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Art Integration: A Turning Point in Becoming

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This article uses personal narrative to articulate one art educator's journey through the first year of teaching middle school. Highlighting the tensions that accompany navigating the liminal spaces between pre-service teaching and in-service teaching, the author articulates the potential of visual culture art integration as a site for meaningful student engagement and teacher empowerment. The article concludes with a call for the intentional inclusion of art integration pedagogy within pre-service art educator preparation programs.

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Navigating the space between pre-service teachers' perceptions of teaching and the reality of being in the classroom can create a sense of disequilibrium. Despite teacher education programs working diligently to prepare undergraduates for the demands of an evolving profession, many new teachers can experience a tremendous reality check upon entering the field (Riches & Benson, 2010). This shock is often coupled with the increasing demands placed upon teachers by society, parents, and administrators through district-wide and state-wide testing. The atmosphere of teaching to the test has created an environment in which there is a continual development/influx/incorporation/demand to adopt new programs that will 'fix' the educational divide (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nieto, 1999). For new art educators whose primary focus in pre-service coursework is teaching their content, the hype to increase test scores can overshadow the more crucial task of incorporating social justice education in the classroom that integrates visual culture while engaging students and empowering their voices (Dewhurst, 2010; Garber, 2005). As a new art educator, I found myself embroiled in this divide¹.

I was to be a "good teacher." I believed in a higher purpose and the good of my calling. I was ready to go above and beyond, working numerous unpaid hours. I was prepared to invest resources of time and money into my students' education. I was to be a teacher who cared about children's emotional and social development as strongly as I cared about their grasp of curricular concepts. Like others before and after me, there were numerous reasons I came to this profession (Anderson, 2000). Yet, I had no idea that the journey to becoming such a teacher would be so difficult, as I struggled to reconcile my calling to teach with the lived complexities of teaching.

As a student in art education, I believed I knew how to teach, and more importantly, how to support young people in their journey through a diverse and challenging curriculum. My ideas were both grandiose and idealistic. Before I ever set foot in a classroom, I

wrote a high school curriculum addressing and challenging issues of diversity through art education, in part because I believed I knew what was missing in art education. Lortie (1975) found that it is not uncommon for pre-service teachers to have strongly developed beliefs about "good" teaching long before they enter their own classroom. I was no different. I boldly believed I could improve what on-the-job, seasoned professionals were currently doing.

Despite an awareness of the potentially difficult transition and lack of balance one feels moving from a student to a teacher role (Donahue & Stewart, 2008), I felt prepared to be the kind of teacher that would support learners, and through art, make an indelible mark on their young lives. Agreeing with Eisner (1998) and Gardner (1999) that the arts are integral to the education of the "whole" child, and seeing the value of art as an entry point for student learning, I chose to take a new position as an arts integration specialist in a large, urban school district in the southwestern United States. I was prepared to teach art, yet nothing had prepared me to collaborate and build meaningful lessons while teaching *all subjects through art*. Armed with a nebulous job description that included collaborating with 30 teachers for two-thirds of my day to develop curricula that would integrate math, science, social studies, and language arts to improve student performance and teaching art as an elective the remaining one-third of my day, I was confident I could do it.

In contrast to my confidence during the interview, the reality of those first weeks unsettled me. I was consistently overwhelmed and unsure of what to do. I had been a good student but now I had no one guiding me, offering benchmarks to hit, or strategies for improvement. This was exacerbated by the fact that as an arts integration specialist, rather than working exclusively in my own classroom, I was tasked with the unique position of working with other teachers—teachers who had been teaching for years, some since before I started Kindergarten—and teaching them how to integrate the arts into their content area.

My lack of familiarity with much of the content outside art, coupled with the fact that most teachers were resistant to investing precious time and energy

¹The anecdotal evidence shared in this article derives from reflective journals kept between 2006-2012, during which time the author was employed as a middle school arts integration specialist.

into another new program that would probably be replaced before the next school year began, increased my anxiety. Many teachers had been adamantly opposed to the program and saw my position as taking away valuable school resources. Some teachers welcomed me into their classrooms, but treated the time as an opportunity to grade papers or go make copies. A few perceptive educators expressed their desire to truly embark upon the collaborative journey of arts integration. These educators offered to share their subject matter expertise and learn from mine as we co-constructed curricula that gave equal value to art and their content area. Yet, even with their willingness and my experience as an artist-collaborator -- as a novice educator -- I was not fully prepared to navigate the waters. In my eagerness to teach art and see the program succeed, I may have been over zealous. At times I found myself fumbling as I made public misstep after misstep in the interpersonal relationships I was attempting to forge with the teachers. These included mistakes as an educator, as well as ones in forming relationships with colleagues whose cooperation, respect and knowledge I desired. My feelings of inadequacy were compounded.

The dawning awareness that I was truly in over my head, both in my classroom and that of others, elicited a mixture of emotions; many times I prayed the hour-long drive to work and cried the hour-long drive home. The distressing classroom behaviors that escalated during my first semester provided evidence of my lack of control and connection to my students. Yet, rather than investigating my own culpability, I found myself condemning parents; I voiced opinions about their childrearing practices and their seeming lack of commitment to their children. In my work with teachers, I struggled to articulate the goals of our collaboration in ways that capitalized on their content area and did not sacrifice the art education learning. In attempts to assuage naysayers and overcome the mess that was my classroom, I fixated on lesson plans that were void of the rigor and relevance (Daggett, 2008) I had once aspired to address.

The turning point came for me when I began focusing on the significance of visual culture in integrated art curricula (Marshall, 2006). Using visual culture

as a building block and springboard (that engaged students in a perceptual examination of their world) proved to be an effective pedagogical model. For example, in creating a lesson that integrated physics concepts of force, motion, and fulcrum with art history, I was reminded of Alexander Calder's creation of the mobile. Fascinated with the way forms move in an unpredictable fashion, like the planets moving through the solar system (Marter, 1991; Petroski, 2008), Calder began experimenting with ways to advance his sculpture from stationary to kinetic. In his effort to make meaning of his visual culture, he transformed the way future generations see sculpture as kinetic in concept and material.

I imagined that many of my eighth graders grew up with mobiles over their cribs. Did they know that, prior to the 1930s, sculpture had been primarily stationary? Using Calder's mobiles as the entry point into physics to address the district's science standards, I purposefully refrained from mentioning physics but focused instead on the artistic use of the physical concepts in his sculptures. Demonstrating the influence of Calder's visual culture on his artwork proved to be an important catalyst for students. They quickly made the connection to space and the study of the universe that preoccupied Calder in his early mobiles. Immediately students were raising their hands, shouting out acknowledgments of their recognition of Calder's use of force, fulcrum and motion—concepts that their science teacher had introduced. These students came alive. The science teacher commented on their engagement and attention, noting that students who rarely look up or pay attention were raising their hands and participating. As this experience illustrates, when integrating art and visual culture into curriculum, student engagement increases. The arts provide a space for students to readily construct meaning from unfamiliar material (Gullat, 2007) and promote discovery (Eisner, 1992). Finding ways to capitalize on student interest in the integrated curriculum, I experienced one small success after another. My ease in the classroom grew as my pedagogical practice became more meaningful. And as I left behind the preconceived notions of what an art educator *should* do and focused instead on coming to terms with what

I *must* do, the opportunity to become the art educator I hoped to be was fulfilled (Deleuze, 1995).

I sought out mentor teachers in my school that supported me in my efforts to grow as an educator. Now I found collaborating with teachers and exploring the challenges of my job was invigorating and exciting as we engaged in substantive art integration (Marshall, 2006). The collaborative process became a catalyst for my growth. Their patience, expertise and wit offered perspective and opened the door for me to get out of my own way. I began asking questions instead of offering counsel; I listened more to the other teachers and found ways to celebrate their interests and passions in our classroom work. This fostered a richer, more committed, and ultimately, more enjoyable experience for all of us.

I laughed with my colleagues and students. I laughed at myself. The students' innocence, curiosity, candor, and humor were refreshing and enlightening. Teaching became enjoyable, no longer a drudge. I listened more closely to my students and their remarkable conversations. I began to cull out their interests and allowed those interests to organically inform my curricular decisions. I found myself heartily chucking the disconnected, albeit slaved-over, lesson plans that I had previously created in favor of co-constructed lessons that included student and teacher input. These lessons acknowledged students' human experience as I was seeing it and as my students lived it. The more I spoke *with* them, rather than *at* them, the more engaged in our work they became and the more autonomy they embraced. Ultimately, I witnessed students investing themselves in the learning process. Inspired by their willingness, I stretched myself to learn new

media, techniques, and teaching strategies that capitalized on their visual culture interest.

Over the next five years, as I lived more fully into the questions (Rilke, 1934), I developed greater facility and skill in creating rich, meaningful curricula that integrated contemporary art and visual culture with other content. The tensions I experienced that first year were necessary for my formation as an educator. They created a discomfort that encouraged me to attend to my situation (Greene, 1995), to be self-reflexive, to honor the reasons I came to the profession, and, ultimately, to celebrate the joy of integrating art.

Yet as rewarding as it was to find my way and grow as an educator—a necessary function of translating knowledge into practice—I believe that purposeful inclusion of art integration pedagogy within teacher preparation programs would have made that transition less difficult. In my current role as a university professor working to prepare pre-service educators, I now have a glimpse into the challenge of art teacher preparation from the other side of the desk. Teaching art integration as a pedagogical practice within pre-service education programs is valuable because it echoes the complexity of life within the classroom. It allows teachers and learners to enter into their curriculum from multiple perspectives (Martin, 1998), to see art as a part of the interconnected system in which we live (Marshall & Donahue, 2014), and to acknowledge the plurality of the sign systems we use to navigate the world (Smith-Shank, 2004). Art integration provides an arena in which art educators can integrate their vision of self while honoring their learners within and through the intricacies of teaching.

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