

Material Culture and Issues-Based Art Education

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Abstract

Contemporary art education engages with material culture and the issues that surround it. It includes critical discussions about fine art, crafts, and design and other artifacts. It delves into the cultures that created the artifacts, the values that surround them, and their relevance to the lived experiences of people. Material culture and issues-based art education helps to make the concepts of culture explicit, facilitates critical responses, and assists students' understanding about the multiple ways people organize and make meanings about their worlds and brings art education into the most important discourses of contemporary life. With this foundational knowledge, the art student is then empowered with traditional and innovative techniques to create meaningful cultural objects of their own.

Key Words: Art Education, Pedagogy, Material Culture, Urriculum, Issues-based Art Education

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We are living in a time of disharmony. Political systems, financial systems, and educational systems are in struggling to stay afloat. People have lost jobs. Industries are suffering. Pandemics travel in airplanes around the globe. Mother nature plays Russian roulette with our sense of security.

At our world shakes in a global climate of unease and dis(ease), art education must adapt and open its doors its practices in order to meet the needs of our culture and our students. Art education must open its doors to other disciplines, ways of knowing and doing, and use whatever discourses are useful to help students develop their skills and ideas. One method to approach this goal is to develop a material/visual culture and issues-based art curriculum.

There are many types of art education throughout the world, some that include the study of fine art and objects of material culture, and others that continue to be almost exclusively technique-based. While technique is very important to art education, this essay builds a case for material culture as a foundation for art education within an issues-based curriculum that calls on social concerns to inform studio practice. It looks to contemporary arts practices to model the practices taking place in significant sites of formal learning in the arts.

Issues-based Art Education

An issues-based approach to art education is interdisciplinary. A teacher starts with an important social topic with which the students are familiar. The topic can include dynamic cultural events such as those listed at the start of this paper, or many others including issues of global concern including ecology, peace, nuclear energy, etc. For younger students, issues can be as simple as the importance of a good breakfast, the significance of smiling, or the ways toys may be designed for boys or girls. In this approach, the teacher starts with a discussion of the issue, then initiates student investigation/research on the topic, more discussion, and media exploration. There is no pre-defined procedure, and teachers are encouraged to work with the ideas in ways that make sense with their own classrooms, but it is

imperative that students be given the freedom to pursue multiple avenues of research that may include geography, history, science, or mathematics. It is in the process of teaching and learning within an issues-based material culture curriculum that students learn the mechanics of art making, looking at and talking about art, critiquing the world around them, and making multiple connections between art and other topics in the curriculum.

Material Culture

Material culture studies strives to be inclusive and does not privilege the visual sense over the other senses. (Bolin & Blandy, 2003, p. 254)

The term “material culture” defies any strict definition but “centres on the idea that materiality is an integral dimension of culture, and that there are dimensions of social existence that cannot be fully understood without it” (Tilly, Keane, Rowlands & Spyer, 2006, p. 1). Visual culture is a subset of material culture. The term “visual culture” privileges the visual sense and implies that objects under scrutiny are experienced through visual means. Using the term “material culture” expands the possible ways an object can be interrogated. While vision may certainly be used, “material culture” explicitly includes the other senses as partners in discovery and engagement. For example, if the object under investigation is a popular candy that might be making children fat, it is clearly relevant to discover how it smells and tastes!

Material culture is a term that is broad-based in its meaning and application, and describes all human-made and modified forms, objects, and expressions manifested in the past and in our contemporary world. (Bolin & Blandy, 2003, p. 249)

Using material culture pedagogy in art education starts with cultural engagement through the use of classroom discourse, reflections, research, and discovery. Using arts-based practices, the students respond by creating their own material culture from their own experience – including geographic location, gender, socioeconomic status, etc. This approach to art education

denies traditional modernist hierarchies of arts and crafts, high and low art, and engages criticality, bringing into conversation and studio practice material that is directly related to students' lives. The primary focus of this art education practice is to teach students to successfully and critically de-code and encode material culture – that is to thoughtfully understand and make artwork relevant to their lives.

Coding Culture

Innovations in communication technology have created nearly instant global cultures, fads, political movements, and as we've seen in the recent past, even revolutions. A country's ideological messages can easily cross borders that once were tightly controlled by geography, wealth, and language. Instant globalization almost insures that while traditional and/or local material cultural exists, it is inevitably affected and modified by global media access. These global messages affect the students' thinking and are important considerations as teachers develop methodologies to encourage their students see the complexity of phenomena. Teachers often benefit from listening and learning from their students who might be more tech-savvy than their teachers and whose daily practices often involve multimedia toys and international conversations. As art teachers adapt their lessons and modify their pedagogy to allow for social critique, art students learn how cultural artifacts (both material and virtual) articulate cultures and how they can serve as the stimulus for artwork.

I have written elsewhere about the pervasiveness of advertising as a cultural signifying system (Smith-Shank, 2008) but it's worth revisiting. Danesi (1995), an Italian-Canadian semiotician is an articulate contemporary cultural interpreter, and his ideas about how advertising influences our lives is useful:

Advertising's implicit messages, styles of presentation, and visual images are surreptitiously shaping the thoughts, personalities, and lifestyle behaviors of countless individuals as well as covertly suggesting how we might best satisfy our innermost urges and aspirations (p. 7) .

Using advertising images as part of art class discourse can help students develop critical skepticism and critique the ways the messages may have manipulated students' desire for objects and influenced their self-identities. Identity is critical. How students understand themselves, their neighborhoods, language communities, and how they understand themselves in relationship with their international peers is an essential part of their art education. Fukumoto (2007) conducted a study of children and their teachers from nine countries to understand how they responded to the idea of 'an art lunch' because the fundamental human need for food would most likely have universal appeal and yet the results would reflect cultural differences. The children in different cultural locations were guided to reflect on the many ways food is prepared, embellished, served, shared, and eaten. They had the opportunity to consider the implications of having enough food for survival and the regions of the world that are in crisis because of food shortages. With new technologies becoming more prevalent in classrooms throughout the world, more cross-cultural interrogations are possible. Material culture, taught within an issues-based curriculum can help students see and understand the multiple ways different cultural groups visually encode their worlds, and how belief systems and practices are evident in material cultural artifacts.

Difficult Material Culture

Relatively uncontroversial material culture, like lunch boxes, can be catalysts for teaching, learning, and practicing tolerance as in Fukumoto's (2007) research project, but also for intolerance. For example, Anna Makolkin (2001) conducted an analysis of political flags, and pointed to the numbers of agendas and passions flags have engendered throughout history including violence, that are a result of flag waving, or as she calls it, "flagomania" and flagomania continues to be a regular event on TV news. What does it mean to wag, wear, salute, or burn a flag?

Like flags, photographs are material artifacts that can give us pleasure or cause pain, disgust, anger, or even fear. Linnap (2007) considered those things that may or may not be photographed and what this restriction communicates about a society. As the ability to take more and more

photographs by more and more people increases, this too becomes an important part of discourse for art education.

Arts-based research is the form pedagogy takes when art education is issues-based and considered within the context of material culture. The products of individual and group research can be visual and/or written responses to artifacts or even news reports. Individual students can develop their own responses or groups of students can work together. Through these research projects, students become literate decoders of culture and they develop the ability to see think critically. Arts-based research pedagogy is not easy basic art education, but it is art education that is student and culture directed, critical and edgy, rich in content, and it can be very powerful. It may not always be as safe, clean, or non-controversial as the old types of art education, but it can be transformative.

“A number of influential societies have come to prefer art that entertains and support safe art [which] is a telling indication that its power lies dormant (Linnap, 2007).” Edgy art is based within cultural contexts and students’ lived lives. Knowledge of traditional high art is important for students to learn as it represents cultural capital, but a consideration of other material culture including traditional women’s arts, crafts, design, objects of techno-culture, as well as other artifacts that derive from diverse cultures can add to the richness of an art education curriculum. All types of material signifiers (the functional and dysfunctional alike) are potentially rich sites for cognition, and sites of reference for reflective creation of material culture by students and artists.

The consideration of material culture as a foundation for arts education ensures a lively, and risky path for educators interested in engaging with contemporary students. It’s filled with pitfalls (like the teacher not knowing all the answers), but which teachers can negotiate if they are willing to be co-learners. To meet the needs of contemporary art education, material cultural objects need to be interrogated, decoded, and through the teaching of practical technical skills, critically re-coded as students develop their thinking and art making skills. New media, advertising, rituals, costumes, personal adornments, fine art, popular culture, cityscapes, home interiors, and traditional crafts can find their way into art education discourse and can

be used to interrogate ideas and make meaning. Interpreting a variety of objects from multiple cultures, and from different points of view, invites metacognitive reasoning that can inform discourse and studio production activities that remain at the center of art education practices.

Conclusions

Using a material culture issues-based approach to teaching art inevitably complicates art teachers' lives by adding to the potential subjects that are available to art education classroom discussions. It was a lot easier when we used only high art exemplars as our only visual references. As Terry Barrett (2008) points out: "The goodness of the works of art studied in art history texts and courses is rarely if ever questioned"(pp. 1-2). With so many different artifacts and events competing for our attention, a really important question for busy art teachers inevitably becomes what to consider, and how to understand the artifacts and embedded ideologies competing for our attention. Must art teachers make choices to include or exclude certain objects, ideologies, genders, races, sexualities, and/or classes to fit within their curriculum? Not necessarily. Selection of content for education in material culture should start with relevant ideas and issues that coincide with students' lifeworlds, cultures, experiences, and ways of knowing juxtaposed with the lesson goals and objectives. Ideally, the content is a negotiated collaboration between the students and the teacher, involving interdisciplinary research, and focusing on engaging issues and meaningful discourse.

The point of material culture issues-based art education is to consider the questions that we didn't ask in previous permutations of the field including: Why is this important? Who says so? Why should we believe them? Where are the voices of minorities and women in this set of artifacts? Whose interests are being served by this exhibition or group of exemplars? Material objects play a critical role in contemporary art education. They ground the ways people think, learn, remember, and participate in life experiences. They anchor perceptions of reality and serve as touchstones that direct us from the past and into the future. Objects that are meaningful to students and events that resonate with their cultural experiences can serve

as springboards to effective and engaging art education. Students can learn to decode and encode relevant art about culture, cultural practices, traditions, and experiences. The move toward material culture is part of the chain of art education theories from industrial drawing to modernist child-centered self-expression, toward an architectural model of connoisseurship and disciplinary-based education, and most recently toward an issues-based material culture curriculum (and which includes visual culture art education). Art education focused on material culture at its best is critical, edgy, inclusive, holistic, and involved with the interrelationship of culture and its products. Art defined broadly is appropriate for a global culture of nearly instantaneous transmission of electronic images, political messages, and ideologies. Using all our senses, including vision to interrogate/decode and create/encode culture is an appropriate and timely task for art education.

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