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Bridging: Feminist Pedagogy and Art Education

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I am the K–6 art educator in Newbury, Ohio. I am going to tell you a little about my experiences and the evolution of the art education program. Newbury is a small, rural school. I have 330 students once a week for 70 min. There is one other art colleague in my district. Between us, we educate the entire school community in art.

When I started at Newbury in August 2006, I had defended my master's thesis weeks before. The retired teacher I had replaced had taught primarily holiday art and crafts for over 20 years. There were large gaps in what I considered art education to be and how it had been taught. Negotiating the new relationships, curriculum, and expectations was challenging. During the first year, some teachers asked me if I would give them student holiday art so they could decorate the classrooms. As time goes by, things have begun to change. We can now collaborate on lessons and share ideas. Newbury students are wonderful, creative, thoughtful artists. They have also had to transition, since I have been their teacher, from thinking art was special fun time to knowing art is meaningful engagement and creation.

My approach to teaching art is very similar to how I was instructed, which is issues-based and structuring lessons under big ideas. Feminist pedagogy is a guiding force in my curriculum. Diversity issues are discussed and explored to varying degrees. As I structure lessons, I encourage my students to inform my perception and my actions. I set up visual presentations that are intended to spur conversation while the students are making art. Throughout the room, I've put up controversial photos, two-sided discussions on the Cleveland Indians mascot,

and news articles about art. I try to grow as an educator by examining my choices, influence, and the hidden and visible curricula in the classroom. Generally, I see feminist pedagogy in my classroom as a conscious way of being, acting, learning, presenting, representing, and connecting.

The history of what art education had been at Newbury compared to the contemporary practices in my classroom does cause some tension. When preparing for this presentation, I found a journal entry from April 2008. It was written the day the administration stated the students could not participate in Mel Chin's PayDirt Project because it was considered "too political" and community members might object to the children making "funny money."

I keep getting stuck in institutions that want hegemonic populations. Want to not only ignore difference but suppress difference all under the guise of bureaucratic righteousness.

Some days I feel inspired by oppression of ideas and actions I believe in. Other days I feel defeated. Most days I just wish for a place to work with like-minded individuals. To work in a place where talk becomes action—that's my dream It's hard to stay motivated and focused.

As I was writing at my desk, a student walked in with something he was extremely proud of and had worked on over the weekend. I continued to write after he left.

But then a kid reminds you that you do make a difference. Your work is important because it's empowering, creative, and relevant. Because what you do is subversive in all the right ways. That everything *is* political. You know it and work to expose it. You know that art is vision, perspective, and voice. That there is a place for it in this world and you work hard to make that space visible and viable.

As art education evolves, I feel the response to art education has not. It has been my experience that there is a large gap between common views of art education and what I do. In this situation, the teacher then becomes the bridge between art, children, the community, and the school administration. One way I validate exploring themes and issues is through books. Inspired by a book I found in the library, I taught a lesson on bridges and bridging in fifth grade last month. In class, we started with the definition of a bridge: "*Bridge*: noun 1) an elevated structure such as a viaduct or an overpass that crosses over water or a highway 2) a card game 3) a link, a connection, verb 4) to join, connect, bring together" (Moore, 2005, p. 45).

Then we discussed three representations of the Brooklyn Bridge: by Frank Stella, by Walker Evans, and by David Hockney. We then moved into studio engagement. The bridge idea stayed with me and influenced the evolution of this

presentation. I had been drawing and writing about bridges and feminism in my journal. I found a book called *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981). I drove to Hiram College in Ohio and read it in the library and copied, quoted, and reflected on all of the narratives in the book. *The Bridge Poem*, by Donna Kate Rushin (1981), reflects that exhaustion and frustration I feel sometimes as an isolated feminist art educator trying to be a bridge:

I've had enough
 I'm sick of seeing and touching
 Both sides of things
 Sick of being the dam bridge for everybody
 Nobody
 Can talk to anybody
 Without me
 Right?
 (p. xxi)

The poem continues to discuss this disempowered state of becoming a bridge that connects narrow viewpoints on gender and race. Rushin (1981) concluded by stating she will not be this bridge between people. Instead she will work to bridge and connect herself to her own power. I know I have tried to become a bridge at times. This concept of bridging can be problematic because the woman is objectified into a static, steel structure that is used and walked upon. Instead, a feminist might view a bridge as movable, built in cooperation with others; a transformative linking that brings people together. In this sense, bridges connect our knowledge, lived experiences, and stories. In the classroom, these bridges are built in collaboration with students. Together we construct knowledge. Students and the teacher are active in learning, not passive receptors of it.

The bridge represents what lies in between two things. It's the space of reflection, questioning, problem solving, and dialogue. In the classroom, we bridge art and gender, art and our lives, our experiences with others' experiences. Those spaces in between are where social change can happen—where consciousness and awareness of the other are vital to the effectiveness of the bridge.

And once we have constructed bridges there can be no denying that knowledge is constructed, that culture is constructed, or that gender is constructed. That lesson in and of itself is radical, especially when there are few, if any, places in elementary school where this is questioned or even acknowledged. When the poet Rushin (1981) says, “[S]tretch or drown, evolve or die,” she knows that when one is passive one does not grow (p. xxii).

And isn't this what feminist pedagogy is about? Bridging, flexibility, fluidity, collaboration, transformation of knowledge, and the valuing of multiple perspectives and voices all can lead to the end of sexism and gender inequity. The responsibility of bridge building demands consciousness, fairness, and inclusion. No woman or man, boy, or girl can do it alone. When inequality and cultural ignorance are socially accepted, there is little motivation for students and teachers to be bridge builders. Judit Moschkovich (1981) states,

I do not hold any individual woman responsible for the roots of this ignorance about other cultures: it is encouraged and supported by the American educational and political system, and by the American media. I do hold every woman responsible for the *transformation* [italics added] of this ignorance. (p. 79)

Sometimes it feels like the public schools are the demolition crews of our bridges: The harborers of sexism, racism, classism, and homophobia. What is torn down and maintained, we can rebuild, re-member, and re-vision. Our knowledge combined with our students' knowledge is transformative knowledge. If it's shared, connected, linked with others, we are all better for it.

Feminists come from many diverse backgrounds and have a varied spectrum of lived experiences. Despite the differences we share, feminist art educators have come to believe and teach within the lens of gender equity. An insightful narrative written by Rosario Morales, called *We're All in the Same Boat* (1981), powerfully reflects upon the connection and power we share together:

I'm saying that the basis of our unity is that in the most important way we are all in the same boat — all subjected to the violent pernicious ideas we have learned to hate — that we must all struggle against them and exchange ways and means hints and how-tos that only some of us are victims of sexism — only some of us are victims of racism — of the directed arrows of oppression — but all of us are sexist — racist — all of us . . . and we struggle those of us who struggle we struggle endlessly endlessly to think and be and act differently from all that [*sic*] (p. 93)

I hope that as you return to your classrooms, offices, and laptops, you can reflect on the bridges you extend to others and that you build with your students. Our bridges aren't just what connect one to the other, but the transformative spaces that change lives and cultures. I tell my students that we can change the world, and try to explain to them that change won't be when they grow up. That change is happening now. Here. In Newbury, Ohio. That they change the world consciously or unconsciously, actively or passively. That's why I know it's as essential to be a feminist in the elementary classroom. I seek to build bridges that empower my students through art.

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Note

Invited Speech delivered on the occasion of my accepting the National Art Education Association Women's Caucus 2009 Carrie Nordlund Award, Minneapolis, Minnesota, April 20, 2009.

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