COMMENTARY

Critical Literacy and Art Education: Alternatives in the School Reform Movement

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Art education offers a way to reach students and make schools more relevant for them. Art teachers can create alternative formats that allow students to explore and learn about their lives. Thereby, students and their communities become the focus of the curriculum and students' responses are valued as individual expression. While teaching art in Philadelphia schools, I began to explore connections between curriculum and teaching techniques and thought of strategies I believed would be beneficial to my students. Now in my new role as an art teacher educator, teaching prospective and practicing art teachers in the current climate of "reform" is a pressing challenge. In this article I discuss critical literacy and its connections to art education. I provide examples from my own experience as a middle school art teacher in the School District of Philadelphia, and more recently as an art teacher educator.

Rationales for Critical Literacy in an Art Education Context

Critical literacy theory suggests that opportunities to learn about social issues related to the inequities in society must be addressed. According to critical literacy theory, a meaningful curriculum that involves students to relate to their own social and political situations will result in increased involvement in school. Critical literacy theory proposes learning about politically relevant issues through language arts skills as a way to make language arts more meaningful. Teaching must be done in ways that give students the authority to make decisions and participate in discussions that are not teacher dominated. Shor (1999) defines critical literacy as follows:

Critical literacy... challenges the status quo in an effort to discover alternative paths for social and self-development. This kind of literacy...connects the political and the personal, the public and the private, the global and the local, the economic and the pedagogical for reinventing our lives and for promoting justice in place of inequity. (p. 1)

By recognizing art as a cultural narrative while using a critical literacy framework, teachers can help students develop an understanding of social and cultural meaning in art, and can provide students with the tools to understand their culture and history and a means to work towards social justice.

Many art educators have discussed the importance of learning about culture (e.g. Chalmers, 1996; Stout, 1997). Chalmers (1996) noted that the arts are critical for developing cultural understanding because arts are a way to transmit the "values, beliefs, myths and traditions of a culture to its people" (p. 36). Likewise, Stout (1997) pointed out that artists are storytellers who do not simply describe their personal thoughts, but reflect the "true essence of history" (p.106). As these scholars point out, learning in the arts provides vital connections to cultural understanding.

Teaching art within a critical literacy framework involves interdisciplinary learning. In a framework like this, students have the opportunity to examine social issues through the narrative qualities of art by combining art with language arts skills, such as discussions and writing. Utilizing writing and discussion in an art classroom provides students with the time and opportunity to become more familiar and relate to the ideas and concepts being studied. Art educator, Stuhr (1994) advocates a radical change in art education that would "entail cooperative planning among teachers from various subject areas, such as social studies and language arts in the secondary schools, and among teachers in the elementary schools" (p.177).

Historically, art has been a means to educate about social justice. In the nineteenth century Eugene Delacroix challenged his contemporaries with his work *Liberty Leading the People*. The French government terminated the display of this painting, as it was feared that the painting might incite revolt. During the same time period, the work of Daumier and Courbet depicted the plight of the poor. In the twentieth century, Picassos' *Guernica* displayed the horrors of war. Artists' themes and ideas may be related to the form of their expression. For example, contemporary artist Faith Ringgold's story quilts are a form of art that previously was not identified as fine art. Her use of traditional African American craft as a vehicle for merging storytelling and quilt making and painting, expands ideas about American life, as well as our ideas about the definition of art. Ringgold's work validates traditional African American quilting and quilting done by women across cultures.

Proposals for Visual Arts Curriculum

Many perspectives and cultures are represented in the work of American artists who question issues of identity, the immigrant experience and past representations of society that exclude or marginalize women and minority groups. Students' work in response to work by Nikki S. Lee and Pepon Osorio, artists who look at identity issues, could include self-portraits with the inclusion of cultural references. Other examples of students work in response to artists dealing with cultural perspectives include explorations of these art-

ists' statements, and students' descriptions about their own work and the cultural connections in self-portraits. An examination of work by artists such as James Kerry Marshall and Faith Ringgold not only provide students with these artists' points of view, but since both of these artists use written text, students have the additional opportunity to "read" the work. Students could be using language skills and integrating the reading and visual art experience. In a related art project within a critical literacy framework, students could use text and images to tell about issues in their neighborhood or family in the form of a comic book..

With the addition of postmodern works to art education curricula, students can begin to find meaning in works beyond the traditional Western art. For example, feminist artists such as Miriam Shapiro, whose work includes the construction of collages that evoke textile design and crafts by women in the 1800s, moves away from previous notions of mainstream modern art. In *Postmodern Art Education: An approach to Curriculum* (1996), Eflan, Freeman and Stuhr describe a postmodern curriculum that is based on the disintegration of the modernist idea that art is a progression toward abstraction. The underlying the idea is that knowledge passes on through the mainstream group at the expense of the minority and the notion that there is not a singular representative cultural art form.

An art education curriculum that is designed by a teacher within a critical literacy context includes knowing the students and determining the techniques and routines based on that knowledge. Opportunities to work collaboratively are beneficial for students; they afford the students opportunities to learn from each other, they displace the teacher as the authority and provide the students with time to process their ideas before sharing with the whole group. Conversations between students that can support learning are vital.

Community Resources and Visual Arts Curriculum

Experiences outside of the classroom give students the opportunity to interact as members of a community. The Santa Barbara Museum in California recently displayed the work of students with difficulties in school. As part of the program, students worked with graphic designers in a studio. They also worked with their teachers to produce statements about themselves. Then they combined writing, graphic design, and art technology to produce self-portraits, which they called *Who I Am*. Providing opportunities to visit art museums and engage in dialogue with museum teachers is a way to involve students in learning about social issues in our culture. In a tour designed to teach students about art and social issues, The Philadelphia Museum of Art challenges students to imagine, think and communicate when they are confronted with art that deals with social issues including race, gender, class, isolation and war. On a tour designed by the museum to teach about social issues and art, students have the opportunity to investigate their feelings about recent events in Iraq when examining a photograph by Jeffrey Wall, *Dead Troops Talk, a Vision After an Ambush of a Red Army Patrol, near Moquor, Afghanistan, Winter 1986*. An exemplary program at The New Museum of Contemporary Art involves teachers and students from the New York City Public schools. The program examines artists and writers who address themes including the experience of minorities, cultural identity and war.

The Picasso Project, a Philadelphia based foundation, provides funds for teachers who connect the arts with curricula in various subject areas. Recently, grants were provided for Parkway High School where students participated in arts based activities that linked to African American literature and to the Pennypacker Elementary School where students worked with neighborhood artists to perform a play that examines the implications of hair in African American culture.

My Art Classroom

As a middle school art teacher in Philadelphia, I was faced with issues similar to those confronted by many teachers and students in urban areas. I saw the inequities that my students faced such as poverty and lack of school services. I experienced the difficulties within my attempts to close the achievement gap between urban and suburban students. The change in my approach to presenting and developing the curriculum in my art classroom was a gradual process through which I learned about critical literacy theory and was able to team-teach with both social studies and language arts teachers. One of the first changes I made was to help students in imagining themselves as artists in their cultural context. For example, I asked students what they would design if they were stained glass artists living and working in medieval Europe. After viewing and discussing the cultural context of Maoist posters, students created a poster that depicted social or political action relevant to their own lives using techniques similar to those in Maoist posters.

My teaching began to utilize a critical pedagogy stance in small steps. I was interested in teaching so that students are involved in issues that are relevant to them and encourage social action (Nieto, 1991). As my students learned about the work of Faith Ringgold, Alice Neal and Diego Rivera, I began to tie their assignments to ideas and concepts that would connect to the students' experiences and issues of social justice. For example, after exploring the art of Faith Ringgold, my middle school students created books depicting a social issue of interest to them. Motivated by the clean -up of the surrounding community; students worked on a long-term project exploring art and recycling. They explored the feminist art of Judy Chicago and created a design depicting a special woman in their lives. My students also created an illustrated book of idioms after a discussion with language arts teachers revealed a need for clearer understanding of figurative language. I utilized writing as a way to reinforce learning, to help to establish interdisciplinary connections between art and other subjects, and to establish community in the classroom. Students discussed art and art issues in small and large groups, and wrote about their own art, art from diverse parts of the world and art

representing their own ethnic groups.

College Level Art Education

As a college level teacher in an art teacher certification program, including many students who have little experience with urban issues, my challenge involves creating awareness of ways that will be beneficial for all students in an art classroom. This includes learning about art education with a critical literacy stance. To approach this challenge my students read from a variety of sources, write about and discuss how ideas related to diversity, culture and ethnicity affect learning. They observe in urban art classrooms and they are presented with many examples of art activities, lessons and projects that address culture and social justice issues. The class utilizes journals and reads literature that explores the history of education in the U.S. and the inequities in schools. As the students read and respond in their journals, their writing demonstrates sensitivity to issues of diversity and culture, as well as a need to know more about the concerns of urban students.

Conclusions

The needs of students should be perceived in terms of their ethnicity, gender, culture and social status. In addition, teachers need to know the students and their cultures as well as the nation's political history to create programs that address the needs of diverse students and make school more culturally compatible. The complexities of teaching students from diverse groups influence instruction. Currently, the lack of support for curriculum not directly linked to standardized tests is a concern. Art teacher preparation programs need time for preparing teachers who can teach about social issues. Art teachers need more meaningful materials to facilitate the discussion of social issues and social action through art. They also need to be able to deal with sensitive issues and uncertainty, and to be willing to change and question their own curricular decisions. As teachers cope with the implications of this kind of instruction, they should realize that in turn they are influenced by political and social systems which require an awareness of their own socially constructed understanding.

When art teachers, social studies and language arts teachers work cooperatively, students and schools stand to benefit. This may involve team teaching and/or cooperative planning which can provide students with expertise of specialists from subject areas. Team-taught units that involve language arts, social studies and art provide students with long-term opportunities to examine issues and ideas. Flexibility in scheduling and planned time for teachers to meet is essential for projects that involve such collaboration. In many schools, it is possible that the art classroom is one of the few places where students can experience a different type of learning. The addition of skills such as writing and discussion, reinforce and clarify learning in the arts, and offer students an opportunity to use language skills in different and meaningful ways. A broader focus of learning can be developed by bringing together language arts and visual art with a critical literacy stance. There is much that can be learned from pairing arts experiences with literacy, and much that art teachers need to learn in the areas of language arts and social studies as they approach teaching and learning with a critical literacy stance.

Joyce Millman is a retired School District of Philadelphia teacher who taught art at the elementary and middle school levels. She established connections to her classroom with community and educational institutions including the Philadelphia Museum of Art, The World Affairs Council, and the Picasso Project through grants and special programs. She attended the University of Pennsylvania in the Language and Literacy Division in 2003 as part of her work as the Philadelphia Writing Project Scholar that year. For the past five years, Joyce has been an instructor in the teacher education programs at Moore College of Art and Design. She has been an instructor for Philadelphia Futures Sponsor-a-Scholar program for two years.

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