

Making the Familiar Strange:
Teachers' Interpretations of Community Art
A Case Study
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Community-based art education has been used as an umbrella term to describe education practices that explore possible relationships between art education and communities.

Community-based art education (CBAE) proponents advise teachers to attend to the community of the schools. Meaningful experiences, real-life settings, and connections with students' lives are among the suggested benefits of community-based educational practices. Viewing art as integral to community life, my study focused on the art of Orleans, Indiana. Discussion of three teachers' views of Orleans locally-produced art disclosed possibilities of local art study for social reconstruction practices.

Influenced by the ideas of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, I am interested in understanding educational practices that are not only attentive to communities, but also seek to affect social change. According to Freire (1995), education has intrinsic political content and can be used as a vehicle for emancipation. Literacy, Freire's primary concern, is not merely seen as a skill to be learned, but in fact as people's fulfillment as creators and interpreters. In this study, Freire's original notion of text has been expanded to encompass works of art. In the process of art interpretation, akin to the process of text interpretation, critical consciousness can be reached through critical examination of visual texts along with the context of their production. Therefore, a person's skill at interpreting and producing written text, handcrafted objects, or artworks can inform understanding of her or his historical situation and, therefore, become a referent for change. Locally-produced art, for example, can assist raising students' awareness of

their own heritages and traditions, which are often neglected. Furthermore, it can help students revitalize ownership of their own community and culture.

Community-based art education, as I see it, has the potential to promote social change. Accordingly, teachers' views of their students' community, culture, and local art have a direct impact on the extent to which such change possibilities are fulfilled (see figure 1). Locally-produced art can be the focus of CBAE practices leading students to understand their local traditions, cultural heritages, and community's social-economic contexts. Because such an understanding is at the core of informing and directing social change initiatives, a teacher's views of local community, art, and culture has a direct impact on general educational practice, and, specifically can enhance or hinder change-oriented CBAE approaches.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Making the Familiar Strange

This case study investigated three teachers' reflections about the art produced in the rural community they teach. "Making the familiar strange" describes the process teachers may undergo to interpret local art. It alludes to the inherent tension of appreciating art that is readily available in the community, and to the process of surpassing prejudices and narrow definitions of art. As a result, well-known objects are granted art status. The conversation that follows illustrates one teacher's process of making the familiar strange, strange enough to be noticed.

Sinuous dirt roads led to Leah Morgan's country house. As we passed through groves of shady trees, I heard birds singing, and I framed countless snapshots of country life. Fields and barns, butterflies and flowers, hay, horses, and cows were composed and

re-composed in a hundred mental photos.

I had completed the field work for this study and wanted to discuss some of my interpretations with teachers—Leah Morgan, Debbie Edwards, and Ann Bex.

Bastos: One time I was asking Leah why she teaches local art. She said she wanted to make students aware that things Orleans people make are art and to promote a connection to their local community. . .

Bex: Last night when I was reading my papers [interview transcripts], I saw that. One thing we try to do at school is to point out, “Grandma makes quilts, Grandma crochets, and that is beautiful.”

Morgan: Traditionally, it has been taught to us that sewing, crocheting, and quilting—the things your mom does—aren’t art.

Edwards: Those are made out of necessity, at one point.

Morgan: Yes and no. Necessity, but also a need to create. A need to create something beautiful that was also functional.

Bastos: I am after your personal histories. How did you become aware of the art that surrounds you in the community?

Morgan: My mom was always making something. She made all our clothes. She could make them better than we could buy them in the store. We thought it was kind of poor and disgraceful. Later on, maybe ten years ago, I met this one girl that was in my class, and she said, “I was always so jealous of you because of your clothes.” I said, “Why?” “You always had the nicest things that your mom made,” she explained. I was never really appreciative of them. I wanted my clothes from a store box. If it was homemade it wasn’t good, store-bought was better. But she was always making something, which I did not consider art then, whereas now—it was art. (meeting with teachers, July 10, 1997)

This conversation underlined Leah Morgan’s gradual awareness of art forms closely connected with her experiences growing up. She described an interpretive process that informed her view of familiar activities as art forms.

The three teachers participating in this study embodied distinct positions about the art produced in Orleans, Indiana—the fairly ethnic and culturally homogeneous rural community they teach. An examination of their distinct views can help illuminate possibilities, directions, and impediments for community-based art education initiatives at Orleans Elementary School. In light of the teachers’ views, and the community’s context I also hope to argue the case for

desirability of CBAE practices that promote social change and suggest facilitating strategies.

A Theoretical Framework

CBAE can be understood as an outgrowth of multicultural art education concerns and practices. As multicultural art education practices seek to respect students' heritages and traditions, creating a diverse and equitable classroom, community-based art education draws on local art, culture, and experiences to design curricula. Therefore, the framework combined Sleeter and Grant's (1994) five approaches to multicultural education, and Marché's (1998) discussion of CBAE orientations. The five orientations to multicultural education describe increasingly encompassing ways to deal with diversity and equity issues in education, which parallel the expanding CBAE orientations of (a) taking from (\leftarrow), (b) learning about (\rightarrow), and (c) acting upon (\leftrightarrow) communities (see Figure 2).

Insert Figure 2 about here

Sleeter and Grant's discussion of the five approaches to multicultural education revealed educational practices presented in an expanding fashion, in which ideas, concepts, and practices of previous approaches were assimilated, modified, or rearranged in the next approach presented. Similarly, the three orientations proposed by Marché gradually built upon each other. For example, to act upon the community, teachers and students need to previously have learned about the community and to have taken information from the community in order to understand it. The framework provided a backdrop to analyze and understand each teacher's stance towards local art and culture, as well as a reference for future development.

I examined each teacher's views of locally-produced art in light of this framework. My analysis of locally-produced art views, as represented by each teacher in this study, discusses stepping-stones and obstacles in a pathway towards change-oriented CBAE approaches. Each teacher, although unique in her perceptions and attitudes towards locally-produced art, is influenced by pervasive views of art and conceptions of education. Therefore, the framework can potentially be applied to other situations with similar concerns.

Teachers' Distinctive Views of Locally-Produced Art

I interviewed and observed three teachers at Orleans Elementary school. They were Leah Morgan, the art teacher; Ann Bex, a fourth grade teacher; and Debbie Edwards, the music teacher. Sharing life stories, experiences with art, perceptions of the community and the school, views of education, and career goals each teacher helped me understand her local art views. As similarities, all three teachers described growing up or living in rural environments culturally and economically similar to Orleans, aspired better futures for their students, and to a greater or lesser degree held conservative views of art marked by distinctions between fine and applied, academic and folk, and elitist and community art. Nonetheless, the three teachers in this study related quite differently with the community and culture of Orleans. Their views of local art, community, and culture can be depicted on a continuum, varying from mainstream to incrementally pluralist positions towards society, art, and education. Looking into these sets of perspectives brings insights to the possibilities of CBAE practices in contexts similar to Orleans.

Debbie Edwards. Edwards, according to Sleeter and Grant's typology (1994) can be characterized as a culturally different teacher. She represented the first position in the continuum. She had mainstream views of society, art, and education, which she applied to local

art. Edwards supported the existing social order, subscribed to conventional art criteria, and focused her teaching on valuing students' musical talent and organizing music performances at the school. Edwards applied her well-developed criteria of excellence in music to visual art. For example, if to become a good musician a person receives music instruction, therefore, artists, whether visual artists or musicians, who have not received formal training are not recognizable artists. Edward's appreciation of locally-produced art and music was condescending. She viewed local art as a subcategory. She represents a cultural different position because she perceived her own heritage, culture, and experiences to be different from her students'. Her implicit educational goal was to acculturate students into her mainstream views and experiences.

Ann Bex. Bex represents the second position in the continuum. As a human relations teacher, she revealed slightly more expansive viewpoints towards society, arts, and education than Edwards. She showed an openness towards local art—she noticed quilts, crafts, and other art forms in the community. However, her discourse about local was more advanced than her practice. She taught art instrumentally, as an enhancement of other academic experiences. Concerned with improving students' feelings of self-esteem and connectedness to the social fabric of the community, Bex included some local art and culture activities into the fourth-grade curriculum she taught. Interviewing local people, writing about the community, discussing students' hobbies and interests were enrichment activities that sought to improve classroom morale and motivate learning curricular content. Bex's reported satisfaction learning about local art and community, especially through Leah Morgan, did not carry over to her classroom practice.

Leah Morgan. Morgan, a multicultural teacher, represented a third position in the

continuum, marked by attention to and respect for local cultural standards that reflect multicultural education ideas. Morgan sensitivity to the local heritage derived from her intimate connection with the community. Morgan lived in Indiana most of her life, attending school in Orleans. She was a local art interpreter to school teachers and myself. She knew the network of local artists and was personally acquainted with them. Morgan enriched and expanded her art curriculum by drawing on local resources. She invited local artists to her classroom to talk to and teach students, Nancy Eagan, a student's mother and woodburning artist, was one of them. Morgan also developed a unit on furniture-making, taking students to visit a local furniture factory, asking them to design and build a chair, and exhibiting the final projects at the local library.

Due to her in-depth knowledge of the community, Morgan successfully included local art and culture into her teaching. In addition, Morgan's art training and practice broadened her personal definition of art. The furniture making unit and Nancy Eagan's visit illustrate Morgan's contextually meaningful art teaching. Therefore, implicitly Morgan subscribed to CBAE orientations that focused on acting upon communities. However, she valued and celebrated the community as it existed and did not make use of art to critically examine it. Multicultural education, rather than social-reconstruction tenets informed the opening of the fine arts canon to honor Orleans artistic diversity (Katter, 1997).

Discussion

I conceive of CBAE as linked to a vision of social emancipation and auspiciously connect it to empowerment of small, ethnically homogeneous, economically-challenged rural communities, such as Orleans. However, the three teachers in this study did not link their

practices and social-change. Holding conventional and assimilationist positions, these teachers were limited in their critical understanding of the local culture, community context, and art. It can be argued that the three teachers' conventional views, influenced by culturally different, human relations, and multicultural education approaches, match, to some extent, conservative aspects of Orleans community. Conversely, sponsoring a social reconstruction vision would require an informed defiance of taken-for-granted conservative stances.

Two teachers' limitations in interpreting local art according to locally-valid criteria reflected the internalization of dominant cultural hierarchies. These teachers' educational ideologies impeded fully integrating locally-produced art into the curriculum. However, as Freire (1973) explained, culture is also a terrain of struggle and contradiction. Therefore, it is precisely in the controversial nature of local art that missing connections between teachers and communities can be found.

In its essence, locally-produced art challenges mainstream views of art and society. As Lippard (1990) commented, the conventional notion of "good taste with which many of us were raised or educated was based on an illusion of social order" (p.7). The three teachers' views of Orleans local art reflected their responses to locally-produced art's controversial nature. On the one hand, consideration for local artists was grounded in recognition of unschooled talent. On the other hand, valuing locally-produced art objects required openness to different aesthetic standards and questioning narrow and conventional definitions of art.

McFee (1991) pointed out that different artistic traditions in the United States society are supported by a network of people who create and maintain that art because it expresses their values. In Orleans, art expresses the values of a mainly white, relatively poor, and not highly

educated community. These characteristics are at variance with the teachers' perceived status, as well as with their educational visions of preparing their students for social mobility through assimilation of common culture values. Interestingly, these three teachers' personal histories are connected with small rural Midwestern, low-income, white communities, not dissimilar to Orleans.

At this point the outcomes of change-oriented CBAE projects in a community such as Orleans are merely conjectural. However, Morgan indicated that revitalizing the links between schools and communities through local art is not only meaningful to students and community, but it is also a required step towards social reconstruction practices. Locally-produced art study can unveil the community's context and power dynamics, exploring the social, political, and structural aspects at play in the local community. In doing so, CBAE practices have the potential to be a referent for change. Change-oriented CBAE would seek to understand the local people, their art and culture, and the possibilities available to them.

Conclusions

Art educators have spoken of cultural literacy as the development of skills for decoding one's own experiences in art (Boyer, 1987). In this study, developing teachers' cultural literacy emerged as an issue of importance because locally-produced art interpretations are facilitated by knowledge and understanding of local culture, tradition, and heritage. Conversely, superficial interpretations were influenced by inability, at time, to grasp the cultural significance of locally-produced art.

The expression making the familiar strange was used to describe three teachers' processes of local art interpretation. In fact, this interpretive metaphor did not hold for all three teachers in

this study. For two teachers, locally-produced art objects were not familiar in the sense of belonging to their elected cultural traditions. Limited knowledge of and openness to the local community's culture created a gap between these teachers and the community and its art. Their lived experiences, to some extent, put them at a distance from local community, culture, and art. For these two teachers, interpreting locally-produced art objects would first depend upon making these objects familiar.

On the one hand, to make the strange familiar calls for action on the part of these teachers. It is an invitation to get acquainted with local culture, and examine its artistic manifestations, values, and traditions. Such a process can recreate local identity. Hopefully, these teachers' reexamination of locally-produced art objects might establish missing connections between their personal heritages and the community's. On the other hand, to make the familiar strange, or to interpret local art, requires ability and desire to attribute meaning to locally-produced objects and art forms. It is an interpretive process that defies fine arts tenets and announces an organic and meaningful relationship between art and ordinary life (Dewey, 1980)

Change-oriented CBAE, require teachers' commitments to expand and constantly reexamine their interpretations of art, culture, and society. Teachers can have a primary role stressing meaningful connections between school and community, bringing schools back to the center of community life, as institutions that might reflect, celebrate, but also question, and transform the life in a community. I strongly believe locally-produced art interpretation can be a catalyst of awareness and change in communities.

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Figure Caption

Figure .1: CBAE's core aspects: community, culture, and art.

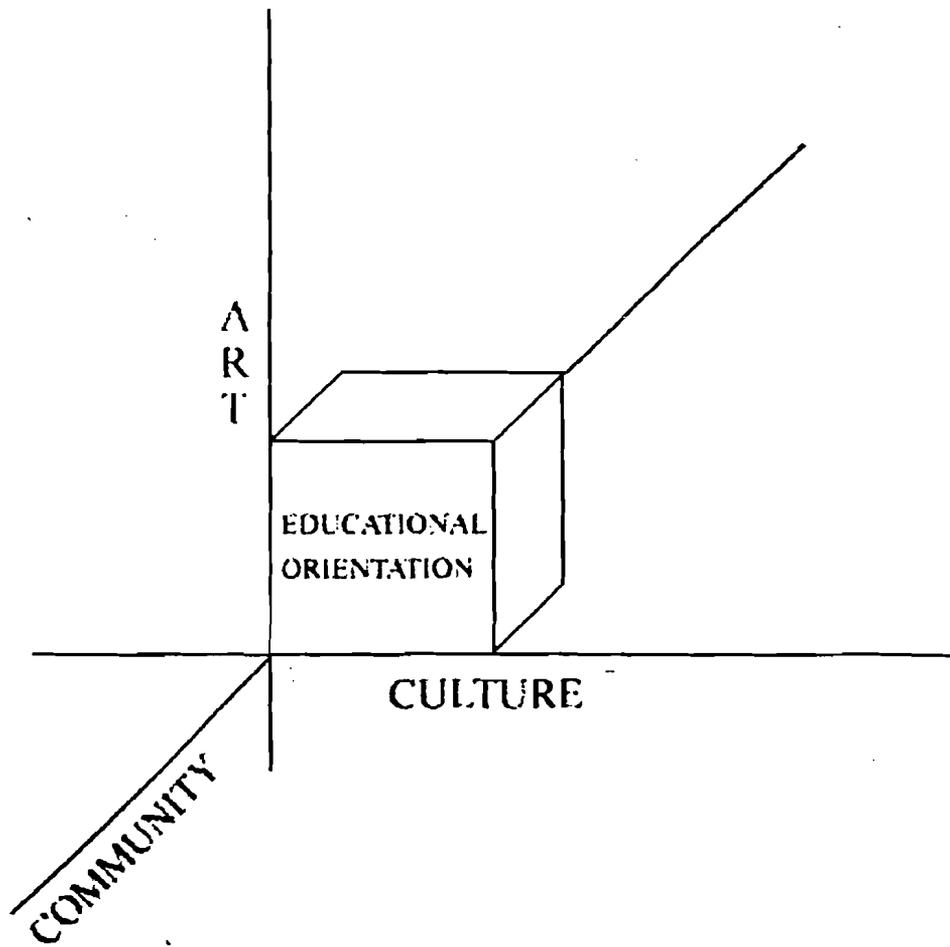


Figure Caption

Figure 2. : Study's conceptual framework:

