged Reflection on My Art Teaching: A Visual Autoethnography

In this article I want to unravel some of the complexities of my practice as a visual art educator who teaches in a public elementary school. I want to reveal my personal struggles in order to convey my understanding of my lived reality in this period of time in art education. To do this I have used a form of visual autoethnography (Smith-Shank & Keifer-Boyd, 2007) where I have created a work of art using the medium of collage and then used that collage as a prompt for my reflection. My reflection is woven into the wider culture of art education, and distinctions between the cultural and the personal become blurred as I change focus in looking backward and forward to inward and outward. At the center of my visual autoethnographic study is my own self-awareness and the reporting of my experiences and introspections as a primary data source (Dyson, 2007). To present my self-analysis I used the tools of collage, metaphor, and expanding narrative to re-think and re-conceptualize parts of my professional life as an art educator and defend aspects of my teaching. Personal reflection is about developing a commitment to sound pedagogical practices through a process of unveiling and representing different complex layers of one's practice in order to transform the teaching experience into a learning experience (Duarte, 2007). In this way this visual autoethnography becomes a form of arts-based educational research.

A Definition of Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a form of research that connects the personal to the cultural (Duarte, 2007; Dyson, 2007; Mizzi, 2010; Starr, 2010). It is a qualitative research method that utilizes data about the self and context to gain understanding of the connection between self and others within the same context (Ngunjiri, Hernandez & Chang, 2010). Autoethnography allows the researcher to use the nontraditional research practice of telling his or her stories in narrative research as a method to reclaim marginalized and self-reflective space in the research. Narrative research methodology embraces multiple way of representing lived experiences discursively and is a multi-layered form of investigation (Xu & Connelly, 2010; Craig, 2009; Fox, 2008; Clandinin, 2006). Traditional forms of ethnography tend not to value the connected life experiences of the researcher; autoethnography finds a place and presence for the researcher's life experiences (Mizzi, 2010). Attention to this kind of discourse helps us understand how people experience everyday life and explore ways of making sense of life and expressing this knowledge (Mitra, 2010). Interpretation and creation of knowledge is thus rooted in the emic context; an autoethnographer reveals the 'voice of the insider' rather than the voice of the 'seeker of truth' (Dyson, 2007; Mitra, 2010). Autoethnography recognizes that all research is subjective, research is an extension of researchers' lives and realizes that knowledge construction is not so analytical or linear that answers to questions are absolute (Ngunjiri, Hernandez & Chang, 2010; Starr, 2010).

Autoethnography is self-focused. The researcher is the center of the investigation. Autoethnographic data provide the researcher with a window through which the outside world is understood. Although the blurring of the researcher-participant relationship has become a source of criticism for the methodology, access to sensitive issues and innermost thoughts makes this research method a powerful and unique tool for understanding (Ngunjiri, Hernandez & Chang, 2010). The credibility of autoethnographic research is established through the 'ringing true' of the story revealed (Dyson, 2007).

For the past twenty years a number of scholars have sought to answer the question of how to name the intersection where art and research overlap (Williams, 2009).

Autoethnographers pay varying levels of attention to narration/description and analysis/interpretation of autobiographical materials. Some lean more toward art while others lean more toward scientific analysis. Autoethnography is a mix of artistic representation, scientific inquiry, self-narration, and ethnography (Ngunjiri, Hernandez & Chang, 2010). Visual autoethnography combines visuals with autoethnographic narrative.

For over 100 years art education has asked the questions of how works of art and the work of art making develop the learner and what curriculum best facilitates learning. Arts-based research becomes arts-based educational research, a tool for developing art education programs when it addresses the problem of shaping curriculum (Rolling, 2010).

Arts-based research is pluralistic: one doesn't state that "I am a writer" or that "I am a visual artist" or that "I am a researcher." Instead one has the freedom to generate mixtures of methodology and audience, inaugurating fresh perspectives, visions, and insights and making available new spaces of inquiry (Rolling, 2010). Arts-based research, like autoethnography, is a controversial methodology, called to task for its unreliability and often idiosyncratic and vague processes (Smith-Shank & Keifer-Boyd, 2007). On the other hand, it has been stated that arts-based research broadens traditional research paradigms, allows for wide-ranging and participatory conversations, and that art is a way of knowing and can be considered a kind of research (Finley, 2003; Smith-Shank & Keifer-Boyd, 2007; Vaughan, 2004).

Arts-based research can focus on art as a mode of personal research that is motivated by the desire to explore and carry out a project with the research addressing first her- or himself and then interested audience members. Collage, derived from the French for glued work, is built upon the juxtaposition of fragments from multiple sources whose piecing together creates resonances and connections which can form the basis for discussion and learning (Vaughan, 2004). In this way, collage can be considered a form of arts-based research. I feel vulnerable as I put forth this visual autoethnography mixture of collage and self-reflection, but I do so in the hope that my particular situation can lend some significance to similar situations faced by other art educators. I write in defense of art educators who wish to teach a curriculum based on social justice and visual culture even in the face of increased high-stakes testing.

My Collaged Reflections

When I create collages, I allow myself to become susceptible to the shifting patterns and colors of the collected ephemera that I deconstruct, then reconstruct into new images. With that vulnerability comes a silent, unconscious response to the images as they merge to make something new. I try to disassociate myself from the context of the images and let them work together in ways that I can't anticipate. When I feel that a collage has reached resolution, I sit back and try to see what meaning emerges from the assemblage of images.



Figure 1. Untitled collage by the author. Photo by the author.

Within this collage, which as yet is untitled, I initially saw images of transformation, innocence, and vulnerability in certain elements of the work. In the image of a young child holding a dove cut from an old museum postcard, I imagined I saw my students, innocent of the current situation in which art education finds itself, having to defend itself once again in the face of budget cuts. The butterflies spoke to me of the intellectual currents that are constantly shifting and changing in art education. The broken glass surrounding the central image made my heart ache for the art programs that have been shattered due to ignorance in the face of our current economic crisis, yet it reminded me of the reflection necessary to do the work of teaching while sometimes feeling overwhelmed at having to be curriculum writer, instructor, guide, disciplinarian, and motivator as the lone art educator in my practical situation (Quinn & Calkin, 2008).

A deeper look at this collage inspired me to make connections to the current curriculum that I teach my students, which I believe shows my shifts in thinking about teaching art to children. I teach visual art to kindergarten through eighth grade students in a school in an urban area of the Southwest. Approximately 75% of the predominantly Hispanic student body receives free and reduced lunch. I feel a deep connection with my students, as we have come to know each other over the seven years I have taught there. I have learned about

their different personalities, differing circumstances, their needs, wants, and desires. I have come to understand them as individuals, not just students, and that is what keeps me motivated to teach art in this sometimes difficult and needy, but always rewarding, environment.

I see in this image the need for my students to locate themselves in what I teach. My students, who are primarily of Mexican origin, seem to be impressed with the fact that Picasso was Spanish. His work, although some of it seems rather strange to them, always generates one or two remarks from students about his ancestry, which students understand as being connected to their ancestry from the days of the conquistadors. I am attentive to the fact that students want to see themselves reflected in my curriculum and thus am happy to include the work of other Spanish, Mexican, and indigenous Mexican artists in my curriculum where I can, though these connections have recently become more limited.

In this collage image I also perceive the dominance of the Western canon in much of what I teach. This is a change from my earlier years as an art educator, when my curriculum was more multicultural. I began my art education career learning about Discipline Based Art Education (DBAE), then teaching in an elementary classroom in the American Midwest according to the precepts of DBAE. I earned a master's degree during the 1990s and with it came a lifetime license for that Midwestern state. If I had wanted I could have taught the same way for the rest of my career. But there was much freedom in what I chose to teach, so I chose to teach from a multicultural educational standpoint. I made this choice partially because my professors were themselves multiculturalists, but mainly because I am a Native American woman who was educated in mainstream public schools and had experienced firsthand the difficulties of growing up 'other.' I taught about the art forms of different cultures and the contexts in which they are created. Additionally I taught about artists who worked within the precepts of the Western canon but were themselves from diverse populations. I saw my role as an art educator to enlighten my primarily white lower middle class students about the diversity of the world, preparing them to become engaged citizens.

Now, in the 2010s, my curriculum is in the process of changing in ways with which I am not always comfortable. The Southwestern state where I now live and teach has effected a law which states that at least 35% of a teacher's evaluation must be based on test scores. The large school district where I currently teach, which is extremely supportive of the arts, asked selected art teachers to develop two benchmark tests, one for third grade and one for sixth grade. Each test covers what some art educators call "the nuts and bolts" of teaching art: perspective, shading, color theory, the elements and principles of design, and other basic knowledge used in understanding and creating Western art.

My curriculum for 3rd and 6th grades has changed: instead of embedding the basics of art into a focus on artworks from multiple cultures and eras with lessons ranging from studio to art history to aesthetics, I am now expected to teach units rooted in the basics, repeated in various forms so that students remember the content and can pass the benchmark tests. I do include studio work in each unit; however, I now also include worksheets to monitor my students' knowledge. Teaching through worksheets creates the anxiety that I am doing my students a disservice. This anxiety also translates into anger about being forced to teach in a way that I believe is inauthentic. In undergraduate and graduate school I was taught that the nuts and bolts of art teaching were overemphasized in many elementary curricula and that educating students for a changing, global society was our duty and first priority as art educators. Using worksheets was seen as promoting lower level thinking. Instead, we were

encouraged to write curriculum units that were focused on using art making and understanding to investigate “big picture” concepts important to society and to students. Authentic learning took place when students wrestled with these concepts and created works of art that expressed their ideas and understandings of them.

In teaching to the test, I find that I am now forced to focus more on the Western canon, imposing formal constructs such as the elements and principles of design on the description of non-Western works of art. Western aesthetics and ways of understanding artworks are not always synonymous with art forms from multiple cultures. Nevertheless, I attempt to capsulize contextual meaning that I present along with looking at artworks, so that students still are getting a small amount of this kind of information, but unfortunately it is no longer an important element in my teaching to these grade levels. My hope is that I can convey contextual approaches to teaching art to my students at different grade levels in their education.

The butterflies in my collage, which I interpret as images representing change and growth, can be seen as a metaphor for how my ideas about art education have changed over the years. Now, having earned a doctorate in art education, I am reading about art educators’ efforts to include visual culture and social justice in their teaching, which is influencing my thoughts about what I should be teaching. Although prescriptive in what is taught in third and sixth grade, the current school district where I teach allows an openness in teaching the other grade levels. Here I am able to begin to alter the required DBAE curriculum so that my teaching can reflect more current art education practices. I am finding ways of incorporating the visual culture of my students into my lessons, such as having a graffiti artist lead seventh and eighth grade students in a graffiti writing workshop. Additionally, in a beginning effort to incorporate social justice issues into my curriculum, I had my students participate in the Fundred Dollar Bill Project. The Fundred Project is an ongoing work by conceptual artist Mel Chin that involves having people, including students, create their own version of currency that will be used to awaken politicians to the importance of funding the cleaning of lead from soil in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina (<http://www.fundred.org>; <http://www.melchin.org>).

My explorations into teaching visual culture and about social justice are tentative, as I teach in a public school where the unwritten but overt philosophy is that we educate all students and should teach from a neutral viewpoint (although a Western viewpoint is not neutral), and that we should not unduly influence students about any political persuasion or situation as such influence is the parents’ right and responsibility, not the teachers’. This creates another tension in my teaching as I believe that teaching is not neutral. I feel that I stand alone in my school district as the single art teacher in my department who has a PhD, and as the only person who seems interested in teaching about something other than the “nuts and bolts” of art education. I believe there will come a time when I must defend my position as an art educator who believes that teaching only the “nuts and bolts” of art education is a disservice to our students. I believe that making connections to students’ lived experiences through social justice art education and visual culture theory is necessary in this time of high stakes testing. Will I be able to persuade administration that teaching only to the test is actually detrimental to our students’ education?

Finding ways to involve students in thinking about social justice is tricky because how this is presented can be seen as influencing students unduly. I reflect a great deal about this topic. Can social justice art education be taught in the public school situation where I

practice? If so, how should I teach about social justice in ways that elementary students can understand? Will I be able to make more connections to my students' lived experiences with a social justice teaching methodology? This continues to be a conundrum that challenges me as I search for ways to change my curriculum to include teaching elements of social justice and visual culture to elementary public school students. Like butterflies that struggle to leave their chrysalises, my emerging attempts at teaching visual culture and social justice are just beginning to materialize as I take away the boundaries of DBAE (defencing my curriculum) and open up my curriculum to new possibilities that I will probably need to defend.

The broken glass surrounding the central image of the collage is somewhat reflective. Metaphorically, reflection is important in the work of teaching; as a reflective teacher I am constantly examining what I teach and how I teach so I can better reach whom I teach. These reflections often occur in the few minutes between classes, or in the few moments I have to speak with a colleague about my classes; thus I can easily see my reflections about my teaching as a series of collected fragments. The spaces between the fragments of reflection form pathways for other kinds of meaning to work their way into my curriculum. I am trying to make some kind of sense of visual culture that will work within the limits of the culture of the school district where I teach. Additionally, I find that I am concerned that my students are focused on images from the mainstream and are not looking at the visual culture found in their own homes and communities. I am becoming aware of the visual culture of minorities and am currently exploring conduits for bringing my students' attention to images other than those found in conventional media and spaces.

The transparency of the broken glass makes the space surrounding the central image ambiguous, imperfect, like life itself and thus like teaching. Although one can see oneself in the glass, the reflection is like a translucent kaleidoscope—a blurring of images. I see myself as whole, yet awkward, fragmented and messy as I reshape my practice as an art educator, considering what to keep, what to jettison, what to modify, what standards and expectations I have to meet while I open space for growth. I anticipate experiencing joys, sorrows, development, and challenges as I will possibly need to defend my changes to my curriculum. I plan to be present to possibility, comfortable in knowing and not knowing, while caring about my students and what they learn from me.

Conclusions

As I created my collage and then wrote about the evocations of meaning the collage created in me, I found myself working through tension, fear, anxiety, and anger at how my teaching practice had been changed not by me but by powers beyond my control, and how I am changing my teaching as I look at and reflect upon my practice to find better ways to connect to my students and their lived experiences. Yet, I seem to have more questions than answers.

In creating this visual autoethnography, I hope that other art educators are inspired to find their voices and to see if their experiences resonate with my own. Additional work in visual autoethnography can create a rich, thick description of the professional lives of art educators. It can be a method for art educators to look at ways to take down the fences erected by lawmakers who advocate high-stakes testing and to defend teaching beyond the test.

Arts-based research can span a broad spectrum from research that uses the arts as a form of data representation to research that is generated as art is created (Vaughan, 2004). Visual autoethnography as an arts-based research form may simply be one among many nontraditional systemic studies of phenomena undertaken to advance human understanding (Finley, 2003). It is not quite art and not quite science but has potential for possibilities of change and imaginative discourse.

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