

# TEACHING CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING WITHIN COMPREHENSIVE ART EDUCATION

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Art educators in many countries face similar challenges in gaining respect for art as an essential component in the school curriculum. Following a general review of national, state, and local education systems in the United States, this discussion reviews the structure of Comprehensive Art Education, an approach that has proven effective for improving the status of art education nationally. The Comprehensive approach is based on four characteristics: Knowledge of learners; foundation in educational theory; knowledge of school practices; and comprehensive valid art content. The four characteristics of this approach provide a platform for advocacy and for variations in the art curriculum based on the needs of local situations. Examples of art teachers in their classrooms are provided and discussed. Although every country has its own unique profile for art education within the larger education system, some variations or adaptations of this approach to art education might be useful in other cultural settings.

Note: The topic of this article was originally presented as a paper for the

Asia Regional Congress of the International Society for Education Through Art (InSEA) which was held in Beijing, China, in December, 2004. The theme of the Congress was "Art Education and Cultural Understanding."

## **Introduction**

The International Society for Education Through Art (InSEA) was founded on beliefs and principles expounded eloquently by Sir Herbert Read of Great Britain, following World War II, in his book, *Education Through Art* (1945). Read spoke out powerfully against "the universal evidence of insensibility" in the human family. His work is an attempt to overcome through education this "insensibility to beauty and truth, to goodness and glory" (p. 303). Read advocated learning about art from many cultures as a means to gain sensibility. He urged us to "look further around and discover (works of art) in other times and countries." He said, "We must look at all types of art, and only then shall we be in a position to understand how art appeals to the imagination" (p.31).

## **Teaching is a Noble Profession**

I am proud to be an art teacher among fellow teachers from many countries. I first entered the classroom as a junior high school art teacher in 1961. I taught junior high and high school students in California for 12 years—some of the most rewarding years of my life. Teaching is a noble profession. As teachers, at whatever level or circumstance, we have the opportunity to change lives for good, to bless others and make their lives richer, fuller, and more rewarding. To be a teacher is a privilege.

Teaching is difficult and demanding as well as rewarding. The early years as a teacher can be very challenging. In the United States many teachers drop out of the profession during the first two or three years. In many instances this might be the result of poor preparation. This is why so many of us who teach at the university level are demanding of undergraduates as we prepare them for the challenges they will face with their first school assignment (Hurwitz and Day, 2001). We want them to succeed. We want them to be ready. We want them to enjoy teaching, to impress their students, and to enjoy the process of education with their students.

## Challenges for Art Education in Many Lands

Art educators in their respective countries deal with similar challenges and problems. Perhaps that is why we enjoy meeting together at international gatherings, reading international journals, and corresponding with our international colleagues. As a group of professional colleagues, we are very interested in learning from each other.

The broad issue of improving art education at the national level is important for every country. My experience on this topic comes from 10 years as a member of the Board of Directors of the National Art Education Association (NAEA), and from working with the Getty Center for Education in the Arts during the 17 years of their activity in the field of art education. My comments are directed toward the national level of art education and advocacy for art education. Every country has a different education system, and art education must find its place within each respective system.

Two generalizations guide this discussion:

- First, Art should be included in the general education of all students.
- Second, regardless of the type of art education we intend to provide, we will be successful only if art is provided regular space and time in the school curriculum.

Study of art is an essential part of a complete general education for all people, young or old. However, art education does not always receive sufficient support and respect within communities and school systems. Art education is not always adequately funded. Art education is not always required for all students, every year. This is true in the U.S. and in some other countries, as well. In addition to time in the school day, another sign of adequate support for art education is the level of implementation of the art program. Art should be available for all students as part of general education. Art also should be available as advanced study for students with special interests and abilities in art and for those who will pursue one of the many careers available in the visual arts.

Faced with the need to improve, art educators ask incisive questions: What has been done in other districts, states, and countries to address these issues? How can we assure that each child and young person receives a quality art education? What ideas have proven successful for improving the

status of art education? Can the success of others be translated across cultures, school systems, and countries? These questions define the very reasons why we come together as international conferees.

### ***Art Education in the United States***

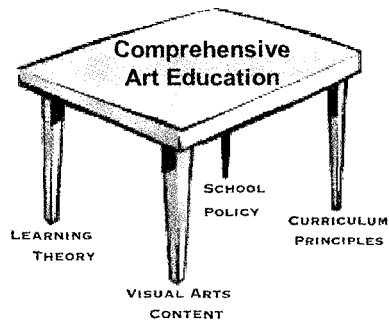
The United States of America is a country of approximately 288 million people whose heritage derives from all parts of the world and from every cultural group. The cultural diversity of the United States continues to expand as approximately one million legal immigrants enter the U.S. each year and many more enter without legal documentation.

The U.S. is committed to provide a free public school education for all children from ages 5 to 17, regardless of their backgrounds, languages, or abilities. The culturally diverse population of 53 million school children and young people are educated within local school districts in each of the 50 states. Each state has a somewhat different approach to education and each of the many school districts in a state has a somewhat different educational program. Schools are funded by a combination of local, state, and federal money. By far the largest proportion of funding for public schools comes from the individual states and from the local school districts within each state. Most educational decisions are made at the local level, including the extent to which art and music are included in the curriculum at each grade level. Over the past 40 years, the status of art and music in the elementary and secondary schools has increased markedly (NAEA, 2001).

In the U.S., there is no required national curriculum for any subject. This is because the national Constitution relegates responsibility for education to the states and the local communities within each state. There are, however, voluntary national standards that influence many state and local school programs. *The National Visual Arts Standards* were developed by the National Art Education Association (NAEA) in 1994. The standards adhere broadly to a discipline-based approach to art education, which has become widely accepted in a majority of the states. This approach is commonly known as Comprehensive Art Education.

# The Comprehensive Art Education Platform in the United States

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As a requirement for success, art education must be situated on a strong platform for implementation and for advocacy. The Comprehensive Art Education (CAE) approach provides a solid platform for rationale and advocacy in art education. The platform is supported by four legs:

- Knowledge of Learners
- Education Theory
- School Practices
- Art Content

## ***Knowledge of Learners***

In the U.S., all students have access to at least 12 years of education, regardless of their abilities, disabilities, heritage, or language. The range of students is wide, but by law, all are guaranteed an education that meets their special needs. For example, the U.S. Office of Education has designated and described the range of disabilities with which teachers must be familiar. Gifted and talented students also are part of the student population in general education. English is the language of instruction in nearly all schools, yet many students speak English as a second language. It is safe to say that art teachers need full understanding of learners. It is interesting to know that many learners who have difficulty in other subjects in the curriculum find success and even joy in the art class.

## ***Education Theory***

The Comprehensive (CAE) approach is tailored for general education, not only for learners with special interests in art. A basic premise is the universal

requirement for art education, the belief that “no one can claim to be truly educated who lacks basic knowledge and skills in the arts.” (NAEA, 1994, p. 1)

Comprehensive Art Education is founded in education philosophy and theory. Psychologist and educator, Jerome Bruner (1960), wrote of the spiral curriculum where concepts might be presented with increasing complexity at several grade levels. He insisted that valid concepts from the disciplines could be taught in forms appropriate for young children. Psychologist David Henry Feldman (1987) wrote of a continuum of understanding that eventually reaches the discipline level. Philosopher of education, Harry S. Broudy (1987, 1988), provided the rationale for the arts in education. Elliot Eisner (1987) has written and spoken eloquently regarding the place and the essential contributions of art in the lives of children and young people.

### ***School Practices: School Districts and Local Schools***

Comprehensive Art Education is organized to conform to the current system of general education. Art education uses the language and conventions of general education, including educational goals and objectives, curriculum, and assessment. Comprehensive art education is intended to complement and support the regular school curriculum.

The CAE approach is tailored for implementation within school systems. It takes into account the structures and practices of schools. For best results, an art curriculum is implemented district-wide, with appropriate variations for individual schools, classes, and teachers. Curriculum and assessment of student progress are important components.

The paramount role of the teacher is recognized: the teacher is the person who makes final decisions regarding curriculum content, teaching methods, and strategies for assessment. The art teacher is the final arbiter of content in the art curriculum. The wealth of potential art content from the art disciplines provides each teacher with opportunities to meet the needs of local communities and individual students.

### ***Art Content Derived from Art Disciplines***

Perhaps the most widely known aspect of Comprehensive Art Education, formerly known as Discipline-Based Art Education or DBAE (Dobbs, 1998), is an emphasis on art content. For decades, beginning in the 1960s, art

educators, scholars, and theorists in the U.S. had decried the lack of content from the real world of art in the dominant media-based curriculum of that era. Gradually, the field of art education moved toward recognition of art history, art criticism, and art production as the central focus for art teaching. Eventually, the philosophical component, aesthetics, was included. Visual culture is included within the Comprehensive construct.

Comprehensive Art Education promises student learning of valid art content. Because art content for instruction is based in the art disciplines, students are engaged with real, valid, and important ideas and practices in art.

### ***Art History***

Art history encompasses the visual arts of all world cultures from prehistoric times to the present. The arts of tribal societies, naïve or folk artists, cultural traditions of art (such as calligraphy, painting, bronze vessels and sculpture, and ceramics), and applied arts (such as illustration, graphic design, animation, fashion design, and architecture), are included in the study of art history. All this content is available for selection by art educators as part of the art curriculum. Over a period of 12 years of schooling, children and young people in a Comprehensive art program would encounter and study a wide range of art from many cultures and sources (Clark, Day, and Greer, 1987).

### ***Aesthetics: Philosophy of Art***

Psychologist Jerome Bruner (1960) famously stated that “any subject can be taught effectively in some intellectually honest form to any child at any stage of development”(p. 33). Bruner’s dictum applies to aesthetics, the philosophy of art. Children and young people deal instinctively with philosophical questions about the nature and purposes of art. Aesthetics in the art classroom deals with questions such as:

- What objects or activities can be accepted as art?
- How is art defined differently within different cultures?
- What are the purposes for which art is used?
- How do the visual arts convey meaning?
- How is quality of art works determined?

The four disciplines of Comprehensive Art Education are not taught separately, but are integrated in the classroom. Aesthetics questions often emerge while children are making art, responding to art, or studying the art of other cultures.

### **Art Criticism**

Art criticism focuses primarily on the postmodern world of contemporary art. Students naturally talk about what they see in art, offer opinions, and indicate their preferences. The study of art criticism integrated with the other art disciplines assists children to develop their skills for interpreting meaning in art, responding to new developments in art, and understanding specific works of contemporary art. Students in middle level and high school might learn to approach art from various theoretical perspectives, such as a psychoanalytical view of Mexican artist Frida Kahlo's self-portraits, where knowledge of her traumatic accident and injury lends meaning to her work.



They might approach Jackson Pollock's abstract paintings from a Modernist or formalist perspective, which values the flatness of the canvas, the quality of the paint medium, and the artist's direct interaction with events that he has initiated in the act of painting. They would learn to appreciate Ellen Wiley Todd's (1991) feminist essay on Edward Hopper's *Office at Night*, painted in 1940, which analyzes the gender roles of a boss and his secretary working late. Students would study works such as African-American artist Fred



Wilson's museum installation, *Mining the Museum*, which explores political and racial issues inherent in museum collections and exhibitions (Corrin, 1994).



### ***Applied Arts and Visual Culture***

The postmodern world of contemporary art is loaded with examples of applied visual arts such as architecture, fashion design, illustration, graphic design, and animation. Visual culture is both pervasive and influential in the lives of children and young people in the United States. Advertising in all forms, the movie industry, and the Internet have opened the world of multimedia to children, for good and ill. The study of visual culture is an important component within Comprehensive Art Education. In the words of art critic, Howard Risatti (1987), art education should consider "the necessity of visual literacy as a way of communicating meaning in modern society. From the local mall to the downtown skyscraper,...to television advertisements, messages that not only reflect but also promote social values are being imposed on audiences unable to comprehend their hidden

meanings because of lack of knowledge of visual forms.... (p. 219)”

### ***Art Production: Making Art***

Art making remains at the center of Comprehensive Art Education. Learning activities derived from art history, aesthetics, and art criticism enrich and complement the art making of students at all levels. The majority of class time is spent with students making their own art, discussing their creative work, and exhibiting their work for others to view. Students use valid art materials and methods related to the world of art. Traditional forms such as drawing, painting, and printmaking are taught and learned. Contemporary forms such as video, installation, environmental art, and digital art should be included in their comprehensive study of art making over the 12 years of their school careers. Visual culture is related to art careers in graphic design, illustration, photography, and advertising. Students engage in art making activities related to all of these traditional and contemporary art media and methods.

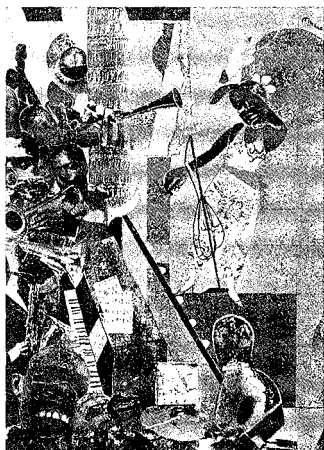
CAE is dynamic and flexible. Whether the content for art education is related to multicultural education, creative expression of students, or the political issues associated with visual culture, art teachers have access to a wealth of art material for teaching. In this postmodern era, the choices for art content are almost overwhelming.

## **Comprehensive Art Education: A Platform for Implementation and Advocacy**

### ***CAE: A Platform for Study of Cultures***



Ethel Tracy teaches art in the elementary school of a predominantly African-American neighborhood in Watts, near Los Angeles, California. She selected the art of Romare Bearden for her curriculum unit that relates art and American history. Ethel wants her students to understand the migration of Black people from the rural South to the urban North during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Bearden chronicled this migration in his colorful collages and related them to the advent of American jazz music, which Bearden loved. This richly textured unit integrates the art disciplines with music, symbols in art and culture, and the history of African-American people. Students created their own collages, drawing upon the store of images and sounds gained through their study of Romare Bearden and his art (Day, 1995a).



***CAE: A Platform for the Study of Postmodern Art***



Sharon Seim teaches middle school art in Bellevue, Nebraska. In her curriculum unit on the art of today, she encourages students to question

some of their basic assumptions about art as they view works by contemporary artists. They develop alternative definitions of the art concept, "landscape," as they study works by Christo and Jeanne-Claude, and Andy Goldsworthy. They address postmodern concepts such as "appropriation" as viewed in Jim Reinders' "Carhenge," an arrangement of automobiles stacked and placed according to the exact measurements of prehistoric Stonehenge in England. Students collaborate to interpret value-laden art such as "Portable Pueblo," by Native-American artist, Robert Haozous (Day, 1995b).

Working in teams, the students research current social issues such as environmental pollution, loss of the rain forest, and extinction of animal species. They express their views through their own art work that comments on social issues. As a culminating experience, students launch their floating "commentary islands," in a pond near the school. The students read statements they have composed.

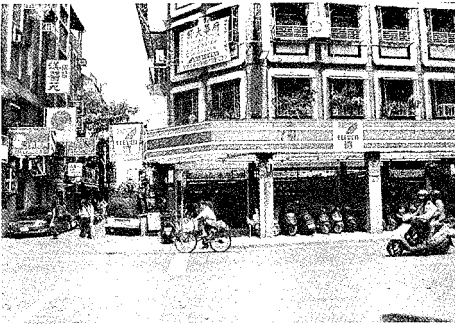
Student: Our island represents the destruction of the fragile rain forest biology. The wall represents the pushing out of civilization. The damaged trees show the effect of pollution on our forests. As you see, less than half of the rain forest is still green and standing. Our team members brought the following personal symbols to our island. Lindsay contributed the animals from her collection. They symbolize all the animals endangered by disappearance of the rain forest. Ashley contributed a rubber stamp as a symbol of the systematic way our wild places are being stamped out.

Student: It is our American dream that our generation might live to see a world that is clean and filled with peace (Day, 1995b, transcribed from video).

When these students have their 10-year class reunion, which class sessions will they remember? Which learning experiences will they recall? I think these students will not only remember this experience in art class, but they will remember the concept they were learning at the time. Their lives were changed for the better as a result of this teacher's efforts.

### ***CAE: A Platform for the Study of Visual Culture***

Chiang, Hsiu-Chi, of Taiwan, developed a curriculum unit based on the impact of visual culture in the lives of her students. Ms. Chiang identified and selected a work of art featured at the Taipei Museum of Fine Art. It is titled *Grocery*, the work of Chen, Ming-Te and winner of the 2002 Taipei Arts Award given to young contemporary Taiwan artists. Chen's three-dimensional installation features a traditional Chinese grocery store on one side and a 7-ELEVEN franchise convenience store on the other side.



Chen's *Grocery* raised a number of issues for Hsiu-Chi and her students. Why are the 7-ELEVEN stores popular in Taiwan? What attracts young shoppers to the 7-ELEVEN? What are some of the social and cultural implications of an international franchise from the U.S. taking over local businesses in Taiwan? What is the future of locally owned family grocery stores? How do local groceries contribute to neighborhood life? Do international franchises such as 7-ELEVEN make similar contributions?

Ms. Chiang and her students explored topics such as: Changes in Consumer Society; Systems of Corporate Identification; and an Internet link titled "Why women and girls must fight the addictive power of advertising." She provided many images for her students including photographs she took in her own neighborhood. Teacher and students developed a detailed history and background of the 7-ELEVEN franchise, which has more than 24,000 stores in 17 countries and total sales in excess of \$33 billion in 2002.

In studying the 7-ELEVEN, students learn how huge business franchises can change the social system in local neighborhoods. What happens to the small family markets when a franchise moves into the neighborhood? What is

gained in the neighborhood, and what is lost? These questions lead students to learn more about marketing systems, display design, logos, and corporate identity through graphic design. The range of learning can be broad and students have opportunity to follow their own interests in relation to the larger study. Finally, students created their own designs for markets that they believe will best serve the community. They are able to apply social and business concepts as well as design principles to their own work.

## **Conclusion: A Pattern for Improving Status of Art Education**

These are a few examples of Comprehensive Art Education in actual art classrooms. The Comprehensive approach is the most widely-accepted in the U.S. Through the efforts of the NAEA, many state professional organizations, the Getty Center for Education in the Arts, and a consortium of professional organizations, the Comprehensive approach has become the foundation for the infrastructure of art education. *The National Visual Arts Standards* were developed a decade ago, approved by the U.S. Congress, and have been adopted by a majority of the 50 states. The standards for National Board Certification of art teachers (NBPTS, 1998) are based on the Comprehensive approach, and the *Standards for Art Teacher Preparation* (Henry, 1999), developed by the NAEA, are consistent with Comprehensive Art Education.

This combination of (1) a well-developed platform for rationale and advocacy, (2) support of strong professional organizations, and (3) development of a national infrastructure to implement art education, has supported art education in the nation's schools. The most recent research indicates that:

- 87% of public elementary schools in the U.S. offer art instruction.
- 93% of public secondary schools in the U.S. offer art instruction (NCES, 2002).
- 85% of secondary art teachers are certified to teach art and 55% have Masters degrees.
- 86% of secondary art teachers indicate that their curriculum conforms to the National Visual Arts Standards (NAEA 2001).

Art educators in the U.S. are pleased to see these high percentages. Yet, we realize that much improvement is still needed. We are not certain that all students receive adequate instruction in art every year. We are not sure how much time, on average; students have in art class each year. We are not certain of the quality of art instruction in every school. Art educators in the U.S. have a great deal of work ahead toward improving art education for all students. We can learn from other countries, some of which provide art education for virtually 100% of their students.

In conclusion, I return to these basic premises:

- First, Art must be included in the general education of all students.
- Second, regardless of the type of art education we wish to teach, we will not be successful if art is not provided regular space and time in the school curriculum.

Let us continue to work toward these goals in our respective countries and situations, and let us learn from each other and support each other across cultures and national boundaries as we labor together in this worthy cause.

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