Diversity, Pedagogy, and Visual Culture

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Patricia M Amburgy is a professor of Art Education at Pennsylvania State University. Her article in the September 2011 issue of The Journal of the National Art Education Association address the education of pre-service art educators as it relates to a course she teaches entitled Diversity, Pedagogy, and Visual Culture (A ED 225). As a high school art teacher I was intrigued by this article in that I wanted to know more about how today’s art education students are being trained. I find it interesting that there is now a great focus on teachers being “agents of change”[[1]](#endnote-1) where it relates to social justice. In this article I will address some of the key points form Amburgy’s article as they relate to teaching high school students.

When I was in undergraduate school (1993-97) the focus was on teaching how to think and speak about art, make art and critique art. This was approached by my professors in terms of generalities; not any specific social relationships. The format of describe, analyze, interpret and judge for critiquing a work of art were laid out but there wasn’t much focus on relating what students saw in an artwork to contemporary visual culture specifically. The focus was on art from history and what we can learn about history through examining the art. Visual Culture is a relatively new paradigm in art education that I am playing catch up with. Even in making that statement I realize that it’s not necessarily true. It’s a new terminology and a revived focus on how art documents, comments on, and judges and influences a particular culture or society. It’s looking at contemporary art in everyday life, not just in a major museum or by dead artists. It’s realizing that we are constantly bombarded with visual messages and we have to either accept the dominant message or see if there is any hidden meaning behind the image. That hidden meaning varies depending on who is the viewer. This focus on visual culture is changing the focus of art education. No longer is it acceptable to just teach media, art making techniques, or art history. Art education now is more about teaching students to think for themselves, make judgments while being tolerant and accepting of diversity, and to how to become agents of social change.

Amburgy’s article is about the course she teaches, but it also exemplifies what the current beliefs about the “what” art teachers should be focusing on in their instruction, but not the “how” to incorporate it into practice. Those things I will have to figure out for myself.

While reading this article I kept asking myself, “How can I relate this to teaching high school student?” To do this I need to break down the article into specific points for further investigation and reflection.

**Point 1:** One of the missions of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) is to “prepare knowledgeable, skilled, and caring professional educators to become critical, reflective practitioners, researchers and artists, and agents of change for social justice in diverse contexts of educational practice.” (Art Education, 2009-2011).[[2]](#endnote-2)

My first reaction was to think, “So now we are expected to rid the world of social injustices while also teaching children how to make art? This sounds a lot like politics in the classroom, and that could get a teacher into trouble in a public school.” Then I thought some more about that mission statement and realized I’m already doing that with my instruction and have been all along. I just have not been focusing my art instruction exclusively on the social implications of the images we are bombarded with everyday. This reminds me of a quote by Picasso in reflecting on his painting *Guernica*, “Art is not made to decorate rooms. It is an offensive and defensive weapon against the enemy.”[[3]](#endnote-3) Contemporary art has become more political, often subversive, but that doesn’t mean that all art has to be political to be a catalyst for social change.

I’ve taught units on documentary and commentary art with a focus on how artists use their art to comment about an event or a social injustice. However, I’ve always used Guernica as the main artwork and compared it to representations of Goya’s Third of May and Velazquez’s Surrender of Breda to investigate the difference of documentary and commentary artwork.[[4]](#endnote-4)  While I still think using those paintings is a good idea, maybe it’s time to bring in some new, more contemporary images that students may be more able to relate to. This means more research on my part. But isn’t that part of NCATE’s mission as well?

**Point 2**: In describing her course content Amburgy explains constructions of diversity. As it relates to her class, “*diversity* includes all aspects of people’s identities that help define who they are. Aspects of identity include ethnicity, social class, race, gender, sexual identity, age and ability, among others.”[[5]](#endnote-5)

I recently began a unit on identity with my 3D Design class. We created a class word web about all the things that contribute to shaping a person’s sense of identity. I found it interesting that no one brought up gender or sexual orientation in any of the discussions. So many other contributors were identified easily and with only some debate. To me, this shows that as a group no one is comfortable bringing up sexual orientation as a contributor to who a person is. Which is interesting because the students in the halls of my school (especially the girls) don’t seem to have a problem expressing their sexual orientation what ever it may be. It’s a little different for the boys. Peer judgment is much harder on them than it is on the girls. I didn’t push the issue in class and sometimes I wish I had. On one hand I feel like I missed an opportunity for enlightenment. On the other hand if the students are not ready for such a discussion then as their teacher I don’t think I should force it on them.

Amburgy goes on to explain that one of the course objectives is for students to understand how visual culture contributes to placing people in “categories of privilege and social power, and keeping others in disadvantaged or subordinate positions.”[[6]](#endnote-6)

Diversity has many implications in life and education. The focus in public schools has been on teaching awareness and acceptance of diverse populations of people without judgment and with equality in social and educational opportunities; so long as everyone conforms to the accepted school behaviors. We are expected to embrace diversity. We are expected to individualize and diversify our instruction to meet the needs of all the students. Yet, in reality that doesn’t happen. The need in education to classify and target certain populations is accepted in the name of meeting the needs of students. This doesn’t always help the students as much as the administration thinks it does. What it does do is offer more services to students on either extreme of the ability spectrum and just pushes through the kids in the middle. There seems to be this expectation that all students’ educational curriculums need to be aimed at all students going on to college and university. Some students have more of an aptitude for specific skill instruction that is not necessarily “academic”. Not all students will have what it takes to succeed in a university, and forcing them into a structure of courses with that expected end could set them up for failure. This in turn perpetuates the separation between privilege and disadvantage. You are at a disadvantage if you have no skill or education. If your education stops at high school because you have become disillusioned with learning because your abilities were non-academic than you will be disadvantaged in life.

What all students need is to learn how to think for themselves. If students can learn how to interpret the barrage of images and information they interact with everyday then they are more likely to succeed in their chosen path in life. Knowing how to interact with all types of people and to be able to decipher, interpret and utilize information for a new purpose are important skills that are being left out of core area instruction. This is where the arts are necessary. Through the utilization of a visual culture approach students can be guided to develop their own conclusions about the intended or implied messages sent through the visual media they interact with every day. Through breaking down contemporary and historical imagery students can learn how to decipher, make connections and construct their own opinions. I am glad to see this becoming a focus in an undergraduate art education curriculum.

**Point 3:** “Visual representations are constructions, not mirrors of reality.”[[7]](#endnote-7) This reminds me of another Picasso quote. “Art is a lie that makes us realize the truth.”[[8]](#endnote-8) I used this quote as a writing prompt in my Advanced Art class last week. It led to an interesting discussion about what is presented as real but is not, such as images of models in magazines. These images are presented as the ideal forms of beauty. The projected “truth” is that beauty is attainable by those who buy the advertised products. This discussion led into how the media influences our sense of beauty and “fitting in”. Yet, the reality is that most all of those images have been digitally altered to smooth out skin and hair, accentuate the essential features and trim down the body. It is the lie that makes us realize the truth. The truth is we all don’t have body editors to “fix” our appearance. IN education the lie is that everyone, if given the same instruction and opportunity, will be prepared to go on to university after high school. Deciding for one’s self what is “truth” is an important skill for anyone in general.

**Point 4:** There are three essential concepts that govern Amburgy’s course. In their simplest form; visual representations will characterize groups of people, offer positions from which to view them, and that viewers make their own meaning in multiple ways.7  Within those three concepts she discusses how reoccurring imagery, or “stories” are important in shaping the viewer’s understanding of the normal and abnormal, and the desired and the undesired within a society. How can I putting these concepts to work in my own art instruction? The answer to that would be use the 5, 5, 5 method of instruction. If there are five artists, five artworks, and five groups of students each investigating 1 artist and 1 artwork then the entire class will have the opportunity to learn from each other’s presentation. I call it 5,5,5, but really it is four small groups and 1 large group inquiry. I model the process of inquiry by asking questions of the entire class to facilitating discussion. Then the students have those same questions again to work on in small groups as they relate to their specific artist/artwork. Each group presents their artist/artwork for a larger group sharing. The hard part is finding the artists and artworks that are appropriate and engaging for a high school class, constructing the questions that lead to critical inquiry, and getting students to participate in both the inquiry and the discussion. I’m not sure which of those three is the most difficult. No one ever said teaching would always be easy.

While Amburgy has the ability to devote an entire course to opening the eyes of her students to the importance of visual culture, as a high art schoolteacher I do not. What I do have is the opportunity to incorporate instruction in visual culture into my own curriculum as to teach my high school students how to think for themselves. From reading Diversity, Pedagogy and Visual Culture I get a glimpse into how the instruction of undergraduate art education is changing. It is evolving into a more holistic approach to educating the student. In the contemporary art classroom there’s more than just art being made. When there is diversity in instruction, which includes visual culture, in the k-12 art curriculum then there is thinking, investigating, art creating, discussion, reflection, personal expression and new knowledge being constructed by students. The more I read, the more I learn. This leads to the reconstruction, and new construction, of learning opportunities for my students. With these learning opportunities I hope that I can be a positive “agent of change” in the lives of my students.

1. Reference to the terminology used by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education in their mission statement and quoted later in the text. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Patricia Amburgy quoted this selection from the NCATE mission statement in her article and cited its source as from the Journal of Art Education 2009-2010. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. There are many websites listing the same quotes by Pablo Picasso. This one came from <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/public/page/lessons/PicassoLesson5> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. For more specific information on the unit I created and taught on art as documentary and commentary visit my website. <http://wirtartalk.weebly.com/unit-1-overview.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Patricia Amburgy’s definition of diversity that she uses in her Diversity, Pedagogy and Visual Culture class at Penn State. For more information about her visit <http://sova.psu.edu/faculty_staff/faculty_directory/patricia_amburgy/patricia_amburgy_phd> [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Patricia Amburgy’s definition of diversity that she uses in her Diversity, Pedagogy and Visual Culture class at Penn State. For more information about her visit <http://sova.psu.edu/faculty_staff/faculty_directory/patricia_amburgy/patricia_amburgy_phd> [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Patricia Amburgy’s definition of diversity that she uses in her Diversity, Pedagogy and Visual Culture class at Penn State. For more information about her visit <http://sova.psu.edu/faculty_staff/faculty_directory/patricia_amburgy/patricia_amburgy_phd> [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. There are many websites listing quotes from Pablo Picasso. This one came from <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/p/pablo_picasso.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-8)