



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

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FOCUSED FOR CHANGE

I find that while waiting for the day's prompt, the 38 high school art students in my class are deeply involved in conversations about the current state of the nation. They seem overwhelmed by the need to communicate and for reassurance that they are not alone in their responses to surrounding circumstances. They want to know if the ideas buzzing in their minds are similar to or different from their classmates. They talk about what can be done about the state of the nation and discuss what comes next for them.

In the art classroom, beyond the constraints of standardization, offering freedom for student-directed topical discussion in relation to making art allows learners to dissect their own biases and navigate those of their peers.

It is obvious to me that the individuals in this student body are forces to be reckoned with. They have the energy and curiosity required to exist in a world that tells them #Enough, #Metoo, #RedForEd, #ImAlreadyHome. This is their everyday environment, and they want to effect change. They look to me for resources and examples of how to navigate life in constructive and successful ways, to address the sociopolitical climate of their world.

I see two sides to an educator's responsibilities that need a balance. One involves policies and district requirements calling on us to check

biases and personal opinions at the door. The other side presents student expectations that seek honest and true sources of guidance. Not all of those 38 students want my opinions. Instead, they need me to teach them how to develop workable solutions while thinking about their situation as a social body. These students are hungry for an outlet to communicate their thoughts and feelings about the country. I want to facilitate art education in a way that empowers learners to become active members of their communities, to be able to live and theorize about social situations. This is a life skill that helps them understand how theories present in real life. Particularly, how social theory works in the art class.

Psychologist Lev Vygotsky believed that humans learn in cultural settings in ways that cannot be understood apart from the settings themselves (Woolfolk, 2007, p. 39). This suggests that these 38 students would not embody the same energy in a different location. Their experiences are a result of the cultural dynamic they have defined for themselves and their subcultural norms. This includes a learning environment where the students have the freedom to explore aspects of their lives that give them pause, where their intellectual processes will not be judged but lead to making products of their own design.

Elliott Eisner suggested that we look to the "relationship of the content of school programs to the kinds of mental skills and modes of thinking that students have an opportunity to develop. In this sense the school's curriculum can be considered a mind-altering device" (Eisner, 2011, p. 9). Some 36 years since Eisner wrote about these realities, we are still struggling with how to improve the learning conditions

in our classrooms, the content of our curricula, and the structure of our education system. The struggles currently faced in education are a result of policies that regard measuring the amount a pupil learns and gains in a year via standardized tests. Teachers, however, can see gains in students that policy makers often do not.

In the art classroom, beyond the constraints of standardization, offering freedom for student-directed topical discussion in relation to making art allows learners to dissect their own biases and navigate those of their peers. They learn how to traverse censorship by considering how the audience will receive their intended meaning within and beyond their subcultural location. This directs students to explore critical thought processes and multistep problem solving, which in turn leads to individual ownership within group dynamics.

As we head toward midterm elections in November, the discussions of my (and no doubt your) students will become more intense. It is up to us art teachers, as a social body, to discuss and share the modes of discussion and artistic production that have worked to empower our students to engage in their world in meaningful ways. ■

References

- Eisner, E. W. (2011). *The arts and the creation of mind*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Woolfolk, A. (2007). *Educational psychology*. Boston, MA: Pearson/Allyn and Bacon.

Find opportunities on www.cstae.org and on www.facebook.com/groups/CSTAE/ and resources on JSTAE, Online Curriculum Portfolio (<https://naea.digication.com/cstae>).

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