The Pennsylvania State University

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TEACHING MEANING: MAKING HIGH SCHOOL ART CULTURE

An Action Research Project in

Art Education

by

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ABSTRACT

I decided to write this action-based research paper because I believe it is essential for students at the high school setting to feel valued, creative, and to have an understanding of self and some self-determination of their identities. A positive and motivational school culture and environment is needed first and foremost. I was inspired to establish an *art culture,* in which (a) students relate to each other about their art, (b) have art experiences that go beyond the classroom, and (c) encourage artistic expression that is a strong balance between concept and craft.

This research is important because it is crucial that we, as educators, are aware of the environment we are constructing and for learning and an art culture to develop in our classrooms. I believe my study, presented in this paper, offers a productive way for a positive art culture to build within a high school. My research is trying to better understand what environment and expectations I can set in order to achieve the maximum attention, involvement, care, and learning from the students and for the students, but more importantly with the students.

My research question is: "How has my teaching changed in the first year at a new school in setting a goal mid year to engage high school art students to make deep, meaningful connections between their life and their art, and to a high school culture of valuing the arts?"

In my general findings, I recognized a correlation between how much the high school students that I've taught invested in their artwork when they *feel* esteem in what they are *doing*. I noticed that students' esteem and confidence grew higher when creating

their art on a personal level; also resulting in higher standards set for themselves artistically, behaviorally, and socially.

    The classroom environment took a turn from individual *laissez-faire,* to community development of a high school art-culture. I conducted research was done within one main project, "......", which involved students' reflections, and a review of studies of other schools' programs, articles, and research of documented findings on creating and maintaining a high school art culture.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Introduction to the Study

Teaching to Engage

My goal at the school where I teach is to shift school culture to a culture of care for the arts that strengthens bonds between peers who value art making. This is my goal because I find it to be essential for students at the high school setting to feel valued, creative, and to have an understanding of self and some determination of their identities. In order to do this, establishing a connection and bond between peers and within their art making for this culture of care to exist seemed to be the first step to take. I did this through starting conversation on a topic that the class all might relate to and care about. I only saw this as a first logical step by watching how the students connect with each other through topics that matter to them over a number of years my teaching.

Learning can flourish within a caring atmosphere. When students can make connections with each other, within their art-making while uncovering important parts of their identity, an art culture of care is established. This art culture is not focused on biology or physiology, but comprises ideas, values, and students' world views. Constructing this culture of care in conjunction with discovering identities can also be an agent of change and foster positive movements to happen within social injustices because students can better understand the world around them and what they offer their communities.

This goal of a culture of care for art students make about their identity was carried out in this action research project by facilitating student discussion of what they find important about themselves, their relationships, and issues they find significant or troubling, as well as future goals. The steps contributing to building an art culture with

students included brainstorming, journaling ideas, and execution of a sculpture project. The project consisted of the constraints of constructing a slab box in conjunction with a sculptural element inside. Students formulated the concept for their sculptural piece from what personally influences them. By investigating themselves, revealing and relating to each other, and giving evidence to their creativity, this contributed to my intended goal of creating a culture of care for the arts.

One of the initial steps I took towards this goal was assigning a sketchbook/ bellringer. Students were to acknowledge an emotion they had that morning coming into school and put it into a symbolic visual; this would later become a small project. We spoke about the importance of being conscious of self and the affects it plays on our day, actions, and outlook.

 Figure 1 is an example of a sculpture piece that extended from one of the daily bellringers. The emotion was "weighed down". Just implementing a simple examination of self was advocating a social transformation within the class by unveiling a vulnerable aspect of self. Guards began to come down. I realized that personalizing this assignment was including the responsibility and commitment of the students to know themselves, visualize self, relate to one another, and have their art come from a meaningful and personal place. The self-ownership brought maturity and respect to community in the classroom. Once guards were down and a bit of vulnerability was aired amongst the class, the students seemed to calm and connect to each other. There was a common ground to build upon.

Figure 1. Student demonstrating a feeling of being "weighed down".

Action Research Problem Statement

This action research project is intended to engage high school students in order to make deep, meaningful connections between their life and their art. Through this intended goal, I experimented with an approach of using student identity, core feelings, and reactions to their life. This method included being able to open the classroom to discussion, project-based inquiry. Students considered what part of their lives will they use to visually represent self. They also questioned whether the sculpture should be permanent or not. Both students and teacher also surveyed thoughts on issues that encompass students' lives. In order for this to be successful, the introduction and demonstrations had to change. This required, before introducing the technique of the project, that the students' selected self concept would be focused and discussed first. Where as previously, I would introduce the techniques and end result, then try to fit meaning from art making rather than *in* their art.

My research question is: "How has my teaching changed in the first year at a new school in setting a goal mid year to engage high school art students to make deep, meaningful connections between their life and their art, and to a high school culture of valuing the arts?" In order to help nurture this shift, I needed to identify and work with the obstacles encountered by public school teachers and investigate a different pedagogical approach then previously used.

My study reveals the importance of theme, content, student independent involvement, and classroom environment. Each affects not only the students' learning but a culture of care that the art room creates. Every chance an educator can be encouraged to change school culture, especially to do so in art education, will help with importance and validity of investing into K-12 art education programs. We, as art teachers, need to continue to advocate creative and meaningful experiences for our students, which focus on students discovering identities, as well as within the art education profession, in which we learn more ways to provide these avenues. This will help ensure that students will have the capabilities to make culturally responsible choices. An environment that promotes students to be open to others' opinions and aware outside of themselves can help build capabilities such as being innovative, activists for what they believe in, skill and technique in proper manipulation of media, as well as being able to address needs of their communities and society as a whole.

Background of the Problem

My intrigue began when I was relocated from one school district and started all over in another due to furloughs. I replaced an art teacher at the high school level, well into the school year. She had established an environment for students to take phone calls

during class, sit without doing artwork, and damage peers' artworks. She did not have guidelines for discussion, and she did not guide students how to focus their art projects. Students devised their own art making processes without guidance on art techniques and tools. An annual art show was not held at the school for every student, but rather at a local restaurant that held, at the most, 15 works per K-12 art teacher. There were no organized art field trips.

As I gathered all the tools that were scattered throughout the room into one place and initiated a process of care through organization for tools after use, I still needed to learn how to instill in the students a sense of respect for the materials and the art program as a whole. Moreover, to make a change in the school's culture toward the visual art program, I needed a hook to entice.

The "hook" that activated students' attention initially was to incorporate their interests in ways that they would find the art techniques I taught useful to their goals. Once they enjoyed their accomplishments and the process of making aesthetic choices, they listened even more to my suggestions that further manifested into more projects that were more than mindless manipulations of clay. However, after the room was in order, projects were made and on display, the students' attention was directed to what was next, the community or culture in the art room still didn't have a peer support structure and the projects were empty in meaning. Yes, their interests matter, but their interests didn't bring on discussion, social acknowledgment and change, identity defining moments, or partnerships between peers. I wanted them to make more than a ceramic bust of a cartoon character. I wanted students to show personal meaning through their work in response to who they are and how they respond to the world around them.

II. Action Research Methodology and Teaching Methodology

Social Theory and Art Education Theoretical Lens

Holly Sidford, currently president and philanthropist of Helicon Collaborative, a company, which offers help for individuals or organizations to understand their positions and how to promote positive directions through the arts, discussed strategies to generate change through art and culture where she states:

> Culture and the arts are essential means by which all people explain their experience, shape their identity and imagine the future. In their constancy and their variety, culture and the arts allow us to explore our individual humanity, and to see our society whole. People need the arts to make sense of their lives, to know who they are. But our democracy needs the arts, too. The arts animate civil society. They stretch our imagination. They increase our compassion for others by providing creative ways for us to understand and deal with differences. The arts protect and enrich the liberty, the human dignity and the public discourse that are at the heart of a healthy democracy. (Sidford, 2011, p. 1)

Instead of looking at art and culture as two different sectors, it is my mission to combine the two in order to make an "art-culture" within the school through the methods and approaches of my teaching. Art-culture, by my definition, is to have a society and community of creative individuals, which vary in demographics (social economic, religion, sex, and ethnicities) yet share a practice that challenges each other to create personal, meaningful art that concerns issues important to the students. This displays the responsibility that is required for my goal to be established.

This *art-culture* that I worked to establish, and the focus of this action research project is an attitude or belief system in which students (a) relate to each other, (b) have social experiences, (c) mirror and change society in which we live, and (d) encourage artistic expression that is a strong balance between concept and craft.

Action Research Methodology and Teaching Methodology

My action research design questions reflected inquires in response of what I did to motivate students, in the 2013-2014 school year, as another way to find content that is meaningful to them. I helped students translate their content into visual form. As soon as the previous project ended, I began to explain that the next project is going to go a little differently. I explained that I was intending for us to make meaningful change within the class dynamic as well as within our art projects. I was open to the students and sought to know what was important to them. So I opened my *Ceramics I* class discussion by questioning what type of art was meaningful to them and why. They helped generate ideas of how to begin this quest as a group and explained what content was significant to them at this time in their lives. At some points, when trailing off into rants of gossip, I had to redirect the discussion back to meaning within their personal lives and belief systems. I chose this approach to the project to not only present content before technique, but to provide a chance for them to take ownership from the beginning. I did this slightly different than Judy Chicago's circle pedagogy, where all sat in a circle with no barriers or physical obstructions between or in front of them. I applied this technique later, and intentionally when students discussed their finished projects. As I started out, I wanted more a informal methods of discussion, in which the conversation was personal and informal, and students sat where they were comfortable, i.e. behind the table, leaning on

their backpacks, sitting on top of the table, or standing in the middle of the classroom while the discussion took place.

I was also hoping for the formal environment to become informal with an open and honest discussion about themselves and having the table turn where I asked more questions for them to answer rather than introduce something and have the students ask me the questions. I believe the environment and methodology that content is explored in is just as important as the content itself. Looking into informal spaces for learning, I found Jamieson (2009) explained that even universities were recognizing that informal learning was active learning, and involved more of self-directed study. Jamieson (2009) creating the knowledge, rather than knowledge being delivered is successful informal learning. In order to do this, universities had to restructure spaces that encouraged social set-ups, group work, discussions, and technology. Although his thoughts were more directed towards a physical informal environment to put the power of play within the informal learning, I believe that kind of atmosphere can exist in the public schools by the way content and interactions with the students are handled.

Brian Clearly's (2013) call for action in *Education Week,* "changing the world, one student at a time," only begins to touch the tip of the iceberg, as individuals need support, networks, and to join with others for change to occur (p. 19). Maybe it's changing the world, one school culture at a time. This can be successful through the arts (Clearly, 2013).

When I started conversing with my students about what they could create in order to reflect themselves much deeper than their interests, we brainstormed about what this meant to us and the why. What could we reflect on about ourselves that didn't rely on our

hobbies or interests? Our ideas, our goals, our belief systems, our memories, others' ideas

about us, our backgrounds, our expectations for us, our irritations, our secrets, our

hindrances, our encouragements, and our influences. The students were surprisingly very

receptive to playing an active role in creating this kind of change.

Examples of their responses just from the questions that surrounded how to make

meaning from our projects are as follows:

> **Teacher:** How could we have more meaningful projects in here?
> **Student:** What do you mean?
> **Student:** My mom still has my Stitch bust up on the bookshelf and loves it up everyday, that's meaningful.
> **Teacher:** That's great, but I'm more worried that we are missing out on some deeper meaning in the art we (pointing to all of us in the room) produce here. I think if we could build our classes to offer more of an outlet on what you're all about, it could be a good thing.
> **Student:** Like, what would we focus on?
> **Teacher:** Well we could focus more on you… more of what you are about, values, beliefs, goals, influences, hang-ups, tributes, monumental moments that you have NOW in life that you feel fulfilled by… stuff like that.
> **Teacher:** What *are* some of those things? Only tell us what you want us to see, and can be very secretive, so it's hard to know what really motivates you at this age besides popular culture! You're vocal about that!
> **Student:** Well, what do you mean by hang-ups?
> **Teacher:** They are things you can't get past, things that form a stumbling block in your life.
> **Student**: Like a pet peeve?
> **Teacher:** Yeah, kind of like that.
> **Student:** Oh, I have many of those!
> **Multiple answers at one time from students:** Drama, loyalty/disloyalty in friendships, tweeting something mean then the next day they act like they don't know you, adults that treat you childish, cliques, etc.
> **Student:** You know what bugs me, those who say they don't gossip but do!
> **Student:** Or when other kids act like they are better than you when they try to use big words and they mispronounce them!
> **Student:** Clean finger nails! I CAN'T stand when people don't clean their fingernails and they don't have to be rich to clean themselves! And that goes for their body odor too!
> **Teacher:** Yeah, but you were taught personal hygiene and the importance of it. Even if some were, they might have not been taught the importance of it, so they don't keep up with it. You have got to give them some benefit of the doubt.
> **Student:** It just bugs me.

Student: It REALLY bugs me when someone just says "go kill yourself" just out of rudeness.
Teacher: WHAT?!
Students: (All heads nod.)
Teacher: Tell me that doesn't really go on at this level?!
Students: Yeah it does, kids will just respond, "go kill yourself" when they don't like what you are saying to them. They think their joking but it's really hurtful and rude!
Teacher: And how do you or others respond to students who say that?
Student: I mean what can you say? You just make some snide comment back and walk away.
Teacher: Do you think that is productive?
Students: Well, there isn't really something else to do.
Teacher: From my perspective, all you can do is concentrate on the kind of role YOU want to take when that sort of comment comes up. How are you going to respond in order to make them think about their words and actions? What could be said for the greater good rather than worrying about how to make them feel bad right away.

We continued to talk about some options of what to say in return, but also why students say these particular things. The insecurities that swarm their lives was the most popular theme amongst the reasons given. I believe this was a version of Judy Chicago's methodology of facilitating individual meaning into content based inquiries.

Decisions made by students with my guidance helped to "define or create" a community of participants, and defining a "thematic concern," (Keifer-Boyd, 2012, p. 203). I asked my students to become arts-based researchers about themselves; confront themselves and "connect with a true source, the human spirit" (Chicago, 2014, p. 13). In doing so, they gave themselves insight on they're identity, and visualized it. I believe this is very meaningful and personal, acting as an agent of esteem, change, and growth. "Action research as social justice research, becomes advocacy when the project extends beyond data collection and analysis to answer research questions, and also changes the current status of conditions impacting teaching, learning, and working" (Keifer-Boyd, 2012, p. 197). Critical action research toward social justice advocacy emphasizes a

"commitment to social transformation, challenging power relations, showing solidarity, recognizing and using emotions, being the change you want to see, and building spaces for critical dialogue" (Keifer-Boyd, 2012, p. 198).

I researched a similar curriculum and school culture evaluation (see Appendix A), one student conducted by Karen Cummings (2010) with high school students seemed to share my common goal and helped support my choices and methods of this one project. I did this in hopes that I would be reassured on the path I was taking or be able to heed advice on what may not have worked. This particular evaluation, done at a small midwestern high school, also documented an investigation of student responses to curricular activities, their interactions, survey responses, and the teaching pedagogies in order to understand students' learning experiences. It was encouraging to know that her hope to change attitudes in the art classroom was fostered and seemed to be successful by having her students investigate their lives beyond general interests.

III. Analysis and Students

Meaningful Project from Circle Pedagogy to Content-based Research and Critique

Themes that have been reoccurring throughout this process of discussion with students' ideas and intents have been linked to memorable sayings, happenings, or feelings that have stood out in students' lives. My motivation was using their own stories and encouragement to forefront a goal in introducing artist Joseph Cornell, who focused on imagery symbolizing what we cannot see. For example, emotions such as our joy, that is internalized and not visible to others. Cornell's shadow boxes made from found objects, are creative assemblages and visual presentations of what he was captivated by. I thought Joseph Cornell would be a good choice in part because he was from a working class

background, had family struggles, and because he worked with found objects. The

students seemed to find aspects of his personality interesting such as being described as

eccentric and shy. They mostly identified mostly with facets of his background in that he

lived a private personal life. It was neat to see that they saw past his art being well-known

and critically acclaimed and understood the meaning behind Cornell's shadow box

assemblages.

    As I investigated where to begin and how to scaffold the project, I recognized

that the emotional is more important than the technical to both the students and I. The

project encompassed basic technical skills of creating a lidded box. The emotional begins

on what they put in and around the box. As I introduced the project, I discussed with

them how we all carry something good or nagging with us daily. The more personable the

conversations, and prompts, the more personal the students' responses were. I gave the

example of what my father always said, "measure twice, cut once". I gave this as an

analogy to double check steps taken not only physically, but emotionally. This included

conversation and day-to-day situations. I try to double-check my steps questioning things

such as: Am I honoring the person I'm talking about? Am I following the directions

given? Am I investing my emotions wisely? Am I making a healthy decision personally

and professionally? Am I meeting due dates? I described how I would create a stack of

rulers for inside my container to show all the "measurements" I feel I make. This is a

tribute to him, but also something I carry with me in many different ways.

    As Judy Chicago helped students to take their ideal to real, I also asked students

to examine their answers, sketch their responses, discuss, review, and then eventually

build a small sculpture inside the box representing what they "carry" with them. It could

have been good or bad, heavy or light, such as advice they've been given, what makes them smile, or perhaps what simply gets them through the day. The sculpture can be removable or fixed in the box depending on what they want to represent. We agreed to share these thoughts on the day of critique, however, as the project grew the conversations with one another during the class did as well.

The outer surface of the box did not have to correlate with what was on the inside. It could be linked, a facade, or a direct opposite reflection of what is on the inside. The box sculptures were to symbolize what and how they felt they functioned as individuals. This too needed to be a purposeful decision. My hope was that the constraints did not stifle, but helped to facilitate their examinations of themselves, and gave enough freedom to make their box sculpture their own.

As the semester progressed I found students coming in through the door claiming this was their "favorite class in the day," and others responded saying they couldn't "wait for the period to come." To me, this was a good step forward towards change.

Researcher's Role

I recognized a correlation between how much the high school students that I've taught invested in an artwork when they *feel* esteem in what they are *doing*. I noticed that students' esteem and confidence grew higher when creating their art; also resulting in higher standards set for themselves artistically, behaviorally, and socially. As a consequence, they were also more open to suggestions about their artwork from peers and teacher. My role as a researcher became clearer during this class as I was able to elaborate more meaningful prompts, which helped foster conversations about the significance for their box. I wasn't just the facilitator, not just a participant in the

conversations, but a responder. I found I can request an action, study an action, research why the action occurred, but if I don't respond to it appropriately then the change I want to see won't occur and the knowledge learned won't necessarily matter. The decisions the students made from my response (or required action) from the dialogue made all the difference. The reciprocating participation was crucial as well, not only to give the projects a meaning, but meaning to the relationships developed between peers by respectfully sharing. This class was not only active participants in their own project, but students saw this project as so meaningful they helped one another out when peers were "stumped" in thought. This is the "art-culture" that I wanted to develop, which seemed to arise from this project.

The best solidarity is a physical display of people standing beside each other. Taking one of the most important methods of Judy Chicago's (2014) pedagogy with participants in her teaching was to sit in a circle and share without tables, desks, or other objects in front of them. Circle pedagogy promotes intimacy, an importance of approach and a vulnerability, which helps acceptance of others sharing. We gathered in a circle, without anything in front of us (i.e., no desks) but the containers/boxes students shared with each other. It was simply wonderful how everyone humbly shared his or her stories and what they "carry" within them daily.

Figure 2 is a photo I took of some of the students that gave permission to be photographed.

Figure 2. Students sharing their art of identity.

As stated above, the meaning behind these box projects was left up to the discretion of the students. They were prompted to symbolize something they carry with them everyday. It could be private, public knowledge, good, bad, something you always want to remember, and something that betters you or something you want to forget. The conversations and responses from the students were delicate, precious, and deeply meaningful. Some examples are below. I'm not sure I can convey in writing the depth of how some of these projects were approached. At the time of documenting, one box was finished being glazed, as all others were bisqueware.

Student 1: This student is recovering and dealing with anorexia. S/he drew a skeleton's rib cage inside and a skull as the topper on the lid. It is something s/he carries daily, but is overcoming anorexia, on the inside and out.

Student 2: The box is full of bubbles, bubble bath and rubber ducky, only on the inside. Her/his personality and disposition is positive, optimistic and "bubbly".

Her/his mother has since recovered from cancer and for this they have much joy.

Student 3: You can't see the top of the box, but it has a rain cloud and lightening bolt on the inside top portion of the lid. On the bottom there is a broken bottle. On the outside top of the lid there are two bottles (unbroken) that are "cheering" and leaning into each other. The way s/he perfected the construction of this box is phenomenal actually. You can tell s/he is articulate and precise. The symbolism is stemming from her/his "inner storm" and the push that the dad gives by saying to keep making wishes/dreams. So they went with the "message in the bottle theme".

Student 4: S/he remembers always that her/his dad liked having apple pie with his mother. Her/his dad is deceased due to suicide.

Student 5: This student lost her/his mother last year due to MS and carries this with her/him daily. S/he made a tribute to her/his mother with this box

and constructed a wheelchair inside with the dates of her life. This student changed her process and built the box around the wheelchair.

Student Responses

The questions of the survey I handed out at the end of the year is listed below:

1. Did you enjoy this project, and why?
2. Was any part difficult for you? Why do you think this?
3. Were you successful in creating this project?
4. How well do you think your teacher communicated this project to you?
5. What would you like to see changed to make the project better?
6. What was the best learning experience you've had in this particular class thus far?
7. What is one thing you will remember from this class?
8. What is one thing that surprised you about yourself in this class?
9. What is one thing you would say, or recommend, to me for future classes?
10. Will you keep this project?

Many responses had a positive result. Most replied in the sense that they enjoyed this project because it gave them "a chance to put something special to me into my work." A few seemed to feel vulnerable and were unsure of the exposure of them visually. The challenging part seemed to be a good balance between technical (keeping the box symmetrical) and narrowing down to just one thing that plays such an important role to them. The documented success rate from survey responses was 90%. This I enjoyed and found to be a positive outlook on the *way* the project was carried out. The success was left in their hands and how well they felt it was executed. They were more concerned about their personal success in representing themselves, than the grade. This is a great leap forward.

Teacher communication was received well. Their responses seemed to be based on the amount of time I gave in formal instruction and the amount of time I took checking in on them one on one. Surprisingly they had many questions throughout the process due to wanting the sculptures to be "perfect".

The survey prompts such as: best experiences, what could have been done better, and what the most learned aspect was, were grouped with answers similar to: learning is never done, always something there to improve, decisions are to be made with time and thought, molding something from nothing is pretty cool, everyone has their own sense of "perfect", and visuals are good when you can't talk about it.

Recommendations for me as an educator was: "keep on, keeping on!", "don't push too hard", "more group projects", "give a theme and then let us decide what to do with it", "stay the same, good balance between what we want and what you want", "nothing! Fun and productive", and "give more examples". This tells me that conducting the class based on individual needs still requires some students needing more independence in their project choices and some needing the focus to be narrowed.

The last part of the survey inquired about their attachment to the project itself. However important it was in making it, I was curious to see what they would do with the actual project; with their sense of accomplishment. Most said it would be used for keep-sake stuff in their bedrooms, some replied they would give it to either a friend or relative and one response in particular reminded me of their age. They reported, "depends what mood I'm in".

Reflection on My Teaching, Art Culture Shifts, Peer Bonding through Art

My initial instinct coming into this particular teaching job was to arrange a sense of order within the classroom, esteem students, and for students to gain a greater respect for the production of art. Although those things were important to foster, the time and place of those things to be manifested came from a different kind of structure. One where there was a boundary dropped from my side when sharing what was important to me,

what I wanted to know about them and in a sense putting them in the spotlight in a very real way. With the new school year starting next week I will keep things aligning with this path of meaning by continuing projects that are identity based.

I didn't stress the in-depth look at our immediate culture and individual heritages. I do believe this is important in multi-cultural education, however, in beginning to make meaning, I wanted them to choose on their own volition what they were representing about themselves and why. The interesting part within this one particular pilot project, the students did not focus on their demographics specifically. The project, however, showed their influences in how they react, what they react to, what they find important and what they reject on a daily basis within their group of friends and family.

I feel my teaching also took a great shift in how I taught project concepts and techniques. I choose to stress the importance of students first making meaning out of the project idea then building technique from that starting point, rather than teaching technique first with the request to put something about themselves in a general manner to follow afterwards. I have changed my teaching approach to guide students to create art about self, identity, and value systems rather than these concepts an after thought within the project. I've noticed when doing the latter, students will put minimal to no effort into the concept, making it somewhat of a joking matter and their priority is to simply execute the technique, finish, and receive a grade. At the beginning of each semester, I also try and set the stage of care and what I want the projects to convey, as well as how much of the responsibility relies with the students to make the class successful. I explain to students what my teaching and project priorities were and how they have evolved. Right away, the expectation and value of art making is heightened and regarded as a

meaningful journey.

The school culture has changed significantly for both the care of the arts and the bonds created between peers. Each has strengthened considerably and displayed growth through seeing the same groupings of students continually sign up for different art electives in subsequent semesters, yet bringing new peers in to be involved. It is such a confirmation that the good that is happening in the art classroom is warranted and needed. The conversations between peers have reflected an established culture of care through the arts. Initial discussions certainly exercise this culture by initial questions from students to myself before we begin a project, and throughout between themselves. Their questions and responses are mature, self-reflecting, and dig deep to involve who they are as they navigate through the technique. There are many connections now that students have about themselves to their art such as in the way they work, the process they took in getting to their end result, and what their final piece ends up looking like. There are many analogies students see in every bit being an extension of self. To me, that realization is meaningful and marked as successful within an art class.

IV. Research in Review

Literature Review and Selected Methodology Studies to Help Nurture Meaning

I've approached this research with selected teaching methodologies such as informally introducing a project/concept, asking more informal questions about student lives, requesting group interaction, and providing a space for working and sharing that offered no barriers. I was reminded of an article by Jamieson (2009) that identified informal spaces as encouragers for high order thinking and learning within higher education institutions. By placing oneself in an informal environment, such as a café, or

on-campus hub spot, students were more at ease and opened communication avenues and discussions that led to learning that normally wouldn't be an option in a formal environment. Wanting this to be nurtured within my class, I took the informal idea and made it *feel* more relaxed by creating the discussion that would link (a) students to relate to each other about their art, (b) questioning what was meaningful to self in order to go beyond classroom criteria, and (c) learning for the student within encouragement of artistic expression that is a strong balance between concept and craft.

The steps contributing to completing these links included brainstorming, journaling ideas, and execution of a project through student interest and perspective. The teaching methodology that I employed is supported by other studies. For example, Barron (2006) focused on the pursuit of interests. I've interpreted "interests" as more than superficial likings of material objects, but importance of being. She touched on three learners that exemplified different paths to their learning. Through these students, Barron tries to uncover what influences provoked them to take up self-directed learning in pursuit of these interests, what resources they take advantage of and how both their influences and resources related to what they were learning in school. In other words, the personal attached to the academic makes meaning.

Outside of the school domain is the primary source of interest revelation. Interests were found to be sparked or influenced by exposure from family members' employment, interface with technology, books read, and personal activities sought out into the community and other social outlets. Barron (2006) found that the it was imperative that community in which the student lives and the school environment need to

be working in cohesion with both the type of learning and the strategies that lure the informal study. Barron (2006) noted that informal learning relies "on rich sensory information and affords learning through imitation and observation in the context of knowledge use and that crucial learning contexts is a result of "typical fusing of the intellectual and the emotional in informal environments due to the primacy of the relationship between learner and teacher, in contrast to schools, which are more impersonal (p. 197). Barron's (2006) study was on learning outside of school, identity and interest.

The importance of theme, content, and that student independent involvement affects not only the students' learning, but the culture and environment of care that the art room is creating, was touched on in Thomas and Brown's (2011) book, A New Culture of Learning. They discuss the importance of shifts from the process of teaching to the process of learning. This shift emphasizes personal experience and sensory modes of learning. The authors set the tone to investigate processes of learning by defining explicit knowledge and tacit knowledge, setting loose boundaries for objectives and experience, introducing inquiry to be more important than answers, and revealing disposition to play a part in interpreting knowledge. These are to promote higher-end learning and spur deeper critical thought.

Cummings (2010), a public school art educator, collected data including student to teacher observations and reflections, recorded classroom dialogue, and student artwork. I liked how she also incorporated the students' journals within her research, which was something, in retrospect, I wish I had done. She believes that "the responses to curricular activities were most significant in influencing students' actions" (p. 56). Cummings

(2010) describes her observations and findings from her investigative study, and in conclusion offers suggestions for the teaching of adolescents in the art classroom" (p. 55).

She describes her mission as changing attitude in the art classroom. Although, a slightly different focus, the end of the means of our research are parallel. Driven by her students' "laziness in their studies and curricular activities," Cummings also wanted her students to investigate beyond visual appearances (p. 58). Instead of leading conversation and students' reflections of themselves immediately directed intrinsically, Cummings' projects did a beautiful job in setting up the students in order to take an image from visual culture and explore the components of it, examine the meaning based around social issues or themes, historical artists, and studio activity. These themes, artists, and projects concentrated on theories about power and privilege, i.e., consumerism and power, trademarks and logos; all the while tying in student interests that they expressed within their written and visual journals. She challenged their assumptions on what they see initially and regarding their perceptions of abilities and artistic processes. I enjoyed sharing the same vision with another teacher that marriages the idea of concept and technique. Although I initially focused on receiving students' engagement, I strongly feel that there needs to be skill, craftsmanship, and concept to play equal roles in any composition. When craft supports concept then the concept is interpreted by the composition of the artwork.

As reflected in my study, student interactions with one another changed and behaviors were drastically altered. Students would not wait on me for initiation of project decisions and "check-ins". They would question or challenge decisions that peers or themselves were making. Students would take initiative to ask me if their choices within

their art would enhance what they are trying to convey. A sense of care and responsibility in handling the physical space and project material was also divided amongst us equally as the artwork developed. There was no longer a need for me, as the instructor, to make sure they paid attention in handling the different stages of the material and space. The students took on that responsibility due to their attachment to the project.

Not only did Cummings document the importance of concept and technique through peer actions, teacher actions, and materials used, but through parent responses. Their interactions within the class were meaningful, purposeful, and seemed to have built a sense of cohesion amongst peers.

Another commonality was the questions that derived from conversation. Cummings (2010) presented her questions of the "whys" of society's consumerism and advertisements in a way that made the student feel valued and heard. The questions, such as, "What is power, what does it represent to them? Does this opinion depend on who you are?", provoked their voice in expressing their individuality.

After reading the responses of Cummings' reflection on parental support, I was impressed with my students' feedback that their parents esteemed them in the arts. Many of my students' parents have their child's art at their work place, on the mantle at home, in their backyard's garden, in their bedroom, as well as other common places such as the kitchen. Cummings noted that, predominately, all the parents of her students were disinterested in their work, the fact that they received an "A" in art and not in any other subject was unsettling to them. The students reportedly found themselves hiding their work from their parents, knowing it wouldn't be appreciated. It was not documented whether or not Cummings contacted parents throughout her time during her action-

research. Whether or not this has an affect, I don't know, however, at the beginning of last year I wrote a letter home to all my students' parents explaining what my classes were about, what I wanted my students to be esteemed in and how this affects the class dynamic. I also expressed interest in seeing parents at the end of the year art show and requested their attendance. This may or may not have impacted parent responses to students' artwork brought home, or discussing what their child is doing within the art classroom. Cummings (2010) research of parents' feelings toward art was art was for "fun or play" (p. 61). Student responses in my study, an initial contact with home explaining the depth of art curriculum, might influence opinions, otherwise, and deter thoughts of senseless learning and "confrontational and unsupportive" attitudes (Cummings, 2010, p. 61).

I appreciated the fact that Cummings (2010) notes that, "Art educators must understand the role of the classroom environment and socialization on students' learning, and must take steps in developing classroom environments that promote care and acceptance" (p. 56). I full heartedly agree, as well as the fact that the topics, projects, and the arrangement of the room affects how discussions are facilitated and interactions are promoted. As stated above in my action-research, Judy Chicago's (2014) teaching methodology of having nothing in front of us while displaying the projects and discussing our ideas leaves room for a vulnerability and trust to take place. It encourages those connections to be made and addressed. Both Cummings' and my research displays how crucial each step of teaching really is. It's not just the concept behind the artwork, it's not just the making of the projects, or solely the conversations that take place and display of thought. It's everything built upon the other that makes this meaning take place and be

substantial enough to build a community and an "art-culture".

Limitations of the Research Design and Implications for Future Alterations of My Action Research

There were two main limitations in this study. These challenges were based around the issue of time. There was a short time frame to actually try many of the results and findings of my research with students within the desired, high school environment. As the school year came to an end, it left me with little time to try another project built upon the last as a response to my reflection and research. This coming school year, it will be beneficial to have students reflect on their own responses about their actions taken to make a shift in creating meaningful art and apply it to other projects in the coming months.

I'm interested in the affect of the connections made last year on those returning students and the new ones adding into the classes. I'm curious as to how those partnerships are going to be established and maintained through both projects and peer relationships. One of the changes made from last year, is the filling out of a short response immediately following the project. I plan on having it be apart of their sketchbook criteria in order to keep as a reference at hand.

I was hoping my research showed accounts that environment, age, media usage, culture, background, ethnicities, and related demographics, matter in the making of meaningful art within this age group. Eventually, I think that all will weigh heavily in their conscious effort, but for the initial step towards this culture shift, the students did an incredible job, despite their different attitudes towards school, at working together and forming a bond on an emotional level, no matter how dramatic some projects were compared to others' that were focused on less intense subject matters. In this next year, I

plan to create a bigger umbrella for multitudes of sub-cultures to find a safe space to commit to something meaningful and personal to the student, while including social change. As conversations were held throughout this process, I recognized each took something different away from the class, but the common thread was that they had given an introspective view of themselves for others to see.

Reflective Analysis

I've included my high school principal in my reflective analysis of making change toward a high school art-culture. Our one on one conversation reflected on my time at this school from the beginning. The change offered to the students has been an immense amount in a short time. It may have been a jolt to the students' familiar system of starting a project before I took over, and their expectation of what the art classroom's atmosphere was to be like, but as discussed, the principal and I agreed it's at a momentum that the students can now expect something new, to be improving, and to build into a community of passionate learners and thinkers.

Her initial, and professional, response was "the arts are certainly a vehicle for students to express themselves in a positive, meaningful, and healthy manner now." She went on to encourage "when an educator, as I've seen you do, can use their craft, as a medium for student expression, interpretation, and a connection to the student and content, true learning occurs." She was not only supportive, but expressed that this direction "allows students to take risks and trust the environment in order to take those risks is a huge component in the learning process." With appropriateness of subject matter between student and teacher being of high concern, especially within the public education in this day in age, the arena where private lives are discussed in a public way is

a liability and consideration of parameters of subject matters is essential. We went on to discuss, however, necessary parameters. It's imperative that a balance occurs where students don't perceive their expressions as inhibited by censorship.

Since one on one communication is a large percentage of the time when teaching studio art, it was important to connect with my administration in that manner. The conversation left me both feeling productive and supported within my efforts of making this shift. Much like Cummings (2010), the students' behaviors significantly altered to be more positive, as did their interactions within their own art. I believe administration saw the affects this shift of culture had on the class dynamic and couldn't help but support the change.

In addition, I presented my research topic and findings, as well as my principal's response to a group of local, public school art teachers in the area in which I live in Central Pennsylvania. There were a variety of answers in the collected responses. One of the three art teachers that I spoke with recalled a local high school art show in which their principal required a particular artwork to be removed from the show. This "piece of work exhibited was a controversial social issue that was meaningful to the student". We agreed that the power ultimately rests in the hands of the administration within public school settings. This is a situation we have all faced throughout our years of service. Some years more than others, but it's always there.

"We would all love to be able to conduct a meaningful curriculum", said another, "but time is a factor in elementary school due to class time going from 50 minutes cut down to 30 minutes. These are serious constraints," she continues, "the students thinking time, time to be able to process the concepts, media, on top of experimenting with

different problem solving criteria and possible solutions are nonexistent." The ripple effects self worth as an educator, which can leave an art educator feeling that art is being devalued by giving less time to art class.

The third member of our discussion reflected on his high school teaching experiences. Class projects were mostly suited toward age-groups in light of the techniques taught. However, he shared that even technique-based projects are successful by the hybridization of ideas. It requires a higher level of thinking for students to take two thoughts and put them together to manifest a third thought. This is an analogy, he went on stating, is for "creating artwork that is personal in another way; that third part created part of that student. It's no longer a pleasing form, but a part of self".

IV Conclusion

Shifts on Art Making Meaning, School Art Culture, and Peer Bonding

My study revealed the importance of theme, content, student independent involvement, and classroom environment affects not only the students' learning, but the culture of care that the art room is creating. Just simply opening the floor for conversation, meaningful art, collaboration, and opening gates for relationships to be formed in a safe space is advocacy for an environment in which students can foster their voice. I had the desire for the art classes to offer this, which is more than technique and a display of collective teenage interests. Through this research, the commitment to shift into meaningful art by (a) students relate to each other about their art, (b) have social experiences that go beyond the classroom, and (c) encourage artistic expression that is a strong balance between concept and craft has been made and implemented.

The activities that engage students should aim to develop not only a rapport between teacher and student, but between the peers as well. Discussions should be honest inquiries about what the student believes and why. Whether the art educator is providing opportunities to conceptualize either the culture within themselves, or visual culture all around them, the attention to each student's individual perspective is called forth.   I identified these qualities in art education only through this action-research, and would like to further investigate how adolescents' perspective influences other aspects of their learning and the environment. Learning the differences between Cummings' (2010) parental responses and my own, I would like to further explore ways that the school's art-culture develops with more parental involvement. I believe I was successful in establishing positive peer interactions and pride within their artwork. Additionally, it affected their behaviors in the art room in comparison with the other classes in which take these approaches of circle discussions, self-presentations, content-based searches and critiques, as well as reflections and evaluations by students in a post- project survey. I feel that I need to bring in more purposeful projects about the influences of visual culture we are exposed to daily. I believe this can only further develop the students' understanding of self and may create an opinion worth pursuing in life. While implementing different kinds of student engagement, I also found what I value in my students as individuals and in my pedagogy. It was meaningful to me to personalize my research and personalize my profession and practices. Not only was it refreshing, but it reminded me that once I feel accomplished in one goal it can be a stepping stone to another. It was through this action-research that I could focus on and experience directly;

the student's involvement in creating an art-culture that creates a connection between

their life and their art.

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