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Drawing on Experience

Pamela Markus

I am learning to teach. Since I did not follow the formal process of certification for teaching, I became an art teacher by teaching art. The ideas that inform my practice have developed and continue to develop through the practice of teaching and making art, rather than being dictated by any set or prescribed pedagogical ideology. These theories reflect my personal experiences related to art and education, functioning in a synergistic way; my past experiences inform my teaching, and those emerging theories inform my ideas about art.

In my research, I explore my role as an art teacher in an informal setting; the research involves observation of my teaching in a summer camp setting, layered with an autobiographical project of writing and telling stories based on experiences related to art and education. The stories written from my own perspective create “texts for professional reflection and dialogue” (Wood, 2000, p.167). The biographic character of teachers’ knowledge has already been acknowledged by many researchers (Goodson, 1992; Pinar; 1981, 1988; Grumet, 1981, 1987; Berk, 1980; Butt et al., 1992), but there has been little exploration into how art teachers understand their actions in formal or informal situations.

Through the research process, I investigate issues about art and education by “drawing on” personal experiences. Questions that inspire the research range from the practical, “what do I do when I teach art?”, to the philosophical, “what is art?”. The documentation of my process as a learner, learning to teach, will be recorded in my dissertation, “Drawing on Experience”.

Art critics and educators have described our time as a period of transition, (Parsons, 2001; Gablik, 1991; Duncum, 2001), but it is no surprise that many teachers teach as they have been taught. Through an autobiographical narrative inquiry, I intend to explore how I negotiate between the modernist values of my art education and studio practice, and my emerging theories for teaching art as a connected, social experience. The goal of writing and telling stories from my own perspective is to examine my pedagogical beliefs in action (Schön, 1983) and through this process, reclaim and reinvent my goals and values as an art teacher.

This article introduces the literatures that rationalize my research, and outlines the methodology, focusing on collage as a visual method. These two facets establish and present the theoretical framework of the research. The overarching question that guides the research is: How do my art-related experiences, theoretical and practical, inform my teaching and how do my teaching experiences inform how I theorize art?

I use the process of reflection to make sense of my experiences and to tell the story of my journey, an ongoing journey of learning to teach. Autobiographical narratives provide a way for me to bring my experiences into language. Brookfield (1995) suggests that critically reflective teaching happens when teachers uncover and examine the assumptions that guide their practice. Through autobiography, I aim to unravel the social, contextual and historical influences that have informed my teaching, and construct a deeper understanding of my practice; in other words, I intend to learn more about my practice as an art teacher. As I begin to understand why I believe as I do, I am more able to make informed actions; actions that I can explain and justify to myself and others.

Autobiography is founded on experience, and experience is grounded in a particular social and historical context. Through autobiographical narratives, I examine how my ideas about art and teaching have been influenced by my membership in different “communities of practice”, a term introduced by Lave and Wenger (1991). Wenger (1998) describes the way that we transfer elements of one practice to another as “brokering”. One of the elements of my practice that I learn to adjust and tune in relation to different contexts is the concept of art.

As I reflect on the diverse contexts in which I have practiced as an artist and taught art, I find that the answer to what art is varies. Weitz and Kennick suggested that it was impossible to set out the necessary and sufficient conditions for defining art (Carroll, 2000). That may be true; no single theory that can adequately define art in every context throughout history, but in specific settings and at specific times, artworks do have particular meanings. In my study, I examine how my personal knowledge about art has been constructed and reconstructed over time. For example, the meaning of art within the context of a fine arts program of the late 1970s where I completed my graduate work is quite far removed from art in a summer camp setting!

What does it really mean when one says that autobiography, learning, and art are historically and culturally influenced? My research will show in a very tangible way how my learning to teach art has been and continues to be historically, contextually, and culturally influenced. Critical reflection provides a space for an ongoing, dynamic dialogue between what I have learned about art in different settings and how I practice as an art teacher in an informal setting.

Autobiography supports the notion that personal experience is the basis of knowledge and assumes that to understand teachers' knowledge, it is beneficial to observe it from a teacher's perspective. The narrative study of teachers' lives is based upon the belief that the teacher is inseparable from the teaching. It is though a narrative inquiry that I will explore how I negotiate the values that inform my teaching.

Autobiography in education may take on a number of forms, but it is basically "a way of gaining knowledge" (Graham, 1991, p.322). An autobiographical approach provides me with a way to explore the disconnected bits and pieces of the past experiences that inform my present teaching, and allows me to articulate my ideas about teaching. Britton explains that "we shape our lives into a kind of narrative in order to fully possess our experiences" (cited in Graham, p.12). Autobiography has the potential to not only describe what teachers do when they teach, but also considers how teachers' personal practical knowledge is constructed and reconstructed over time (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Autobiographical research may help me to discover, connect, and better understand the past experiences that inform my practice.

Following the notion that there is no single way of writing a life, I piece together different methods. I begin the fieldwork by videotaping the classes that I teach at summer camp. The first period of each day is taped for a period of three weeks by setting up a stationary video camera in a corner of the room. Each evening, I review the tapes, "cataloguing" them by writing descriptive memos. In a second notebook, I add an interpretive layer by writing reflective memos.

Throughout the research process, I keep a journal as a record of ongoing experiences related to art and education; these include my participation in two local

quilting guilds, observation of introductory art education classes, and reflections on current gallery and museum artwork.

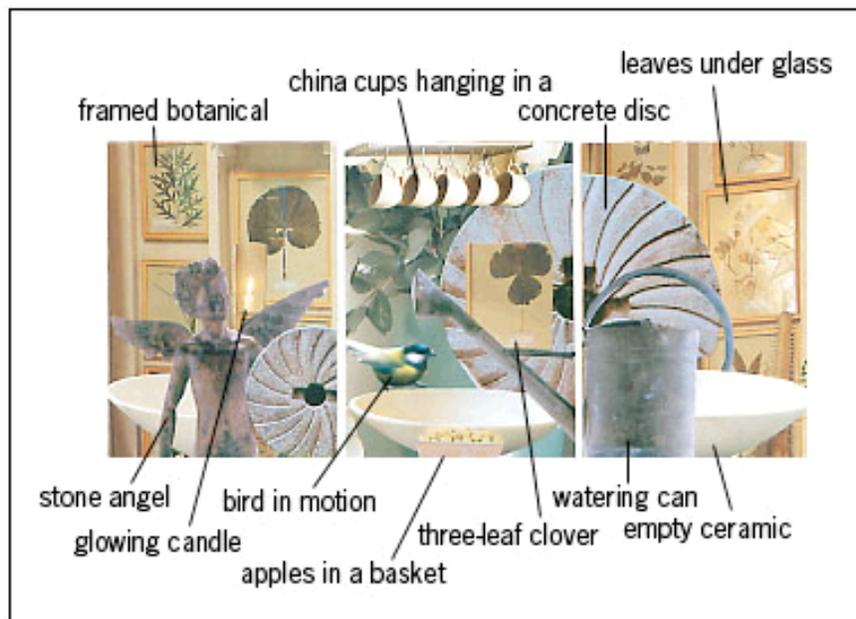
The written reflections are woven together with the literature review, the “conversations” that I have with educators, artists, philosophers, critics, and novelists. My personal experiences provide the warp through which the theories of others are woven, constructing a more solid, whole cloth. Holden Caulfield in “The Catcher in the Rye” puts it this way: “What really knocks me out is a book that, when you’re all done reading it, you wish the author that wrote it was a terrific friend of yours and you could call him up on the phone whenever you felt it” (Salinger, 1945, p.18). The literatures become the “friends” whom I have conversations with, if only speaking hypothetically.

The memory work, or the methods that I utilize to access my past experiences related to art and education, are inspired by the work of Haug (1987), Mitchell & Weber (1999), Kuhn (1995), and Spence (1995). The process involves both writing and collage, introducing visual methods into the research.

Visual methods add to the more traditional approaches in several ways. Visual methods impart an intuitiveness to the process; the spontaneity is valuable for uncovering memories and helping researchers discover their assumptions and stance in their work. Collage disrupts the linear process of inquiry (Allnutt, Butler-Kisber, et al., 2003) and the activity of cutting apart and repositioning images adds new ways of looking, new insights. Visual methods lend themselves to multiple interpretations since images are less codified than words alone, reiterating Dewey’s belief that the work of art is completed by the viewer. Lastly, visual methods mediate new understandings in the research by bringing “feeling” to the forefront.

The format that I choose to work with is based on Artist Trading Cards, which are original or small edition works of art created on 2 ½ x 3 ½ inch cards. The idea is to trade the cards directly with people at trading sessions; the exchange of cards and the interaction between people are of equal importance.

To illustrate how I use collage to find the words in my memory work, I will show the example of the collaged cards based on “camp art”. The set of three cards is constructed by spontaneously selecting images from magazines based on my memories of camp art. I begin “translating” the images into words on a literal level, acknowledging that there is no direct parallel between words and images. This is represented in the following box.



The next stage is bringing the words to a more conceptual level. The words on the left are the literal translations and those on the right are more abstract.

china cups hanging in a row	
concrete disc	earth
framed botanical samples	
glowing candle	fire
leaves under glass	nature under glass
three-leaf clover	common
stone angel	
empty ceramic bowl	
watering can	water
bird in motion	air
apples in a basket	basic

From the collage and the conceptual interpretation of the images, I construct a narrative that describes my remembered experiences of camp art.

Carved stone discs, garden ornaments. Rock. The earth. Stone. Something so entirely opposite to that which is conceptual or ephemeral. Literally concrete. The bowls- the containers. Containers for ideas. Botanical samples, framed like art. Bits of nature captured under glass. An old watering can. Rusted, well-used. Water, basic. And a rack of plain tea-cups hanging from above. A basket of apples. So basic. So down to earth. Nothing complicated. Nothing that is not easily understood. Accessible. The bird, the angel, the air. The candle, fire. The stone, the earth. The watering can, water. All we need. The four basic elements.

To uncover the essence of the experience of camp art, I pull out the “nuggets of meaning” (C. Hussey, Personal communication, June 2001). From the narrative, I draw out the words: “Camp art is accessible; it is nature captured under glass”.

In the book *Visual Methodologies*, Gillian Rose (2001) presents several critical visual methodologies, stating that what she means by critical is an approach to the visual in terms of the cultural significance, social practices, and power relations in which it is

embedded. Although her text offers some guidelines for investigating the meanings and effects of visual images, she doesn't believe that in the end, visual images totally rely on a sound methodology. She writes: "They also depend on the pleasure, thrills, fascination, wonder, fear or revulsion of the person looking at the images and then writing about them. Successful interpretation depends on a passionate engagement with what you see. Use your methodology to discipline your passion, not to deaden it" (Rose, p. 4).

In my own approach to using images in research, I honor Rose's suggestion. I select images that "speak" to me, images that draw me in and fascinate me when I construct the collages. I rely on this passionate engagement with the images to find the words for the experiences that inform my present teaching. As I create, I learn.

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