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Art Ed Foundations
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“When any civilization is dust and ashes, art is all that's left over. Images, words, music. Imaginative structures. Meaning—human meaning, that is—is defined by them.” Taken from Margaret Atwood’s dystopian sci-fi novel *Oryz & Crake*, these words stay relevant to any artist or art educator. In post-pandemic times, schools are faced with increased issues of violence, lack of resources, mental health crises, and delays in social development. This is an added layer to continued segregation issues, low graduation rates for multilingual learners, and a rise in student diversity that teachers and schools are unprepared for (Spring, 2020). The need for a creative, personal practice of both inward and community reflection and expression is more relevant now than ever. Art education has the ability to address the multitude of these complex issues from a holistic approach that acknowledges students need to be seen and have a sense of belonging, while also growing their critical thinking and problem-solving skills. In response to 21st century issues, art education has advanced and adapted its pedagogy for a reconstructed arts curriculum based on what is relevant and meaningful for its students today. Through contemporary curriculum, critical theories acknowledging power and perspective, and student-centered learning, the art room is pivotal in a student’s lifelong ability to connect, belong, challenge, reflect, and create.

Since the start of the millennia, reform in art education has been evolving alongside the rapid change of the 21st-century. Following the prior decade’s Standards Movement, new waves of multicultural art, community-based art, and social justice art began to transform the ways in which we think about art education (Gude, 2004). The shift in thinking has moved away from Western

ideas of art as being craft or product-based, and towards contemporary ideas of making. Modernist and traditional practices have been updated to postmodern principles that provoke open-ended-ness, experimentation and play. Arthur Wesley Dow's *Principles of Design*, a formalist and Western approach to making, have been replaced with contemporary principles that align young artists closely with current professional artists. (Gude, 2004). In Cindy Foley's Ted Talk, *Teaching Art or Teaching to Think like an Artist?*, she argues art education and creativity should embrace ambiguity, experimentation, and open-ended problem-solving, rather than the old age idea that drawing realistically is the ultimate goal of being creative. Having more wide-spread access and understanding of what it means to be creative and an independent thinker further promotes others to engage with creativity instead of perpetuating the idea that people can't be artistic, especially if they can't draw (Foley, 2014). This creates a more accessible art room experience for all skills and learners.

Inclusion in an arts space is the driving force of culturally responsive teaching, where the structures of art making are built to support a wider range of students and cultures. The lens asks: who are you teaching, what are the population's needs, and how can they thrive in an art class, as opposed to, this is what art class is and you fail if you don't fit into this box. Furthermore, social justice and activist art give students tools for creating a basis for change and protesting important perspectives on human rights and equality (Dewhurst, 2018). The purpose of art has been reinvestigated and not limited to it being for self-expression, implying that art is not just for privileged communities but is in fact essential to the disenfranchised (Marshall, 2021). The past twenty years have changed art education as we know it. Students are no longer drawing still lifes or copying photographs in graphite, but creating collaborative installation or performance pieces that engage their own interests, identities and communities (Helwick, 2009). Students are no longer

being told what to make and how to make it, but are coached through developing a concept and then problem-solving how to execute an idea or process.

Art education has been following academic advancements in art history and art theory that have begun to have a huge impact on the art room experience. Theories such as critical multiculturalism, post colonialism and globalism bring conversations of power and perspective into the classroom. These theories expand beyond the idea of representing different artists at different times of the year, but consider multiple lenses of teaching and learning art daily. They center discussions on Whiteness, its oppressive systems, and acknowledges the white gaze or lens in which art is traditionally taught or viewed. Beth Link asks the critical question, “How can educators use images to cut through centuries of systemic erasures to help students see and critique White supremacy?” (Link, 2021). What is the impact of having students address the Western Canon? Students connect with what is relevant to the current events of their lives. Interacting with issues of race and power in the context of art can be powerful and challenges the learned misconception that art lives in a vessel of realistic drawing and beauty.

While acknowledging Whiteness, elevating invisible voices and perspectives is just as important in this work, as is understanding the ways in which subcultures think about and create art. “There are many critical issues to consider and reflect upon as one reimagines multiculturalism in art and in the art education classroom. A couple of issues at the fore of the critique of liberal multicultural art education include: Western constructed aesthetics and hegemonic curriculum” (Acuff, 2014). Art educators are deconstructing stereotypes, racism, and tokenism with thoughtful work on how to better teach and understand art from subcultures without perpetuating appropriation and misconceptions. For example, acknowledging that artists identify as individuals as a western lens, while many cultures see art through a collective lens such as folk art, indigenous art and

aboriginal art. Familiarizing oneself with groups about artists can prevent inaccurate grouping and assumptions for a more meaningful learning experience.

These theories all work to spark conversation around how we value art, art from different cultures, and for different purposes (Sowell, 2016). Postcolonial theory brings up “questions of subject, agency, identity resistance, and decolonization, which refers to examining the complexities of using indigenous, transnational, diasporic racial identity, politics, and multiple subjectivities in conducting research, both as the researcher and the researched” (Bode, 2014). This context allows for deeper discussions around power, and the ways these structures impact the way we perceive what counts as knowledge. Globalism expands on this by considering the ways in which cultures have complex connectivity, polarization, and hybridity with one another (Delacruz, 2009). Understanding the ways in which art movements, techniques, and ideas are recycled, built upon, and connected amongst time periods and cultures teaches students the full picture of what art discourse is. All these theories work together to create inclusive learning spaces on a deep and meaningful level for students. Sleeter’s Transformative Curriculum Design embodies postcolonial theory in order for educators to deconstruct their teaching practices for marginalized voices and perspectives to be heard and taught (Bode, 2014). This deep and important work investigating power and multiple histories is integral for students to feel valued and represented, while laying the groundwork for inspired yet authentic making as opposed to copying or appropriating artwork from marginalized groups.

The recent advancements in art education pedagogy and curriculum deconstruction all lead to student centered learning. Putting the student at the forefront of their art education empowers them to bring their previous knowledge to the space, follow their own interests, and learn agency and drive. Contemporary ideas of artists as researchers can be applied to students having the

opportunity to research their own history and cultures as a means to making art (Dewhurst, 2018). This puts students as the experts of their material while also giving them a chance to educate others. At the core of this mission comes the importance of community. It is integral for art students to have a sense of belonging in the classroom in order for them to make meaningful work around identity. Giving students this power and freedom to drive their studio practice contributes to community building through collaborative projects, critique, and self and peer assessment. Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process is a four-part critique structure used to elevate student voice, eliminate bias and ambiguity within discussion, and enable students to get what they want out of their feedback (Chavez, 2021). Other collaborative opportunities include tasking students with finding a connection with a peer despite differences in culture, a lifelong skill that can be applied to many endeavors (Dewhurst, 2018). This idea of not just tolerating or accepting differences, but understanding and celebrating them is what this work achieves in the art room. When students feel empowered in their learning, they are able to find meaning in their research, making, and community.

Art Education is important because of its transformative nature that empowers students to be actualized in their own voice, identity, and place in the world. Sometimes art class is the only opportunity students have to explore their identities and interests. By creating a sense of safety and respect, students can develop and strengthen their own voice as individuals and use art as a tool for processing their experiences. Art is the vehicle for this, whether they move on to be creators or makers, or not, they will hold the confidence in their perspectives, have the tools for communicating it, and the knowledge of how to work with others. Without an art education, students are at risk to suffer from being disconnected, uninspired, and unseen by Western, US education.

Sources

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