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STUDIES IN ART EDUCATION INVITED LECTURE

The Studies in Art Education Invited Lecture is presented at the annual meeting of the National Art Education Association. Each year the presenter is elected by the Studies in Art Education Editorial Board as a leading scholar in art education. This year, the lecture was presented by Professor Kerry Freedman, Northern Illinois University. Professor Freedman, Past Senior Editor of Studies, has published widely inside and outside of the field of art education on issues concerned with cultural critique in education, student uses of visual technologies, and postmodern curriculum.

Candace Jesse Stout
Senior Editor

Artmaking/Troublemaking: Creativity, Policy, and Leadership in Art Education

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Parts of this article were presented by the author in an invited lecture at the Hong Kong Museum of Art in December 2005. I wish to thank the museum and the Hong Kong Institute of Education for their support.

This article addresses dimensions of contemporary policy that are influencing art teaching and learning. In the light of recent policy, and its challenges to creativity, art educators have been placed in the position where we need to make trouble through a re-definition and extension of professional responsibility. In response to negative impacts of policy, some art educators are enhancing student learning about the expressive, the imaginative, and the inspired through educational leadership that goes beyond traditional teaching.

International policy is having an increasing impact on creativity in art teaching and learning with some troubling implications for the future of the professional field. I have used the phrase 'troubblemaking' in the title of this article to mean constructive action. But, trouble, troubles, troubled, and troubling have various meanings. They can refer to problems, as in the case of having troubles; or danger stated as in trouble; or concern, as in being troubled by something. They can also mean disconcertion, as in I find something troubling. But trouble can also refer to a challenge, as in the practice of troubling an idea or troubling that which is taken-for-granted.

I am troubled by recent policy and I seek to trouble its practice. If we want students to develop a deep knowledge of the power of art, we
must see our professional practice as problematic, dangerous, showing concern, disconcerting, and in short, challenging to the minds, hands, and eyes of students. We must help students to understand that creative work can be troubling (some of the best art is) and that art troubles previous ideas and images. Making art often means making trouble and teaching about art can and should make trouble of its own.

The kind of trouble caused by a good art education results in change, change in the way students think, change in the way they behave, and specifically a change of mind leading to creative action. In this context, a reconceptualization of creativity is called for in the professional field. I view creativity in terms of its social and cultural contributions; creativity can be seen as an act of leadership as well as the expression of an individual. From this perspective, to be creative, action must be constructive, and perhaps, even reconstructive.

Historically, as a field, we have made an argument for art education to provide an industrial workforce (late 1800s), to teach lower socioeconomic children good citizenship (early 1900s), as a therapeutic response to a pathological world (1920s), to beautify depressed environments (1930s), to support wartime activities (1940s), as art for art's sake (1950s & 1960s), and to emphasize excellence through the study of fine art disciplines (1970s & 1980s) (Efland, 1990; Freedman, 1989). Not until contemporary times has the aim to help students understand the visual arts as creative, social action been openly expressed.

As I will illustrate, professional practice now requires creative leadership, by both teachers and higher educators, which troubles policy and incites creative action on the part of students and colleagues. I will discuss some of the important dimensions of recent educational and public policy that are influencing art education and some of the exciting ways that art educators are responding to negative impacts of policy in order to enhance their students' learning about the creative, the imaginative, and the inspired.

Creativity and the Educational Effects of Policy

Social scientists and policy-makers in many post-industrial countries are placing a new emphasis on creativity. What is variously called the creative sector, creative industries, and the creative class, includes producers of a wide range of visual culture, from fine arts to popular arts (such as film, television, architecture, crafts, comics, toys, folk art, computer games, advertisements, and fashion). The recent popular and renewed interest in the creative arts and design is changing conceptions of social, political, and economic development. The growth of visual technologies alone, from computer graphics to digital video, has had a tremendous impact on economic and social development.
The economic growth of this sector of the post-industrial global economy is becoming influential enough for even business people and politicians to notice. Richard Florida’s (2002) often cited book, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, has made such a compelling argument that government officials in parts of the United States are changing local policy and investing millions to attract creative workers and companies to their regions. Florida argues that one-third of the U.S. economy is made up of creative class jobs, although he uses the term more liberally than most people would in the arts communities. But, even limiting the definition to the realm of visual culture that art educators are now teaching, about 10% of the U.S. economy is made up of the creative sector, which is substantial.

The same growth of visual culture has occurred in other post-industrial countries. For example, the creative sector was recently given credit for twice the growth rate in the UK as compared to the economy as a whole (British Consulate press release, November 21, 2005). And since 2003, in its annual Policy Address, the Hong Kong SAR Government has emphasized an invigoration of the economy by actively promoting the creative industries (Hong Kong Chamber of Commerce, March, 2003).

It is becoming generally understood that cultural strength can no longer be assumed to be about traditional consumer products; rather it is about information, creative ideas, and networks. Economic and public policy experts are becoming increasingly aware that a strong, creative labor force is not only essential to developing the knowledge necessary to succeed in “creative economies,” but also that strong social structures are required to ensure the development and distribution of that knowledge (e.g. Florida, 2002; Venturelli, 1998).

But what about the importance of a strong art education? Creative social, political, and economic growth cannot be sustained or valued without the solid foundation of a professional art education for producers as well as an art education for those who are expected to value the creative arts and the cultural experiences they enable.

I raise this question because at the same time that the idea of creativity is becoming newly valued in various multi-disciplinary contexts, international public policy is beginning to arrest the healthy growth of creativity through educational policy that defeats innovative teachers and imaginative students. For example, in Illinois, the psychometrian assessors of the state goals refused to allow art educators to use the term creativity in the goals because creativity cannot be measured with multiple-choice tests. This situation reflects the current political and socioeconomic conditions that are moving us toward the development of an educational system emphasizing information gathering and distribution skills without sufficient attention to the meaningful...
qualities of communication. At the same time, concerns have increased about youth violence and terrorism resulting in new policies intended to increase security, but which may mainly function to reduce individual freedoms.

Although the common definition of public policy is based on the idea of public service, policy can hurt as much as it can help. Without intelligent and thoughtful criticism of the public policy that influences educational practice, students’ experiences in the arts may not reflect educators’ best, creative visions for their futures. Let me provide some examples that are currently influencing art education.

The following three global conditions are being used to shape policy and limit the possibilities of both visionary teachers and imaginative students:

1. Global tensions are causing fear-driven security policies.
2. Politicians are generating conservative fiscal policies for social services, such as education, and promoting the “businessization” of education through, for example, privatization and corporate sponsorship, resulting in essentialist curriculum and assessment policies.
3. Economic interests are promoting quick-fix creativity development policies.

The educational results of these conditions are:

1. increased fear of addressing challenging topics in curriculum and instruction;
2. limited spending on learning resources, but increased spending on testing and a narrowed curriculum of “inputs” (reading and math), not “outputs” (critical thinking and expression);
3. growing acceptance of an increasing standardization of urban environments.

In the following, I will first discuss each of these policy effects and then discuss examples of educational leadership illustrated through some constructive trouble making by dedicated and socially responsible teachers.

Policy and Self-Expression

A U.S. example illustrates the first of these effects: an increased fear of addressing challenging topics. In April 2005, a 15-year-old Washington State boy was approached by the U.S. Secret Service following the confiscation by school officials of some violent drawings he had done of President Bush in a sketchbook for art class. The school officials and the local police considered these drawings threatening so they contacted the Secret Service who deal with both threats to the President and with school violence.
In the United States, controversial drawings are protected speech (Honig, Washington State Americans for Civil Liberties spokesperson, personal correspondence, February, 2005), and although the boy was reprimanded in school, no legal action was taken against him because it was resolved that these drawings were political statements, not threats against an individual or institution. However, this situation raises troubling issues for art educators. Students see graphic representations of violence on a regular basis, so it should hardly be surprising that the same types of images appear in their art. In a political environment where policy becomes law with virtually no public debate and much of the media promotes fear (while doing little actual analysis to inform us), it is understandable that even well-intentioned teachers and school officials could become fearful and avoid challenging topics.

In response to such real or assumed policy, as I will illustrate, fearless art educators are teaching about the complexity of art through a range of (sometimes challenging) visual culture. Some art educators are working to help colleagues understand their rights and the rights of students in order to support creativity and freedoms of constructive expression. Art teachers are critically important in sustaining an environment of democratic criticality, particularly in the face of the increasing influence of visual technologies. Helping art educators to develop leadership skills and skills to build trust in the classroom can promote reconstructive self-expression and a critical social consciousness. In the US, in order to move beyond limits of policy, professionals in schools and in higher education are developing collaborative skills and strategies, such as school-university partnerships, to benefit students and promote creative learning.

Curriculum, Assessment, and Fiscal Policy

The second effect of federal policy is limited spending on learning resources, but increased spending on testing, and a narrowed curriculum. A generally conservative political attitude toward schooling is reflected in current educational policy, which results in an emphasis on testing and narrowly defined objectives with little consideration of the larger, humanistic aims of a democratic education.

In the US, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act reified this view when it was supported by the Bush administration. As a result of strong lobbying by arts education professional groups, art was included as a core subject in this act. However, as Laura Chapman (2005) has pointed out, that was the only good news for art education. The enactment of the act has emphasized reading and math testing. Annual tests are given to students and public records are made of the test scores. Schools that do not show an increase in test scores on an annual basis are punished through budget reductions. With such strong motivation, schools are
reducing time and resources for the arts and increasing the time and money spent on testing. Rather than promoting arts learning in curriculum (which interestingly has been suggested in some research to improve learning in other school subjects), time is being used to teach students how to take tests. Even art teachers are being contracted by their administrators to help students improve their "academic" subject test scores.

At first, many people in the socioeconomic groups that have had consistently lower test scores applauded this act as a way of "leveling the playing field." However, ninety percent of the people who completed a Web survey about NCLB stated that they did not believe the act will be successful and a strong majority (over 70%) stated that it required too much testing (Open to the public, 2006).

The emphasis on inappropriate assessments and the so-called academic subjects is not only prevalent in the United States. Based on a series of UNESCO reports on art education, from Jordan to Brazil, from Great Britain to Samoa, art is short-changed in favor of other school subjects even when art is considered a core subject. When testing per se is not the major problem, a lack of resources and materials hinders art education, often because policy is not in place to ensure that these resources are provided. And when testing is the emphasis, policy ensures that short-term learning is the major goal rather than the long-term growth that a good art education can support.

The greatest emphasis in some countries is increased control over public schooling through financial incentives (and punishments), the privatization and commercialization of schooling, and a curriculum focused on raising test scores through an emphasis on formal and technical aspects of learning to the exclusion of meaningful content. This problem was illustrated in relation to U.S. art education by the results of the last National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) for art (carried out in eighth grades across the country), concluding that although students had a reasonable level of formal and technical knowledge about art, they were remarkably weak on interpreting visual meaning (NAEP, 1997).

Fortunately, as illustrated below, in response to essentialist curriculum and conservative fiscal policy, some teachers and teacher educators are newly approaching curriculum as a creative activity. This creative curriculum development and instructional methods that support teaching visual culture for meaning, emphasizes concepts as well as skills of analysis, critique, and synthesis in expressive artmaking, writing, and speaking. This approach to curriculum helps students to understand the importance of art in their daily lives and relates this knowledge to other modes of communication. Such a curriculum demands appropriate forms of student assessment, such as portfolio assessment.
Environmental Development and the New Creativity

The third effect of policy influences students through the visual environment. Regional development, even development that seeks to attract and grow creative industries, often standardizes the environment. Many urban governments in the US are working to develop their regions in this manner. The same shops can be seen, the same restaurants, even the same landscape design. Global companies and products make everything look the same and heritage differences in visual culture often become hidden or disappear altogether. Art educators around the globe are becoming increasingly concerned by the fact that local and regional differences in visual culture are being destroyed by centralizing governments and multi-national corporations.

The so-called creative sector has an underbelly that can hardly be considered visually inspired. For example, much of popular visual culture, such as toys, household goods, and clothing, is mass-produced in countries allowing lower employee wages than the US and in surroundings little enhanced by creative design. Computer game development is becoming increasingly outsourced from a gaming company in, say, California, to a software development company in, say, India where different parts of the game are developed by various problem-solvers who may never see the final visual outcome (Friedman, 2006).

Without a curriculum that enhances critical capabilities, students tend to see the range of visual culture with an uncritical eye, under-valuing the creative and the distinctive. And without experiences that actually promote thoughtful engagement of students with the processes of visual culture production, they will not come to understand the complexity of these processes, their importance to daily life, or their power to transform knowledge and experience.

In response to standardized environmental development, educators are teaching students how to effectively critique, which helps students to think critically about the range of visual culture they encounter. Educators are taking greater leadership in partnering with cultural institutions that have traditionally valued creativity, such as universities and museums, and with popular creative industries, which can aid students in understanding aesthetic relationships between the popular arts and the fine arts in a variety of environments. Through such cultural work, students can learn the value of creative work in relation to environmental considerations.

Thus far, I have argued that professionals are taking action against policies that are sapping creativity from art education. These policies and their influences contain remarkable incongruities. While on the one hand, public policy seems to be moving in the direction of creativity as a test of cultural vitality; on the other hand, educational policy is focused on limiting the learning of creative thinking and production.
In the following, I will discuss some specific examples of action taken by courageous teachers in the process of troubling policy.

Leading Creativity: What is Basic to Art Education?

In the past, student artistic production has often been characterized as therapeutic self-expression. In contemporary contexts, creative production may need to be thought of less as therapeutic self-expression and more as the development of cultural and personal identity. People can come to understand the characteristics and the influence of identity through the visual arts and it is through the arts that identity is often constructed. It is difficult to explain some of the most important aspects of life, such as love, honor, spirituality, without referring in some way to artistic forms. Contemporary students often come to know about social and cultural conditions through their viewing and making of art. Much of school age development focuses on the establishment of identity and students’ artwork is an identity-defining response to social and cultural conditions. In this way, rather than merely emoting what is inside of them, student creativity can be thought of as an imaginative illustration of their responses to external conditions.

This is why recent educational policy misses the point. So-called basic skills do not develop adequately without opportunities for meaningful, creative applications that lead to students’ personal and cultural growth. Such growth depends on the rich and complex construction of knowledge. It is well documented that learning takes place most effectively when people are engaged through their interests, even when viewing art (Csikszentmihalyi & Hermanson, 1999). An emphasis on “input” learning is not as effective as learning through creative application based on students’ interests, capabilities, and goals.

Likewise, the idea of what is basic in art education needs serious reconsideration. We have moved far beyond the idea that art education is only about line, shape, and color. Of course, these are important as they allow people to represent their ideas in visual form, but what is truly basic to art education has not just to do with questions of how people make art. What is basic to art education also has to do with questions of why people make art, how they use art, and how they value art. Part of the job of promoting creativity now must be to revisit the concept in relation to postmodern ideas about originality and reproduction. From this perspective, individualism in art education refers to differences in interpretation and opportunities to make art that is meaningful to students based on their interests. What is basic to art education includes creative and critical skills and concepts and has as much to do with the creativity of audiences as of artists. These are important considerations in the current art education reform involving visual culture, which emphasizes creative experiences based on teachers’
knowledge of student interests, sociocultural conditions, and fine art and popular culture (Freedman, 2003).

Leadership as Professionalism

When policy-driven art standards are not consistent with contemporary trends, kept up-to-date, or centrally assessed after teacher certification (which is the case in the US), teaching professionals must ensure quality in art education. This means that teacher educators must assume the responsibility to act as leaders and to transform pre-service and in-service programs to prepare teacher leaders. These changes call for a dramatic shift in the focus of professional program planning.

In the past, art teacher education has not typically focused on the acquisition of leadership skills. Neither have opportunities for leadership been readily apparent to art teachers in schools. Quite the contrary, art teachers have commonly felt isolated in schools and have had difficulty finding supportive groups of colleagues through which to lead change. In part, this is the case because art teachers, particularly at the elementary level, are literally isolated, often being the only members of the profession in a school and geographically located far from the center of leadership (the administrative office). Professional development opportunities in schools that could support leadership in art education are lacking because, in many cases, district art administrators who could aid professional development do not exist and art teachers are expected to benefit from attending development workshops that are not specific to their subject.

Teacher Leadership/Student Leadership

The idea that art education can help students learn about the challenging aspects of visual culture through teacher leadership was expertly illustrated by a mural project carried out by the students of teacher Lisa Kastello, a graduate student in the Northern Illinois University (NIU) art education program. As the photographs illustrate, this project enabled Lisa’s students to understand art as the visual expression of powerful ideas. After giving approval for the students to do a mural in the school cafeteria, school officials rejected the students’ design because it included an image of a gun (center photograph), although the message of the mural was peaceful. The students had designed the mural based on their interviews concerning the visual memories of people who had graduated from high school in the decades between 1950s and 1990s. One of the memories reported was about the famous image of a flower placed in an Ohio National Guardsman’s gun by a student at the 1970 Kent State demonstration against the American invasion of Cambodia. As part of the mural design, the students had drawn a flower in the barrel of a gun.
Mural design project for school cafeteria by students of Lisa Kastello, graduate student in the Northern Illinois University (NIU) art education program. Photographs by Lisa Kastello.
The teacher used the rejection of the mural as a way to help the students understand the complexities of art and censorship. Lisa turned the situation into an even more effective learning experience by enabling the students to paint their mural on panels, which were then exhibited in other locations in town. A local newspaper article was also published about the project. The mural helped viewers to realize the benefits of dealing with challenging topics through curriculum, promoting creative action to enhance learning, and changing standardized environments.

This student experience is consistent with changing forms of student consciousness that are now involved in the construction of identity and a basis for approaches to teaching visual culture. Art educators have long known that art helps students understand the human condition through their investigations of themselves, particularly when students find their artistic strengths and are allowed to develop them. As I found during the research I conducted with teens who play computer games (Freedman, 2003), and as Danish visual culture researcher Helene Illeris (2005) states, young people engage in encounters with art as active participants rather than passive viewers. Performances, installation art, video and computer art are preferred to traditional art forms. (p. 235) … being hooked, experiencing otherness, participating in social exchanges and engaging in meta-reflective processes of learning seem to underline all the positive learning experiences that young people have in their encounters with contemporary art. (p. 239)

Another important influence on the current reform of art education has been changes in student populations and in the visual culture that influences them. Teaching visual culture is more multicultural, more interdisciplinary, and more technological than art education in the past. It addresses the range of challenging issues that lead professional artists and students to make powerful visual statements based on their own cultural experience. Fundamentally, it is about art as a form of cultural production and it seeks to reveal the creativity of makers and viewers that gives meaning to images and artifacts.

Making Trouble/Making Change

To illustrate the power of teachers to make change by reconceptualizing what is basic to creative art learning, I quote a statement published in the Illinois Art Education Association newsletter by Robert Hewett (2005), who is the Chair of his high school art department and a graduate student in the NIU program. Bob states:

After accepting a high school teaching position, I began to reflect on my own teaching practices with one significant question in
mind. What is the role of the visual arts within a high school curriculum?

I wanted to give my students a meaningful experience that would motivate them to master media and techniques. [But] it occurred to me that a relevant contemporary high school program is structured around student interests and significant social issues and concerns. Contemporary postmodern art, design, technology, and popular visual culture would provide an invaluable resource for addressing these interests and larger issues. With these as motivators, considerations such as media and technique would be subject to the needs of student learning.

[Taking an approach to teaching] visual culture ... addresses many of the questions and concerns that I had raised regarding my own teaching practices. Change was intimidating and challenging at first, it still is. But the benefits for me, my students, and my profession are vast.

What is the role of the visual arts within a high school curriculum? Now, I feel I am truly beginning to answer that question. (p. 8)

Later, after working with the other teachers to make substantial changes in the art program, Bob wrote (personal correspondence, 2005):

The effect on our art program has been really noticeable. Students are truly motivated and interested in what they are learning and creating. I think that this is due to the students seeing art as really relevant and connected to their lives and experiences no matter their ability to manipulate media.

We try to present the visual arts as a way of knowing, making meaning, and constructing knowledge. We stress visual and popular culture, current events, and contemporary visual forms and technology. Also important, this approach has made a difference in the way our school administration views our purpose and relevance, especially where visual technology is concerned. We receive funds much more easily when we frame our requests in terms of providing the student with relevant life skills such as those for contemporary visual technology and constructing and deconstructing visual knowledge and communication.

The teachers introduced here took action to change local policy. Although changing policy was not easy, they considered it their responsibility to make trouble through the use of their professional expertise. They not only improved the overt curriculum, they enhanced student knowledge about art by modeling creative leadership.
Conclusion

So, what can teachers, researchers, and policy makers do to make art education meaningful in the context of debilitating and conflicting policy? I recommend the following:

1. Promote basic research and policy research. Good research questions are often troublemaking. They can challenge what has been “known,” confronting previously conceived facts and beliefs. We (as a field) have been immersed in the development of theory for the past decade as we have worked to reconceptualize art education for a 21st-century context. But, we have troubled curriculum without adequately troubling policy. This is illustrated by the low number of articles that focus on policy analysis in art education journals. (I know from my recent Senior Editorship of Studies in Art Education that policy research submissions to this journal have been extremely rare.)

2. Support art education policy and practice that is both individually creative and socially responsible to help students and adults realize the power of the visual arts to transform daily life. In doing so, help students to learn the many reasons why people create at the same time as they learn about how people create.

3. Rethink creativity. Research and experience tell us that our older notions of creativity simply will not serve us now. Constructivist research indicates that we are continually creating meaning; researchers who study creativity argue that it is tied to deep knowledge and group cognition. Each of these bodies of research supports the idea that art education should be based, at least in part, on students’ interests and concerns.

4. Emphasize intellectual and organizational leadership with the goal of developing local, national, and international coalitions to influence policy.

Finally, helping students to think and act creatively now requires a redefinition of policy and leadership at all professional levels. We can no longer be mere advocates in our responses to policy; we must become activists who work together to trouble policy and lead creativity.

References


Artmaking/Troublemaking: Creativity, Policy, and Leadership in Art Education


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