

Abstracts/Résumés pp. xv-xxi

We Practice What We Preach: A Local History of a Community-Based, Student/Faculty Art Exhibition (2002-09)

Elizabeth Auger Ashworth

Nipissing University

Daniel H. Jarvis

Nipissing University

Purpose of the Exhibitions

Student-organized exhibitions hold the potential to greatly enhance the visual arts school curriculum. Burton (2004, 2001), for example, contends that there are a number of multi-faceted benefits for art students, art teachers, and for the art education program in general through the implementation of student-organized exhibitions. In *Exhibiting Student Art* (2004), he concludes:

The key to successful student art exhibitions rests in the knowledge and skills students learn from doing it first-hand. . . . They need to immerse themselves in various aspects of art exhibition, from preparing and presenting art to other people to exploring alternatives of scale, venue, theme, and purpose. . . . When exhibitions of student art are presented well, parents, teachers, and administrators recognize and appreciate the value and meaning of art in the school curriculum. Exhibitions of student art convey a continuous message that the quality of ideas, the depth of issues, and the magnitude of expression are

displayed along with and through art. (p. 46)

Student art exhibition events can address socio-economic issues (Russell-Bowie, 2005), function as part of integrated or interdisciplinary projects (Floyd, 2004; Jarvis, 2001), and even unite students from different continents using today's high-speed Internet connectivity. Although there is literature surrounding student art exhibitions at the elementary and secondary levels, evidence of student-organized, exhibition-based learning at the post-secondary level seems scarce, particularly within teacher pre-service education programs.

In originally conceptualizing the community-based art exhibition in 2001, one of the authors considered the following significant points: (i) she wanted to give pre-service teachers, faculty, and support staff a chance to show their work; (ii) many students did not have exhibition experience, especially with hanging a show; (iii) such an experience would help them to start an art resume and to learn how to frame and price their own work; (iv) it would be a bridge between school life and real life; (v) it would be a good showcase for the artists while also being educational for colleagues, administration and the community; (vi) it would nurture community/university relations; (vii) it would help the local art gallery involved to achieve their mandate of showing a variety of quality work from various Ontario artists; (viii) an exhibition would serve to advertise the university to a wider community; and, most importantly, (ix) it would prepare pre-service teachers to curate shows for their own future students.

History of the Annual Exhibition

The first Nipissing University Faculty of Education art exhibition occurred in the 2001-2002 BEd program year. It was a small, 2-week show with only 12 senior art education elective students and two faculty members participating. Apart from the participants, approximately a dozen visitors attended the opening of this first show at the White Water Gallery, an artist-run centre in North Bay, Ontario. Even with these low numbers, it was clear from the excitement shared by the participants and visitors that the concept had potential for both artistic and academic purposes.

The original idea for the exhibition came from informal discussions with teacher-candidates who were training to become Senior level art teachers. It was discovered that most candidates—even though many had BFA degrees—had never been in a formal show. All had taken at least five post-secondary studio courses so they had some background with creating art, but did not have experience exhibiting their work (Senior Visual Arts elective students, personal communication, September 2001).

The title of the exhibition, “We Practice What We Preach,” came from informal discussions with art education students in which they shared frustrations about how little the general public knows about what they do. According to Blatherwick (2005), “the main objective in exhibiting student works is to honour artistic achievements and provide a place where work can be seen, reflected on and interpreted” (p. 133). By showing their work and providing a venue for reflection and interpretation, the participants could assure their future students, colleagues, and members of the community that they were not only art teachers but also practicing artists.

For its first two years, the show was displayed in the smaller “members’ section” of the gallery known as “Innerspace.” By being situated there, the show “piggy-backed” onto larger exhibitions in the main space and benefitted from the receptions and daily traffic for those larger shows. The show could have been exhibited at the university, but the opportunity for participants to display their work in a local gallery was invaluable. It gave them the chance to learn more about the form and function of artist-run centres in order to encourage participants to continue to be practicing artists during their teaching careers. As well, although the university is an inviting space, it can be intimidating to the general public. The exhibition’s location in a downtown gallery, therefore, provided an opportunity for anyone in the community to see Faculty of Education work in a more centralized and accessible space.

From its humble beginnings, the annual Faculty of Education show grew to the point where it not only has been moved into the gallery’s main space, but has also needed to be juried for

the 2008 and 2009 shows because of space limitations. For the 2008 show, for example, 38 Faculty of Education students from all three divisions (i.e., Primary/Junior, Junior/ Intermediate, Intermediate/Senior), professors, and support staff entered 42 works of art, of which 22 pieces by 18 artists were selected by gallery board members, using a “blind” selection process (e.g., artists’ names were covered during the judging). It is not unusual for student shows to be juried. Irwin (1997) noted that the Canadian Society for Education through Art (CSEA) supports the idea of juried art exhibitions of works by secondary and post-secondary art students.

In its first six years, the show was hung “salon-style,” that is, all artwork entered was displayed close together on every available surface (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Early exhibition artworks arranged in “salon-style”

For the 2008 and 2009 shows, however, the works were displayed in a linear style, that is, the works were centred at eye level and spaced wide apart (see Figure 2). The first six shows did not have a jury process; all those who wanted to participate were welcome to enter up to two pieces each (for space reasons) and all works were exhibited. This “open” process, however, led to some quality-control issues. Some works entered, for example, were not deemed by gallery funding agencies’ representatives to have enough artistic quality for the White Water Gallery. In fact, their presence in the shows ac-

tually hindered funding for the gallery (D. Elzinga, personal communication, December 2007).



Figure 2. Artworks arranged in a linear and eye line-centred style

According to the National Art Education Association (NAEA), “art education should be directed toward developing the creative potential of a wide spectrum of student capabilities” (NAEA, 2001, p. 2). Based on her background as a classroom teacher and art educator, and following the NAEA policy, Ashworth, the show’s coordinator, felt that the works should not be judged and that all work entered should be exhibited. She believed that all those who wanted to have exhibition experience should have the opportunity, regardless of their “capabilities.” The Faculty of Education show, however, was not going to be hanging at the university, so gallery rules had to apply. The works for the 2008 and 2009 shows were selected by a team of gallery board members, all with BFA and BEd degrees, and who had much experience curating shows for the White Water Gallery and other venues. Their selection criteria included the gallery mandate of “showing a variety of media of high quality.” Burton (2006), however, states, “selecting art poses a controversial problem for exhibiting student art. Some educators believe that students may be traumatized if their work is not selected. This potential problem may be averted by selecting work following . . . criteria and avoiding subjective decisions” (p. 24). One participant voiced concerns regarding her fellow classmates’ feelings when she said,

I understand how it was a juried show, but I'm not sure I agree with the way the works were selected. It seems as though they were looking for a particular style of art and not actually showcasing the variety of talent of Faculty of Ed students. For instance, certain artists had more than one piece chosen, while others' work wasn't chosen. (J. Baxter, personal communication, September 17, 2008)

Other teacher-candidates supported the jury process:

I chose two works that have received favourable comments in the past, work that I thought might be interesting/accessible to a larger public audience and not just the art crowd. I wholly approve and encourage the jury process; it reflects the reality of contemporary gallery practice. (J. Finley, personal communication, December 8, 2008)

So although some teacher-candidates and faculty were disappointed that their work was not selected, others indicated that they understood the nature of, and reasons for, the jury process and viewed it as a learning experience. In this sense, this particular issue remains problematic.

Logistics of the Exhibition

The show has been open to anyone in the Faculty of Education, including Consecutive, Concurrent, and Master of Education students from not only Nipissing's North Bay campus, but also from the Brantford and Muskoka sites. As well, members of both the Education faculty and the university support staff are invited to submit their works. One faculty member, who participated in the show for several years, shared her thoughts on the experience:

It is truly amazing to see my students in this different atmosphere. Among the paintings and sculptures you become introduced to your students in a different way and as a result see another dimension of who they are as people...and talented people at that! It can alter the professor-student relationship (in a positive way). No longer am I simply the prof and they the students...now

we are both artists and can share in that pride. The pride they show is evident while at the show and before, when they give up their own time to help set up. (J. Barnett, personal communication, September 15, 2008)

All media are welcome as long as they are ready to display (i.e., includes hanging apparatus) and can fit through the gallery door. The gallery has moderate space to hang two-dimensional works, some sculpture plinths, and multi-media equipment to present digital works.

There is neither an exhibitor's fee to display work, nor fees paid to the participating artists. The university has a gallery membership which entitles students, faculty, and support staff to show their work at the White Water Gallery, while, in turn, the exhibition helps the gallery achieve its mandate to show works by artists from Ontario and beyond. Most teacher-candidates who participate in the show are from Southern Ontario. Their hometowns are displayed beside their names on the labels with their work to advertise the fact that they are not necessarily local artists. Works can be for sale; the gallery takes no commission so any sales are handled directly with the artist, which is often another new learning experience for the teacher-candidates. Over the past seven years, most works sold at the exhibitions were purchased by parents and professors.

According to McLean (1993), "because of their complexity, exhibitions are inevitably produced by groups of people. No matter what role one plays, developing an exhibition is an act of collaboration" (p. 40). All participants in the Faculty of Education show are expected to help hang the selected works, prepare and host the opening, and take the artwork down at the end of the four-week exhibition. These duties are often new to participants and they learn much in the process to apply later to not only their own group and solo shows, but also for those of their future students. The act of hanging a show, for example, involves making decisions about where works are placed. Participants need to consider wall size and shape, hanging requirements for each piece, works which are complementary with regard to colour, placement of pieces to grab attention,

etc. They also need to know how to display works securely, how to place them at the right viewing height, how to level, clean, and label each work, and how to position lighting for best effect. All of these skills are essential for artists and this exhibition provides a great venue in which to learn them. The participants are taught these skills and are supervised by both the show's coordinator and by gallery staff (see Figure 3).



Figure 3 Participants hang the show

According to Burton and McGraw (2001), "Students are quite capable of curating their own exhibitions. When they exhibit their own art, they view it in an entirely new context through the eyes, minds, and hearts of others. This gives the work dimension and quality they would otherwise never experience" (p.31). Initially, the show was run entirely by the coordinator with little input from the participants because of the hectic nature of the Bachelor of Education program. Recently, however, more duties have been handed over to the participants so that the exhibition is more of a learning experience. It has become more of an empowering and enlightening project than it was in its infancy. According to one student participant,

I really enjoyed participating in the . . . show. It was a great experience and a useful addition to my resume. I found it very helpful and fun to take part in hanging the artwork beforehand, and was able to gain some practical skills. I also really enjoyed the opening day. It was a fun celebration with good people, good food and beverages, and good conversation. (L. Jewell, personal communication, September 17, 2008)

The show is chosen annually through the gallery's call-for-submission procedures. Several months before the opening, the coordinator writes a proposal outlining the theme, length, and any other pertinent exhibition details needed by the gallery in order for the gallery programming team to make their decision as to booking the show. Once the show has been accepted, it is advertised early in the school year and is usually scheduled during a four-week period in the second term when all students are on campus. That allows prospective participants to have time to complete work before the jury process. Although the majority of participants have had formal post-secondary art education, there are some who have not taken art classes since elementary school. That being said, many of the latter group create art as a hobby (i.e. photography, watercolours) and enter works created outside of the classroom. The participants narrow their choices to one or two pieces before the judging takes place:

This was the first time I was in a jury process for my artwork to be chosen. I felt more excited than anything else. The difficult part was choosing the two pieces of artwork to submit. Questions that arose in my mind were: Do I choose different media? Do I choose different subjects? Do I choose different styles?, etc. . . . [I]t reminded me of trying to put together my art portfolio. (G. Murphy, personal communication, January 3, 2009)

Based on this student's comments, it appears that the decision-making process was a valuable learning experience in itself.

For the 2009 show, information labels mounted beside each work were expanded to include reflections from each artist

to share thoughts about their work. According to Blatherwick (2005), "In more interactive exhibitions, personal stories, additional information or questions might accompany the artwork" (p. 133). Such reflections provide more information to the viewers than what is usually placed on labels beside works of art. The reflections submitted for the 2009 show were insightful, providing much information to the jury and the visitors to the show. For example, one student's reflection read as follows:

"Tangled Up In Blue" is an aquatint print that I created in December 2007. It was my first attempt at aquatint, as I was new to the printmaking medium. I was a little apprehensive as there were many steps involved with achieving the right shades and contrasts. Ultimately, after many hours of acid baths and print after print, it resulted in a very unique piece. The subject choice was an easy one for me, as I adore portraiture and the challenge to maintain likeness to the subject. Choosing the subject (Bob Dylan) was in my head as soon as the project was laid out in front of us. My goal was to create one of his album covers. I wanted to make it look rustic and fresh at the same time. In the end this print is very important to me and is one that I am proud of. (W. Joncas, personal communication, January 6, 2009)

This reflection is educational because it not only describes some of the aquatinting process but also gives the reader an idea of the conceptualization process and of the artist's feelings.

The jury selected the works several weeks before the show opened which allowed enough time for the participants to prepare their chosen work(s) for hanging. Those who wanted to participate from Nipissing's other campuses could send their work ahead of time and, because the opening was always on a weekend, they had the opportunity to not only help hang the show but also attend its opening reception (see Figure 4). According to McLean (1993),

Receptions serve a number of purposes and are an important element of the exhibition development process.

Clearly, receptions draw attention to the exhibition and allow the museum [or gallery] to publicize its existence. . . . A less obvious but important function of receptions is to provide a catharsis for project team members and other people who have worked on the exhibition. (pp. 64-65)



Figure 4. The excitement of the annual exhibition reception

In the show's first few years, the participants both prepared and funded the openings, treating them like pot-luck celebrations of their hard work. In recent years, the university has provided funds for the opening receptions' food and drink as part of the Cultural Affairs Committee mandate of promoting university arts activities. As well as greeting their visitors and chatting about their work, the participants clean the space, set up the buffet, refill appetizer trays and punch bowls when necessary, and clean up after the reception (see Figure 5).

After the opening, one student participant noted:

I know that many of my classmates and I really enjoyed the chance to exhibit and experience artwork and to engage in an afternoon of creative interaction. I learned a lot about the other people in attendance through the opportunity to see, speak, and mingle. (J. Klemm, personal communication, January 11, 2009)



Figure 5. B.Ed. teacher-candidate sweeps up after the opening

As well as participants and their friends, several Faculty of Education professors attend the opening each year in order to see the show and support their students and colleagues. One colleague sent the following comment:

A highlight for me is asking the students to explain their work for me. This year, I teach five of the participating artists...they were all present for [the] opening and I had the chance to speak to each one. I appreciate the opportunity to attend the exhibition each year. (J. McIntosh, personal communication, January 11, 2009)

The gallery does its part by preparing the space (i.e. wall repair and painting), providing staff during business hours, and advertising the show through their website, membership mail-outs, and local newspapers. For the 2008 show, the gallery director installed a web cam at the opening and later used it to create a virtual tour for the gallery web site. The show is advertised on Nipissing University's intra mail system so that all students and employees are aware of which teacher-candidates and colleagues are participating. As well, the advertising targets local high schools for field trip visits. According to a former White Water Gallery director, "We Practice What We

Preach” is the show with the highest gallery visitor traffic each year (D. Elzinga, personal communication, February 2008).

Leah Sherman (as cited in Richard & Lemerise, 2001) categorizes art exhibitions into four major groupings according to their characteristics: “promotional and advertising; educational and didactic; artistic and relating to museums; . . . entertaining and interactive” (p. 10). The Faculty of Education exhibition has reflected all of these functions during its eight-year history. It has promoted pre-service art education, it has educated the community about the Faculty of Education and a variety of media, it has taught the participants about hanging exhibitions, and it has provided visual entertainment to its viewers.

The Future of the Exhibitions

Although the show has been popular, the participants and visitors do not include the majority of students within the Faculty of Education. Ideally, all of them could gain much real-life experience to share with their future students by participating in such a show. According to Lackey (2008), “disadvantages to the use of exhibition for instruction include the fact that people can only learn from a display if they actually visit and pay attention to it” (p. 35). Although it is advertised well to all teacher-candidates within the program, approximately 40 students and faculty enter artwork and usually close friends, family, and some professors come to see the exhibition. If it is to be used for instruction on a larger scale, then perhaps organized field trips for local elementary/secondary school students and/or BEd candidates would prove useful. Further, individual visits could be encouraged through the implementation of a mandatory assignment which would require teacher-candidates to find the gallery and view the exhibition.

The future of the student/faculty exhibitions at the authors’ university looks promising, as growing interest in the annual show continues to result in increased participation. For the past few years, the show’s organizers were seeking a larger venue because the small community gallery in which it has been situated could no longer adequately contain the number of desired artworks to be exhibited. As of January 2009, the

White Water Gallery has moved into a new and larger space that can accommodate many more works. Future shows will be open to even more works as the space is expanded in 2010. Currently, only finished works are accepted into the show; however, with a larger venue, process pieces (i.e. thumbnail sketches, artist journals, and printmaking plates) related to the finished artworks could be included to make the show more educational in nature.

To make the jury process more educational for entrants, future judges will be asked to write feedback notes on prepared templates for each entrant so that they know the strengths and weaknesses of each piece, as well as suggestions for improvement. According to one student, this type of feedback would be welcome:

I somehow thought that it was a larger show than it is and that at least one of my works would get in. So I am disappointed, after making the effort to bring my paintings up and then them being rejected. I guess, overall, I feel a little empty as I didn't really get any feedback on why my work wasn't chosen and/or why other works were. (M. Bilton, personal communication, December 18, 2008)

Based on comments like this, the show will involve a discussion between the coordinator and the invited jury members to clarify their expectations beforehand. Entrants will then be given an idea of these expectations before they choose works to submit to the jury. Another change will be for the jury to see the entrants' reflections for each piece while they are conducting the jury process, helping them to make their decisions more easily and to provide constructive feedback.

Conclusion

The Bachelor of Education program represents an incredibly busy school year for teacher-candidates as they take courses in their areas of specialization as well as those in methods, management, technology and other curricular areas. Therefore, the time invested in the planning and implementation of

the student/faculty art exhibition each year obviously comes at the partial sacrifice of other pressing and equally important demands within the program. That being said, it is our opinion that this initiative is highly beneficial to teacher-candidates, faculty, university administration, and the local community at large. As we prepare for next year's instalment of this anticipated community event, we already share in the excitement of the exhibition opening where all those involved will once again converge in a common place to celebrate the visual arts and its significant and vital contribution to the school curriculum.

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