

# Students' Ways of Knowing Their Ways of Knowing: Examples from Art Education

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## **Student's Ways of Knowing Their Ways of Knowing: Examples from Art Education\***

*Deborah Smith-Shank*

### **Introduction**

For the past two years I have been listening to stories about art and about art education from pre-service elementary teachers in their last semester of college at Indiana University. I wanted to learn from them, ways they know what it is they know about art. These stories have been shared in interviews and focus group sessions, as well as in autobiographical written self reflections about their early art experiences.

In order to understand these stories, I chose to follow the lead of Fioch (1988) and Umiker-Sebeok (1991); to look at these stories as folk tales and to use narrative analysis based on the work of Propp (1968) to examine them. In the folklore format of narrative analysis each story is looked at as a folk tale. It is then interpreted by looking at the contract, the hero's competence to complete the contract, the performance of the task, and sanctions which signify success or failure in completion of the contract. By looking at narratives from a select culture and comparing their components, it is possible to get a glimpse into the worldview of the group under study.

In each autobiographical reflection, the writer was considered a hero on an educational quest during which tasks were undertaken. His or her initial art task was always to make an art product. As heroes progressed through the educational system, and certainly by middle school and junior high school, a second task identified by student-heroes, was to bring home good grades. The assigned task and the implicit agreement to complete the task constituted a contract between the hero and those who sent heroes on their educational quests: sometimes parents and sometimes teachers. By completing contracts, heroes gained something of value: a good grade or an actual art object which often has become a prized family possession. As heroes attempted to carry out contracted tasks, the issue of artistic competence entered their narratives. Quite often, heroes faced problems because, for one reason or another, task(s) proved to be difficult and even undo-able. Like the princess who needed to spin straw into gold, many of these pre-service elementary teachers believed that art tasks were impossible, either because they had insufficient innate ability, insufficient

- \* All respondent quotes are taken from 277 written self-reflections, as well as from interviews with twelve individuals, and two focus group meetings which took place in 1991 and 1992.

instruction, or insufficient help to perform the required actions. Helpers, good fairies, or "dragons," in the form of teachers, parents, peers, or siblings appeared in many narratives, in many guises, to help or hinder heroes along their educational journeys.

Heroes who believed they had abilities, alone or with help, to carry out their missions generally obtained the sought after object of value. They followed through on the contract. Heroes who found that they could not obtain their objects of value (they could not spin straw into gold) indicated that there had been some trickery involved in the contract to begin with or that they had encountered insurmountable obstacles that no available magic could overcome.

Central to each of these narratives were sanctions. As heroes proceeded in their quests, they perceived positive or negative signs, or sanctions, which like formative evaluations, indicated the quality of their progress. Positive sanctions indicated success, and heroes receiving these sanctions continued merrily on their ways, confident that they were, and would be, successful in art related activities. When heroes perceived that they were receiving negative sanctions, however, many of them felt betrayed. Many felt that they were attempting to complete a task that had little to do with their concepts of their original contracts. The result was that these heroes either left the quest for art education entirely or, while continuing to ploddingly persevere, they perceived themselves as failures at art-related activities.

By choosing to use narrative analysis to understand these self-reflective stories, I have implicitly indicated that a structuralist point of view is guiding this research project. On the other hand, I also chose to look at interviews and focus group stories from what could be called a post-structuralist point of view that was informed by postmodernism, feminism, critical theory, and critical ethnography. In spite of apparently clashing interpretive contexts, I believe that these conceptual frameworks are not mutually exclusive. To explain differences between structuralism and post-structuralism, I turned to Culler (1982) who provided a clear explanation:

In simplest terms, structuralists take linguistics as a model and attempt to develop "grammars" – systematic inventories of elements and their possibilities of combination – that would account for the form and meaning of literary works; post-structuralists investigate the way in which this project is subverted by the workings of the texts themselves. Structuralists are convinced that systematic knowledge is possible; post-structuralists claim to know only the impossibility of this knowledge. (p. 22).

Culler indicated that these schools of thought need not be mutually exclusive. By looking at any text (including autobiographical self-reflective stories) from both a structuralist and a post-structuralist perspective, one has the potential for building broader and deeper insights than would be possible or accessible

from looking at a text from only one perspective. By using both a structuralist and a post-structuralist point of view to look at autobiographical texts, I am choosing a postmodern framework from which to understand students' ways of knowing their ways of knowing.

Zurmuehlen (1991) has pointed out that by taking a postmodern perspective, one is not replacing an old paradigm or school of thought with a newer one. Rather, by choosing a postmodern perspective in teaching or in research, one has chosen to take a position which can appreciate the value of many different "isms." By appropriating what is most informative from any, or all perspectives, doors are opened for broader insights than would be possible if one selected only one "paradigm" from which to understand a text. Postmodernism then, allows broader insights into qualitative quandaries than are possible by limiting oneself to techniques available from only one philosophical or pedagogical tradition.

To begin with, I segmented Respondents' self-reflections into narrative units to facilitate my understanding of student heroes and the "dragons" they encounter along their art education journeys. From a structuralist formula all folk tales are theoretically built from the same components, and universal structures can be presumed. Building on post-structuralist understanding of these texts, I then attempted to show ways in which personal and cultural histories, not only of heroes, but also of dragons, helpers, and educational institutions have subverted the "grammars" inherent in these universal tales.

#### **Students' Ways of Knowing Art (The Context)**

Elementary teachers are not specifically educated to teach art, and yet in many cases, they're responsible for the art within an elementary curriculum. Even in cases where there is an art specialist within an elementary program, generalist elementary teachers are encouraged to use art to enhance learning in other subject areas. For this reason, I felt it was important to understand how they had experienced art and how their experiences inform their plans for their own teaching endeavors.

I asked them to tell me stories about experiences they had with art as young children, both in and out of school. Their stories were not only about art, but were about the contexts, in particular, American contexts, in which art was experienced. Their interpretations of contexts in which their art experiences were embedded influenced how they felt about their own art abilities, especially when their abilities were contrasted to the art abilities of others. These stories were about how they knew what they knew about art and art education. Clearly, context is always important to interpretation. As Goodall (1991) pointed out:

Persons and things are connected, context is always important, and no matter how straight or fair we try to be, what we see and how we locate meaning in life depends upon who and what we are and what

we want, believe, and fear ourselves and others to be. Or, in summed up Buckaroo Banzai form: No matter where we go, there we are. (Goodall, p. 8)

Zurmuehlen (1977), who has looked at the stories of graduate students who are artists and art teachers, pointed out the value of autobiographical stories in understanding the historical link between students' pasts, presents, and their futures:

Personal cultural histories . . . select, narrate, and interpret events from the vantage of the present. These accounts are significant not because of what we may analyze about their pasts, but because the choices [they] make form a context for their self-understanding, they establish a link between their own aesthetic traditions, their present art work, and their future direction. (p. 136)

Art and art education has recently received considerable press; much of it negative. Senator Helms and presidential hopeful Buchanan have bolstered careers and expanded constituencies by opposing public funding for art. By extension, the viability of funding for public art education is also tenuous. Is art a subject doomed to disappear from publicly funded curricula? Julia Kristeva was asked if there will be a place for art in the twenty-first century: (Jardine, 1990) She addressed influences and contexts as she answered:

This is a big question, because actually one does have the impression that not only in the twenty-first century, but right now, art is generally considered as something insignificant. It's not serious . . . . What are these things? . . . This isn't really what's important. Perhaps this always has been the case, but now it is even more so with these large problems of biology, of the State, of religion, of all these large, increasingly urgent issues around. But I think that [art] is an extremely important problematic, an extremely important practice, and I think that if humanity does not succeed in conserving this practice, it will condemn itself to a sort of psychological death . . . . This type of language, which provokes in us pleasures, desires, and pain, has an immense power to modify the totality of human personality. These are cathartic modules, modules that regulate psychic and physical life, modules of survival itself, which society has always used without know what it was doing. (p. 87)

As we approach the next century, change is rapid throughout society (c.f. Toffler, 1980). The latest computer technology is available to students, but in many inner city schools, so are ouzis and police-lined school hallways. Reconstruction of schools and deconstruction of texts are part of the context of current educational research and literature. How is art education being defined or re-defined by cultural texts at this time in history? From the contexts they bring to the discipline, what does art education mean to

students? Most elementary teachers are women. How does gender inform educational contexts, in particular, the contexts of pre-service elementary teachers?

**The Context: Historical Review of Art Educational Thought and Practice**

At this time in the American historical curricular continuum, most college bound students do not take art after it ceases to be required, usually at the time of middle school or junior high school. As such, most pre-service elementary teachers have not had a great deal of formal art education. One Respondent who had a fairly typical background in art described her experiences:

All through elementary and middle school, I took the mandatory art classes. In high school, I didn't take any elective art classes, so the only art experience from high school I received was from presentations that required artwork. At college, I've taken just this methods course. No other art experiences to speak of. (Respondent reflection #82)

Most pre-service elementary teachers plan to incorporate art activities into the other subjects they will be responsible for teaching. However they do not want to be responsible for teaching art as a separate subject. They do not feel that they have enough experience to teach art. Use it, yes; teach it, no. One Respondent explained:

I don't exactly know where I'll come up with ideas, but I guess from lots of books! I don't see myself sitting down and doing art with them. "OK, this is an art lesson." I know that's what we're learning we should do right now, but when I get out there, I don't see myself doing it. I see myself incorporating art into something else. Social studies or science even. That's what I see myself doing. (Gaea interview, 10/14/92)

One other Respondent anxiously pointed out that it was in her art methods class, during her last semester in college, that she found out for the first time that not every elementary school has an art teacher, and that she may find herself responsible for teaching art. If we keep in mind how few formal art experiences most pre-service elementary teachers have, it comes as no surprise that many of them have unanswered questions and some anxiety about teaching art. Part of the problem they have with teaching art is a result of conflicting messages they have received as to what exactly art education is, or should be.

These pre-service teachers understand art to be necessary for "creative thinking," for "hand-eye coordination," for "self-expression," and for development of "well rounded" individuals. They understand that they may be responsible for grading art, yet they feel extremely uncomfortable about

doing so. They have observed many elementary teachers do craft-type projects with their classes, and yet, realistic drawing and painting, which is rarely taught in elementary classrooms, is what they really think art is. What they remember fondly about art experiences are the fun, non-graded, project oriented, holiday gifts, and decorations they made in their own elementary schools. Yet, these art activities are not what they learn about in their art education methods classes, where they encounter aesthetics, art history, and art criticism, along with more sophisticated areas of art production. Conflicting messages and signals lead them, not only to question how to teach art, but also to question the types of things they can count as art, and what kinds of things they should be teaching as art. These conceptual conflicts inform their contexts as pre-service elementary teachers.

Similar conflicting contexts and the resultant inevitable debates about context, are also occurring between and among expert art educators (cf. Eisner, 1988; Hamblen, 1990; London, 1988; & Qualley, 1989; Smith, 1989). Even as the collateral experiences, cultural, and curricular contexts influence what and how students understand art and how teachers teach, so too does art education's past and current in-vogue pedagogy influence what is taught as art, how art is taught, and ultimately, how students know what they know about art.

As questions about art have been raised and answered, and raised again, various pedagogical tactics have come into favor and then been replaced with other conceptually framed proscriptions. Should art be taught as tradition? As innovation? Is art taught for creativity? For self expression or aesthetic appreciation? For manual or mental dexterity? Should art production be the sole endeavor of an art classroom, or should aesthetics, criticism, and art history be part of the content? Should art include a dose of cultural anthropology or semiotics? A bit of art educational history seems in order to contextualize these questions.

Around the turn of the last century, the modernist cultural revolution quaked the solid foundations upon which art has always been taught. Suddenly it was no longer adequate to be able to draw mechanically and from plaster casts, or to view and listen to discussions about Romantic or uplifting great art. While artists were developing new and non-representational art, quite different from anything that had been taught in the schools or academies, art teachers were trying to understand it. When confronted with modern art, they were at a loss because traditional methods of art instruction were insufficient to help them understand and teach modern art. The solution of least resistance was to fall back and teach art in the ways they always had done, and in ways they themselves had been taught.

Into this culturally-defined pedagogical confusion came a man called Arthur Wesley Dow (Mock-Morgan, 1985) who assessed the chaos, and with a little help from his friends, redefined what it was art teachers could and should be teaching. He examined the then-new and unteachable Western modern

art, juxtaposed Oriental art and some modern science, and found a way to talk about it. Dow found that it was possible to talk about and teach art, using a distancing procedure borrowed from modern scientists: objectivity. By looking at art from an impartial and impersonal point of view, it was possible to study the line, the shape, the texture, the color, and the form of a work of art. No longer was sentimental and personal association with the visual narrative of a work of art important. That was an old fashioned notion and, in fact, subjectivity got in the way of serious artistic scholarship and production.

At about the same time, other art education experts looked to the new science of psychology and made a case for free artistic expression as the key to healthy psyches in young children (c.f. Keel, 1965). As these new theories of art education became known, some art teachers made drastic changes in their curricula to reflect modern thinking. Others modified their curricula of habit to include comfortable aspects of the new thinking. While still other art teachers continued to teach drawing and appreciation in the old ways. As art teachers continued to pursue their own idiosyncratic pedagogies along came the Cold War, and with it a move, not only in art education, but in all of education, to get to the heart of each discipline in the school curriculum – to teach the basics. Unprecedented funding for research ensured that there was a national move in all of education toward emphasis on subject matters and across-the board strivings for academic excellence on modern objective tests. Zurmuehlen (1991) described the shifting paradigms which have made up art education in the past – from Dow's elements of design, to self-expression, to art in daily living, and finally, to art as a discipline. Each paradigm, Zurmuehlen concluded, was a response to the time in which it was popular.

They were reasonable responses to circumstances affecting individuals, schools, and society. In some cases the teaching of art had to change in order to remain in the school. In other cases the changes were a function of responses to shifts in the social climate or a perceived social crisis. (p. 15)

### **A Postmodern Shift in the Educational Climate**

According to several writers (Giroux, 1988; Jones, 1991; Parks, 1989; Zurmuehlen, 1991), the social climate has shifted anew, and art education is in a position to respond to the change. This new shift or era has been described as a "post-modern" or "postmodern" one. Smith (1989) who passionately criticized the postmodern movement, accurately described postmodernism as:

an assault on Western notions of meaning, objectivity, truth, intention, rationality, and reason as they influence thinking generally, including thinking about history, criticism, and teaching of literature. (p. 170)

Throughout history, "art" has meant many things to people within historical periods and within various cultures. Even within temporal and



cultural boundaries, the meaning of art is an elusive and debated subject. The relatively recent, post WWII coexistence of multiple cultures within first world countries, precipitated a movement that was not based upon unified and linear lines of power and definition. Postmodernism arose to satisfy the re-conception of culture as incoherent, without central authority, unity, continuity, or central purpose (Lyotard, 1984). Kellner (1988) pointed out that there is no longer one privileged, grand, or coherent theory of postmodernism, in spite of its being "labeled." Rather, he pointed out, postmodernism is a "loosening up and development of our old theories" (p. 32). Rather than a paradigm shift in which the old ways are pushed aside to make way for the new, postmodernism looks to the old ways, all of them, to make use of what is viable in them. No one paradigm or movement is privileged over another, but rather, all are looked at for their inherent fit and usefulness. (Zurmuehlen, 1991)

If the time is ripe for a shift in cultural understanding, then a move away from Modernism is in order for art education. Why would the social climate be so ripe for a move away from Modernism? Kellner gives one reason:

Although traditional high culture provides unique pleasures and enticements, its enshrinement and canonization also serves as an instrument of exclusion, marginalization, and domination by oppressive sex, race, and class focuses. (p. 32)

What does postmodernism mean to pre-service elementary generalist teachers who have traditionally been excluded or marginalized in art education research? None of my Respondents specifically mentioned being part of a post-modern movement. Yet they did incorporate postmodern ideas in their stories and they indicated their intention to act on these ideas in their teaching practice. Their refusal to "invoke the ancestors" for the correct reading for, or definition of, art within their classrooms denies the modernist "grand narrative." (Lyotard, 1979) As one Respondent pointed out:

There isn't just one way to do art or understand art no matter what art teachers say. What about the stuff that isn't in museums and is still art? (Daphne interview, 9/18/91)

Their frequent references to interdisciplinary education and art education which validates personal contexts is testimony to changing cultural readings of art. Postmodern pedagogy would capitalize on autobiographical narratives and contexts. One Respondent pointed to the advisability of incorporating students' autobiographical contexts in educational pedagogy:

In elementary school, children have enthusiasm for everything. Why no capitalize on it in those early years? When kids get older they learn to hate school because it doesn't fit into anything else in their lives. (Lorelei interview, 10/16/91)

Post modern educational pedagogy would begin with the questions, what do students know, what experiences have they had? And how can a discipline's content be juxtaposed with students' contexts to facilitate learning? As teachers, pre-service elementary generalists will be functioning in and working from cultural and educational contexts, in cultural and educational ideologies. Their contexts are the consequences of postmodern American culture. Giroux (1988) pointed to the need for postmodern political awareness that:

addresses popular culture as a serious object of aesthetic and cultural criticism . . . and when coupled with the postmodernist emphasis on diversity, contingency, and cultural pluralism, points to educating students for a type of citizenship that does not separate abstract rights from the realm of everyday . . . (p. 26)

Postmodern elementary education would be driven not by a single, coherent narrative, but by the diversity of contexts children bring to classrooms. These various contexts would not only influence and inform, but would direct the course of art educational pedagogy and content. Postmodern elementary education would, in an interdisciplinary and holistic fashion, encourage diversity of artistic styles, subjects, and genres in an effort to contextualize art education for the children who would be learning.

### **Defining Art and Art Education**

Those who have chosen to become elementary teachers have elected to teach young children a variety of subjects rather than one specialty subject. Art is a part of the smorgasbord of educational disciplines that pre-service elementary teachers encounter. Is it reasonable to expect that art will play a key role in their classroom practices? The answer to this question depends upon how the definition of art is selected by those who will use it. Pre-service elementary teachers have not had a dense background in formal art education. Yet, for the most part, their lack of art educational background does not seem to disturb them unless they have to perform an art activity. Over half of the pre-service elementary teachers who participated in this project admitted to being anxious about drawing, painting, and presenting their artwork for critical review. Nevertheless they intend to use art, as they define it, in their future classrooms. These future teachers contextually defined art according to their own experiences. As one Respondent explained:

Art is beauty. And of course, what is beautiful in my eye, may not be beautiful in your eye. And I think beauty -- they say, beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but I think that it's also because of all our past experiences. Everything keeps building on it. (Cassandra interview, 9/18/91)

If their experiences were good, they anticipated using the types of art lessons they encountered as elementary school children:

I feel that my background in art is pretty good and that it will help me when I am teaching. I hope to do a lot of the things I did when I was in school with my future students. (Respondent reflection #117)

If their school art experiences were not good, they hoped to avoid art altogether by teaching in a school with an art specialist. Others anticipated capitalizing on the art experiences they did remember as positive, usually experiences that happened out of school. One Respondent had a difficult time remembering any art experiences she had in elementary school, but vividly remembers the art experiences she had at home. She anticipated that her own classroom art activities would parallel her positive home experiences:

As a child I was constantly surrounded by pads and pads of paper, thousands of colored pens, pencils, and thick markers, big, fat erasers, and lots of space to create . . . I believe art is a very important part of children's schooling. I hope to supply my students with as many true art experiences as I possibly can . . . Unless they get the lessons at home, school is where they are going to get it. I feel it is my duty to supply these children with positive art experiences. (Respondent reflection #73)

Holiday art was often remembered fondly. Several Respondents told stories about decorating Christmas trees with artifacts parents have kept since they were small children. Feldman (1972) has pointed out that children's artwork which receives no answering response is incomplete. Those artworks which Respondents' remembered, and around which stories were told, were ones which had received validating responses and, in turn, have become part of their autobiographies:

Things that I most remember from grade school are pictures that I have kept. Looking through these things I have done, I have noticed that most of them were done along with other subjects besides art. I have found two reports from Social Studies and both of them have cover pages with a little bit of art. These reports and cover pages were done in the fifth grade. I also did an art picture about the freeing of the hostages . . . I think our own art experiences will have an impact on the way we feel about art and the way we will do it in the classroom. (Respondent reflection #86)

Some Respondents remembered projects they associated with art that they had done in school, but which had been produced in the context of other disciplines. Incorporating art into other subjects in an important theme for these future elementary generalists. Even if they do not teach art directly as "art" in their classrooms, many of them will use art as part of other lessons. As this Respondent pointed out, her experiences will inform her teaching.

One Respondent reflected on arbitrary disciplinary boundaries that he felt isolated art from the rest of the curriculum:

By having art as separate, I was conditioned to believe that art happened in art class, and for the most part it didn't transcend the boundaries placed on it. Even though I was (and still am) a compulsive doodler, and I didn't see that as art . . . There will be a place for doodling in my classroom. (Respondent reflection #115)

Another Respondent told a story about a unique and positive experience she had in the fifth grade in which her teacher allowed the walls between disciplines to effectively disappear:

In 5th grade, I had an innovative teacher named Mr. Green. He was the first teacher I'd had who integrated Art into all of our curriculum. I remember illustrating science write-ups, we staged a mock trial and drew the people involved in the courtroom, we made a huge window-size string art design, we went outside and drew trees and flowers; it was my best year in elementary school. Mr. Green is part of my decision to become a teacher. (Respondent reflection #42)

Mr. Green and his instruction has become part of this Respondent's context and will directly influence her classroom teaching, her pedagogy, and her students. Although pre-service elementary teachers are clear about their definition of art for their classrooms, they also want to, as one informant put it, "do the right thing, according to the experts."

As a group, pre-service elementary teachers are a pragmatic lot. They want to know what, as well as when, where, and how art should be taught. At the same time, they also want to understand and define art from their own perspectives and contexts. They want their experiences to fit in with what they know, but they also want to "do the right thing." They want to know exactly what they should be doing according to the art experts, and then take it, or leave it, as they choose. One Respondent expressed her frustration with the insensitivity of art experts:

Tell me what I can do. No. not "tell me." help me find ways. I think part of our problem is that it is very easy for someone who is proficient at something, whether it is music or a language, or art, to look at a novice and understand where that novice is coming from. And I think people in the arts, maybe they are very insensitive. (Lorelei interview, 10/16/91)

Significantly, art experiences that were remembered fondly in these stories were those in which respondents had experienced success. As they approach careers as elementary generalists, they are watchful to avoid what they perceive to be the pitfalls of insensitivity. As one Respondent explained:

Students enjoy things in which they can feel successful. Therefore, teachers in art (and other subjects as well) must accentuate the positive . . . . The experiences I do remember were the ones in which I was successful. I feel as a teacher, I must remember that. The easiest way to turn students "off" from art is to tell them (directly or indirectly) that they are no good at it. Hopefully, I will not find myself doing that. (Respondent reflection #68)

### Issues of Gender

Contextual art educational pedagogy would necessarily address gender differences. Belenky, Clinchy, Golberger, and Tarule (1986) pointed out that women prefer to contextualize their learning experiences. To specifically address women's ways of knowing and learning, pedagogical and curricular design ought to begin with the question "What does a woman know?" (p. 198) and build upon that context. They assert that:

Most of the women we interviewed were drawn to the sort of knowledge that emerges from firsthand observation, and most of the educational institutions they attend emphasized abstract out-of-context learning. (p. 200)

Less than 5% of Respondents participating in this study were men. Most elementary school teachers are women. Two Respondents related frightening stories about their educational experiences which, although only indirectly associated with actual art pedagogy, contextually influenced their ways of knowing about education. Other Respondents made reference to issues which could easily be attended to as women's issues. These issues and concerns make up the content and context of their stories, and are an important part of who these pre-service elementary teachers are now, and their ways of knowing.

One question I asked all Respondents was why they decided to become elementary teachers. Their answers indicated that elementary teaching was a career that could be easily accessible to them, a career that they believed to be non-threatening, and a career that they had seen modeled in their own educational experiences. In spite of a couple answers that reminded me of responses to questions in Miss America Pageants in their desire to change the world for the better, most were very pragmatic in their choice of career. One Respondent made the observation that "There's not much else out there, in my view. What else am I going to do?" (Helen interview, 10/14/91) Either they had a parent (most often a mother) who had modeled this career for them or they had teachers who had inspired their career decisions. Another Respondent explained why she liked the idea of teaching small children:

I'd like to teach around first or second, or maybe third. I don't really care to go above fourth grade. I just I find it easier. Some people

think it's harder to teach primary because you're constantly repeating yourself over and over. You know, kids don't listen. But I think that's easier than handling some of the attitudes of the older children. You know, a lot of kids talking back, questioning what you're telling them. I just think it'd be easier to teach primary. (Gaea interview 10/14/91)

She also thought elementary school would be easier to teach than it would be to teach older children. Yet her reason was her perception that she wouldn't be able to keep up with the older children academically. Her lack of confidence in her ability to out-smart older children was modeled for her by her mother:

My mom was an influence on my choosing elementary. Oh, she told me that I couldn't teach if they were going to be smarter than me (laughs). My mom said she couldn't go back to teaching high school like she was going to because they were probably smarter than her. And that is really kind of a scary aspect because I know some of those kids know a lot of things about computers and you know, math manipulatives, and things that I don't know about so, stay low. And just pat them on the back (laughs). (Helen interview, 10/14/91)

Is lack of confidence a woman's issue? Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) pointed out in their book, **Women's Ways of Knowing**, that "Indeed, highly competent girls and women are especially likely to underestimate their abilities (p. 196)." Neither Gaea nor Helen, both competent and intelligent women, want to be put in a position where their abilities or control is in question, control of discipline and control of the subject matter they will be responsible for teaching.

Control and lack of it seems to be a theme running through many stories about art, art education and decisions to choose a career within an educational system. One Respondent examined her reason for choosing a career in education. Her road to this decision was not direct, but came from a context of stereotyping and indirect intimidation which has influenced her decision to become a role model for female students:

I didn't consider teaching until I got into high school. It all started with this test one day. It was my geometry class, and there was a substitute teacher and she couldn't find the test. For some reason it was misplaced or something like that, and we ended up taking it a half an hour late, so we had to finish it the next day. And when he [the regular teacher] came back the next day, we finished the test in the half an hour that we had to finish it. He said, "Well you know why she lost that. You know why she couldn't find the test." I figured he was going to say she misplaced it, or he had misplaced it, or something like that and he said, "Well, it's because she was a woman." and I was like whoa, I'll just pretend that I didn't hear you say that, you know? And I'll keep that in mind and make a mental note and say something

to him after class. And then he kept saying, well, then he kept saying "You know, women make such stupid mistakes. If it were up to me I'd line the women and men up on the track outside and have the boys walk across the field and slap the girls across the face for every stupid mistake they made." And this really happened. And something I noticed is that the women in my class didn't - they didn't want to say anything about it though they were offended. But that's when I decided, wow, teachers really, just because they have this title, doesn't mean that they're the best role model for us. (Boadicea interview, 9/18/91)

Eisenberg & Goodall (in press) explained the role of context for decision making:

Each action is based on an interpretation of contexts. Each interpretation is based on that unique individual's understanding of the contexts, understandings that are further complicated by the fact that when we act we cannot 'take it back'. Right or wrong, smart or dumb, whatever we do - after we do it - it is already done. We cannot 'erase' a human action any more than we can 'take back' an unkind word or gesture. Our actions become part of the permanent record, a resource for others; interpretations of contexts and meanings. (p. 138, in manuscript)

One beautiful, tall, and charming young woman told a story about her early maturity and the inner city school she attended which has become part of her contextual understanding. This story she told is about the darker side of many students' education. The story takes place in art class and she describes the chaos, disorder, and lack of control that many informants called to mind when describing their experiences with art:

I went to a really kind of scary, junior high. And I just remember being twelve years old or whatever you are when you're in seventh grade, and having this really evil child kept rubbing my leg (laughs). And I didn't know what to do. So I'd speak out, and I'd be in trouble. Because I'd speak out and this boy would moon me all the time in the back of class. And I just had really gross experiences. . . . [The teacher would] turn her back, and he'd have his pants down. And I'm back there going "Hey!" and I'm in trouble. By the time I'd turn my work in she'd take out-bursts to heart and say 'Well, this is not what I asked for,' 'You know this is late,' My work was all stressed. (laugh)

I asked her if she had ever asked the teacher to change her seat. She looked surprised and answered:

I was too scared. And she did change my seat once, but they would come across the class and still bothered me. She moved me to another table, but I still sat in the back. There were just two girls in

the class. And I was a big girl too. I mean, I was only a couple inches shorter than this. I was about 5'6" and they were all still little pip-squeaks. I was this big girl you know, and well, I guess there's really not much I could do . . . . I was the same way in home ec for some reason. I think just the structure of art and home ec and people expecting those kind of things, especially out of girls, oh 'You should be able to do this really well.' Well, maybe, maybe not . . . . So it was frustrating. At that age, you don't really feel like you can tell your parents either.

. . . . art in high school would have been another scary experience. There were a lot of scary people in there. It was scary. Photography was scary enough. They had drug deals in the darkroom. You basically didn't go to the bathroom during the school day. Didn't go into too many corners by yourself. I told my mom about one instance and she didn't believe me, or she told me it was my fault or something. So I didn't tell her any more . . . . I had a lot of other things to worry about in high school (laughs). (Helen interview, 10/14/91)

The contexts that come across in these stories tell of experiences of school cultures that encourage girls, and the women they will become, to search for orderliness, control, and safety, in their careers as elementary teachers. These stories point out the legacy of dysfunctional schools, teachers, classrooms, and teaching in which "functional" would include not only safety, but also encouragement, as well as pedagogy designed to specifically address the particular needs of students who are girls and women. They are contexts which influence these students' ways of knowing.

### **Observation and Continuing Questions**

Students know what they know from contexts in which they experience learning. These contexts are not only classroom contexts but, on a grander scale, they emanate from the cultures in which students' learn to learn. To begin to understand how students learn is to listen to their stories and begin to understand their particular contexts.

Are stories pre-service elementary teachers tell about art educational experiences actually significant? Roland Barthes (1988) questioned the significance of narratives when he asked: "Is everything, in a narrative, functional? Does everything down to the least detail, have a meaning?" (p. 104) He went on to answer his own questions, and thereby to point out the significance of these stories:

In the order of discourse, what it noted is, by definition, notable: even when a detail seems irreducibly insignificant, refractory to any function, it will nonetheless ultimately have the meaning of absurdity or uselessness: everything has a meaning or nothing has. (p. 104)



Each of these stories about art point to significant episodes, insights, details, events, and experiences which can allow insights into what it means to experience art as a student. Taken together, these stories can inform art educational pedagogy by identifying heroes, contracts, dragons, helpers, magic potions, positive and negative sanctions, and various art educational journeys; some exemplify success and others failure. These educational stories are memorable and thus significant. They can provide clues to developing empowering art education practices and pedagogy for student-heroes.

Out of the various theories of art education juxtaposed with their own collateral experience, art teachers and elementary teachers have written their own stories about art which have shaped their lives and their teaching, and ultimately the lives and the teaching of their students, and their students' students. Students' most powerful influences on their understanding about art have been the teachers they, themselves, have had. To build pedagogy that addresses disciplinary needs while also addressing students' needs, it is necessary to re-incorporate pre-modernist narratives into art education; not only for understanding art work, but also understanding art students. A lone "grand narrative" is no longer adequate to meet the needs of multi-faceted, multi-cultural, and multi-paradigmatic American society. Autobiographical "small" and "multiple" narratives of students are parts of the context by which we can hope to understand the ways students understand what they understand about art and art education.

By loosening conceptual constraints imposed by single perspective research, rich insights are available into the multiple texts which inform students' ways of knowing about art, and about education in general. Thomas (in press) in his forthcoming book **Doing Critical Ethnography**, challenges researchers to take "a walk on the wild side" which he explained is:

a call to reject inhibitions imposed by assumed meaning and to cultivate in their place the fiercely passionate and undomesticated side of our scholarly nature that challenges pre-given ideas."  
(p. 8 electronic manuscript)

By rejecting traditional and artificial limitations and boundaries imposed by adherence to single "paradigm" research, understanding postmodern contexts of students' knowing becomes in itself postmodern. Because postmodernism "emphasizes the arbitrary nature of cultural signs and their codes" (Thomas, p. 30 electronic manuscript), a further consequence could be that researchers may consciously choose to be emancipated from single metaphorical images that have driven modernist research and knowledge production.

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