Interest Group
Caucus of Social Theory in Art Education (CSTAE)

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Last semester, I had a student who regularly shook my hand, saying thank you on her way out after each lecture.

I also had a student participant in my dissertation study who hugged me as we wrapped up our first face-to-face interview, though we had only just met 10 minutes earlier. The previous semester, I had a student who played the kazoo in a royal march tune as I walked, every class, from the classroom door to the class computer. It was awkward at first, but the other students enjoyed it and it seemed to mean something to the student, so I just went with it (and enjoyed it).

These memorable interactions with students suggest to me that the digital age has not eliminated the need or space for social interaction.

For the past several semesters, I have noted that during our first day of class, more and more of my students ask questions about me, my background, my interest in art, and why I chose to teach. The questions are personal, but not invasive; the students seem to genuinely want to know who I am. This makes sense, as they do, after all, spend a significant amount of their time with me, physically in class, as well as intellectually, as they read and complete their assignments at home. So it seems that students want not only to know about their instructors but to connect with them.

A common lament by many in our 21st century, tech-savvy society is that we are losing human connection with one another. Many argue that social media has replaced direct social interaction. However, these memorable interactions with students suggest to me that the digital age has not eliminated the need or space for social interaction. Rather it forces us to reevaluate the quality and nature of the social interaction we seek and encourages us to create spaces for such experiences when necessary.

The framework of symbolic interactionism theory argues that humans—in this case, undergraduate students—are active agents in shaping their world (Herman and Reynolds, 2003), as opposed to passively letting the constructed world, such as social media or digital technology, shape it for them. We may think that in the absence of—or without limitations of—social media interactions, students are forced to become active agents.

However, we might consider instead that embodied rather than virtual interactions may be viewed as encouraged rather than forced, when we view students as active agents in shaping reality. Looking at these student encounters with me, their instructor, through a double lens of social interactionism and embodied cognition, supports this nuance in verbiage.

To clarify, embodied cognition argues that human cognition develops through an embodied experience—basically, what we in education refer to as "active learning." Most undergraduate students are digital learners reliant on touch-screens and instant information. Embodied cognition via the touchscreen frames much of their (and to be fair, our) existence.

But beyond browsing my social media profiles, there is no opportunity for embodied learning when students are in my classroom, face-to-face on that first day trying to figure me out. So, before students can assign to me a meaning from which they base their behavior toward me, they must become active agents in creating a chance for embodied knowing, either through symbolic interactions of knowing—like a friendly, post-class handshake ritual, an awkward but surprisingly welcome hug, or playing a kazoo as if I were royalty entering the room.

A critical point of social interactionism is that there must be consensus about, and of, meaning in the social interaction. If I am interpreting their actions correctly, in contexts of social interactionism and embodied cognition theories, my students' symbolic interactions with me are ultimately modes of communication, of a desire to know me. Their active attempts to engage with my class by way of connecting with me on a physical plane reflect the connections between the actions of our bodies and the processes of our minds. And if that is the case, then it makes me miss my royal kazoo entrance more so than I already did.

These everyday efforts at meaningful communication and connection seem especially welcome in a world of increasingly confusing and often chaotic interactions, in real and virtual social worlds. And though I might need, for legal reasons, to curb the unsolicited hugs, I will continue to welcome the handshakes of recognition and gratitude.

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Reference

Herman-Kinney, N. J. & Reynolds, L. T. (2003). *Handbook of symbolic interactionism*. New York, NY: Alta Mira.

Rebecka Black
CSTAE Columnist. PhD Candidate, Art & Visual Culture Education, School of Art, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ. E-mail: blackr@email.arizona.edu
Ann Ramsay
CSTAE Columnist. Adjunct Faculty, Art & Visual Culture Education, School of Art, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ.
E-mail: annabrooksramsey@email.arizona.edu
Manisha Sharma
CSTAE Coordinator. Assistant Professor, Art & Art History, Visual Culture Education, School of Art, University of Arizona, Tucson.
E-mail: msharma1@email.arizona.edu