

Principles of Possibility: Considerations for a 21st Century Art & Culture Curriculum

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Has any art teacher ever reviewed the national or state standards for art education or the prevailing list of elements and principles of design and then declared, “I feel so motivated to make some art!” I don’t believe so and this is why using standards as they are conventionally written is not an ideal structure on which to elaborate a curriculum. Contemplating the main topics of a curriculum ought to stimulate students’ and teachers’ anticipation and participation. Modernist elements and principles, a menu of media, or lists of domains, modes, and rationales are not sufficient or necessary to inspire a quality art curriculum.

The structures on which each art teacher, school, or district builds unique curricular approaches should have in common that they investigate big questions about the uses of art and other images in shaping our interactions with the world around us. My goal in writing this article is not to create a new canonical list of art education principles. I do want to provide a framework that teachers can use as an outline of meaning making experiences that should be included in a curriculum that engages and empowers today’s students.

Playing

Learning begins as deeply personal, primary process play. Such play must be truly free, not directed toward mastering a technique, solving a specific problem, or conscientiously illustrating a randomly chosen juxtaposition. Today’s students, over constricted by an education system that often focuses on knowing the one right answer, need guidance in reclaiming their capacities for conceptual, imaginative play. At Spiral Workshop, each course begins with creative play based on the gaming methods of the Surrealists. Initially, students may be confused and suspicious, but as peers and teachers model an experimental attitude, soon the classroom is filled with artistic activity and exclamations of surprise. These students have learned the important artistic lesson that artists do not know the outcomes of their works before they begin. Artists immerse themselves in a process of making sensitively interact with images and ideas as they emerge.

Forming Self

Artmaking can be an important opportunity for students to further their emotional and intellectual development—to help formulate a sense of who they are, and who they might become. Quality projects aid students in exploring how one’s sense of self is constructed within complex family, social, and media experiences. Unfortunately, many projects in art classrooms do not actually promote expanded self-awareness because students are directed to illustrate or symbolize known aspects of self-identity, rather than being encouraged to consider themselves in new ways through investigating content that it often taken for granted. Authentic insight into self is more likely promoted through indirect means, asking students to reflect and recall experiences through making art. Such projects as reconstructing memories of childhood spaces, designing trophies for labels that have been assigned to them by families or schools, depicting a “least liked” body part, or describing how their identities are constructed in part by the objects that they desire often afford students unexpected insights into the self.

Investigating Community Themes

Great art often engages the most significant issues of the community, calling on each of us to bring our deepest understanding and empathy to our shared social experience. In today’s interconnected world, these themes encompass the global community. Through collective identification of generative themes, teachers can draw all students into personal engagement with the curriculum content because learning new skills becomes important for exploring significant life issues. Dialogical pedagogical practice is based in praxis, the unifying of thought and action. In art classes, the obvious choice of action will often be art-based community-education—artworks, thematic shows, documentaries, posters, installations, murals, zines—all designed to involve others in reconsidering the inevitability of the status quo.

Encountering Difference

Good multi-cultural curriculum introduces us to the generative themes of others—helping us to see the world through the eyes of others—understanding the meaning of artworks in terms of the complex aesthetic, social, and historical contexts out of which they emerge. It is far better to introduce students to fewer artworks or cultures in depth, than to present many artworks with little or no context. Don’t limit the study of others to “timeless” artifacts and undifferentiated representatives of “the people.” Do represent “others” for your students as dynamic individuals and groups who are changing and evolving in contemporary times.

Attentive Living

Drawing, painting, and photographing natural objects and phenomena sensitize students to the complexity and beauty of the world around them. Many artists feel refreshed and creatively inspired by immersing themselves in nature. Through architecture and design curriculum, teachers and students examine the ways in which the person-made environment shapes the quality of life. Students can conduct psycho-geographic investigations to explore the psychological impact of spaces on individuals and on social interactions. Considering modern to postmodern design from Bauhaus to Target (or from Arts and Crafts to Martha Stewart) encourages students to consider the interrelated discourses of design and consumerism.

Empowered Experiencing

A quality art curriculum gives students the knowledge they need to notice and interpret a wide range of visual practices. Responsibly introducing students to today's discursive practices in art history, aesthetics, and art criticism means introducing them to the analytical procedures of such fields as cultural studies, visual culture, contemporary theory, feminist theory, and postcolonial theory as well as various psychoanalytical perspectives. Such context-based methodologies have the advantage of building in an awareness of the environment within which the images or artifacts were made—an important aspect of introducing the art of other cultures in the curriculum.

Empowered Making

Making should remain at the heart of K-12 arts education. In this increasingly visual world, many people, including those not officially designated as artists, will make and distribute images as part of a wide range of work-related and personal practices. Students of the 21st century need to know how to construct, select, edit, and present visual images. Contemporary curricula that describe drawing or elements and principles as *foundational* are echoing the values and theories of the modernist era, not objectively stating universal timeless truths. Consider structuring general artmaking courses to introduce six areas of artmaking—expressionism, realism, formalism, applied design, craft, and postmodern (including digital) practices.

Deconstructing Culture

Knowledge of contemporary theory gives art teachers powerful tools to engage students in exploring how their thoughts and desires are shaped through immersion in local and global cultures of visibility. When analyzing the origins and effects of images, teachers are not introducing extraneous “non-art” content into the classroom because our business is to teach students to be nuanced observers of how meaning is made through images. Visual culture concepts can also help teachers to structure contemporary *aesthetic* investigations of the stuff of our everyday lives. Recent Spiral Workshop art projects have been based on visual cultural terms such as Bricolage/Counter-bricolage (the practice of making new meaning out of the pre-made materials at hand/advertisers re-appropriation of youth bricolage styles) and Encoding and Decoding cultural consumption. Another rich resource of inspiration for deconstruction projects is the writing and images of the Situationist International. Framing students' artwork as taking place within the “Society of the Spectacle” and using techniques such as *detournement* (to reveal significant cultural subtexts through surprising juxtapositions) connect students to a rich tradition of subversive avant-garde artists.

Reconstructing Social Spaces

It's not enough for youth culture makers to deconstruct aspects of the current culture that don't support a sustainable global culture of joy and justice. Young artists must also learn to construct new spaces in which caring, courageous communities can emerge. One can escape the society of the spectacle by stepping into worldviews generated outside dominant paradigms. Working collectively students and teachers can literally reshape their schools and communities through creating murals, mosaics, sculptures, pavements, seating installations, theme-based school art shows, magazines, pageants, projections, websites, videos, and countless other art forms.

Not Knowing

Through a quality art curriculum, students learn that they do not know many things that they once thought were certain. They learn to see many things differently. They learn new strategies of making meaning through which they can interrogate received notions of “the real.” They learn how to play, not just with materials, but also with ideas. Understanding that our notion of reality is constructed through representations in language and images, these students will not mistake representations for reality as such. They will be able to entertain new ideas and new possibilities. If it is indeed true that our notions of what is real and what is possible are shaped in cultural discourses we art teachers have the potential to change the world.