

The Pennsylvania State University
School of Visual Arts
Art Education Program

**ART ACTIVISM MATTERS:
IMPLEMENTING SOCIAL JUSTICE ART PEDAGOGY**

An Action Research Project in Art Education

by

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ABSTRACT

This action research study investigates the effects of today's social issues on middle school students' motivation and engagement in the art classroom. I examine the relationship between various social issues and the middle school students directly in my classroom; specifically, the direct impact of these social issues on the lives of students. This study is motivated by the question: *how can I teach activism through art making?* To examine this question and further support this inquiry, two support questions are necessary: (1) *how do students respond to art about social issues and activism?* (2) *how can I motivate students to be interested in creating original, passionate works about social issues that are meaningful to them?* This study tested hypotheses regarding the relationship between my curriculum as a middle school art teacher in the state of Pennsylvania and the incorporation of social activism into the art classroom setting. It was hypothesized that the inclusion of relevant social issues is positively related to middle school students' intrinsic motivation through the creation of artistic pieces. This study is aimed to illustrate the positive ramifications of art activism in a middle school classroom. Previous research indicates that content relevant to student concerns sparks intrinsic motivation in secondary aged students. This study advances our understanding of students' intrinsic motivation and student "buy in" as it pertains to social justice and activism in the art classroom. This action research is a deductive study based on the use of current social issues in the art classroom to implement social justice into art pedagogy. This study uses a variety of research tools to collect data including: photographs, student work, classroom map, student journals, field notes, and questionnaires. The findings from the research show the impact of social justice and social issues on art pedagogy is more complex than previously assumed.

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Prologue to the Study

Five years ago, I found myself among a diverse group of art educators from all across the country at the Marlin and Regina Miller Gallery located within the Sheridan Art Building on the campus of Kutztown University. With the advice of my Penn State advisor, I enrolled in a course titled “Creating Pathways with *The Dinner Party* Institute,” a workshop held at Kutztown University. I thought I was just going to learn about the artist Judy Chicago and study some of her most famous art. What I didn’t expect, was to develop such a strong and sudden connection to these women’s stories, which also, revealed current social issues in the world around me, and helped me to identify myself as a feminist and social art activist. As part of the institute we visited “The Dinner Party” installation at the Brooklyn Museum of Art and attended a lecture by Judy Chicago. Since this encounter, my life has been forever changed and the lens in which I now see the world includes a feminist and social justice lens.

It wasn’t until I took the Creating Pathways with *The Dinner Party* workshop that I realized that gender equality is still an issue today. For some reason, my generation born in the 1980s, does not talk about women’s rights or even mention the “F” word: Feminism. From my previous understandings, feminism carries with it a negative label and I personally never identified with feminism. Conversations for gender equality never came up in my household (even though I was raised by a strong woman) or among family members and friends. Because we never talked about gender equity, I never learned about what women have gone through; thus, begins the vicious cycle, which Judy Chicago tries to put an end to with her artwork. She emphasizes why her work is important by citing Gerda Lerner in the following statement:

Men develop ideas and systems of explanation by absorbing past knowledge and critiquing and superseding it. Women ignorant of their own history [do] not know what women before them had thought and taught. So generation after generation, they [struggle] for insights others had already had before them, [resulting in] the constant reinventing of the wheel. (Lerner, 1993; quoted by Chicago, 2007, p. 9)

Gender issues such as the wage gap, access to quality education, and inequality in healthcare are still ever present in today's society. Women have overcome many obstacles over the past century, but the women today still can't seem to break through the *glass ceiling*. For example, popular movie star Jennifer Lawrence in 2015 penned an open essay on social media speaking out that she made less money than her male co-stars. Her essay went viral, which caused many people to “*weigh in*” on the matter. The #MeToo movement and social media campaign, which began in 2007 by Tarana Burke, gained momentum in 2016 when the United States elected a president who was heavily criticized for disrespecting women. This momentum continued in 2017, when *The New York Times* published an article detailing the accusations of many women who had charged movie producer Harvey Weinstein for sexual assault (Gonzalez & Kludt, 2017). The #MeToo media campaign invites women to tell their stories of sexual abuse and harassment using the hashtag #MeToo. Moreover, the “#MeToo” movement renews a push for the Equal Rights Amendment. Thanks to women like Jennifer Lawrence, Emma Watson, Amy Poehler, Meryl Streep, Rose McGowan, and the 2000 other artists who pushed forward and signed the *We Are Not Surprised* (WANS) declaration, many anonymous voices are now speaking out about sexual harassment in the workplace. Women are uniting to speak out on

sexual harassment in the arts, academia, and every other type of workplace creating and engaging conversations or actions to end gender inequalities.

Since the course at Kutztown University, I have become concerned with gender equality and began to notice gender inequities in the world around me. From television commercials, magazine covers, movies, and advertisements, gender inequities are encountered on a daily basis. Evidence shows that young students are trying to understand their world and are aware of gender assault, harassment, and discrimination. Yet, it had not occurred to me that my own curriculum lacks the opportunity for students to find their voice through social justice until I heard Ashley Judd's speech at the 2017 Women's March. I stood on the lawn of a museum in the District of Columbia with my brothers and sisters listening to Judd's story. As I reflect on that moment, I felt a sense of community in a sea of social activists that was filled with handmade posters waving, people shouting, and music playing. The Women's March was organized and carried out for women's equality. This moment that I shared with my mother made me realize the impact that my curriculum can have. I vowed to promote social activism while at the same time empowering all of my students.

Problem Statement

When I turn on the television, listen to podcasts, or log onto social media, I see division all across the United States of America. Art educator Kerry Freedman states:

We live in an increasingly image-saturated world where television news may control a person's knowledge of current events, where students spend more time in front of a screen than in front of a teacher, and where newborn babies are shown videos to activate still developing neurons. (Freedman & Stuhr, 2004, p. 816)

Students are becoming very aware of the social issues and political unrest unfolding around them. They will inevitably carry the weight of these issues into their classrooms.

From my own personal experience as a middle school art teacher, I have found a common difficulty in the middle school art room is to find a way to increase student intrinsic motivation. How do teachers motivate students to invest in creating original and passionate works of art based upon current social issues? This action research project is intended to actively engage middle school students in the creation of art representing the various social issues that directly impact their lives.

Teaching students to create issue-based artwork promotes higher level thinking through problem solving while setting the stage for students to make meaningful artwork. (Bastos, 2010). Art educators should incorporate 21st century artistic practices into their curriculum so that students may have the tools and vocabulary to not only understand the visual world around them, but to actively engage in creation of art while adding to the social commentary of their generation. In Shirley Chisholm's words: "If they don't give you a seat at the table, bring a folding chair" (quoted in Williams, 2018, p.1). This study reveals the importance of students bringing their unique voices to the table, creating safe spaces for students to process and reflect on social issues, while also fostering activism through art making.

Research Question and Subquestions

My overarching question is: *How can I teach activism through art making?* Sub-questions that support this inquiry are:

- *How do students respond to art about social issues and activism?*
- *How can I motivate students to be interested in creating original, passionate works about social issues meaningful to them?*

In my action research, I identify lessons and strategies for the classroom that support and validate art and activism.

Significance of the Study

In this study, I have explored various content specific strategies that will help teachers examine both themselves and their classrooms for art and activism practices. The self-reflection process presented in the conclusion section of this study provides strategies for educators to construct an environment for creating and exploring contemporary content-based art that motivates students to bring meaningful issues into their artwork. In the book *Contemporary Issues in Art Education*, Shirley Hayes Yokley (2002) states: “When teachers select content related to students’ personal concerns or concerns attuned to the personal, the more meaningful the content and the more actively involved students become” (p. 200). Important to the work of art educators is to self-reflect and provide biased-free opportunities for students to investigate topics meaningful to their lives as content for their own personal artistic passions. As an educator, it can be very easy to promote your passions and include your beliefs into the classroom and inadvertently convey bias to a given social issue. The aim is to influence your students to see your passion for art and activism while the students find their own unique passion and make their own connections in a bias free classroom environment.

Methodology

This study was conducted at a middle school in central Pennsylvania and I employed an action research methodology, using a reflective, explorative and inquiry-based process. Keri Smith (2011) uses these same techniques in her book *How to Be an Explorer of the World*. She challenges readers to always be looking, while further encouragement motivates the readers to consider anything of interest during quiet moments of personal reflection. Through this reflection

process, the readers are able to make unique individual connections to the world around them. The more I thought about her book and the “explorations” she assigns, the more I perceived the process she describes *is* action research. Smith (2011) states: “You are an Explorer. Your mission is to document and observe the world around you as if you’ve never seen it before. Take notes. Collect things you find on your travels. Document your findings. Notice patterns. Copy. Trace. Focus on one thing at a time. Record what you are drawn to” (p. 11). When I think of action research in this context it is really just a way to give educators the space and time to observe our teaching practices and bring awareness to the stories going on in and outside our classrooms.

By using this approach, I was able to look at my teaching methodologies with a fresh perspective to include a social activist lens in my curriculum that validates, supports, and celebrates students’ voices in my classroom. With this in mind, I also identified which methods are best for me to teach art and activism as well as to help other art teachers find strategies to examine themselves and their classrooms for art and activism practices. It is important to note that during the reflection process the teacher needs to consider the projects will be student driven through their own personal interests. A variety of research tools were used to collect data and findings that show how my curriculum either supports or disregards social activism in my classroom including: photographs of student work, classroom, student journals, field notes, and questionnaires.

Photographs of Student Work and the Classroom

I photographed student artwork to reveal social issues and explorations in the classroom. In addition, I photographed my classroom, instructional materials and any other findings as I examined my methodologies and practices for art and activism. As an artist and designer, I took

panoramic photographs of my classroom on a consistent and evolving basis to examine how space arrangements affected my classroom.

Questionnaire

I gave students a pre and post questionnaire regarding their learning on social activist artists. See Appendix A of the questionnaire, which was included in the IRB proposal (Appendix B).

Student Reflections

Students were given time to reflect throughout their art making process. They were asked to reflect on social justice artists in their journal as well as write a self-reflection on their artwork.

Field Notes

I took notes on my observations and reflected in a journal for social activism and student motivation. The timeline for the study (Appendix C) provides an overview of the action research project.

Researcher Role

As part of this action research, I, as the researcher, assumed the role of participant observer. In this role I found myself, the researcher, “recording and reflecting on observations and interactions in which the participant observer role is frequently part of the action” (Keifer-Boyd, 2013, p. 247). Through the introduction of new content and instructional techniques, I participated in the research study with my students. However, through the observer role, I was able to collect data from student work through class observations, student artwork, reflection questions, and student questionnaire. Through observations, personal professional interpretation,

and communication with students a more effective data set was observed through my role as a researcher.

Study Design

My plan allowed me to study changes over the course of one month working with an 8th grade art class. I examined how student motivation developed as I introduced social justice artists into my curriculum.

1. I found and studied in-depth five activist artists and related social justice art education (SJAE) curricula to identify strategies, and to identify feminist and art activists who have impacted the local area to include in the curriculum.
2. Applied for and obtained IRB approval to do the study.
3. Implemented SJAE lessons and strategies over the course of one month working with 8th graders in a rural school district in Pennsylvania.
4. Evaluated and presented findings based on the research questions.

Delimitations

For this action research project, I delimited my study to a group of middle school students whom I am able to work with as part of a full year art program. This group of students were selected for the study due to prior teaching experience working with them as well as a more expanded time frame for data collection and research purposes. This study followed the students' progress and work in the art classroom only. While current social issues and subsequent activism may be introduced and discussed in other classrooms, I wanted to formally observe and document student work through my own personal experience in the art room.

Limitations

Upon reflection, this action research was limited by two main factors. The factors revolve around the students in the course and the limited or lack of diversity in the school. Most students in the course are of Caucasian descent with a few students of mixed raced backgrounds. The students come from predominately lower middle-class backgrounds, as per school records. These factors may or may not limit the students' viewpoints of current cultural, social, or political events studied and discussed as part of this action research project.

Data Collection and Analysis

A Shift in Mindset: From “Me” to “We”

Before I set my plans in motion I took the time to read and reflect on my classroom observations. One journal entry in particular stood out to me, which helped to launch my art activism journey. On January 26th, 2018 I wrote:

Eighth graders came into the art room today and immediately had their snack and talked between bells. They did not begin their projects or get materials out until I gave them instructions to do so. One student was nonstop checking their ¹ computer. When I saw their screen I realized they were texting a friend and asked them twice to put their computer away. Roughly half of the class is off task and talking to their peers unrelated to the art assignment. Students were encouraged to bring their earbuds into class so that they may listen to their favorite music to help inspire their art. Most students did not take up this opportunity and it was apparent this strategy did not motivate them. Why do they appear disinterested? What am I doing wrong?

After reading this journal entry I was able to see my frustration and the holes in my classroom rapport. It was a clear that there was a disconnect between students' interactions, our classroom community, and inevitably the quality of artwork I received. Furthermore, how can I teach art activism if students appear disconnected not only with each other but with me as well? Before I asked the students to dig deep, share their personal viewpoints, and create passionate artworks it was clear that I needed to make changes to the overall classroom community.

As a reflective practitioner, I went to a photograph of my classroom to help me understand the behaviors and attitudes that I was receiving from middle schoolers. In *Figure 1* the picture shows art tables spread far apart, further promoting middle school cliques and student-teacher isolation. The table formation places students in a position where they are facing each other's backs unable to see the projector and demonstration table clearly. The flow of the classroom is choppy and unsuitable for open and honest collaboration. This particular photograph brings to light the failures in my classroom set up and reminds me that the physical space can impact student dialogue and engagement for better or worse.



Figure 1: Classroom before changes; N.Tucker, 2018

So, how can I correct students' communication barriers? Enter Will Wise, a Penn State University professor and co-founder of *We!*TM whom I had the opportunity to meet on a professional learning day. I walked into the library as I did every meeting but instead of finding my friend and sitting at their table I saw a new arrangement. The tables were pushed to the side and the library chairs were arranged in a circle. Everyone was engaged in conversation and the energy in the room was electric unlike previous faculty meetings. Wise continued to present an interactive session on how to break down communication barriers and boost connection and engagement. After his session I picked up his book, *Ask Powerful Questions: Create Conversations that Matter*. In the book Wise (2017) encourages readers to change their mindset:

“By asking powerful questions to those around you, you can start exploring worlds other than just your own. Your world will open up and you will see things you did not see before. People will feel connected. Moreover, from that place we can begin to make a difference.” (p. 246)

When I read this passage, it was clear to me that this is what I ultimately want students to be able to do; ask powerful questions about the world around them, be open to others’ points of view, and feel connected to make a difference in the world through their art.

Wise developed a set of tools to help shift our mindset from that of a “me” to “we” stance. He says; “A *We!*TM mindset considers and values the needs of the others, allowing them to fully express their own humanity.” (p. 246). After participating in his session and reading his book I had an “aha” moment. I could apply these same principles to my classroom to help my students become more trusting, open, and engaged in conversations that truly matter; the first step to making activist art.

During Wise’s professional learning session I played the *We!*TM Connect game, a system to build rapport and trust within a group. In this game all participants had a card with a question on it (see Figure 2). Each player walked up to another person and asked their question but were only able to listen to their response. Finally, they switched cards and moved on. To break down the communication barriers and trust issues evident in my classroom I developed my own set of “We!” art cards. My goal for implementing this game was to begin building an authentic informal learning environment, build trust, as well as create a safe space to exchange ideas before my larger goal; art activism.



Figure 2: We! Art Connect Cards; N.Tucker, 2018

Each art card I created represented something different. The green cards were light and fun asking students silly questions about their daily life. The blue cards were a bit deeper and ask students about being an artist and the purple cards share contemporary artists who use art activism practices in their work. Below is an excerpt from my journal on March 12th, 2018 that describes how the “we” art cards unfolded;

Students came in, sat at their seats and ate their snack between bells. I welcomed students into the classroom and told them that they will be participating in a game today and that they would be up and moving the first part of art class. It immediately peaked their interest. I explained the “We!” art game and at first there was hesitation across the group and they stayed within their cliques. Eventually as the game went on I saw students branch out and interact with other peers in the class. I also participated in the exercise and learned alongside students. While barriers were slowly breaking down I discovered students’ favorite art medium, their goals as artists (one wants to go to art school and pursue fashion) and what their favorite food was! I was also able to see how they engaged with activist art in an informal way. One student said; “I liked getting up and walking around.” Another said; “It was nice to hear commonalities between each other.”

This exercise was more than just an ice breaker. It taught students empathy, listening skills, openness, and rapport. This was a wonderful opener to my art activism lesson to help set the boundaries and guidelines for the rest of the unit.

Sketching to Practice, Plan, and Ponder

In the book, *How to be an Explorer of the World*, the author (Smith, 2011) places emphasis on curiosity, sketching, and exploration. One of the initial steps that I took towards fostering curiosity and a trusting class atmosphere was assigning sketchbooks to be created in teams. I knew going into this unit that I was going to ask students tough questions and that some may not want to answer aloud. These sketchbooks offered students the time and space to reflect and sketch during quiet moments in class (see Figures 3-6). Students were given the option to bring in paper from home that meant something to them. In Figure 4, a student makes a personal connection to their sketchbook by using sheet music they read in band. Each group took their turn at blending paper to a pulp before forming it over a plastic screen. By the end of the project each student had a handmade sketchbook to document their art activism journey.



Figure 3: Student making their sketchbook; N.Tucker, 2018



Figure 4: Student making a sketchbook from sheet music; N.Tucker, 2018



Figure 5: Student collaging their sketchbook; N.Tucker, 2018



Figure 6: Student handmade sketchbooks; N.Tucker, 2018

What is Socially Activated Art?

During Will Wise's presentation I vividly remember him saying; "Take the temperature of your audience." Meaning, before you start a presentation check your audience and meet them at their level. Following his advice, I set out to see how my students interacted and responded to socially activated art through an art criticism activity.

Each group received a photograph of Linda Stein's artwork, *Heroic Tapestries: Anne Frank*, 2015. Students were not given any information other than the piece of artwork itself and asked to complete three statements; I see, I think, and I wonder based upon the artwork (see Figure 7). After the activity took place I noted the following observations:

Once the "We!" art game was over they looked at Linda Stein's art. I gave students 7 minutes to complete this assignment as a group. They deconstructed her work collaboratively. Most students understood the main point of her artwork however it was interesting to note that some students were overly concerned that the piece did not look "pleasing" or like a tapestry. Some had even described it as "thrown together," "pasted down haphazardly," and "ugly" a typical middle school response. Only one group out of six noted the important and "fierce females" in the work; Anne Frank and Superwoman. All students actively participated.

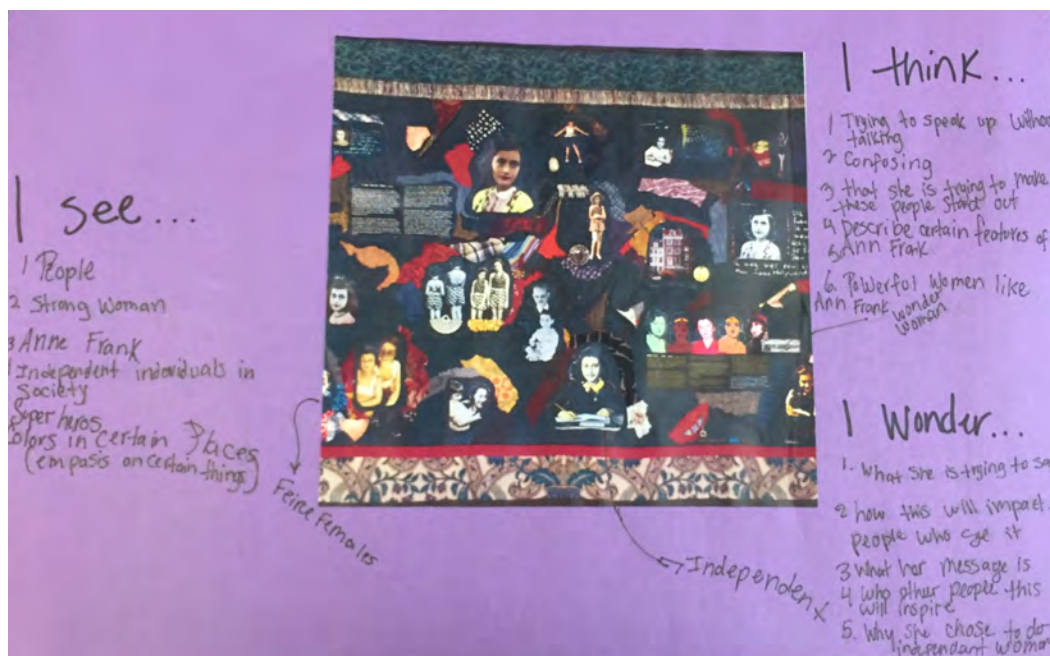


Figure 7: Linda Stein Critique; N. Tucker, 2018

This quick exercise helped me to gauge their level of understanding of art activism and informed me how to proceed further. Students worked together collaboratively and were fully engaged in the art critique process, however, some groups had a difficult time seeing past the aesthetics of the piece to see deeper meaning in her work. This “hook” sparked their interest to learn more about the social activist artist Linda Stein.

Following the critique, I showed the video; *Holocaust Heroes: Fierce Females* featuring Elizabeth Sackler, Gloria Steinem, and Linda Stein herself. While the video played students sat up and absorbed the information unlike any other video that I played for them in the past. After the conclusion of the video I gave students quiet time to reflect and answer these three questions in their sketchbooks; *What do you think about Linda Stein’s Tapestries highlighting female heroes of the Holocaust? What does it take to be a brave upstander? Have you ever stood up for something that you thought was important?* What I observed and the conversations that happened during this class is a teaching moment I would not like to forget. In my journal on March 12th, 2018, I wrote:

Students quietly watched a video clip on Stein to learn about the Hero Tapestries. After the video they seemed to have a better appreciation for her work. We discussed their new understandings and saw that it was painted and stapled together. I instructed students to reflect/sketch in their journal answering three questions about Linda Stein’s video. This was a really poignant moment for me because all students started the reflection assignment right away without having to explain ... teacher win! Students were so quiet and engaged. I did not have to redirect or explain the assignment like I have had to in the past. This behavior was especially wonderful to see from my one usually “rowdy” table. When students were done I asked them to continue embroidering/ decorating the cover of their sketchbook. Before they left I gave them a homework assignment which will lead into tomorrow's lesson; bring in a current event that interests you. They all looked puzzled.

When I reflect on what made this teaching moment so successful I think it comes down to a genuine learning experience shared by all. The Holocaust was such a terrible time in our history that students could not help but feel. Feel for Anne Frank, feel for the people who were

caught in the middle, feel for people today who continue to suffer the same type of discrimination and bullying captured in the headlines. Students left the room feeling empathy for others, another skill to understanding and creating activist art. It wasn't until I read their sketchbooks that I truly understood the full impact Stein's artwork had on them.

In Figure 8, a student shares their personal takeaway from Stein's artwork. They echo the female empowerment message in Stein's work while also saying "It does not matter what the art looks like, what matters is the meaning behind it." (See Figure 8.) The student consciously decided that this artwork was no longer all about aesthetics and saw the powerful message behind it. Finally, the student goes on to admit "I've always been afraid of what others will think or do. I am more of the quiet shy type." This student's honesty reflects the peer pressure and self-esteem issues middle schoolers face today. At this age students do not want to stand out in the crowd and would rather fit in with their peers. They will do just about anything to fit a particular mold. This student admits that they are afraid of what others will think or do if they do decide to stand up.

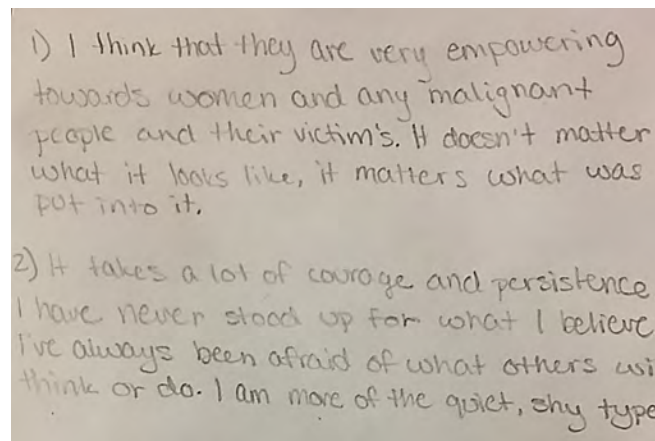


Figure 8: Linda Stein Sketchbook Response; N. Tucker, 2018

In contrast, the student's reflection in Figure 9 describes an appreciation for Stein's work coupled with an honest middle school answer. The student says, "I think Linda Stein's idea is

fantastic and inspiring. However, her idea isn't very impacting. In this generation making tapestries that celebrate brave women will have little to no impact on society." What I think this student is trying to say is that Stein's artwork does not immediately grab the attention of a middle schooler. My takeaway; consider the media and find a relatable contemporary artist that will first meet the middle schooler at their level before pushing them out of their comfort zone.

In Figure 10 a student responded to Stein's work in an alternative way; a poem. This is a great example of how choices and individual voices are celebrated through the use of sketchbooks. In Figure 11 another student's reflection displays hesitation, honesty, and reluctance towards the work saying; "It was really ugly" and "I have and I failed."

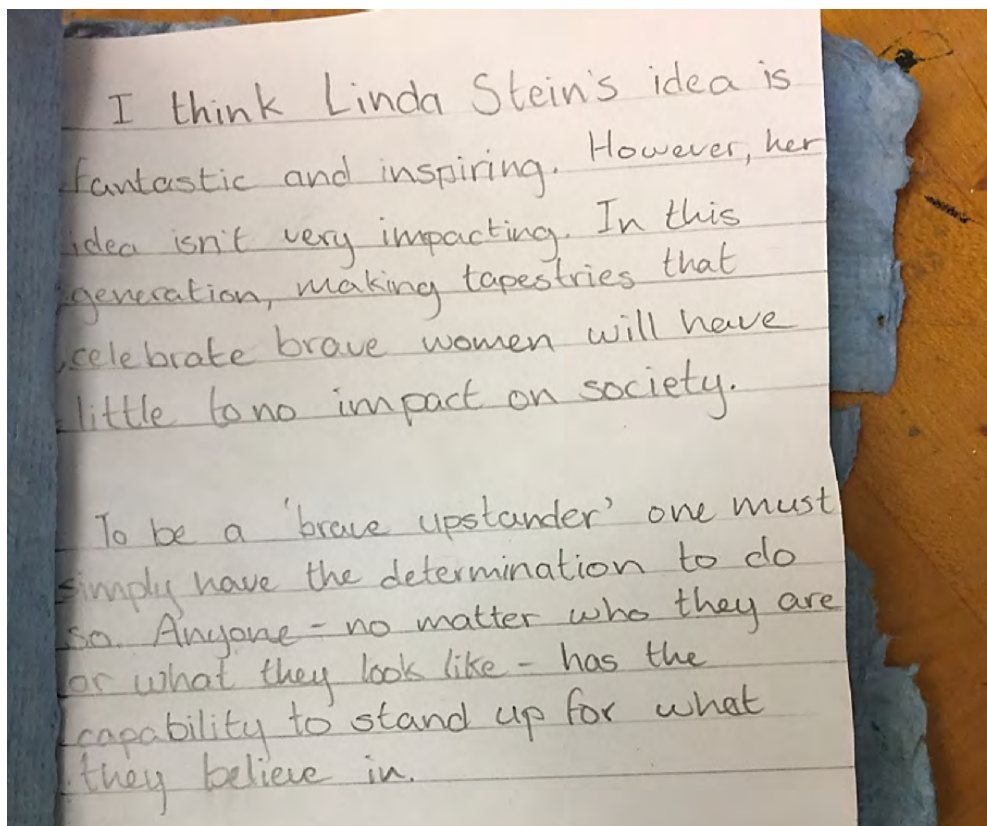


Figure 9: Linda Stein Sketchbook Response; N.Tucker, 2018

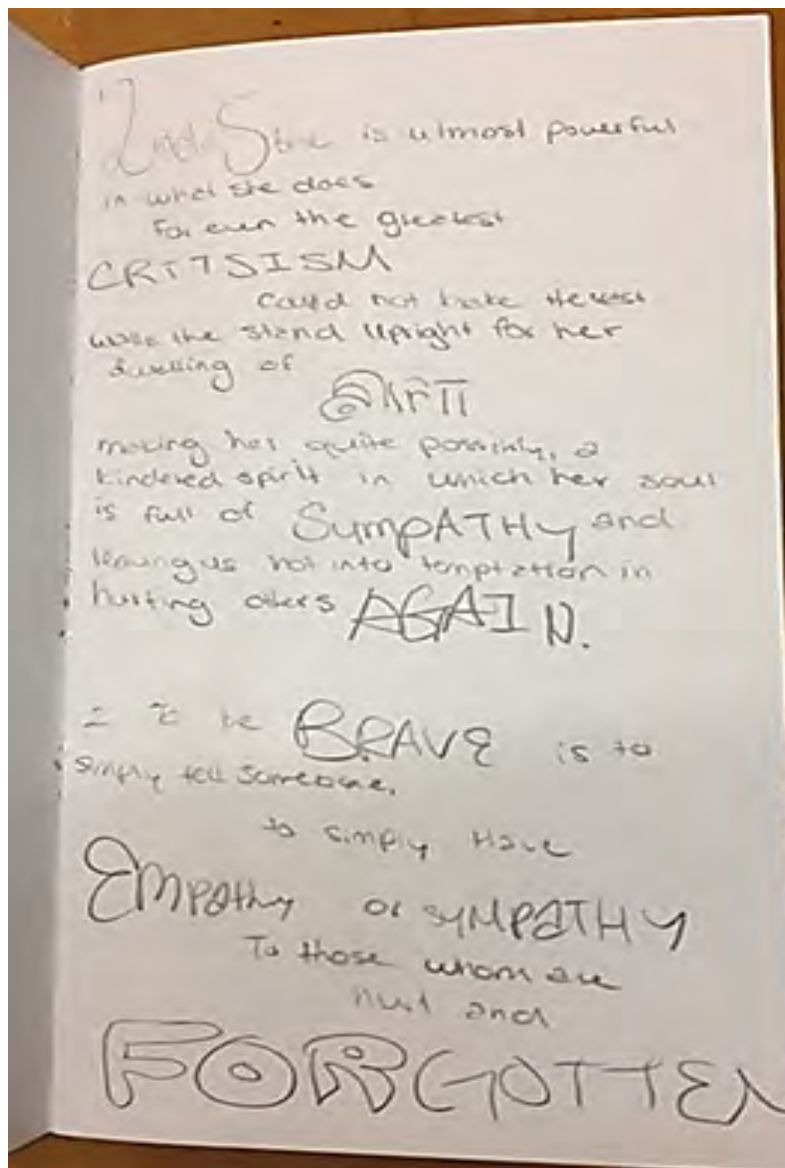


Figure 10: Linda Stein Sketchbook Response; N.Tucker, 2018

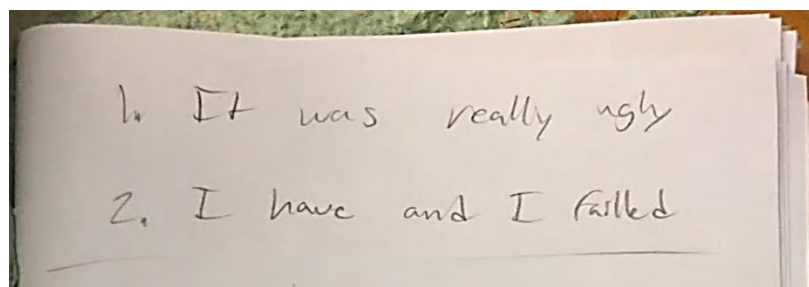


Figure 11: Linda Stein Sketchbook Response; N.Tucker, 2018

Being able to read their reflections after the lesson truly gave me another layer of understanding of the learning that took place. It was in this moment that I realized the sketchbook was a really wonderful tool for students to ponder and make meaning on their own.

The Power of Current Events

What interests my students beyond the four walls of my classroom? What are they paying attention to? Students are bombarded with news every single day from sources such as social media, television, and the radio. In fact, during this research there were two extremely polarizing events that students were very well aware of; the Stoneman Douglas High School shooting where 17 students were murdered and the March for Our Lives Movement, a student led demonstration in support of stricter gun control laws. My generation experienced Columbine, the first school massacre of its kind and since then school shootings have become an epidemic spreading across America. However, after the Douglas High School shooting the call to action from young people across the United States has grown. This time around it feels different. It seems to me that this generation will likely be the ones to enact change to put an end to this. After these events took place it was befitting to start my Social Activism Unit by giving students the opportunity to bring in a current event that spoke to them. Below are three journal excerpts on the Editorial Cartoon lesson.

3/13/2018

I pushed two tables together and started class off with students in a circle (to continue an open and safe atmosphere.) Students thought it was odd to begin class this way since we've never done it before. I asked them to share their current event they found interesting. At first, their answers were kind of silly and superficial but as we began to talk more and more, one by one, they started to share in depth social issues and meaningful dialogue bloomed. For example; one student talked about the forest fires out west, another talked about Russia, gun laws, China and school shootings. It was nice to talk with them in an informal way about tough topics they are seeing in the news. I told students for their first art project in the art activism unit they were to take their current event or social issue important to them and make an editorial cartoon.

After our class discussion on current events, I had students take the pre-questionnaire. (See Appendix B.) Students had many questions for me and I was not prepared for some of them to not be able to answer some of the questions. I reassured them that it was okay if they did not know I just wanted to see what they did know about the topic. The pre-questionnaire revealed that the majority of students did know about social issues and activism, but their answers were vague. During studio time students worked really well and remained on task. You could tell that they were motivated by the assignment by how quiet they worked as in the past students would have been chatty.

3/14/2018

Today students walked into the art room with the bell ringer assignment laid out on the table; write as many social issues you can think of. Markers were laid out and students added as many as they could think of (see Figure 12). The activity was slow to start, however, once I added some, they added some until everyone felt comfortable to write something on the banner paper. Some got very excited to share their ideas and social issues they knew. One student in particular began to tell me about her struggles with identity and the Netflix documentary she watched about women's rights filmed in a comic style called "The Breadwinners." This informal bell ringer allowed me to connect to one of my students and she was able to share with me some of her personal struggles she has been going through and how this film has helped her. Some of the issues they chose to write down concerned me. Issues such as suicide and drug abuse were brought to the forefront of our class discussion. Since this is Middle School I was a little worried about the content they were bringing forward and their maturity level, however, if I was going to ask them to have meaningful dialogue and make artwork about things they are concerned about how could I limit them? Students continued to work really well on their social issue comics. It was wonderful to see true engagement over the creation of an artwork. In my last lesson students were offered the opportunity to create work listening to their own music and this did not keep them engaged. However, the ability to bring something into class that they felt was important kept them working and invested in their creation. Two students came down during Tutorial time to work on their comic.



Figure 12: Social Issue Mind Map; N. Tucker, 2018

3/15/18

Prior to class I relocated the Social Issue banner to the hallway. I greeted them at the door with markers and asked them yet again to add to our social issue mind map. It was really awesome to not only see the interaction of students but also teachers and support staff coming down the hallway. Students were able to explain what we were learning in class and other teachers added to the conversation. Soon our mind map was a collaborative piece created by the school community. This was a powerful move to relocate the banner beyond the classroom walls and into the hallway. Through teacher-student interactions I could see and hear the shift in students' thinking; the issues were not isolated to just themselves, they affected their teachers too!

Students worked really well. The craftsmanship in their artwork is much better than the quality I have seen in the past couple of weeks. Some students in class still appear to be struggling with the idea of "social issues," however, it will be nice to see how they receive this unit in the coming weeks.

Three students came in during tutorial to get caught up and work on their cartoon assignment. A natural conversation formed around their artwork.

Student 1: What are you making your comic about?

Student 2: Mine is about the weight of the world on your shoulders... the pressure of everyday life. Like school shootings and school pressure to do well. What about yours?

Student 3: Mine is about body issues and the definition of beauty.

Student 4: Mine is about animal abuse, specifically the snow leopards.

It was wonderful to hear their conversation spill out beyond the 50- minute class period.

For one of the first times, I observed students laughing and sharing stories around the creation of art, a small confirmation that what I was teaching was working. I often forget how invaluable setting up informal learning environments can be. Through my observations I could see students get more comfortable and confident with sharing their ideas with each other. This is a great example of how the classroom community began to grow stronger and students were displaying empathy towards each other's social issues. It is evident that they were transforming from a "me" stance to a "we" approach.

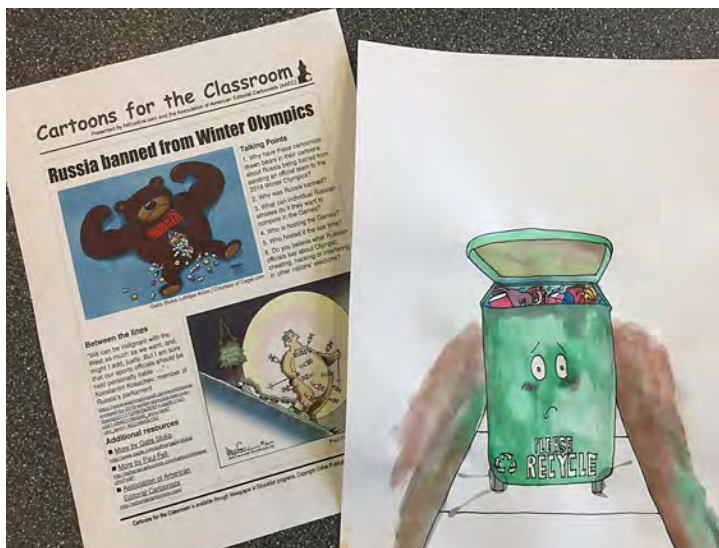


Figure13: Editorial Comic Art; N.Tucker, 2018



Figures14: A student shows the weight of the world on their shoulders; N. Tucker, 2018



Figure 15: A student investigates plastic pollution; N. Tucker, 2018



Figure17: A student reveals multiple social issues important to them; N.Tucker, 2018



Figures16: Editorial comic highlighting eating disorders; N. Tucker, 2018



Figure18: Editorial comic about recycling; N.Tucker, 2018



Figure19: A student highlights LGBTQ rights; N.Tucker, 2018

Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?

As art educators, we know the value in selecting the correct curricular materials to hook our students and engage them in new techniques. When I looked around my room at the art books lying on a shelf for both students and I to access I wondered; what *is* my curriculum saying? For this two-part exercise, I first gauged students' knowledge of female artists followed by a critical look at my own curricular books to find out exactly what messages were being sent.

As middle school artists walked in the art room door their bell ringer read: Make a list of as many female artists that you can think of. Then, make a list of as many male artists you can think of. First, they worked in small groups to compile a list then we created a master list on the board and quickly discovered that they were able to list twice as many male artists as female artists. Why is that? When I asked them this question, I received many different answers: "Women are not respected in the art community." "They are not taken seriously." "They are hiding their work." "We have not been taught their artwork."

It became evident that throughout students' art education there was an inequity of female and male artists being taught in the classroom and that needed to change. To help students understand the weight of this issue we looked at The Guerilla Girls, a group of female activist artists. I chose these female artists because of their unique presentation style; the use of masks, humor, and bright colors to expose gender issues in the art world. I knew their art would immediately grab the attention of middle schoolers in contrast to Linda Stein's tapestries.

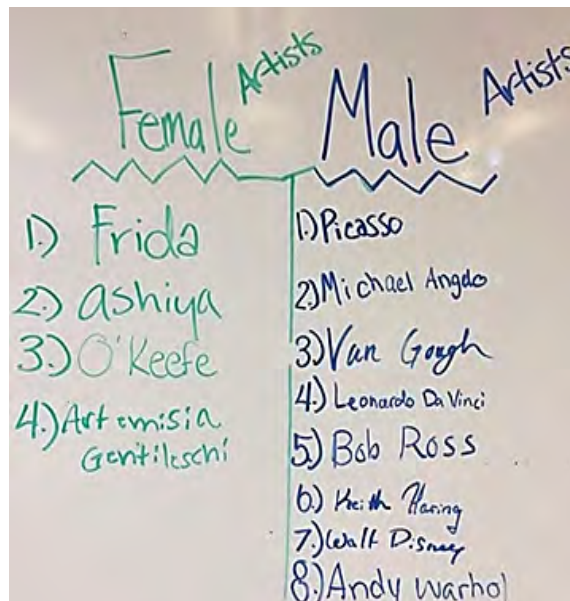


Figure 20: Gender in Art Activity; N. Tucker, 2018

Students read “*Activists or Artists?*” (2016) a Scholastic Art Magazine article on the Guerilla Girls followed by a debate on their stance as artists, activists, or both. This exercise revealed that 13 out of the 16 students had felt that the Guerilla Girls were both artists and activists. During the debate, one student said; “I believe both since they are making both art but art critiquing how women don’t have as many art exhibitions. Another student supports this stance stated; “The Guerrilla Girls are activists and artists because they are expressing themselves through pictures but they are doing it to change society’s view on women artists.”

In contrast three students felt that the Guerilla Girls were strictly activists. Another student said; “The Guerilla Girls learn more towards activists. This is because in their posters or pictures they are almost always addressing some sort of problem happening in the world, and nothing else.” In addition, another student said they are “activists because it was not even their intention for their posters to be adored and considered as art as long as what they were trying to say got its point across.”

Finally, the debate did not reveal any student who felt that the Guerilla Girls were just “artists.” While observing their debate it appears that the students think their work is much more than just the simple creation of a product. Students recognized and were moved by the fact that what the Guerilla Girls make and put out into the world calls on viewers to question the norm.

After revealing gender biases in art museums, I asked students to take a moment to look at our classroom. Each group received an art book from our art library. Just like the Guerilla Girls they were to find and document the amount of male and female artists represented in the book and present their findings.

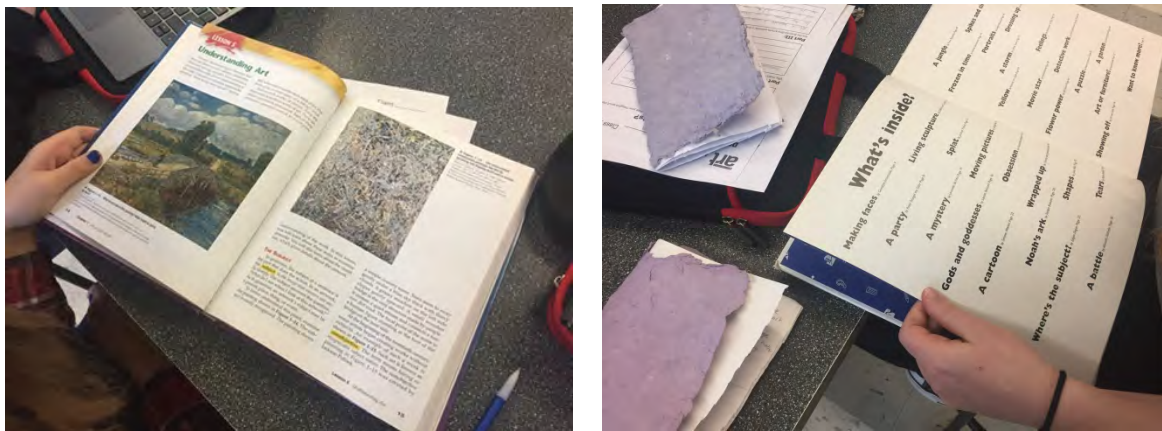


Figure 21-22: Students search for female artists in their textbooks; N.Tucker, 2018

Students discovered the following:

- Group #1: 90% of artists were male in an art book published in 2011.
- Group #2: 73% of artists were male in an art book published in 2005.

Group #3: 91% of artists were male in an art book published in 1996.
Group #4: 88% of artists were male in an art book published in 2007.
Group #5: 77% of artists were male in an art book published in 2017.

After revealing the statistics, I asked students to reflect and answer the following in their sketchbooks; *Is there an inequity in the art books we have in class? Why do you think that is?* Students had a wide range of responses in their sketchbooks. Yet again, I found the sketchbook to be a safe place where students could answer openly and honestly. One student wrote; “Females weren’t as likely to become artists and men are more thought highly of ... our book is from 2007 and we had nearly triple the amount of male than female. There is still an equality problem.” Another student wrote: “It was quicker to think of a male artist because they have more freakin ‘rights’ than women.” Another entry discusses favoritism between genders: “Male artists are more common, and because they’re boys everything they do is more appreciated.” These students displayed an understanding and awareness of the inequality around them and in our curricular books. In contrast another student writes: “I don’t think there is an issue, guys just might be more talented than girls.” (See Figures 23-26.)

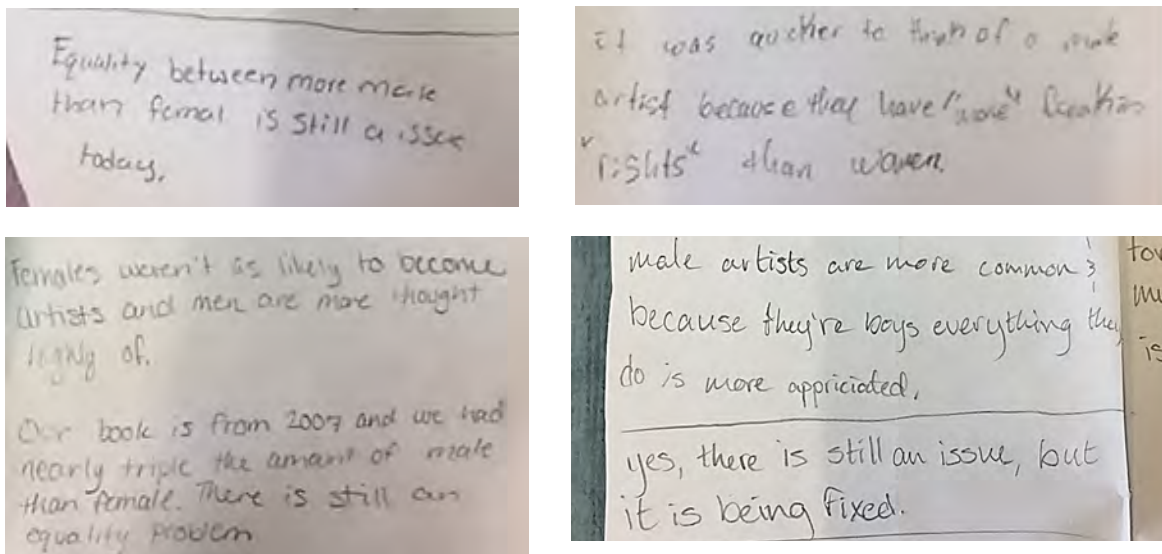


Figure 23-26: Student reflections about female artists represented in their textbooks; N. Tucker, 2018

This exercise brought one of the deficits in my curriculum to the forefront; representing an equal amount of female and male artists in textbooks. I also need to keep in mind to showcase artists of different backgrounds and ethnicities to make sure that all students are seen in the work that surrounds them. This activity was a good reminder that what teachers aren't saying or showing in their classroom is just as important as what they are saying.

Social Issue Silhouette

When I think of socially activated art I immediately think of Kara Walker. I knew immediately middle schoolers would connect with her artwork, thus, she became the next art activist to study.

To continue an intimate and engaging atmosphere, I changed the art room tables prior to students walking into the lesson. Some of these modifications pictured in the figure below include; moving the demonstration table to the opposite wall, relocating stools to the back counter, sliding the tables together and placing them at an angle. With these changes student artists were able to easily access art supplies that the demonstration table had once been hiding. The tables created a horseshoe seating arrangement to promote positive dialogic discussion, peer interaction, as well as provide a space in the center to congregate. Finally, moving stools to the back counter offered students flexible seating to work freely around the room.



Figure 27: New classroom layout to promote classroom engagement; N.Tucker, 2018

Once these changes were made it was time to bring students together to discuss Kara Walker. Similar to Will Wise's exercise that I participated in, I had all students grab a chair and sit in a circle in the middle of the room. We dove into the work of Kara Walker using art critique cards as a jumping off point for meaningful conversation. Students sat in the center of the room and found that they were unable to hide behind their tables. In this new layout, students were able to critique Kara Walker's work by building upon each other's thoughts. I not only observed verbal dialogue flourish, but I also saw kinesthetic engagement increase. In my journal on March 19th, 2018 I wrote:

Students walked into the classroom with a mixture of hesitation and excitement at the new classroom arrangement. You could tell I disrupted their seating and with that their comfort zones. As they began to file in one by one they had to choose another location to sit. Students eagerly grabbed a chair and critique card and moved into the center of the room. They displayed genuine interest in the artist's work projected on the board. This was quite the contrast to how art class started before (snacks, being silly, being told to get their art out.) Thoughtful and engaged discussion followed. The classroom dynamic is becoming more proactive and authentic.

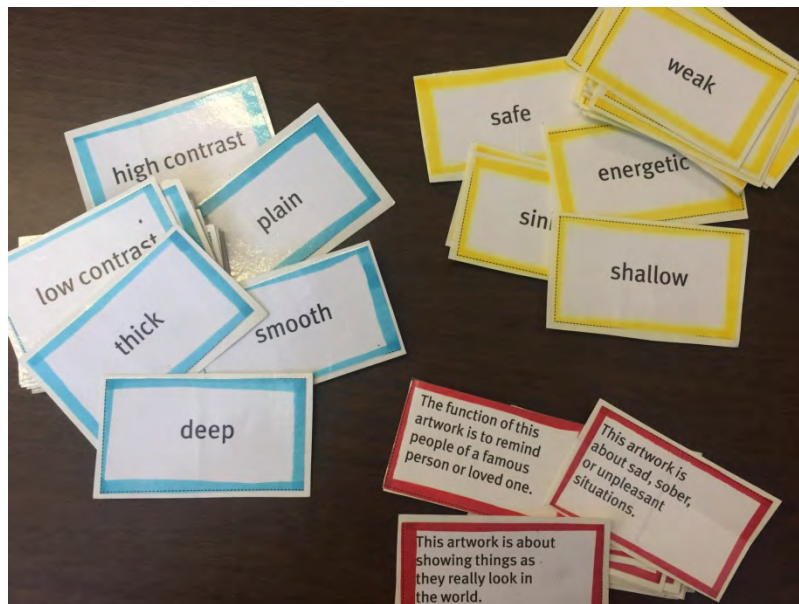


Figure 28: Art Critique Cards; N. Tucker, 2018

After we discussed Kara Walker students received their next assignment; create a silhouette based upon a personal social issue in the style of Kara Walker. Students referred to the

social issue mind map and chose a meaningful issue that they wanted to bring to light. Below are examples of student artwork from the lesson.



Student 1: This student loves animals and while trying to decide what they wanted their focus to be on they learned of the passing of the world's last male northern white Rhino. Her typical artwork usually features sea life but was able to make a statement about animal protection laws against poaching through this project.

Figure 29-32: Social issue silhouettes; N.Tucker, 2018



Student 2: Body image is a huge topic in Middle School. Students are very concerned with how they look to their peers and many of their insecurities bubble beneath the surface. This student has done an excellent job at conveying this issue using a silhouette.

Student 3: This student works through their feelings about the recent school shooting. Their work wrestles with gun control and mental health awareness.



Student 4: This artist was heavily impacted by the Women's March Movement and identifies herself as a feminist.

Creating Whimsical Art as a Form of Protest

Up until this point students were given mini art assignments to explore art activism. Having this time to culminate their art activism journey, students were put in the driver's seat of their learning with an open and unstructured assignment. To begin, we turned to art activist Nick Cave and his art and music making ways.

To continue to foster student collaboration, problem solving, and listening skills, I developed a game to motivate learners to investigate Nick Cave. In my personal experience, middle schoolers love games and if you can turn anything into a competition the better! Thus the “Art Detective” game was born giving students time to engage with his work in a fun and authentic way. Each group was given a picture of

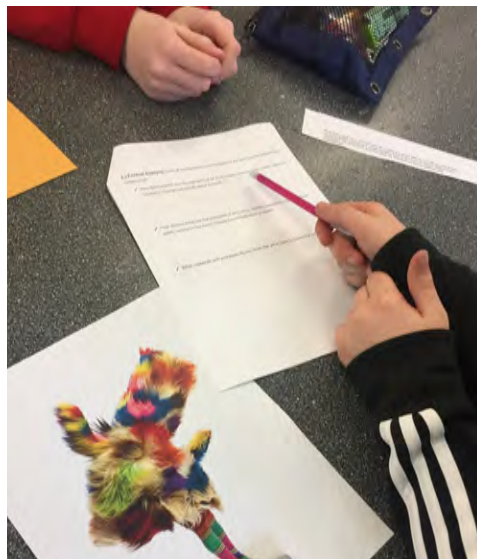


Figure 33: Art Detective ; N. Tucker, 2018

his artwork, a set of clues, and an art detective question sheet. Students had to decide who in their group was going to be the “lead detective,” “the recorder,” and finally “the reporter.” When students heard a “gong” noise they were allowed to open up one clue from their evidence packet. The art detective game allowed students to work together and unpack Nick Cave’s artwork before I gave them any information about the artist. Students were quick to arrive at the conclusion that his work was art activism. Group number one said; “He was using his art to show that even the objects with the least value can be bright and vibrant. He used his art to hide gender, race, and age. He used his imagination and let it travel.” Group number two said; “ He is trying to bring a sense of peace and equality by making it out of materials that will be subjected differently.” Finally, group number three said; “It doesn’t matter what I look like it matters who I

am. To distract people from another's race." Through these observations it was evident that students were able to look past the aesthetics and found objects unlike the superficial answers that I received about Linda Stein's artwork in the beginning of the unit. After continued art criticism assignments, students were getting better at interpreting pieces of socially activated art. Finally, students watched a Nick Cave video to hear firsthand how his sound suits were created and performed. Students were in awe.

Art students were asked to create an action plan for a sound suit in response to an event personally relevant to them. Though this was an open assignment the expectations were clear that it must be wearable, make sound, as well as be constructed out of found objects. Examples include; a mask, cuff, shirt, headdress, and shoes. I laid out an example of this type of artwork on the table and their eyes lit up. I asked students to guess what materials it was made out of and students shouted; "Seashells!" "Plastic!" "Glass!" The object pictured below shows the necklace I designed and constructed out of discarded and worn out garden gloves. I brought this example in for students to see my personal work and to continue the discussion of how objects can have a second life.



Figure 34: *Second Skin*, constructed from rubber gloves; N. Tucker,

Before students began the creation process they had to work on ideation. Below are the steps students had to take before transforming their object(s);

Reflect: Think of a pivotal moment in your life in which you were influenced by a larger public social event. For example: Election of a political leader, the end or beginning of a conflict, a natural disaster, or a personal situation.

Write: Write a detailed, first person description of the event establishing and describing the surrounding details as well as your feelings and reactions.

Share with a friend at your table and one not at your table.

Create: Imagine, return to this event and adopt a persona or disguise with an alternate reaction or response. What would this disguise look like? How would you act in this persona? How would others react? How would this influence future events and how would it influence who you are today?

Below are a sample of student responses and sound suits (Figures 35-39).



Figure 35: White Mask; N.Tucker, 2018

Student 2: “I am doing my sound suit on the pollution with plastic and the island of trash floating in the ocean. I plan on using shampoo and conditioner bottles. ”

Student 1: “My event is based on the shooting at the Jason Aldean Concert. As the concert was happening, a shooter entered into the concert with a gun, and in the middle of Jason’s one song, the shooter started to fire the gun trying to kill the crowd and Jason.”



Figure 36: Plastic necklace; N. Tucker, 2018

Figure 36: Plastic necklace; N.Tucker, 2018



Student 3: “The current situation I’m in with my mental health. My personality is very psychotic and crazy because I suffer from things such as chronic depression, sensory issues, anxiety, PTSD and dysphoria. This counteracts from my joking, friendly, and calm self.”

Figure 37: Black Mask; N. Tucker, 2018



Figure 38: Girl scout socks; N.Tucker, 2018

Student 4: “A pivotal moment in my life is when I joined girl scouts and gained a sense of belonging and figured out what I liked to do. I found out who I was.”

Figure 39: Old t-shirt; N. Tucker, 2018

Student 5: “When I heard on the news about child abuse it made me think, would people still treat kids the same if they were covered up in a sound suit? Is there a way I could use one of my sister’s old t-shirts and make the sound suit for her and film a video of her performing it?”



Throughout the art making process this unstructured and open assignment made me nervous. This was the first time I gave them such an assignment and I worried if they could handle it. Perhaps I was even more concerned if I could handle it. As I watched the creation phase unfold students resembled a colony of ants working together and utilizing every square inch of the classroom. Some were working on the back counter, some were on the floor, others moved tables to fit their needs and some even made their way to the art closet. Students did not stay in their respected tables like they once did. Now the space was open and they visited each other during the art making process. For the first time students looked comfortable in their art making. Feathers, yarn, plastic and glitter were flying all around the room and I was okay with that. Students were engaged and motivated all the while having a positive dialogic discussion.

We celebrated, wore our sound suits and danced the last day. Everyone performed their sound suit and shared their personal story with the class. We had a few giggles but at the same time understood the weight of the issues being brought to light. I ended by giving students the post-questionnaire and not so surprisingly their answers were more thoughtful and rich. Before, where there were missing answers, there were more complete and personal stories.

Conclusion

Art can be vast, subjective, and often times a powerful area of the curriculum at the middle school level. Students within this age group are beginning to develop a strong sense of self identity as well as finding their role in the world we live in. By being an “Explorer of the World,” I challenged students to think and reflect inwardly about themselves and the impact they can have on the world around them. It is at this point where my action research allowed students to look at art making with a social activist’s lens. Through action research I found that these

methods enabled students to share their voice and create meaningful artwork that they are passionate about;

- 1.) Build a classroom community that conveys trust and reinforces communication.
- 2.) Utilize the physical space to celebrate curiosity and choice.
- 3.) Allow students time and space to sketch and reflect on issues weighing on them.

Beyond the data collected, my favorite part of this action research was connecting with my students on a deeper level. In the Figure 40, two students pose with their sound suits. During the art making process they had also shared with me how their masks represented changes in their identity that they were working through. These students felt comfortable enough to share this with me and I was happy to know that I gave them the opportunity to explore this through their art making. After this picture was taken they kept their masks on and skipped down the hallway to show another teacher. I can still remember the joy and laughter emanating from these artists. It was in this moment that I realized that this art activism unit brought us all together. I heard students' personal struggles and discussed social issues weighing heavily on their minds. I gave them the time and space to reflect on the social issues that mattered to them. If I left them feeling anything at the end of this unit it is this: I see you, I hear you. I think that is what our students need to know from their educators. If we can continue to do that through our curriculum then profound artwork will follow.



Figure 40: Students celebrate wearing their sound suits; N. Tucker, 2018

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Appendix A: Questionnaire



Name: _____

Period: _____

1.) What is a social issue?

2.) Which social issues are most relevant to you?

a.) Personally

b.) To this school

c.) To this city

d.) To this state

3.) How can art be a form of activism, a creative response to a critical social issue?

4.) Should art be used to advocate, critique, or respond to social issues?

5.) Does an artist have a responsibility to comment on society?

6.) How can they do so responsibly? Do they have to do so responsibly?

6.) Should artists provoke divergent (differing) points of view about political, moral or other social issues?

7.) How might an artist depict one of these current issues in order to promote constructive discussion?

Appendix B: IRB Application



PennState

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Vice President for Research
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205 The 330 Building
University Park, PA 16802

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orp@psu.edu
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EXEMPTION DETERMINATION

Date: March 15, 2018

From: Joyel Moeller, IRB Analyst

To: Nicole Tucker

Type of Submission:	Initial Study
Title of Study:	ART ACTIVISM MATTERS: IMPLEMENTING SOCIAL JUSTICE ART PEDAGOGY
Principal Investigator:	Nicole Tucker
Study ID:	STUDY00009092
Submission ID:	STUDY00009092
Funding:	Not Applicable
Documents Approved:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Debate (0.01), Category: Other• Nicole Tucker (2.01), Category: IRB Protocol• Questionnaire (0.01), Category: Data Collection Instrument

The Office for Research Protections determined that the proposed activity, as described in the above-referenced submission, does not require formal IRB review because the research met the criteria for exempt research according to the policies of this institution and the provisions of applicable federal regulations.

Continuing Progress Reports are **not** required for exempt research. Record of this research determined to be exempt will be maintained for five years from the date of this notification. If your research will continue beyond five years, please contact the Office for Research Protections closer to the determination end date.

Changes to exempt research only need to be submitted to the Office for Research Protections in limited circumstances described in the below-referenced Investigator Manual. If changes are being considered and there are questions about whether IRB review is needed, please contact the Office for Research Protections.

Penn State researchers are required to follow the requirements listed in the Investigator Manual ([HRP-103](#)), which can be found by navigating to the IRB Library within CATS IRB (<http://irb.psu.edu>).

This correspondence should be maintained with your records.