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Influences of Studio Practice on Art Teachers' Professional Identities

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Introduction

Art teachers have many personal stories about their passions and careers and various professional backgrounds. I was a visual artist for more than fifteen years before deciding to pursue a doctorate in art education. And I still make art. In the process of shifting from artist to art educator, my professional identity became unclear and a personal and intellectual struggle ensued. Am I an artist, art educator, or researcher? Can I be all three? These significant questions concern me and many other art educators in the same or similar situations.

How do art education professionals who teach and concurrently create professional artwork describe their professional identities? Do all art teachers make art to display in professional venues? Are they considered artist-teachers, teacher-artists, or something else? How do they self-identify?

This study is undertaken to consider these questions. Pilot study questionnaires and interviews have led me to focus on K-higher education art teachers who make art as part of their professional practice. Self identity, both personal and professional, is the focus of this study.

What is identity? What are the aspects of identity in the postmodern era? What is the professional identity of art teachers in the field? Many theoretical researches and investigations are looking for personal, social cultural meaning; however, identity is a complicated concept that has no single definition of its nature, yet it exists within individuals' lives (Kroger, 2000). Erik Erikson (as cited in Kroger, 2000) explains that identity is formed by three intermingling elements: "one's biological characteristics; one's own unique psychological needs, interests, and defenses; and the cultural milieu in which one resides" (p. 9). Kroger claims that "identity is

formed, delimited, and constrained within ongoing relationships and the cultural context; identity is ascribed by the demand of the culture” (p. 7). Yet, many researchers and writers observe that identity is continuously shaped, developed, and changed throughout one’s lifetime. Thus, the concept of identity can be understood from various perspectives.

Defining professional self-identity is a starting point for art teacher formation. Palmer (1998), a well-known educational scholar, addresses this issue:

Good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher...By identity I mean an evolving nexus where all the forces that constitute my life converge in the mystery of self: my genetic makeup, the nature of the man and woman who gave me life, the culture in which I was raised, people who have sustained me and people who have done me harm, the good and ill I have done to others and to myself, the experience of love and suffering—and much, much more. In the midst of that complex field, identity is a moving intersection of the inner and outer forces that make me who I am, converging in irreducible mystery of being human. (p.13)

Art teachers ask themselves many questions to understand the connection between their self-identities, professional identities, and teaching practices. It is important to look closely at the influences that help define art teachers’ self-identities as well as their professional identities.

Certainly, the nature of art itself — creative, innovative, and original or postmodern — demands that its teachers discover their self-identities. In particular, the postmodern point of view values visual arts that reveal multicultural viewpoints as well as unique self-expression (Efland, Freedman, & Stuhr, 1996). In order to convey these ideas, artists focus on clarifying their self-definitions of both aesthetic and personal identities. Additionally, from a postmodern point of view, the implementation of teaching and learning is meaningless without connections

between the world and individuals as well as the consciousness of individuals' personal identities (Efland et al., 1996; Nicholson, 1989; Parks, 1989). Calling for meaningful teaching and learning, Palmer (1997) echoes the crucial meaning of defining self-identity as a major concern to promote better teachers:

As I teach, I project the condition of my soul onto my students, my subject, and our way of being together. The entanglements I experience in the classroom are often no more than the convolutions of my inner life. Viewed from this angle, teaching holds a mirror to the soul. If I am willing to look in that mirror, and not run from what I see, I have a chance to gain self-knowledge-and knowing myself is as crucial to good teaching as knowing my students and my subject. (p.14)

Various academic journals reveal the issues of teachers' self-identities as well as professional identities and their significant influence on teaching philosophy and pedagogy. Many scholars (Adams, 2003; Anderson, 1981; Anderson, 1997; Beijaard, Verloop, & Vermunt, 2000; McDermott, 2002; Rasanen, 2002; Skrzeczynski, 1995) argue that a teacher's professional identity is important and powerful in motivating his/her students, as well as promoting teaching practice. For instance, McDermott's (2002) article "Collaging Pre-service Teacher Identity" describes how pre-service teachers can explore their self-identities through the collage-making process. The author explores how essential it is to define self-identity is for developing pre-service teachers' professional identities: "When pre-service teachers' self-knowledge and pedagogical awareness emerge ideally they make living knowledge" (p. 57).

In keeping with the idea of the significance of defining self-identity and professional identity, Palmer (1997) asserts the connections between teachers' self-identities, professional identities, and teaching practices:

In fact, knowing my students and my subject depends heavily on self-knowledge. When I do not know myself, I cannot know who my students are. I see them through a glass darkly, in the shadows of my unexamined life—and when I cannot see them clearly I cannot teach them well. When I do not know myself, I cannot know my subject—not at the deepest levels of embodied, personal meaning. I will know it only abstractly, from a distance, a congeries of concept as far removed from the world as I am from personal truth. (p. 14)

Rae Anderson (1997), who did a case study of one artist/teacher noted that in both teaching and art making there was a struggle for excellence. In terms of professional practice, both artist and art teacher share many common qualities but also have many differences in the ways they perceive and practice their profession. The process of defining professional identity involves understanding varied experiences; this helps teachers to develop their educational philosophy and pedagogy (Irwin, 2004).

In order to recognize the varied experience of the world in particular ways, Irwin (2004) suggests a perception of multi-identity. Irwin (in press) argues for “a multiplicity of perceptions that held between and within sensual and textual ways of knowing.” (p. 16) Irwin’s idea offers art educators a better understanding and appreciation of the multiple-identities involved in creating art and teaching art. However, this perception of multiple identities often causes inner struggles as individuals attempt to carry the value of traditions and balance their own achievements (Irwin, 2004). Nevertheless, in our postmodern information age of continual multi-tasking, individuals often engage in overlapping and tangential job experiences that promote multi-skilled professions.

From the literature, it seems that defining art teachers' self-identities as well as their professional identities promotes teaching empowerment. In the next section I will explore ways art teachers' studio art practices influence their professional identities and their teaching practices.

Art Teachers' Studio Art Practice and Professional Identity

Studio art practice needs to be seen as a valuable site for raising theoretically profound questions and exploring them using robust visual methods that have the potential to yield critically grounded and individually transforming outcomes. Artistic practice therefore comprises a critical coalition that involves an ongoing dialog between, within and around the artist, artwork and context where each has a role to play in the creation of meaning (Sullivan, 2004, p. 811).

Art making is a stimulating and can be used as a means to enhance understanding of self, ideas, and art-making and teaching practices. For both teaching and practicing, art opens up new possibilities for meaning-making (Anderson, 1997; Sullivan, 2004). Researching, when considered as searching and re-searching, is also a practice in which many K-higher education art teachers engage. Art-making many times involves research into the process of self discovery. Perceiving a multi-professional identity allows a teacher to develop his/her representative professional talents as well as to motivate his/her students (Anderson, 1997). For instance, Irwin (2004) writes:

Perhaps all educators desire becoming artist-researcher-teachers when they begin to question how they were taught and how traditional methods lack life and living. They yearn for enhanced meaning, they wish to create, and they long for their own self-expressions of certainty and ambiguity. (p. 2)

Sullivan (2004) theorizes studio art practice as practice-based research and articulates the role of art-making experiences:

For some art educators the studio is a unique place for problem finding and problem solving, media exploration, and giving form to ideas of personal and social relevance.

For others, it is the educational consequences of the studio experiences that offer tangible outcomes. (p. 803)

Conceptual Framework

A number of authors have developed frameworks for understanding the important role of studio practice in art and art education. Particularly, two main conceptual frameworks are adopted for this study: Sullivan's (2005) theoretical framework of visual arts knowing—transcognition—and Irwin and Cosson's (2004) theoretical framework of a/r/tography as living inquiry. Sullivan's framework examines the importance of studio art practice as a visual knowing process, whereas Irwin's framework investigates the significance of the perception of multi-identities. When art-making practice influences art teachers' professional identities, art teachers often struggle with their multiple professional identities such as artists, researchers, and teachers. Hence, these two theoretical frameworks support each other within the perception of teaching and creating art as an exploration of self-identity.

Art Practice as Research: Visual Art Knowing

There is a framework for understanding that art practice is a form of research (Sullivan, 2005). For instance, there are four interconnected domains of visual art inquiry that describe different research traditions and methods. These include what Graeme Sullivan (2005, p. 95) calls "Interpretivist, Empiricist, Critical, and Art Practice."

- Interpretivist: Dialectical-Meaning / Constructivist / Dialogue/ Interdiscipline / Networks
- Empiricist: Exploratory-Explicate / Conceptual / Reflective / Discipline-Based / Self-Similar
- Critical: Positionality-Change / Contextual / Question / Transdiscipline / Perspectival
- Art Practice: Meta-Theoretical / Practical / Understanding Practices / Reflective Practices / Postdiscipline Practices / Visual Systems Practices

In addition, Sullivan (2005) identifies an integrated approach to visual arts knowing which he calls “transcognition.” It consists of three perspectives as follows: thinking in a medium, thinking in a language, and thinking in a context. In terms of visual art practice as a form of inquiry, there is a notion of changing conceptions about artistic thinking and knowing practice. Sullivan states that visual arts’ knowing is constituted by not only the structure of the creative mind but also by social contexts. Sullivan also emphasizes three perspectives and their practices that illustrate the various ways of visual arts thinking. For example, art practice is the fundamental nature of visual arts knowing within the artwork, within the viewer, or/and within the setting (Sullivan, 2005).

A/r/tography as Living Inquiry

A definition of a/r/tography is “a living practice of art, research, and teaching: a living métissage” (Irwin & Cosson, 2004, p. 30). Métissage is “a metaphor for artist-researcher-teachers who integrate these roles in their personal and professional lives. It is also “a metaphor for the very processes and products that are created and used within this activity” (Irwin & Cosson, 2004, p. 26). A/r/tography as a practice of meaning-making offers “a multiplicity of

perceptions that held between and within sensual and textual ways of knowing” (Irwin & Cosson, 2004, p. 16).

Through memory, identity, reflection, meditation, story telling, interpretation, and representation, the artists/researchers/teachers are living their artworks, representing their understanding, and performing their pedagogical positions as they integrate knowing, doing, and making through aesthetic experiences (Irwin, 2004). As a result, a/r/tography offers art educators an educational perspective to understand and appreciate that the processes involved in creating and teaching art.

Problem Statement

A basic principle that defines what it is to be human is the need to be located within contexts that confirm one’s identity (Sullivan, 2005). According to the literature, there are significant responses about art practice as research that influences art teachers’ professional identities and promotes good teaching practices (Anderson, 1997; Ball, 1990; Irwin & Cosson, 2004; Sullivan, 2004). However, many art teachers struggle with their professional identities and the dichotomy that culture seems to present: studio artist vs. classroom teacher. The resolution of this struggle is essential for art teachers who are concerned with defining their self-identities as a fundamental portion of becoming good teachers. Furthermore, “contemporary art practice that includes direct contact with artists and their artwork reveals how artworks can be seen as ‘sites of possibility’ for making art, thinking about art, and teaching art” (Sullivan, 2005, p. 152).

Although many art educators and their advocates care about studio practice and its influence on promoting professional identity, some art teachers have little or no time for making art which also causes a personal and professional ideological tension.

More and more often, art teachers are engaging with art-making experiences “by investigating the potential for knowledge creation that exists between theory and practice, and beyond assumed discipline boundaries, artists pursue issues and ideas that have personal and public relevance” (Sullivan, 2005, p. 152). The art teachers who both create art and teach art and re-search within art and culture believe that art teachers’ art-making experiences can facilitate a better understanding of their professional identities as well as improve their teaching practices. The art teachers who believe in the power of studio practice consider that making art, responding to art, reflecting, re-searching and teaching art are significant in fostering creativity and innovation as well as inspiring their students (Ball, 1990; Szekely, 1978; Thompson, 1986; Wright, 1990).

Although many studies (Adams, 2003; Anderson, 1981; Anderson, 1997; McDermott, 2002) reveal the importance of defining teachers’ professional identity in order to develop their professional practices, there is a gap in literature supporting the idea that studio practice influences art teachers’ professional identities as well as their teaching practices. Hence, this study examines and analyzes the beliefs, influences, and contexts that art teachers experience in order to teach art and, at the same time, practice art.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the aspects of studio art practice that art teachers understand as having a significant influence on their professional identity. Moreover, this study investigates to what extent studio art practice is related to art teachers’ professional identity and the significant aspects that have an impact on teachers’ understandings of pedagogy and art making. This study is driven by a main research question and seven sub-questions.

Research Question

In what ways do K-higher education art educators believe studio practices influence their professional identities and practice?

Sub-Questions

- In what ways do art educators define their professional identities?
- How do art teachers' professional identities influence their personal identities?
- In what ways do art educators' studio practices influence their identities?
- In what ways do art educators' studio practices influence their practices?
- What motivates art educators to spend time making their own art?

Significance of the Study

Teaching itself can be understood as an art when teachers, as do dancers, musicians, or painters make judgments based largely on qualities that unfold during the course of action. (Anderson, 1997, p. 38)

Art educators are required to be knowledgeable about a wide range of media and skills (Ball, 1990; Szekely, 1978; Thompson, 1986; Wright, 1990) but teaching art involves much more than the teaching of techniques. Good art teachers “discuss art [and] deal with the various roles which art assumes in contemporary and past cultures” (Ball, 1990, p. 55). Good art teachers help students develop their own views about their artwork, their visual culture, and their relationships with both.

Teaching and learning is interactive; teaching and learning art is creative and can be inspirational interaction. As Ball (1990) explains about her experiences within teaching and creating art:

I evolve as an artist teacher—sometimes being more one than the other. It is my hope that I can maintain a balance between the artist and the teacher so that both can flourish

within me. Whether or not I shall always teach, I cannot say; but art has been, and always will be will be a part of my idiosyncratic being. (p. 59)

The significance of this study is to add to the research on studio practices, art educators' professional identities, and pedagogy, to open discussion of the conflict inherent between studio art practices and K-Higher Education art teachers' careers, and to better articulate art teachers' professional identities. This study will explore how studio practice helps or hinders art educators in their professional lives. This study will explore the significant knowledge about the relative importance of integrating art making, research, and teaching in art teachers' lives. The outcomes of this study may perhaps help many art educators more clearly understand their professional identities as they self-identify as artist, researcher, teacher, or all three.

Conclusion

Just knowing about our subject area helps us to present its content in ways that make it more possible to learn, so, too, can "knowing" about ourselves as persons help us present ourselves in ways that enhance learning. (Lipka & Brinthaupt, 1999, p. 211)

Understanding self-identity is the personal knowledge one values about his or her own psychology (Lipka & Brinthaupt, 1999). As teachers, knowing themselves helps them present themselves in ways that enhance teaching and learning. It motivates "interpersonal dynamics of a classroom into proper perspective" (Lipka & Brinoaupt, 1999, p. 211). Whether they want or not, art teachers are recognized as artists and teachers in schools as well as society. Although the dual professional identities, artist-teachers, are not easy to pursue within the lives of art teachers, many studies reveal that the experiences of both making art and teaching art are interwoven and enriching art teachers' lives. Excellent art education programs in higher education value both the role of artists and teachers within the art teachers' lives. In the field of art education, many art

educators agree that balancing multiple identities is empowering art teachers to demonstrate their artistic processes and pedagogical strategies.

Teaching as a human activity emerges from one's innerness; thus, we teach who we are (Palmer, 1998). Hence, postmodern ideas of the self can help teachers with their own problems of establishing a clear understanding of self-identity and authenticity in the classroom (Piper, 1997). Many art teachers, who identify themselves as artist-teachers, argue that art making experience often empowers their professional development as well as allows them to demonstrate confident studio skills in the classroom. Artist-teachers, who encourage the creative process in artmaking, present great values. Artist-teachers, who demonstrate the understanding and enthusiasm in the creative process, provide great insights. Artist-teachers, who consider their own artistic development as a lifelong process, recognize potential personal values within themselves as well as the artistic development of the students (Szekely, 1978).

In terms of identity within an art teacher's life, being a good teacher or a great artist-teacher may not be so critical; however, maintaining one's artistic nature while teaching art can be an important aspiration of art educators in the postmodern age. As Szekely (1978) points out, "the ability to harmonize one's creative powers in teaching and art making should be the foremost competence of each art teacher" (pp. 19-20). In a sense, recognizing art teachers' professional identities as well as their self-identities is essential for making better art teachers who promote understanding and help the students develop through art education.

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