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“So What.” “Who Cares?”  
 “Whatever.” Changing Adolescents’  
 Attitudes in the Art Classroom

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*While teaching art in a small midwestern high school, I began an investigation to better understand my students’ learning experiences. As my students engaged in a visual culture-oriented art curriculum, I investigated their responses to curricular activities, their interactions, and my teaching practice. Student journal entries, survey responses, teacher observations and reflections, transcriptions of classroom discourse, and student artwork were among data collected for analysis. Although the activities the students encountered during the curriculum were noteworthy, the relationships and interactions occurring in response to curricular activities were of most significance in influencing students’ actions. This essay further describes my observations and findings from this study, and offers suggestions for the teaching of adolescents in the art classroom.*

My high school art students were becoming lazy in their studies and disinterested in curricular activities. Responses like “so what,” “who cares?” or “whatever” during art lessons were increasingly more frequent than when I began teaching 9 years earlier. I had become disheartened by their responses and embarked on a quest to better understand my students’ learning experiences. I first examined my existing secondary art curriculum; it was formalist in nature, focusing on skills-based studio processes, a discipline-based pedagogy incorporating aesthetics, art history, and criticism into each studio lesson. My readings about social reconstruction in education (Banks, 1993; Kozol, 1991; Nieto, 2000; Sadaker & Sadaker, 1995), social theory in art education (Delacruz, 1990; Fehr, 1993; Gaudelius & Speirs, 2002), visual culture theory (Duncum & Bracey, 2001; Mirzoeff, 1999), and art curriculum

organization and content (Burton, 1994; Erickson, 2001; Gude, 2000) indicated that a reform of my existing curriculum was warranted. Based on my understanding of these writings and my own emerging insights, in 2002–2003, I created and implemented a thematic curriculum organized around social issues and concerns expressed by my students and undertook a study of their subsequent attitudes and behaviors (Cummings, 2003). Although the classroom environment improved, changes in the students' performances or attitudes were not noteworthy.

I also realized that my students were fascinated with popular culture; consequently, I developed and implemented an art curriculum during the 2004–2005 school year to engage them in critical inquiry about imagery they found of interest. Art educators have advocated the study of visual culture in art education for some time (e.g., Duncum, 2002; Freedman, 2003; Tavin, 2003), yet there was little visual culture–oriented research undertaken by elementary and/or secondary teachers in their own classrooms. While reports have been published about classroom practice (e.g., Duncum, 2006; Tavin & Anderson, 2003), they emphasize lesson content, studio processes, and teacher practice. Although studies revealed students were engaged while viewing and discussing popular culture, missing was evidence of changes in the students' behaviors.

## Methodology

To further my understanding of the learning experience, I investigated my students' responses to curricular activities, their behaviors in the classroom, and my teaching practice. Action research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000) and ethnography (Tedlock, 2000) provided the framework to guide my investigation. My research brought to light implications of the classroom environment and the influences of the teacher on students' learning.

### *The Study*

The study was conducted in a public high school<sup>1</sup> in a rural community near a large midwestern university. Four years of art instruction were offered at the school. The first-year curriculum provided beginning-level art instruction focusing on studio skills, techniques, and vocabulary; an analysis of Western art history; and an introduction to aesthetics and art criticism. The second-year course offered further study of various art media while emphasizing themes portrayed in art. Third-year and fourth-year curricula featured student-designed independent studio practices. Successful completion of the previous year's art instruction was required before advancing to the next course; an art course was not required for graduation.

Participants were students from the second-year course. Eleven female and three male students were involved in the study; they were predominantly 15–16 years of age.<sup>2</sup> The students had a foundation of art knowledge from the first-year course and had an understanding of my educational expectations. The study did not require participants to engage in additional activities, as the data collected was from assigned curricular tasks.

### *Data Collection Methods*

Survey responses, student journal entries, teacher observations and reflections, transcriptions of classroom discourse, and reproductions of student artwork were collected and analyzed. At the beginning of the year, I surveyed students enrolled in the art class.<sup>3</sup> Social injustices, personal concerns, and life's challenges were among the survey topics; responses were used as I developed curriculum units. Students' journal entries provided insight into their understandings of the curricular topics and offered me direction when making any curricular changes. Students documented their progress on each studio project and responded to popular culture imagery through mixed-media collage and written narratives in their journals. For each class, 5–10 min was scheduled for journaling; however, an additional 40–60 min was required each week for the completion of the collage images. My journal entries documented observations of the students' behaviors and reflections on my teaching practice. Audio recordings of unit introductions, group discussions, and project critiques were completed; 38 hours of audio were transcribed and analyzed. The transcriptions provided insight into my students' views and understandings about art. To provide documentation of artistic development, I photographed and cataloged my students' artwork created during the year. The various forms of data provided multiple perspectives and contrasting perceptions within the same situation and thus enabled a truer portrait of the classroom situation to be developed.

Each week and then again at the end of each quarter, I assessed students' journals.<sup>4</sup> I read the journals weekly to monitor students' interests, document influences of the curriculum, and identify individual student change. At the end of each curricular unit, I analyzed students' journals, my teacher journals, and transcriptions of classroom discussions in order to assist me in identifying an action plan to further my understanding and advance my students' learning. Time between these analysis episodes varied, but an analysis occurred approximately once per month during the year.<sup>5</sup> At the end of the school year, I reread the data in their entirety and conducted a final analysis, identifying factors influencing changes in my students' behaviors.<sup>6</sup> Through a process of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, I came to better understand the classroom experiences.

## My Curricular Orientation

For my art curriculum, visual culture was defined as the study of popular culture images and its cultural context (Barnard, 1998; Sturken & Cartwright, 2001). With hopes of furthering my students' investigations beyond visual appearances, I designed curricular activities encouraging the exploration of the production, distribution, and use of images (Duncum, 2001), calling into question assumptions and representations of imagery, and examining how images are situated in social contexts of power and privilege (Giroux, 1994).

I conceptualized my curriculum not as a route to be followed, but as a series of units of study to be considered and modified in process.<sup>7</sup> As the year ensued, I developed lessons in response to students' interests expressed during class and illustrated in journals. Each unit consisted of a social issue or theme,<sup>8</sup> a visual culture site,<sup>9</sup> contemporary and historical artists,<sup>10</sup> and a studio activity. Units involved preliminary inquiries, class activities, artwork discussions, students' personal investigations, and studio production, and concluded with teacher and peer assessments, self-assessments, and reflective writings. Preliminary inquiries introduced students to the topic and initiated discussion; questions were open-ended, seeking the students' understandings at that particular moment. Class discussion followed. Subsequent activities were developed emphasizing the questions posed by the students. At this point in the lesson, a visual culture site was introduced and investigated. The unit culminated in a studio activity. I asked the students to use the ideas shared during discussions as motivation and explore the theme and visual culture site from their own perspective. As the students developed their artwork, I offered them opportunities to analyze and discuss historical and contemporary artists relevant to the unit topic to provoke further inquiry, generate ideas, and inspire the students during their investigations. With each studio lesson, I demonstrated a variety of artistic processes, addressed aspects of composition development and craftsmanship, and advocated critical inquiry and self-expression through art making. The pattern of initial inquiry, discussion of visual culture sites, artwork analysis, discussion, and personal investigation followed by a studio activity, critique, assessment, and reflection was maintained for each curricular unit.

A typical unit topic was Consumerism and Power, and required students to investigate trademarks and logos. I wanted students to become aware of the influences of their visual culture environments on notions of their own individuality. Preliminary questions for the first activity included the following: What do trademarks represent? How might this differ depending upon who you are? Is there an element of power or authority associated with the images? Who holds this power? Discussion led to an investigation of trademarks that students found interesting or appealing. I asked, What brands or logos do you advertise? What

do these images represent to you? What might they mean to someone else? The Nike swoosh was of particular interest to some students. Afterward, the students discussed their findings with their peers. The art of Keith Haring, Margaret Kilgallen, Kara Walker, and Michael Ray Charles was later examined and discussed. The



Figure 1. Meredith's personal symbol. Mixed media, 6 × 6 × 2 inches.

subsequent studio activity required students to illustrate a personal view or attitude toward society by using symbolism. Meredith chose to comment on animal cruelty. Another student illustrated their support of women in a male-dominated sport, and two students chose to illustrate environmental concerns. Each artwork was unique in form and message but similar in theme.

### Students' Behaviors

My visual culture art curriculum created many opportunities that both supported and challenged the assumptions, ideals, and abilities of the students; however, it was in response to their interactions with others that their behaviors were most significantly altered. Influencing factors included teacher actions, parent responses, peer comments, and materials manipulation.

#### *Interactions Between Students and Teachers*

Students' behaviors in response to my actions in the classroom highlighted the significance of the teacher on students' learning experiences. At the beginning of the school year, Justin's responses to questions were consistently noncommittal; despite my repeated encouragement, he often shrugged his shoulders and commented, "I don't know." Justin appeared to ignore any suggestions I offered, yet during the critique of his first project he stated, "I don't know, that is what Mrs. C. said [I should do]." Later in the year, in a written reflection, Justin responded,

I thought we would just get to draw something. But then I realized it has to have a hidden meaning like all our other projects so I'll probly [*sic*] just wait till the end & do something crappy again. I hate those stupid hidden meanings.

Justin's statement revealed dissatisfaction with his artwork and expressed his aversion to the emphasis I placed on illustrating personal expression. My references to meaning and purpose discouraged Justin from revealing any pleasure he gained in the manipulation of the materials.

During subsequent discussions with Justin, I emphasized his interests. I frequently showed him contemporary and historical artworks illustrating styles similar to his own; Justin responded favorably to Greek hieroglyphics and the artwork of Roy Lichtenstein, Jacob Lawrence, and Keith Haring, and disliked that of Jean-Michel Basquiat. His final project showed evidence of inspiration from the artworks discussed and illustrated personal and meaningful imagery. After interviewing his peers, research, and self-reflection, Justin created a triptych comparing the perception of others with his own self-awareness. On the exterior, he portrayed what he defined as normal, a composition including stars, buildings, trees, and a sun. In comparison, the interior revealed a complex, bizarre, and unnatural state of being depicted by a colorful array of flames, imaginative creatures, and horrific events. During critique, Justin stated, "The outside is normal and plain, on the inside, different. Life is not as it appears; although people think I'm like others, I'm not." Justin's visual representation was original and personal. He was no longer shy or timid in his responses, and he no longer evaded questions but responded directly to those asked. Justin's confidence in his artistic abilities was demonstrated by his willingness to share his personal views both visually and verbally. I recognized the influences of my words and actions on Justin's artistic development; by changing my behaviors, I influenced his attitude toward creating art. My efforts to engage the students in conversations of interest and relevance to the individual changed their classroom behaviors significantly.



Figure 2. Justin's psychological self-portrait, interior view. Metallic colored pencil on black paper; 10 × 18 inches.

### *Relationships Between Parent and Child*

An inconsistency between the students' understandings about art and art making and those of their parents was revealed in our classroom discussions. For example, during a critique, Zoe commented about her father,

He was mad because I didn't have A's in science and math but my grade in Art he didn't care about because [he said] it wasn't important. . . . My parents look at this class as play or fun time, they don't understand how hard it is.

Sharing a similar sentiment, Liz revealed, "I gave it [an art project] to my mom, and she put it in my room. . . . She didn't want it." While discussing one of her sketchbook images, Mara shared with classmates,

I don't do mine at home, I have to hide it in my room. My parents will want to see it and I don't want to show it to them. They won't see it the way I do. . . . At school it is safe, everyone understands. Even if they don't think the same, they try.

Indications of agreement—affirmative nods, supportive statements, and expressions of similar experiences—often followed these kinds of comments. During the year, 13 of the 14 students indicated conflicting views or ideas with those of their parents; only Lacey remained silent when others voiced negative commentary. Parents' comments were viewed as unsupportive and confrontational; support and approval were found in the relationships the students developed with their classmates.<sup>11</sup> The accepting, supportive classroom environment fostered my students' willingness to share feelings of frustration and dissatisfaction and supported the examination of interactions with parents.

### *Peer Interactions*

A sense of comfort and familiarity encouraged the students' honesty and openness as the year progressed. Their behaviors at the beginning of the year suggested uncertainty about their artistic abilities. They were apprehensive when confronting others; they seldom verbalized dissimilar views and oftentimes perceived criticism as failure. For example, Meredith remained silent during critiques when the statements of her peers suggested alternative interpretations from the meanings she noted in her journal. When I questioned Meredith about the discrepancy, she commented that she did not want to hurt anyone's feeling by stating her opposing views. She also stated she perceived critical comments of her artwork as personal attacks on her character rather than as suggestions for improvement.

By year's end, the students exhibited increased confidence in their artistic abilities. Critical statements were regarded as constructive criticisms of the work rather than criticism of the individual, and negative commentary was shared in both

written statements and verbally. A critique of Liz's project generated negative comments such as "I kind of got lost." "Was it suppose[d] to look rushed and sloppy or did you run out of time?" Liz accepted their remarks and acknowledged their alternative views. She replied, "I thought about using my whole face but whenever I am in different moods, my eyes are the only thing that stays the same. . . . I like the way it turned out. I just wanted the contrast." Although their comments were not completely favorable, Liz expressed confidence in her artistic choices. Even in times of disagreement, my students were encouraged to think critically and deeply about the decisions they made by the words and actions of their peers.

### *Engaging with Art Materials*

Students' journal imagery indicated further inquiry into the curricular topics. Several weeks after the discussions about stereotypes, Meredith created a simple, but powerful, collage by using reappropriated images of hair and skin tones she found in teen magazines. Accompanying the image, Meredith wrote,

This really made me think that race shouldn't really matter. Even though it's hard to embrace something different, people should. So I cut out a bunch of ads from magazines and used pictures of people's hair and skin. . . . The really in-

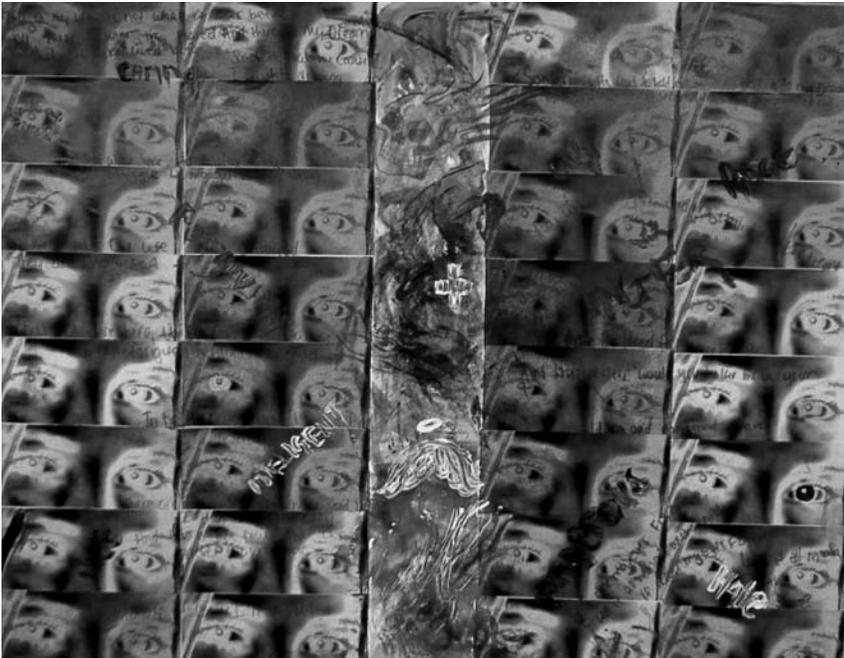


Figure 3. Liz's psychological self-portrait. Mixed media, 24 x 36 inches.

teresting part was that some of the skin tones for some [hair colors] were on the other side of the spectrum than what they were [expected to be].

Meredith intended to communicate to others an understanding that one's ethnicity is not a factor when judging character. As she created her collage, she realized her own biases and came to a new understanding of herself. It is important to recognize that Meredith's personal discovery and growth were not accomplished merely through materials manipulation and logical thought processes but required interaction with others. The pattern of group discourse, individual student introspection, discourse, materials engagement, and reflection leading to new and ongoing discussion and self-reflection encouraged the development of new understandings. Creating artwork encouraged the transformation of individual student understandings; the product merely served as evidence of the transformation.

Through the shared classroom experiences, a community characterized by a sense of belonging, comfort, and mutual support developed, and the connectedness of the participants fostered trust, emotional openness, and personal risk taking. The creative processes offered students opportunities to communicate personal views, come to a new understanding of the site investigated, and develop



Figure 4. Meredith's student journal entry. Mixed media, 11 × 8 inches.

a new understanding of themselves. The students acknowledged differences and became tolerant of opposing views. They established a common ground with their classmates and created a foundation for the building of future relationships through their art production.

### New Understandings of Students' Behaviors Revealed

Although transformation of the students' behaviors beyond the 1-year study was not determined, I found sufficient evidence to indicate changes in their behaviors when they were enrolled in my art class. Increased confidences in artistic abilities, willingness to share, acceptance of differences, and support and compassion were revealed. The thematic, social issues, and visual culture-oriented art curriculum I offered was relevant, meaningful, and contributed to my students' behaviors. My finding is also that the revised curriculum content, although of significant influence, was not the driving force in changing these students' behaviors and responses. Rather, I believe that socialization was of utmost importance.

It was in response to the curricular changes, changes in teaching, and the classroom environment that a feeling of belonging and a sense of community developed, and because of this kinship, the students' behaviors and attitudes changed. By creating a classroom atmosphere conducive to a continuous exchange of ideas, mutual respect, and tolerance of differences, I encouraged the students' self-reflection, discovery, and development of new understandings. I accepted my students for who they were, treating them as unique individuals and encouraging their questioning of self-understanding and individuality. I did not try to change their views or dictate their actions but guided them to a new realization of the importance their actions play on the lives of others. I set high but attainable expectations; sometimes my students' artistic endeavors did not meet with what I expected, but I always supported and encouraged their personal growth rather than focus only on the end product. I became more than a teacher to my students, but also a friend, mentor, advisor, and counselor. Noddings (2004) states, "When we listen to them, we learn what they are going through, and this knowledge can be used to shape what we do in teaching" (p. 154). My students taught me the importance of teaching with love (Delacruz, 1997) and understanding, care and compassion, trust and acceptance.

### Implications for Art Education

My study revealed the importance of the classroom environment on students' learning. Art educators must understand the role of the classroom environment and socialization on students' learning, and must take steps in developing class-

room environments that promote care and acceptance (Noddings, 1995). Curricular topics, activities, and room arrangement must be structured to facilitate discussion, encourage interactions among students, and, at the same time, promote individuality in students' artistic endeavors. Activities should be developed to engage students in deep and meaningful inquiry, encourage the investigation of questions relating visual and social experiences (Gude, 2000), and provide opportunities to experience topics from an individual perspective.

Further investigation of adolescents in art classrooms, the influences of the curriculum, and the influences of experiences outside the classroom on students' learning is warranted. For instance, I briefly identified students' perceptions of parental art attitudes and behaviors (as shared by students) but did not investigate the extent to which parents actually influence students' attitudes and classroom experiences. Additionally, although my data analysis suggested that the curricular topics and activities I implemented in my art curriculum encouraged the interactions among the students, I was unable to determine the extent to which the curriculum content and topics of discussion influenced changes in the students' behaviors. I propose the need for additional studies investigating the influence of visual culture art curricula on students' behaviors.

Further research into real-world art teacher behaviors and attitudes in the classroom would be of significant value today. By investigating my students' actions and behaviors in the art classroom, I came to understand the implications of my own actions on the learning environment. I became a student in my own classroom, learning about the nature and value of art, and learning how to be a better teacher.

Finally, the voices of our students are seldom heard in education research, yet they are the individuals who have the greatest amount to gain or lose in the learning process. On-site firsthand classroom research that privileges contemporary adolescent students' ideas, opinions, interests, reflections, and understandings is greatly needed. It was through their eyes that I came to a new understanding of adolescents' learning and the influences of interactions on the classroom experiences.

## Notes

This essay is based on my doctoral dissertation (Cummings, 2007).

1. Enrollment was 457 during 2004–2005—99% Caucasian, 4% low income, and 15% special needs (data from the school's improvement plan for 2005–2006).
2. Class enrollment was 17. Parental consent was not obtained for 3 students.
3. Art Issues and Interests Survey (Cummings, 2007).
4. Weekly assessment criteria: idea development and productivity. Quarterly assessment criteria: self-expression, originality, composition, and craftsmanship.

5. Initial coding categories: attitude, motivation, and identity.
6. Codes included student/teacher interchange, external influence, peer influence, physical activity, and environment.
7. Curriculum objectives and lessons can be found in my dissertation (Cummings, 2007).
8. Themes included, but were not limited to, consumerism and power; stereotypes and individuality, and relationships and family influence.
9. Comedy television, clothing labels, magazine covers, amusement park design, and family photography were among the visual culture sites explored.
10. Keith Haring, Margaret Kilgallen, Kara Walker, Rene Magritte, Michael Ray Charles, Barbara Kruger, Jacob Lawrence, Frida Kahlo, Betye Saars, Cindy Sherman, and Diego Rivera were among the artists discussed.
11. Students' responses were consistent with what is considered normal adolescent behaviors (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984). To identify a greater understanding of the parental influences on adolescents' behaviors in the classroom, interviews with parents would be warranted, but this was not within the scope of the study.

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