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ARE 6148: Curriculum in Teaching Art
Reading One: What's Worth Teaching in Art?
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Summary

In the spirit of postmodernism, the question of “What’s worth teaching?” may be better addressed with the more pertinent inquiry of “What’s worth *learning*?” To guide education in the direction of fostering lifelong growth, rather than meeting short-term outcomes, Wiggins (1989), Bolin (1996), and Gude (2004, 2007) addressed ways in which educators could approach curriculum to better suit the needs of learners in their quest for knowledge and understanding as applicable in life, rather than their recall of facts and information as meeting standards in school. This investigation into alternative approaches to address curriculum has, at its core, a point of view that shifts “passive teaching” to “active learning.” Essential components include active participants (educator and learner) who engage in pertinent inquiry with the purposes of finding answers, making discoveries, and forming connections that promote understanding of self, community, and society, as a whole.

Pertinent inquiry may be viewed as developing “habits and standards” (Wiggins, 1989, p. 45), asking “essential questions” (Bolin, 1996, p.7), formulating “generative themes” (Gude, 2004, p.6), or pursuing “big questions” (Gude, 2007, p.6). The answers and discoveries relate to the knowledge learners gain, as well as the wisdom that educators use in shaping today’s curriculum. Furthermore, curriculum must be assessable such that educators are able to guide learners in obtaining significant and usable knowledge.

Key Points

Wiggins (1989) wrote, “an authentic education will therefore consist of developing *the habits of mind and high standards of craftsmanship* necessary in the face of one’s (inevitable) ignorance” (p. 45). He outlined, first, the past inadequacies of trying to teach with the aim of eliminating ignorance; then, he suggested a modern view to promote intellectual inquiry. Common throughout, are teachers and students with shared responsibilities as participants in investigation. Educators and learners should develop the habits of mind (intellectual virtues), such as being better listeners, investigators, and entertainers of new ideas; and high standards should produce exemplary work that show thought, attention to detail, and pride in craft. In producing work as a result of education,

Wiggins stressed “curriculum [as] inseparable from assessment” (p. 58), with assessment as variable rather than standardized. At the foundation of continual learning is the cycle of “Question-Answer-Question” (p.48). While Wiggins proposed a modern view for education as a whole, Bolin (1996) and Gude (2004, 2007) further addressed considerations and strategies for curriculum related to art-making and art education.

Bolin (1996) emphasized that the realm of pertinent questions changes with time, and there are those questions that withstand the test of time. The “underlying questions that span time and culture, questions that address the fundamental nature of what it means to be human...[to examine] who we are, where we have been and who we desire to be” (p.7) demand attention in today’s visual arts, culture, and curriculum. Art curriculum must include questions that “encourage the reconsideration of ideas and actions carried out by all those who are actively involved in art making, art writing, and art teaching” (p. 8). The combined strengths of art and essential questions provide opportunities to address issues regarding self and others.

Works of art and artifacts become sources for questions; issues in society and with one’s self are seen as places of wonder; art-making is perceived as an opportunity to wrestle with the imponderable elements of our lives and an occasion to challenge the mysteries of ourselves and our world.
(p. 10)

Gude (2004) illustrated 8 postmodern art-making principles as “strategies for understanding and making art today...[to] gain skills to participate in and shape contemporary cultural conversations” (p. 13). Three criteria supported Spiral Workshop curriculum: “generative themes...[art] projects based on diverse practices...[and] art as investigation” (p.8). With research generated from the works of Spiral Workshops and the projects of Contemporary Community Curriculum, the strength of these criteria support consideration and application of her postmodern principles in art curriculum. By providing alternative principles, she avoided the “bland and formal 7 + 7 (principles and elements)” (p.8). Her new list of principles, a list that is “not meant to be exhaustive” (p. 12), provide possibilities that exist in combining visual form and conceptual art making. The list of postmodern principles includes appropriation, juxtaposition, recontextualization, layering, interaction of text and image, hybridity, gazing, and representin’.

Gude (2007) expanded on her 8 postmodern art-making principles to include ideas to address “big questions about the uses of art and other images in shaping our interactions with the world around us” (p.6-7). She put forth a framework of 10 principles of possibility to include the following: playing, forming self, investigating community themes, encountering difference, attentive living, empowered experiencing, empowered making, deconstructing culture, reconstructing social spaces, and not knowing. She noted that these principles “not be used as the structure of an art curriculum by themselves...because the field of art education needs more comprehensive frameworks for planning art curriculum” (p. 7); yet, she continued to write, “I believe that these principles are a useful structure or checklist that art teachers can use to determine whether a curriculum provides a range of important art experiences” (p.7).

Personal Reflection

Pertinent inquiry as big ideas, essential questions, generative themes, or other significant conceptually based initiatives has the potential to jump-start new approaches in planning strategies and selecting content for art curriculum. Significant investigations using essential questions should help generate answers and more questions. In choosing which essential questions to address, realizing that “all students need not learn the same things” (Wiggins, 1989, p. 57) helps narrow the focus. Essential questions should aim to address the needs, desires, and inquiries of students. Curriculum would ideally have enough flexibility to incorporate exploration and experimentation, with room for making discoveries.

Which essential questions should be addressed? How will educators plan art curriculum to meet the needs of today’s learners? Each educator, working with many student perspectives, will likely make individualized assessments and considerations as to what may be essential for her students to learn. In considering other perspectives, these authors provided ways to approach curriculum such that educators and learners are active in their pursuit of knowledge and understanding. Research and writings will continue to explore and uncover new ways to teach; however, the ultimate goal should perhaps focus on “What’s worth learning?” As we continue to ask questions, find answers, and consider pertinent inquiries, Bolin's (1996) closing remarks are fitting: "The more conundrums that are answered, the greater the number of perplexing questions in life that emerge. As disheartening as this perpetual bout with significant questions may seem, such persistent battling shows that we are engaged with something worthy of our most earnest struggle" (p.10). Go Hercules!

References

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