

*Collecting in a Postmodern Consumer Society and Its Relationship to Art Education*

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**Introduction/ Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of my research is to begin to examine the collections of an art teacher and her students' collections in regards to teaching art, making art, and learning about art. For my dissertation I propose to study and understand how these collections can become sources of inquiry and learning in an art classroom. I will first discuss my personal interest in contemporary collections and the rationale for studying this topic. Next, I will review relevant literature that defines the broad arena of collecting studies. After this literature review, I pose research questions intended to guide my inquiries. Next, I describe methodologies for conducting research appropriate for this study. Then I will describe the research site including the student population and discuss possible limitations of the study.

**Personal Interest**

Not unlike other baby boomers, I have a personal connection with the current collecting phenomenon. Growing up in the productive post war years of the 1950s and 1960s, I am a part of the generation of children who first became indoctrinated into a blossoming consumer society. Kismaric and Heiferman (1996), write about how the children of my generation were unique. Children who were born into post WW II had not experienced war or depression like the previous generation. Instead, this was a healing time for a country that was living in the shadow of a devastating end to WW II. As a result, Americans turned to isolationism, individualism, and consumerism on a personal and national level. Many families moved to the expanding suburbs and put their psyches and positive energy into the new generation of baby boomers. In the schoolroom, the educational philosophy of Lowenfeld (Gaudelius & Speirs, 2002) and

others promoted a child-centered approach in art education that encouraged self-expression and creativity as therapeutic remedies and security blankets from the horrors of the past.

The middle class grew into a new position of power. I had the good fortune of growing up in a middle class family in this time of optimism, economic growth, and a rising standard of living. Unlike the children of previous generations, we were more often consumers than producers. Wartime materials recycled as new products produced plastic games such as, Cootie,<sup>™</sup> the Hula Hoop,<sup>™</sup> and the Frisbee.<sup>™</sup> Other plastic products for children including the Etch A Sketch,<sup>™</sup> the View Master,<sup>™</sup> and play miniature sets of simulated schoolrooms, work, and home life were popular. This popularity and increasing consumerism at the end of the 1950s, boasted a \$1.25 billion toy sales. Toy sales in the entire 1940s totaled only \$84 million. (Kismaric & Heiferman 1996).

We also were the first generation raised in a camera-based world of television, advertising, and films. The media begin to play an important role in our daily lives. Mass media advertising, targeted directly to children, empowered us as potential customers and helped us become infatuated with accumulating things. In the 1950s, television commercials were instrumental in selling products like the Ray Gun<sup>™</sup> and the Barbie<sup>™</sup> doll. It is estimated that around forty million children watched the TV show *Disneyland* on Sunday evenings. This show inspired many mass produced items produced for children. Kismaric and Heiferman (1996) report that in 1954 Disneyland's TV episode of Davy Crockett motivated Americans to spend \$100 million dollars on a

variety of Davy Crockett products such as coonskin caps, lunch boxes, guitars, t-shirts, snowsuits, bathing suits, and toothbrushes.

As a young child, I have vivid memories of imaginative play with many of these mass produced items. I loved to wear my brother's Davy Crockett coonskin cap when I played dress up. Arranging and rearranging the plastic furniture in my modern ranch dollhouse was a daily event along with spending hours in narrative play with my Barbie™ doll. In fact, this play was the beginning of my interest in collecting objects. At around the age of ten, I begin accumulating things I was interested in such as fashion magazines, Nancy Drew Mystery books, detective and science fiction books, and Barbie™ doll clothes. I empowered these objects with meaning and in a sense developed an intimate and narrative relationship with them. This material culture that I chose to keep and examine helped me form my identity and learn about the world, and at the same time afforded me many hours of pleasure.

My collections now consist of such things as masks, vintage clothing, dolls, miniature dollhouse furniture, and a proliferation of art books and magazines. I've used my own collections when teaching art and as an inspiration for creating art. As a photographer, I assemble, construct, and play with my collections of objects to create narrative artworks. Not only do I investigate and learn from these objects, I have found how transformation of these objects through art making can empower them with new meanings.

### **Rationale**

Collecting is a significant social and individual phenomenon existing in both private and public life. It deserves to be looked at carefully for possible implications and

connections to teaching art in and out of the classroom. Collecting is valued and practiced for a number of reasons including, investment opportunities and challenges, social relationships, cultural connections, collective and personal memory, creative and aesthetic pursuits, and transformative experiences. Students' personal collections are part of their cultural landscape and identity and it is important to recognize this shared cultural community by legitimizing their objects of passion and helping them understand how these material objects are connected to a greater whole. All these aspects of collecting can have important implications for the field of art education. In the proposed study, I intend to focus on those variables of collecting that have direct relationship to art teachers' collections and students' collections in respect to teaching and learning in art.

The current generation of children have access to an enormous amount of material goods and now have the Internet as an additional source. Do students utilize this source for buying, trading, and learning about their objects of desire? If this is a common occurrence, how do they use this tool? Are they able to decipher the underlying narratives used to sell these products? Do they email their friends and share their collections virtually? These types of questions could be addressed when asking students about their beloved objects. Very little contemporary research about children and their collections exists. This is especially the case in art education. A literature review indicates that art educators have written a few research articles on the topic of collecting. Fattal (2002) and Flood, Grauer, Irwin, & Zimmerman (2004) look at how collections and the collecting process can be applicable to the art classroom. There is a need for case studies that research how teachers use their own collections in teaching art or for that matter incorporate children's personal collections into the teaching and learning process.

## **Literature Review/Conceptual Framework**

A substantial amount of research about collecting exists in a variety of academic fields, such as anthropology, art history, cultural studies, psychology, sociology, and folklore. This body of research presents evidence that collecting is interdisciplinary in nature and is encrusted with multi-layered meanings. It is not my intent to compile a complete comprehensive literature review of this overwhelmingly large body of scholarly work associated with collecting and collections. Instead I will highlight an overview of important information in the field that I see relevant to art education and this particular proposed study. Previous research suggests that this topic is quite broad and can be viewed through a variety of lenses (Belk, 1995; Dilworth, 2003; Pearce, 1998; Stewart, 1993).

Conceptually I am interested in looking at notions of collecting within our consumer society through a postmodern lens. This lens allows for multiple viewpoints and perspectives. Postmodernism can be a troublesome concept to understand as its meaning has been defined differently according to the field of study. However postmodern theory is the reflection of the conditions of our contemporary life (Grundberg, 1999). Postmodernism can be described as exhibiting these characteristics and ideas:

1. A global, electronic culture driven by the world economy and communication (Jencks, 1996)
2. Artifacts of postmodernity include the dominance of television and popular culture, the wide accessibility of information and mass and telecommunications. (Stankiewicz, 1998)

3. The idea of plurality is essential; the necessity of crossing boundaries and mixing genres is a norm (meaning that different fields are intermixed) (Jencks, 1996)
4. A rejection of the distinction between high and low or popular culture, both in choice of materials used to produce art and in methods of displaying, distributing, and consuming art. (Klages, 2003)
5. Postmodernists connect art to daily life and prefer personal contextual narrative to scientific or universal accounts. (Milbrant, 1998)

As a theoretical framework, postmodernism offers infinite possibilities for more inclusive ways of viewing and lends itself to the interdisciplinary study of collecting. Therefore, I combine the postmodern theoretical frameworks of Pearce (1998) and Belk (1995) as the dominant source for this inquiry. I also rely on writings by Stewart (1983). I do so because their writings and ideas about collecting compliment and relate to one another in a number of ways. They write about collecting as a process in context to contemporary life and ask what is the meaning of this activity for the individual.

Much of the research about collecting I have presented has overlapping commonalities and ideas. The theoretical views of Belk (1995), Pearce (1998), and Stewart (1984) are adapted and used as a conceptual framework to ground my proposed study (see figure 1). The overarching conceptual theme is encapsulated in a postmodern consumerist perspective viewing collecting as a process and experience. The common threads of research that I frame for reference as a source of influence and interaction with art learning are: collections as a form of cultural and individual identity formation or as

Pearce (1995) labels, extension of self, collecting relationships formed within family and community, which includes public and private spaces, collecting as a narrative activity crossing space and time boundaries, and collecting as a form of work and play for children, teachers, and artists. I emphasize these particular findings and embellish them as they have relevance to the educational setting and future art education theory and practice. Even though I label these areas separately, I realize they are not isolated categories, but are interconnected, fluid, and circular in nature.

### **Research Questions**

In this study the following broad questions and ideas will serve as a guide for classroom observations and become a basis for formulating teacher and student interview questioning strategies:

1. What objects are students in this 7<sup>th</sup> grade middle school class interested in collecting?
2. How do students accumulate items for their collections? (What process do students of this age group participate in; such as buying, trading, Internet exploration, etc.)
3. How do students use their collections? (display, organize, play, socialize, etc....)
4. What does the collection of these objects mean to individual students?
5. What does the art teacher collect and how does she incorporate her own collections into daily classroom art lessons?
6. How might students' and teachers' collections be useful for teaching and learning about art?

As I observe the art teacher with her class the following questions will guide my investigations:

1. Does the art teacher employ a certain teaching philosophy that relates to collecting? In what form is this philosophy present? (Examples might include: teaching strategies, relationships, environment, artifact use. . . etc.)
2. Are the students encouraged to make connections in the classroom with their own cultural interests and collected artifacts?
3. If the teacher uses her personally collected artifacts to teach art what are the consequences or results? (Are they different when student's interests are emphasized?)

### **Proposed Study/Methodology**

The intent of this proposed study is to examine a middle school art teacher's collections and her students' collections in regards to teaching art. In order to better understand how collections can become a source of inquiry and learning in a middle school art classroom, this study is designed as a qualitative case study. Yin (1994), advocates that a case study is the appropriate method for how and why questions guiding a study. Bromley (1986) writes that direct observation in a real setting such as the art classroom allows access to personal and subjective thoughts, feelings, and ideas. (cited in Merriam, 1995, p.32). The nature of a qualitative study lends itself to methodology as described by Pearce (1998) where the focus is on the collecting process and the researcher attempts to think in an exploratory rather than an assumptive manner. This exploratory approach corresponds with the search for answers concerning why students collect (explanatory/personal) as opposed to merely investigating what (content) is

collected (descriptive/impersonal). This way of looking at collections is reviewed by Pearce (1998). In comparison with earlier ways of examining collections, the goal is to offer explanations rather than descriptions of collections by addressing cultural process instead of cultural history. This more reflexive approach allows the researcher to gather data and look for patterns and new ideas in contrast to proceeding with an hypothesis and testing this idea against data (p. 10-11).

The study will take place in a small arts-orientated midwestern town. The newly constructed middle school of about one thousand students will be the site of the investigation. The school is situated in a new subdivision on the periphery of the developing city, which hosts a large research university. Students in the new suburban middle school are predominately white middle class with the exception of some rural students and others who are economically disadvantaged. A seventh grade elective art class that meets daily for fifty minutes will be the focus of the study along with the veteran art teacher. The teacher and the class were chosen by a reference from an expert researcher in the field of art education. The researcher highly recommended the teacher for this study for a number of reasons. The art teacher is known to be a master educator and artist and has the respect of the academic community. Her student teachers also speak of her as a positive role model and exemplary art teacher. Most importantly she fits the description of the type of teacher I would like to study. She is an avid collector of various artifacts many of which she utilizes and incorporates into her classroom teaching environment.

I arranged a preliminary visit to her classroom to discuss the proposed project. While visiting her room for the first time I noticed classroom displays of her collections

of cultural art objects. In fact, one of the recent projects she worked on with her students revolved around expressing their identity in a three dimensional format incorporating personal objects or parts of their collections from home. She is enthusiastic about the idea of learning about interests of her students in respect to collecting and commented on the variety of objects that are important to them at this time in their development. Her experience, personal interests, and insights make for an ideal teacher for this study.

### **Limitations of the Study**

One limitation of the study is that this art teacher could be considered atypical, exhibiting exemplary qualities not present in the average teacher. Therefore the data would not necessarily be applicable to the general population of teachers in other art classrooms. However the study might serve as a model example. Another limitation lies in the lack of diversity in the school population and its location. The school is composed of primarily middle class Caucasian students and is situated in an atypical college town. Consequentially the study would only signify possible similarities in the larger population with the same demographics. However it could be the starting point of research for other art educators who would like to research how students and teacher's collections are incorporated or part of the teaching process and art making. Other studies could be conducted with a similar population for comparison and verification. A comparison to a dissimilar population would possibly reveal different insights as well. For example, a rural or an urban location would fit into this category, as would a middle school classroom in another country. Nonetheless this proposed study could serve as an initial case study about the relationship between contemporary collecting and teaching art

in a middle school classroom that others may use as a basis to continue research about this topic.

### **Data Collection**

The time spent in the classroom will allow for a holistic view of the teaching and learning process and permit me to gather information on how the teacher uses her collections and her students collections to teach art. If direct observation does not allow the opportunity to see how students own interests and personal objects are incorporated into art lessons, I will peruse the teacher's yearly curriculum for additional lesson plan implementation.

In addition to the class observations, personal interviews with the art teacher and her seventh grade art students will allow for personal reflection and interaction between the researcher and the participants. Based on the conceptual framework, I formulated interview questions that address larger questions suggested by different categories. These questions ask students to think about why they collect objects and what it significant or meaningful in regards to these objects. The interview questions are an attempt to find out how they gather these objects, manipulate, and interact with them.

To begin my investigation, I will interview each student for about a half hour during class time. Through the individual interviews with students I hope to identify two students, if possible a male and female who exhibit a high interest in collecting artifacts. To achieve a more complete understanding of the child and his/her collections, the two selected students along with the teacher will be the subjects of individual case studies and more extensive data will be collected. In addition I may visit the two student's homes to meet and talk with their family to look at how collections are used and displayed in a

private or domestic space. If the parents grant permission, I would like to photographically document student's personal collections at home and interview them informally about how they are used and displayed in more depth.

### **Data Analyses and Interpretation**

The first level of analysis of data will be a descriptive account of the classroom teaching environment and experience. Information from the individual interviews will be collected and constant comparative analysis will be used to generate conceptual categories according to the questioning categories. Merriam (1998) writes that "Categories and subcategories (or properties) are most commonly constructed through the constant comparative method of data analysis . . . at the heart of this method is the continuous comparison of incidents, respondents' remarks, with each other. Units of data and bits of information are literally sorted into groupings that have something in common" (p. 179).

To verify interpretation of my data I will ask participants in the study or their parents in the case of children, to review my transcripts. I will also solicit outside researchers to review and critique the written analysis and interpretations that I have formulated. Finally, I will make every effort to clarify my personal assumptions and theoretical orientation at the start and conclusion of the study. After the data is analyzed, I will interpret meanings that have emerged from the data and reflect back on the conceptual framework to determine if my findings agree or disagree with categories found in the conceptual framework. I then will draw conclusions and make recommendations for the field of art education based on my findings.

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