

Earning the MFA: Investigations of curricula and pedagogies as a means of developing graduate studio art students' sense of self

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Mary and I chuckle now as we recall the satisfying high five we exchanged while sporting graduation gowns several years ago. We had completed three years of intense artistic training, installed our thesis projects, and passed the oral exam that rounded out our Master's of Fine Art (MFA) degrees. Earning the MFA, the terminal degree in the studio arts, was a scholarly accomplishment that reflected our commitment to creating thought-provoking art. Moving forward with our lives, Mary and I resigned from peer-driven discussions, rigorous engagements with creative work, and the camaraderie we shared in our university studios. We left our academic artistic community with nearly perfect grade point averages and a better understanding of how to approach the elusive, theoretical, conceptual, yet now slightly less mysterious, professional art world beyond the university's campus.

A few years ago, I called Mary. We assembled more stories of isolation, rejection, and self-doubt. Out of school, we were now in the professional world, exhausted and broke, not to mention spiritually bereft. As was typical among my peers, I was a studio art MFA graduate unprepared for the often artless living of contemporary American life. Mary and I shared what appeared to be a prevalent sensation of disconnect between a life motivated by innovative theory and creative production and our lives in general. Over time, our inspired, thoughtful artistic intentions were replaced with resentment. I began to question how the experience of earning an MFA degree so elegantly framed such naive expectations.

I knew it was unacceptable that the handful of degrees I had earned during my years of study within higher education afforded a life disconnected from each institution's distinct mission. As my inquiry intensified, I was becoming less motivated to make art. What, *exactly*, do art students want to gain from an MFA program? I wondered if the curricular planning for MFA programs actively took into account helping students grow as creative citizens of the world.

Who makes these decisions? I reflected on what was modeled by my former studio instructors and recalled the implicit understanding that MFA graduates often become art instructors. What, if anything, had the program promised applicants? Had I been sold a “bill of goods?” Given the pride that I once had for having been accepted into one of the country’s competitive graduate studio art programs, why does reflecting on the experience of earning my MFA degree haunt my sense of inner purpose? Ultimately, I wanted to examine the ways, specifically, in which the graduates of MFA programs are being trained to walk into our contemporary world with a sense of purpose and a relevant education?

Background

I explored the history of and various contemporary intentions for earning the MFA degree as well as what kind of lives MFA degree candidates believe they will lead after graduation. I wished to understand and reconcile what led Mary, my peers, and myself to grapple with unsatisfied lives after graduation. It seemed as the Dean of the Yale Law School, Anthony Kronman, expressed in his book, *Education’s End*, the “true purpose of education has been lost, namely, a deep exploration concerning the meaning of life” (Kronman, 2007, p. 8).

Limited research has addressed the origin of the MFA degree as a teacher’s and a woman’s degree, the expansion of visual arts programs in higher education after World War II, and the effects that the “art stars” of the 20th century have had on higher education in the visual arts. The MFA degree was formally acknowledged as “the terminal degree for teachers of studio art courses” in 1966 (Singerman, 1999, p. 188) and was to be “used as a guarantee of a high level of professional competence in the visual arts... [and] a certifiable level of technical proficiency” (Singerman, 1999, p. 190). Some literature on this topic has also addressed issues related to MFA students and teaching. Daniel Grant (2011), a regular contributor on the arts for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, revealed that many artists “want the degree so that they can be candidates for teaching jobs at the college level” (Helping Fine Artists Become Fine Teachers section, para. 2). Joe Girandola, Director of the MFA program at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia, concurred with Grant’s statement: “I’d say most, if not all, of our MFA students are thinking about teaching at some college, and they know that it’s almost impossible to get hired without the degree” (Helping Fine Artists Become Fine Teachers section, para. 3). Projecting into the future of the visual arts in higher education, James Elkins claimed, “The studio art Ph.D. is coming and there’s no way to stop it” (p. 108). He surmised, “[Art] institutions in the United States have the opportunity to rethink the [Ph.D.] degree... [an] arrangement [that] is an exemplary use of a university” (p. 109).

Research studies and MFA visual arts programs

Research that has been conducted on MFA visual arts programs is rare, although several scholars and artists have contributed to debates about what MFA programs should comprise

and look like. For example, James Daichendt (2010) has written about the scholarship of being an artist as well as the ways in which required writing activities could have a positive impact on the students within MFA programs. James Elkins (2001) has published several books which include topics related to artists, art schools, and art teaching. His scholarship often addresses the relevance of contemporary visual arts degrees. Howard Singerman (1999), who has been an important source of information regarding the history of the MFA degree, was originally inspired to do his research given his own experience of earning an MFA degree in sculpture. Editor, Steven Henry Madoff (2009) pulled together the voices of various contemporary artists and art educators including Anne Hamilton, Mike Kelley, and Ernesto Pujols as they articulated their ideas and suggestions for the visual arts programs within today's art schools. Finally, the three-year-old quantitative annual survey entitled the "Strategic National Arts Alumni Project" or SNAAP, recently assessed the lives of nearly 66,000 of the nation's fine arts program alumni (SNAAP, 2012).

My doctoral research investigated the personal and professional lives of MFA graduate students as well as the curricula and pedagogies of MFA studio art programs in the United States. Specifically, I examined issues related to the developing sense of self that takes place within a visual arts MFA graduate student. My investigations were not only informed by the research on MFA art programs (Daichendt, 2012; Elkins, 2001; Ritchie, 1966; Singerman 1999), a range of arts education studies (Efland, 1990; Egan, 2005; Eisner, 2002), and literature on teaching within higher education (Beudert, 2006; Lee, 2011; Madoff, 2009; Palmer, Zajonc, & Scribner, 2010; Shulman, 2005), but also research that is related to student development in higher education (Chickering, 1993, 2006; Egan, 1989; Magolda, 2008).

Arthur Chickering, an expert in the field of educational leadership and policy, stated, "Although American higher education can justifiably take pride in its capacity to develop the student's ability to manipulate the material world through its programs in science, medicine, technology, and commerce, it has paid relatively little attention to the student's "inner" development – the sphere of values and beliefs, emotional maturity, moral development, spirituality, and self-understanding" (Chickering, Dalton & Stamm, 2006, p. vii). According to the literature, "Students, especially nontraditional students, are increasingly demanding that education be more relevant to their personal lives and professional goals. They want to know that value has been added to their lives as a direct result of their educational experiences" (Brancato, 2003, p. 60). The American Council on Education (ACE) stated as early as 1937, "educators must guide the 'whole student' to reach his or her full potential and contribute to society's betterment... the personal and professional development of students is a worthy and noble goal" (as cited in Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010, p. 8). The ACE revised its statement in 1949 stating that faculty, administrators, and student personnel workers were to

encourage the development of students and recognize their “individual differences in backgrounds, abilities, interests, and goals” (as cited in Evans et al., 2010, p. 9).

In her unpublished dissertation entitled, *Graduate School and the Self: A Theoretical View of Some Negative Effects of Professional Socialization*, Egan (1989) examined the identity transformations of graduate students and their readiness as academic professionals upon leaving their programs. Her study took into account the settings of graduate programs and their intended outcomes as she investigated “changes in students’ self-images, attitudes, and thinking processes” (p. 201). Findings revealed that the graduate students often acknowledged the “constant pressure to perform, to do more” and the “guilt over time spent away from studies” (p. 204). Egan also questioned the re-socialization or the “process designed to ensure that [graduate students] adopt a new, predefined professional self” (p. 204) as they believed that they were expected to act independently, yet comply with the innately subordinate environment of higher education. As her study brought to light the inner conflicts that had emerged from within the students, Egan concluded that enduring the intensity of graduate school in an atmosphere which fostered self-doubt left graduate students to believe their challenges most often stemmed from personal inadequacies (Egan, 1989).

A longitudinal study by Baxter-Magolda (2008) found that college environments often do not create the conditions necessary for developing what she calls, self-authorship. This can be defined as “the internal capacity to define one’s belief, identity, and social relations” (Magolda, 2008, p. 269). Essentially, Baxter-Magolda documented the epistemological aspects of her participants’ human development experiences in college, and after college, by observing their “sense of themselves and their relationships with others” (Magolda, 2001, p. 343). In her study she assessed choices of the participants – both undergraduate and graduate students – and considered how the choices related to values exploration and their self-determined paths to “enter the unfamiliar world outside education with concerns that center around establishing careers, developing meaningful relationships, being able to manage their lives on their own... and being satisfied and happy” (Magolda, 2008 as cited in Evans et. al., 2010, p. 184). Magolda found that students and graduates often struggled with challenges for which they were ill prepared. She found that the epistemological development of her participants was tightly intertwined with the development of their sense of self and relationships with others. She concluded that, “self-authorship is central to knowledge construction” (Magolda, 2001, p. 436).

My doctoral minor, higher education, further informed my examination of “how our values shape our everyday lives as students, teachers, and leaders in the higher education context” (Lee, 2011, p. 1) in a course entitled, “Values, Consciousness, and Professional Practice.” I evaluated higher education’s impact on issues of identity and character (Astin, 1993; Bowen, 1977; Chickering 1993), intellectual growth, relating to others, defining values (Greene, 1995; Palmer et al., 2010), seriously navigating career choices (Daichendt, 2010; Pascarella &

Terenzini, 1991), and anticipating quality of life after college (Bok, 2006; Kessler, 2000). The various pedagogical activities in my “values” course helped a group of 30 graduate students to explore these topics in various ways which included writing reflectively (Tolle, 2005; Cameron, 1992), and being mindful of Goleman’s five components of emotional intelligence - self awareness, self regulation, internal motivation, empathy, and social skills (Goldman, 2006; Gradle, 2011). We also explored different types of meditation that brought about body awareness and stress-reduction (Kabat-Zinn, 2006; Tolle, 2005) as well as others that related to mindfulness-based modalities, research, and insight to character (Feldman 2005).

I realized that many of these course activities were similar to the ones that I had practiced as an MFA student while I sought to define my artistic voice and professional purpose. The experience of and reflections on taking this course contributed to the impetus for this research study. Moreover, I designed a course intended for MFA visual arts graduate students entitled, “Issues of Relevance and Character in the Fine Arts” within which the curriculum and pedagogies addressed issues related to the students’ personal and professional lives. I hoped to help MFA graduate students practice reflexive actions, examine individual convictions, and maximize their experiences in graduate school inner-personally, intra-personally, and as future professionals.

Research Study

These ideas and planning for my course led to a semester-long, single-credit, colloquium series in which three public university MFA graduate student participants and I explored oral, written, and visual pedagogies. The ongoing examinations during this 15-week study considered current and newfound perspectives with regard to master’s-level academic training specific to the visual arts.

Research Questions

The question that guided this research study was:

How do the experiences related to personal and professional development within an MFA visual arts program influence a graduate student’s individual sense of self?

In order to address this overarching research question, I posed the following sub-questions:

1. How do MFA students within a course that addresses the curricula and pedagogies of their graduate programs and their experiences as MFA students describe themselves as individuals, students, artists, teachers, and future professionals in the field of the visual arts?
2. How does participating in the course allow MFA students to examine and reflect upon their personal and professional growth as well as their graduate experiences?

3. How does my role as the teacher-researcher-artist of the course enable MFA students to critically examine and reflect upon their experiences and their developing sense of self as MFA students?

Research Methods

I employed educational participatory action research methods for this qualitative inquiry in which the colloquium series was positioned at the center. According to Krauss (2005), “qualitative research and qualitative data analysis in particular have the power to be transformative learning tools through the ability to generate new levels and forms of meaning, which can in turn transform perspectives and actions” (pp. 273-274). Within educational action research, teacher-researchers build rapport to develop open, student-centered, supportive relationships and to relax the participants making them more inclined to offer full participation (Blair, 2010). “The educational action research paradigm empowers the participants to take charge of their classroom, to improve teaching, and to advance student learning” (Pine, 2009, p.79).

Participatory action research methods situated the MFA student participants and myself as a single team of investigators that could underscore the valuable nature of on-going collaborative change. Action research looks to understand development in the midst of bringing about change (Lange, 2004). The methods of this research paradigm integrate social investigation, educational work, and action (Hall, 1981; Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998; Whitehead, Taket, & Smith, 2003), and uses “knowledge within a team context to create innovation and transformation as collective action” (Burgess, 2006, p. 422). According to McTaggart (1997), participatory action research emphasizes both authentic, or “real,” participation and the relevancy of “worthy” actions.

The characteristics of qualitative participatory and educational action research methods helped to facilitate an environment that encouraged collegial engagement among the participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Elliot, 1985). Specifically, we navigated through the sequential spiral of action research that included planning personal and professional discussion topics, practicing inventive pedagogies, reflecting as individuals and as a small group, and responding to new awareness and insights (McNiff & Whitehead, 2005; Pine, 2009; Somekh, 2008). Participating with this progressive learning process provided various opportunities of transformed perspectives.

Design and Content

During the fall semester of 2012 in a classroom familiar to the participants, I facilitated the eight bi-weekly sessions that comprised the colloquium series. The individual and shared reflexive activities involved the participants in creating responses to various prompts including journal writing, metaphor analyses, conceptual mapping, and collaborative exercises (Egan, 2005; Mezirow, 2009). For their final project, the participants designed the “Ultimate MFA

Course.” Throughout the semester, newfound awareness helped the participants to determine the value of interconnections among their roles as individuals, students, artists, teachers, and future professionals. In general, the colloquium series became an academic platform for the participants to identify, gather, and analyze issues related to their MFA graduate school experiences.

Data collection and analysis theories

Three types of data were collected – oral, written, and visual. The oral discourse from each of the eight sessions was audio-recorded. The written artifacts included survey responses, book reviews, artist statements, lists, and records of electronic correspondence. The visual data comprised digital images of the study’s site as well as the visual journal entries and select artworks created by the three MFA students – Annika, Jenna, and Nate. As the artist-teacher-researcher, my artifacts included bi-weekly plans, follow-up notes and their modifications, images of my artwork, and reflection worksheets, memos, and field notes. To organize the data, I created data summary charts that aligned with each of the three research sub-questions. The charts helped to systematically categorize data culled from each individual participant as well as from the group of participants as a whole. I applied what Creswell (2009) calls phenomenological research analyses that focus on “significant statements, the generation of meaning units, and the development of what Moustakas (as cited in Creswell, 2009) calls an essence description” (p. 184).

The data from this study were analyzed through a theoretical lens that combined two theories. First, Jack Mezirow’s *Transformative Learning Theory* (2009) considers how one’s future actions result in revised interpretations of one’s experience, and secondly, Jack Whitehead’s *Living Educational Theory* (1989) “draws findings from the cyclical actions, reactions, and responses of educational action research” (Whitehead, 1989, p. 41). These two theories framed the reflexive nature of the data and supported immediate interpretations of the participants’ educational experiences.

Research Findings

As anticipated in qualitative research, the findings from this study comprised constructions of reality that helped to understand this particular social situation and this specific group of participants. In this section, I discuss some of the many findings that emerged in relation to each of the three research sub-questions.

The findings from research sub-question one revealed distinct variations in the descriptions that each participant used to identify himself or herself as an individual, student, and artist. For example, Annika professed, “I’m going to art school to get to the core of who I am, what I believe in, and what I’m going to say” (Bergstrom, 2014, p. 150). For Annika, practicing her art making had the “ability to bring me into the present” as it felt otherworldly, meditative, or

“outside the scope of natural laws; not spiritual, but an elevated place outside reality” (Bergstrom, p. 150). Jenna disclosed that during her first year in the MFA program, she had been waiting to change. She had hoped that she would somehow “wake up and be different” (Bergstrom, 2014, p. 151). However, during her second year in the MFA program, Jenna had come to understand that she was not going to wake up and be different, and that “school is what you make of it.” Jenna willingly took on the responsibilities of being a graduate student as she believed that “an MFA student should, most importantly, walk out into the world with confidence” (Bergstrom, 2014, p. 152).

Similarities among the participants’ descriptions of themselves emerged when we critically examined the nature of their roles as teachers (TAs for the university’s School of Art), a character role within which they were fairly new. During the semester of our colloquium series, the participants were interested in learning how to think, or “perform,” like teachers and consider issues related to classroom environments, assessment strategies, and designing effective presentations. They discussed the stress that they felt while leading critiques with undergraduate students, determining the amount of time to put into their teaching preparations, and holding students accountable to specified standards. Our conversations evolved and reflected what was most rewarding about being a teacher as Jenna claimed, “That’s rewarding... help[ing] students think through things that feel impossible” (Bergstrom, 2014, p. 156). The three MFA participants also agreed that their roles as teachers prompted each of them consider the ways in which they met certain academic and artistic standards as art students themselves.

When the MFA student participants described themselves as future professionals in the field of the visual arts, Annika, Jenna, and Nate disclosed similar yet vague understandings about what lay ahead for them after graduating from the university. For example, each of the participants anticipated selling their artwork in some way such as through gallery representation or by working on commissions. Also, Annika and Jenna believed that teaching was likely to be a part in their futures as Nate was already applying for teaching positions in higher education because he was in the last year of his MFA program.

Findings from research sub-question two indicated that participating in a course of this nature offered students experiences with both planned and emergent curricula and addressed topics upon which MFA programs rarely focused. For example, one session we addressed issues related to oral, written, and visual communication. Each of the participants wrote an interpretation, or a “review,” of one another’s creative work. This and other exercises encouraged them to consider implications for the words they used when talking to different audiences or writing a formal artist statement. The participants gained new perspectives regarding the ways that their visual artwork communicated.

The course provided a safe space for the participants to share different ways to manage the many types of relationships and stressors that influenced their inner-personal as well as professional development. In another session, we analyzed journal entries that visually represented each of the participant's relationship between their teacher self and their artist self. In order to create their images, Annika, Jenna, and Nate had individually considered the ways in which their two roles might overlap or clash. (See Fig. 1)

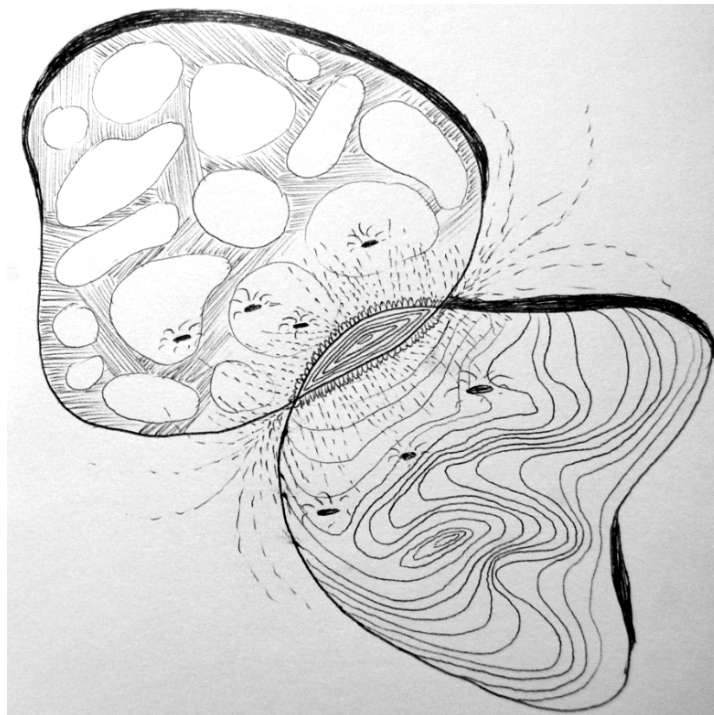


FIGURE 1. HIS ARTIST SELF AND TEACHER SELF, NATE 2012.

Nate shared, “I want [the shapes] to overlap more than they do because I find myself not following my own advice when I’m teaching... I don’t always think through my own work in the same way that I ask my students to do” (Bergstrom, 2014, p. 173).

Finally, it appeared that participating in this course empowered the student participants’ “voices” as they collaboratively designed the “Ultimate MFA Course.” Originally intended to be the topic of a blog outside of class, this activity entailed vigorous in-class discussion and several weeks to complete. The participants asked me if they could present their syllabus and curriculum at a faculty meeting at the School of Art because it reflected what the participants believed to be the strongest aspects of their program such as its three-year plan of study and the financial support it provided when graduate students worked as TAs. The “ultimate” curriculum also included learning how to create and maintain a professional website and how to write a teaching philosophy as these were not part of their university programs. Annika, Jenna, and Nate believed that possessing these skills was imperative to their futures in the field.

A number of the findings substantiated the importance of my role as the artist-teacher-researcher, the subject of research sub question three. Having a background in art education as well as having earned an MFA degree, I often felt as if I could “see myself” reflected in the participants’ experiences. For example as a graduate student, not unlike Annika, Jenna, and Nate, I had been driven, idealistic, unconcerned about my social life, and I was also older than most of the others in my program. I too, had been ardently committed to earning the MFA degree and enjoying a creative future. As the semester progressed, I found myself having empathy and relating to each of the participants as an art student more so than an instructor.

These findings contribute to a construction of reality that is particular to this group of individuals. “Living” (Whitehead, 1989) the evolution of our educational theories, we analyzed the relevance of an MFA degree as well as the roles we played while earning it. The semester was “exhilarating and exciting [through] encountering issues and challenges where you work to develop new insights and connections” (Hausman, 2009, p. 112). As I advance my position in the field of visual arts in higher education, I embrace the opportunities to implement similar courses and create more reflexive practices for MFA students and faculty members.

Conclusion

I believed my combined strengths as an art educator and a visual artist had the potential to fuel inspiring, yet pragmatic perspectives on issues related to the promise and purpose of the MFA degree. The experiences of conducting this study and of teaching the course helped me to address some of my questions concerning what art students expect (or desire) from MFA programs. Through this research, I hope to have exposed essential means for guiding MFA students toward their professional goals as well as toward the “artistic process and the inner dynamics [that] give form to their ideas and feelings” (Hausman, 2009, p. 108). The data from this study are rich and seem to indicate that further research is needed to more closely define issues related to the curricular and pedagogical value of an MFA student’s developing sense of self. I hope that the findings from this research will serve the future objectives for similar courses for MFA graduate students as well as MFA visual art programs.

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