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Teaching Philosophy

Art is a sacred act. It is a uniquely human behaviour, and among the oldest in early human beings. In fact it has been speculated that the arrowheads and cutting tools which seem the product of a pragmatic early man, were in fact the residue of habits of pleasure. Many of these arrowheads were made so large and unwieldy that they were completely impractical for daily use, leading us to the conclusion that our development as a species depended on Art. Thus, to consider art and art education as a luxury would be like considering walking, playing, exploring, and reflecting as luxuries. On the contrary, art education is a fundamental social good.

This emphasis on the “social” nature of both art practices and collaborative learning is a key part of my praxis. The communicative potential in both the creation and exhibition of art works elevate the social consciousness in both creator and viewer. This puts Art in the unique position of being able for transmission of ideas and transformation of the individual in both directions ways.

At the same time, I have always been uncomfortable with the fact that almost every education system around the world places the arts at the bottom of its hierarchy of subjects. Even then, art is “put to the service” of other goals, including such rudimentary ambitions of “developing hand and eye coordination” and “improving communication skills.”

My solution to these conflicting ideals is to position that the material object and the “making of things” as a deeply meaningful and sufficient activity in itself, the way that math, science the and liberal arts are all considered worthwhile fields of study which do not need be justified by outside interests. Recognizing that we live in a consumer era that often alienates people from the objects in their lives, I consider the advocacy of a lifestyle which includes the making of things an act of social service. Put simply, I take “an art for art’s sake” approach to education.

My mode of education is one that emphasizes “the making” above all else. A strong emphasis is placed on the on the studying the traditional uses of drawing and painting materials from around the world, including European oil glazing traditions, East Asian calligraphic painting, and the techniques of Indian miniature painting. This foundation of knowledge is then free for students to manipulate in any way which seems relevant to their time and place, and individual interests. Based on Joseph Beuys’s notion that “everyone can learn, and everyone can teach” all readings, audio and visual research material will be chosen by students for presentation in class. The effect is the creation of both a collaborative artistic community, and the development of a rich reserve of information to draw inspiration from. While students will be exposed to readings, and in-class discussion about the history, culture, and production of art, the curriculum does not deem them mandatory to their grading. Never in this class are students required to also juggle the roles of curator, the historian, and the critic; the artist’s only true task is to be the artist.

Teaching Rationale

Much of my teaching philosophy changed in dramatic ways after I found myself feeling disagreement with many of the readings. It was not what was part of the theory that left me feeling uneasy, but it was the lack of practicality in much of it. A major exception for this was Bates' article "Becoming an Art Teacher", which finally gave a name ("bat-oriented") to the lackluster educational planning throughout the public school system for visual art. His lengthy history of the evolution of art education in North America not only deepened my appreciation for the field, but by presenting the pros and cons of the shifting paradigms led to me articulating my own deepest conflicting feelings about both personal relevance, academic rationality, and social construction curriculum positions.

The dilemma presented itself: How do you create art education for the betterment of society without demeaning the inherently avant-garde nature of the field?

In fact, the biggest influences on my changed lesson plan were the professors leading my studio courses. When I compared my own initial philosophy to the pedagogical positions of my drawing and painting professors, I questioned why I had put so much emphasis on the development of generalized skills when what I really cared for was a serious and rigorous studio practice. I looked back to my own practice and my insights into the practices of my peers, and realized that while we all approach art making in different ways, the simple act of transforming materials changes us as individuals for the better. In essence, all that needs to be done is to show a student a number of methods to make an object; leave them to it, and the rewards of learning to make meaning of their own work are incalculable.