

**The Arts as a Door for Social Change:
Reasons for Implementing Social Change Projects**

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Abstract

A variety of resources suggest that there should be a greater importance placed on teaching art education students about democracy, cultural awareness, and social cause projects. It is up to the art educators to create organized lessons that allow students to understand their role in a democratic nation and to understand their own culture in order to create work that can bring light to other cultures and societal issues. This paper provides plethora of overlapping opinions about the benefits and the vital necessity to educate students in the ways that they can be proactive citizens. The art educators have a social responsibility to the students to teach the students about the significant role that art plays in the communities, and the ways that students can utilize their creative freedom to take action in the world around them.

Keywords: democracy, inter-cultural, cross-cultural, social change, social action, social practice, art education, curriculum

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In our contemporary society, art education has been influenced by the experiences of past educators and researchers. The current living environment is intertwined among communities across our country and our world. It is up to the teachers to foster the idea of altruism in their students by inspiring projects that embrace social change. Art for social change is a great way to bring people together, make them aware of community issues, and create neighborhoods that thrive. Ianni (1968) explained that there is a “consistent agreement among anthropologists and artists on the role of the arts as agents of social change” and the arts as the “spirit and image of a particular culture or society” (p. 17). Art embraces all cultures, and the creation of art has been around an impressive amount of time. Therefore, as long as art is a living and breathing concept, then there is no doubt that it can be used to foster changes in our mindsets. Roman (1968) wrote that it is vital to understand and accept the power of art and to recognize its necessity because “every work of art is a moral act” which “no matter how removed from social relevance it seems, both triggers and expresses social change” (p. 23). Contemporary art holds in its grasp a potential for dialogue, controversial or not, about our society.

Students and their identities are constantly influenced by popular culture, and “educators should address issues of how to think about popular culture, through multiple perspectives, performative interpretation, and meaningful productions” (Tavin, 2003, p. 201). Art educators should increase their scope of classroom lessons and construct lessons that require students to use their foundational skills to create projects that speak to people outside of the classroom. As students grow to be independent artists they will assume roles as group leaders who spearhead creative projects in their neighborhoods, increase “neighborhood self-awareness”, “reach segments of the population inaccessible to traditional social-service professionals”, and “serve as

a unique communications bridge between the neighborhood and program administrators”
(Roman, 1968, p. 27).

This paper focuses on democratic ideals, intercultural understanding, and changing the society for the better in the art classrooms. Students may understand their position in our democratic society and understand the importance of democracy in the creative field. Art educators should teach students to learn about their own cultures and assert their own position in their environment which will allow them to become more aware of cultural influences on the artistic world. As a result of understanding art in a democracy while learning about their cultures, art educators should promote the idea to students of creating artwork that challenges and changes the society around them. The following paper will delve deeper into each topic in order to construct an understanding about the importance that art educators play in cultivating these ideals in the minds of their students.

Summary

Between the 1960's and 2020, there has been a minimal progression within the art classroom of the type of information taught to students. While many practicing contemporary artists are focusing on manipulating their own work towards criticism and improvement of our society, much of the art education world in elementary and secondary schools has not made the same transition unlike practicing artists. Blandy (1987) expressed that art education should be viewed as more than an elective course or an artistic enrichment program and must be kept in a balance between individual “self-realization, artistic individualism, and personal aesthetic fulfillment and social goals” (p. 81). A shift of focus must come from the direction of art educators who must create a balanced goal for creating artwork. It is difficult to strictly focus on artwork that embodies an individual without considering possible implications of the society.

According to Gude (n.d.), “students whose work investigates issues of real concern to them are more engaged in the learning process” (p. 8). The drive to see engaged students should be more than enough a reason for art educators to proceed with implementing a new and diverse curriculum.

Democratic Voice

As a country of liberty, student voices must be heard, and it is up to the art educators to embrace those voices and teach students how to use them. Lanier (1969) stated that “art education could be made relevant to pupils, engage the ‘guts and hopes’ of youngsters and through these excitements provoke intellectual effort and growth” (p. 314). In a democracy, people can demonstrate their power over the government, seek equality for all, art students have the ability to push their education forward to achieve the changes that democracy shrieks for. There is a common misconception that art and democracy are irrelevant to each other, and the “field of American art education adjusts and readjusts the balance between art and democratic values in its prescriptive theories of art curriculum and instruction” (Blandy, 1987, p. 26). A constant battle is held in whether art should be taught around the subject of democracy, and several cases push the idea that both are codependent. Blandy (1987) wrote that “one positive value of democracy lies in its ability to encourage and protect the artist’s right to this freedom of expression” (p. 29). In many countries, freedom of expression is non-existent and political turmoil is the direct effect. “Democracy has served art by guaranteeing freedom of choice and expression and by keeping alive the idea that viewing and making art are desirable experiences for all individuals (Blandy, 1987, p. 29). A more direct statement about the power of democracy is non-existent. Democracy allows artists to create, and art-educators have the privilege to teach their students about their freedoms.

Democracy in the art classroom is like an open door. Once students understand why they have the autonomy to create, they can begin to understand how this independence allows them to use their voices and create art that changes society. Blandy (1987) stated “students should have the freedom to develop their own critical, conscious choices, then democratic principles will be continued best by those citizens most able to practice individual and group processes in democracy” (p. 104). Understanding the society, would allow the students to create artwork that benefits their surroundings and students will be able to communicate with the world about its troubles. Gude (n.d.) expresses that the “abilities to investigate, analyze, reflect, and represent are critical skills for citizens of a participatory democracy” (p. 14). Art educators can develop critical thinking skills in their students to question their settings.

At one-point artists saw themselves as “quintessential free agents pursuing their own ends” and as “free and self-sufficient individual” (Gablík, 1992, p. 2). It is no longer enough to create art for one’s own means. Muth (1985) expressed that artist “must not be made to feel that they are ultimately or basically separate and divided from other persons and having to follow predetermined cultural patterns and rules for behavior in order to be whole with them” and while working within the society seeing “truth, clarity, openness, and moral significance of immediate and sensuous wholeness, the necessary being of aesthetic expressions in social life” (p. 82). Art educators must embrace the community they are teaching in and garner significant influences from that community which will inevitably benefit their students. Kester (1998), asserts that artists should “recognize that the process of shared dialogue can proceed most effectively if they function not as privileged outsiders, but as coparticipants who are intimately involved in the concerns of the community or constituency with which they work, and this ‘community’ may be defined by such factors as geographic location, commitment to a specific political issue or

movement, or identity based on race, gender, sexuality or class (p. 15). Once students begin to understand their surroundings and the affect they possess to change their society, they may be encouraged to produce artwork that speaks to many levels of democracy. It is vital to teach about the important ways art can dictate change, and the way students can direct that change. Blandy (1987) asserts that “citizens living in a democratic community have the responsibility of making judicious decisions on moral, ethical, artists, and practical issues that affect the common good” (p. 47). As democracy plays an important role in the classroom, it also paves the way for students to begin intercultural understanding and its effect on their lives.

Intercultural Understanding

Learning about the role democracy plays in an art class is equally as important as discovering cultures in the art classroom. Blandy (1987) summarized the connection between democracy and culture by stating that “an art education in cultural literacy emphasizing democratic principles of freedom and responsibility enables students to develop conscious freedom of thought by being able to interpret and critique their own feelings and cultural assumptions about art” and “they identify and maintain cultural traditions while continuing to modify and expand upon their own conscious aesthetic choices” (p. 94). The more students understand about their culture the more connections they can make with the cultures outside of their own. Blandy (1987) expressed that “art is one system of cultural communication that conveys, differentiates, and potentially integrates unique cultural views” (p. 76). Art is a familiar way of expression to many, if not most, societies and from one artwork to another people are able to discuss, debate, understand, and evaluate cultural productions of art. Once students understand their culture and have made connections through interactions with other cultures, they may begin to understand other historical accounts. Muth (1985) explained “if artworks

being perceived are from a time or culture different than the students', the examination of the culture will have to come largely from the written record or through vicarious experience from people who have experienced the culture” and this will “make the student aware that a cultural context does exist in connection with an image” (p. 56).

The society keeps evolving, and with rapid access to technology, it is easy to view and experience new cultures. Lanier (1969) pointed out that “in the early decades of this century, we accepted the concept of America as a melting pot for multiplicity of diverse ethnic immigrant groups, a concept which casts the schools in the role of primary agent of social change” (p. 315). A variety of multicultural students thrive in the classrooms today, and with one look to their side they may discover something different about their peers. Gude (n.d.) explained that “the essential contribution that arts education can make to our students and to our communities is to teach skills and concepts while creating opportunities to investigate and represent one’s own experiences—generating personal and shared meaning” (p. 6). Students may learn to see the similarities and differences between their own culture and the culture of others. Blandy (1987) stated “students can continue to clarify their own beliefs and cultural assumptions as they create new scenarios in art form of interest to them” (p. 102). While understanding who they are, the students may grow their imagination and start asking questions and seeking answers to new questions while expressing their creativity.

As educators, there is a duty to the students, and we must direct their studies that fosters well rounded citizens. Gude (n.d.) asserted “good multicultural curriculum introduces us to the generative themes of others—helping us to see the world through the eyes of others—understanding the meaning of artworks in terms of the complex aesthetic, social, and historical contexts out of which they emerge” (p. 9). Through the creation of artworks students are directed

to research, observe, and investigate the meaning behind their projects. Gude (n.d.) explained that students may share their investigations of cultural exchanges and personal stories with others through “exhibitions, art sited in community settings, banners, magazines, pageants, projections, websites, installations” (p. 14). Muth aligned his thinking about culture and democracy by stating that a “teacher might approach cultural literacy through the teaching of art is to use communally significant current events and manifestations of contemporary culture as motivational stimuli for both studio and appreciative assignments” (Muth, 1985, p. 57). Art teachers are in the field of creativity, and in the contemporary world student art projects must be well developed to allow for further understanding of worldly topics beyond simple mastery of techniques.

Changing Society for the Better

Teaching about democracy and culture within the classroom will expand the students’ understanding of the action they need to take in order to create art projects that matter. Gablik (1992) explained, “it is not activism in the sense of the old paradigm, but an empathic means of seeing through another’s eyes, of stretching our boundaries beyond the ego-self to create a wider view of the world” (p. 6). Studying democracy, their own culture and the culture of others should expand the minds of students and allow them to understand the circumstances of other people. Blandy supports this by saying, “understanding art experience in relation to its social context, and pursuing it with a socially humanistic conscience, could lead to experiences that might be individually meaningful and, at the same time, socially progressive” (p. 87). As students begin to understand the role art plays in their lives and how it can be used for social change, their mindsets may change as well. Blandy (1987) wrote that “as art educators we could be more democratic if we looked at the ways visual art is used to strengthen social bonds and how it is used to reach out to others” (p. 9).

As students create art pieces, they must delve and explore the meaning behind what they are creating. These projects can widen the students' gaze in order to see the role they play as members of our society. Muth (1985) writes "students must draw upon their own experiences to define and validate the forms they make" and "this experiential component must, of course, be supplemented, defined, and put in context by the introduction of experiences and forms from the larger artistic social context" (p. 56). Creation for the sake of aesthetic reasons is no longer the goal for contemporary artists. It is important to illuminate the goals of the projects for the students so that they can evolve into creating meaningful art projects independently. Ianni (1968) pointed out that some people "view the artist as the principal agent of change in a culture" and "in every society, the artist is the experimenter, the innovator, the rebel" (p. 17). Students can be taught to ask the tough questions, to discuss critical issues, and to formulate their own ideas through the explorations of artists that have done the same in the past for the sake of their society. An important idea that Frances (1968) states is that what really matters is if the artist wants to act as an agent of social and cultural change he must work with and within the society and the culture he hopes to change" (pp. 18, 19). The student artist should work within the bounds they understand and critique what they know through extensive research. It is meaningless to create art and offer creative opinions when the student does not associate with that part of society.

In order to implement the study of socially conscious projects, teachers should focus on creating lessons with a big idea in mind that resonates with the students and allows them to focus on the community they are living in. Gude (n.d) wrote "art teachers can become community-based artists – identifying community themes, working with students to make aesthetic investigations of content, and creating new spaces for discourse through engaging local and

dispersed communities through student artworks” (p. 13). As long as art educators are the guides, students may embrace their journey in working in their neighborhoods to understand the population and produce creative solutions to ongoing local problems. Art classes can reform their schools and adjoining neighborhoods through the productions of “murals, mosaics, sculptures, pavements, and seating installations” (Gude, n.d., p. 14). Many students can participate in group activities to bounce ideas off each other to understand the bigger picture. Lanier (1974) interestingly summed up the three major points in this paper by saying that “if schooling does nothing else, it must at least engage the student in that continuing dialogue and supportive study which clarifies the ways in which the social, economic, and political world around him works and how that world might be improved” (p. 13). Muth (1985) wrote that the “end goal of the socially defined art curriculum is the understanding of human nature - oneself included - in the societal context, through the processes of making, examining, and talking about art” (p. 59). If students can be taught one thing, it is to think for themselves, and think of ways to align goals towards improvement of their society.

Connecting Past to Present

As an art educator, it is important to acknowledge that teaching with an ideology of social change art projects is not something that has been taught unanimously throughout the art world. Sporadically will you see an art teaching preaching about the importance of finding projects that work towards improving our communities. As an art educator, I would like to keep researching the goals of scholars for implementing such ideals in the art classroom, and at the same time align many of my lessons towards social practice. Gude (n.d.) explained that “it makes a lot more sense to plan a curriculum focusing on understanding the role of artists, artistic practices, and the arts in reflecting and shaping history and culture and to then incorporate objectives related to

formal properties, analytic techniques, or media processes into these larger themes” (p. 7). While I agree that teaching the fundamental principles and elements of art and design is vital to art students, it is equally important to incorporate projects that have meaning to them.

The Advanced Placement art curriculum was massively overhauled this past year, and the changes brought about the idea for students to explore larger subjects that require critical thinking and problem solving along with experimentation. The older students may have already developed the mind set to bring their opinions about society and culture to life, but younger students should be able to participate in the dialogue as well. Initially, it would be difficult to create an entire curriculum revolving around social action projects, but every minute lesson will create a curriculum. It is also critical to participate in a conversation with educators from other subjects to create interdisciplinary curriculum. For example, the civics teachers may teach students about democracy, the history teachers can teach students about culture, and the art educators can incorporate the artistic elements while integrating proper background information about the art being created.

Overall, art is an important factor in our educational system that can be taught to students to allow them to think for themselves and direct their creativity towards helping others. Lanier (1975) explained that “what art education needs is a strong central concept” where the directing idea uses art as “a means to clarify the ways in which the social, economic, and political world works and how it can be improved” (p. 28). There should not be a debate whether it is important to teach students how to visually react to the changing world around them. Students should be able to reach into their knowledge bank and be able to ask questions and commit to solving problems using the visual language. Lanier (1975) was not wrong when he asserted art to be “in

the service of social responsibility” (p. 28). As educators we are also socially responsible to teach our students beyond simple foundational skills.

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