# Early-Career Art Teacher Educators' Professional Tensions as Catalysts for Growth

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## Abstract

While research studies in art education suggest some of the tensions that beginning career art education faculty members face on the job, research has not yet specifically explored how these new faculty members experience their earliest years in the role, nor how they learn to develop personally authentic pedagogy for educating art teachers. This multi-case study involving eight full-time art education faculty members with less than three years in the role, responds to this issue, understanding that new knowledge-for-practice is often generated within spaces of creative tension such as career transition. Analysis of interview, questionnaire, and participant reflection data revealed that participants' tensions were predominantly influenced by discrepancies between (1) their established occupational roles/identities and pedagogical practices, and expectations placed upon them that they had not fully anticipated, and (2) their own, and others' values about art and art education. Significantly, participants' critical reflections on their tensions indicated beginning gains in professional self-understanding and pedagogy reconstruction.

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## Introduction

This paper summarizes the results of my dissertation study focused on beginning career art education faculty members. I define beginning career art education faculty as faculty in the first three years in the field. My own experience as an art education faculty in the first three years illuminated several conflicting factors. The most challenging being my pedagogical approach, that is teaching future art educators how to teach art. I was a nontraditional[1] teacher educator, having had less than five years of prior PK-12 teaching experience, and had little experience to draw on when teaching about teaching. I sought support from more experienced art teacher educators who gave me some moral support and some quick tips. I learned much of what I needed to know to survive on the job, but this knowledge was hard-won, developed in an ad hoc way, and was infused with ever-present doubts about its usefulness beyond the context of its acquisition.

My motivation to do doctoral research was based on the questions: "Do most other art teacher educators experience similar challenges during this transition?"; "Are transitions from PK-12 teaching to higher education challenging for most?"; and "If so, what is learned through such challenges, and how is it learned?" My dissertation study used the idea of *grappling with tensions*[2] as a lens to investigate early career university-based art teacher educators', i.e., those possessing no more than three years of full-time experience in the role,

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[1] The typical pathway into becoming a teacher educator in higher education in North America and in other countries is through public school teaching (Berry & Loughran, 2005; Milbrandt & Klein, 2008; Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2015). "Nontraditional" teacher educators, which I position myself as due to my relatively limited experience in PK-12 education, are "teacher educators in schools of education who have not begun their careers as a public school teacher" (Newberry, 2014, p. 164).

[2] I rely on the definition of tensions as it is conceptualized in relational dialectics theory (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) as interactions between opposing forces that are present in relationships. Therefore, the concept of professional tensions used in this study refers to the "push and pull" interactions between contradicting forces (e.g., self-based factors such as subjective identity and beliefs versus factors external to the self, such as others' expectations, beliefs, and attitudes) encountered on the job that result in feelings of ambivalence, surprise, doubt, difficulty, or puzzlement.

experiences with internal ideological conflict in the context of transitioning into the full-time faculty role.

## Problem Statement and Literature Review

University-based art teacher educators, as role models for aspiring art teachers, have a powerful influence on their pre-service students' views of teaching, and potentially on their future teaching practices and professional dispositions. However, their work is "rarely observed and documented by others, especially by other art educators within the field" (Beudert, 2009, p. 12) despite the hefty moral and intellectual responsibility ingrained in this work. Additionally, the fact that demographic data on art education faculty members is still scant (NAEA Research Commission, 2014) draws attention to the need for more current, in-depth studies to be done in this area. It is therefore relevant for the field to understand the subjectivities, concerns, and professional needs of the educators who are currently coming into art education faculty jobs.

Also, newly hired art education faculty members have few models to guide their emergent practices, and they generally receive insufficient or inconsistent mentorship (Beudert, 2006). Much of their development of professional knowledge for educating teachers and for other aspects of their role (e.g., service), is gained on site through trial and error, reflection, and developing both formal (Tollefson-Hall et al., 2019) and informal mentorship relationships (van der Weiden et al., 2015). Like teacher educators in other disciplines—they undergo numerous tensions due to teaching's inherent uncertainty and art education's marginal status in academia (Cohen-Evron, 2002).

Teacher educators whose prior academic and occupational experiences that are like their current work duties (e.g., teaching the subject in PK-12 and/or higher education) have been pre-socialized somewhat for the role. However, being new to the full-time role and its numerous, demanding, and often ambiguous responsibilities, presents its own sets of tensions. Teacher educators' most reported tensions are (1) feeling the pressure to be an ideal role model for aspiring art teachers (Murray & Male, 2005), (2) making sense of higher education work (Goodwin et al., 2014), and (3) feeling "deskilled" when expertise gained through prior classroom teaching experience does not prove to be sufficient for teaching others about teaching (Berry & Loughran, 2008; Field, 2012).

In addition to these general tensions, art education research literature offers glimpses into discipline-specific tensions. The most reported art teacher educator tensions include conflicts between their own concept-driven approaches to teaching art and art education, and non-art-educators' oversimplified notions about the subject, e.g., that learning and teaching art entails "doing anything you want" (Stockrocki, 1995, p. 50) or that art education is primarily the teaching of "craft" (Beudert, 2006). This literature summarizes some of the ways that art teacher educators work through and *sometimes* resolve professional tensions but has not yet gone deeply enough into this topic to shed insight into their thinking and decision-making processes in response to these tensions.

## Research Questions

The research questions that this study addressed, therefore, were:

1. What types of tensions do early career university-based art teacher educators identify in their professional practices?
2. In what ways do early career university-based art teacher educators' identities, academic and professional experiences, and values, inform the tensions of their on-the-job experiences?
3. What strategies do university-based early career art teacher educators use to negotiate their professional tensions, and what is learned consequently?

## Theoretical Framework

The theories that framed the study were (1) Baxter and Montgomery's (1996) relational dialectics theory (RDT), (2) creative tension, and (3) Argyris & Schön's (1974) theory of action framework constructs of theories in use and espoused theories.

RDT explores oppositions (tensions) in relationships and the negotiation of these oppositions. RDT's three main tensions (stability vs. change; integration vs. separation; and expression vs. privacy) provided a lens for exploring ways that the art teacher educator's established professional identity would likely come into tension with work life at the university—whether the self, knowledge, and beliefs that were brought into the faculty role might change or remain

stable, be integrated with or separated from other ideas/communities, or be expressed or not, in certain situations of university-based teaching, research, and service. RDT formed the bulk of the study's framework for understanding the nature and types of tensions experienced by the art teacher educators, as well as the general strategies used to respond to, and hopefully resolve tensions.

The systems bounding the tensions between the art teacher educator and the faculty teacher educator role were envisioned as spaces of potential *creative tension* (Palmer et al., 2010; Senge, 1990) in which negotiations between their established professional identities and the dynamics encountered on the job would generate learning and change. Creative tension exists where there is a gap between the known, believed, and/or assumed, and the unknown, disbelieved or not understood. Creative tension's tenets were relevant for analyzing the ways in which participants would negotiate tensions and what they might learn through this process.

Argyris & Schön's (1974) theory in practice framework was also used in data analysis, particularly for research question three. Within this framework, "espoused theories" refers to the consciously held beliefs about self and concepts other than self, which may or may not be reflected in action. "Theories-in-use" refers to beliefs that are deeply internalized but perhaps not recognized, and yet are reflected in action. These constructs helped me to analyze whether and how shifts in thinking/assumptions about self and practice were occurring in response to tensions.

## Methodology

A qualitative multiple case study research design (Stake, 2013) guided the research process. Each participating art teacher educator represented a single case, or unit of analysis, bounded within a unique system (Creswell, 2013) that constituted their current work environment and their job responsibilities. Studying the cases individually and then side by side allowed participants' unique circumstances and experiences as well as those that were similar across cases, to be illuminated through analysis.

### Participants and Context of the Study

Eight art education faculty members (six women and two men) participated in the study. They worked at public or private higher education institutions located in different regions of the United States. These institutions include colleges of

education and schools of art (in colleges of visual and performing arts) in universities, and independent schools of art and design.

I used purposive criterion sampling to recruit participants from US universities with art teacher preparation programs. Criterion sampling involves "searching for cases or individuals who meet a certain criterion, for example, that they…have had a particular life experience," such as being first-time, full-time art education professors in higher education institutions (Palys, 2008, p. 697). Participant selection criteria included (1) being hired as a full-time faculty member at their current institutions no more than three years before participating in the study, (2) teaching teacher-preparation-focused art education courses and/or supervising pre-service field experiences, and (3) possessing zero years of prior full-time[3] experience as a university-based art teacher educator. Participants' ages ranged from their late twenties to their mid-forties. Four are US-nationals and four were born outside of the US. They span different racial and ethnic heritages and their years of employment as faculty members ranged from one to three years at the time of their participation in the study.

Table 1 summarizes the participants' academic and occupational backgrounds in art and art education prior to becoming full-time art education faculty members, their years of experience in the faculty role at the time of their research participation, and their professional responsibilities as faculty members.

[3] Prior career experiences that qualified art teacher educators for participation included PK-12 teaching and teaching in other educational settings such as museums, and/or having had an adjunct faculty position/s that did not amount to more than three years before being hired into the current job role.

Table 1: Overview of Participants

| **Participant** | Years employed | Prior academic and teaching experience | Current professional role & responsibilities |
|---|---|---|---|
| Sandra | In her 1st year | Master's and doctorate degrees; 14+ years PK-12 (non-US) and non-public-school-based art teaching | Public urban-area university; *Teaching*: Art Education majors & non-majors<br>*Research* & *Service*: Not yet required |
| Kerri | In her 1st year | Master's and Doctorate degrees; 2 years teaching collegiate art education courses as a GTA | Private urban-area university; *Teaching*: Art Education majors & non-majors<br>*Research* & *Service*: Not required |
| Brandon | In his 2nd year | Master's and doctorate degrees; 20+ years non-public-school-based art teaching; 5 years GTA experience | Public urban-area university; *Teaching*: Art Education majors & non-majors<br>*Research* & *Service*: required |
| Mark | In his 2nd year | Master's and doctorate degrees; 15+ years teaching art at PK-12 (public schools) and college levels (GTA) | Public non-urban-area university; *Teaching*: Art Education majors & nonmajors<br>*Research* & *Service*: required |
| Diana | In her 3rd year | Master's and doctorate degrees; 3 years PK-12 art teaching (non-US); 5 years GTA experience (non-art-education) | Public semi-urban-area university; *Teaching*: Art education majors & nonmajors<br>*Research* & *Service*: required |

| **Participant** | Years employed | Prior academic and teaching experience | Current professional role & responsibilities |
|---|---|---|---|
| Suzette | In her 1st year | Master's and doctorate degrees; 13 years PK-12 art teaching | Public urban-area university;<br>*Teaching/Administration*: Art education majors & non-majors; student teaching coordination;<br>*Research & Service:* Not yet required |
| Melissa | In her 1st year | Master's and doctorate degrees; 4 years non-public-school-based art teaching; 3 years GTA teaching | Private semi-rural-area university;<br>*Teaching/Administration*: Art education majors & non-majors; student teaching coordination;<br>*Research* & *Service*: required |
| Joanna | In her 2nd year | Master's and doctorate degrees; 18+ years PK-12 and non-public-school-based art teaching; 9 years GTA & adjunct collegiate teaching | Private urban-area university;<br>*Teaching/Administration*: Art Education majors & non-majors; Student teaching coordination;<br>*Research* & *Service*: required |

*Note:* GTA stands for Graduate Teaching Assistant roles in which collegiate teaching experience was gained while a doctoral student.

## Data Collection

Data were collected over a total period of eighteen months. Individual participants' periods of participation ranged between three and six months based on their availability. Data collection methods constituted:

- three semi-structured interviews,

- a demographic profile survey questionnaire, and,
- a second questionnaire focusing on professional tensions.

The data collected from each of these methods, along with participant-provided professional biographical information and up-to-date CVs and teaching philosophy statements, were used to conduct single case analyses and cross-case analyses of the participants' data.

### Data Analysis

Data analysis involved coding and cross-case analysis methods (Stake, 2013). Each piece of data for a particular participant—i.e., their CV, teaching philosophy statement, interview transcripts, and written and/or visual reflections—was coded separately using an inductive process to reveal emergent themes and issues. Steps in the individual case analysis were precoding, simultaneous coding (Saldaña, 2016), thematic coding (ordering themes based on significance and frequency), and then analyzing the themes against the theoretical framework. An iterative cross-case (comparative) analysis process followed. Here, emergent themes were finalized through continuous data reduction (focusing, simplifying, and abstracting) and through organizing, re-organizing, and synthesizing initial and secondary codes into themes throughout the process.

## Findings and Discussion

Across the individual and cross-case narratives, three main sites of tension became evident: *identity* (subjectivities and backgrounds), *values,* and *knowledge*. Key findings relevant to these three factors are organized under correspondingly named themes. Identity and values correlated specifically with research questions one and two, which asked, respectively, about the types of tensions that participants grappled with and the relationship of these tensions with their established identities and pedagogical practices. Knowledge correlated directly with research question three, which concerned knowledge development through grappling with tensions.

Table 2 summarizes the key findings according to the major themes that emerged and indicates the incidences of these themes in each participant's data set. The following sections present these themes and offer examples of their occurrences for selected participants. Strategies used by participants to manage the tensions that occurred for them within these themes are also discussed.

Table 2: Summary of Key Findings

| Key Themes | Relevance of Themes to Participants |
|---|---|
| Categories of Tensions | |
| Professional-Identity-Related Tensions | |
| - *Confidence vs. insufficiency* | |
| - Being a nontraditional art teacher educator | Kerri, Melissa, Diana |
| - Being a traditional art teacher educator but finding established expertise insufficient | Mark, Joanna, Suzette, Diana |
| Professional-Values-Related Tensions | |
| - *Professional values as sources of struggle and strength* | Diana, Mark, Diana, Melissa, Joanna |
| - Art education (teaching) philosophies in conflict with others' (perceived student resistance) | |
| - Art education philosophies as grounding forces | All |
| Knowledge-Related Tensions | |
| - *Lacking content knowledge for teaching specific courses and topics* | Diana, Mark, Sandra, Melissa, Mark |
| - *Lacking pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) for teaching specific courses, topics, students* | Suzette, Diana, Mark, Melissa, Joanna, Kerri |

# Professional Identity

## Occupational Experience as Confidence and Insufficiency

Consistent with findings in literature on newly hired university-based teacher educators (McAnulty & Cuenca, 2014; Goodwin et al., 2014), most of the study participants, to different degrees, reported experiences of struggling to feel legitimate in their positions. Although prior school teaching experience is widely assumed to be sufficient, "although not necessarily essential [...] for teaching prospective teachers how to teach" (Berry & Loughran, 2008, p. 169), former

PK-12 teachers' senses of identity and confidence earned through their experiences as "excellent school teachers" (Chick & Beswick, 2018, p. 476) come under threat when they realize that their expert teacher knowledge feels insufficient for leading others' professional learning (White, 2014). Here, the dialectic tension of stability versus change is evident, as the pre-established expertise brought into the job now needs to be changed or expanded.

This situation proved to be most applicable to Suzette, as she, of all the participants, expressed the strongest connection with being a PK-12 art teacher. Because of this connection, she found it difficult to translate the knowledge and expertise that she had developed over time into a pedagogy of art teacher education. She saw teacher education at the university level as being "very theoretical," therefore making it difficult for her "to make a perfect alignment between the theoretical and then what's happening" in the real world of school teaching.

For all eight participants, their prior occupational experiences engendered either confidence or a sense of insufficiency depending how well-matched these prior experiences were with different aspects of their jobs. For example, Diana and Sandra, having been school-based art teachers in other countries prior to doing doctorates in the US, expressed confidence in their knowledge of teaching. However, they, along with Kerri, experienced feelings of otherness and cultural dissonance (an integration versus separation dialectic) due to their lack of immersion in the US education system as learners and/or as teachers. Because they had spent their formative years outside of the USA, they felt at a loss when trying to connect with their students through shared cultural knowledge. Sandra felt that she did not have culturally relevant knowledge of US visual culture and social issues to bring into her teaching, and Kerri felt unknowledgeable about the US education system, as she had had limited and non-continuous experiences in it. Kerri also expressed a feeling of "illegitimacy" as a teacher educator due to her lack of a PK-12 teaching background.

## Professional Values

### Art Education Philosophies in Conflict with Others'

The most significant ideological tensions that emerged from the data analysis were those based on differences among the participants' perspectives about art education subject-matter, and those held by students. For the seven participants who had recently graduated with doctorates from liberal-leaning, culturally

diverse art education programs. They found that the issues, topics, and approaches to art education that they had come out of their alma mater university programs embracing and integrating into their teaching philosophies were often at odds with others'—i.e., students' and some faculty colleagues'—more conservative attitudes about the subject.

However, all eight participants perceived at least some resistance from their students to aspects of the content they were teaching. For example, Melissa, Diana, and Mark reported facing pushback or disinterest from both art education majors and non-majors, especially when artwork that did not fit their assumptions about art were included in their classes. Diana, noted, "They chose this course because they heard that it's easy. They are non-majors not interested in art." Melissa echoed this attribution, referencing a student who rolled her eyes when some artworks created in response to Trayvon Martin's murder were shown, "I think in her mind it was like, 'Why can't we just do the easy, simple 'learning how to portray things realistically' type of art?'" Mark also faced hostility from a class of pre-service art education students when he praised a "conceptual, student-directed project" presented by one of the students in the class, but confessed his distaste for her second project, which "involved having young students decorate their handprints."

### Art Education Philosophies as Grounding Forces

Although some participants struggled to enact their art-education-based beliefs and values in ways that were satisfying to them, these values also grounded them and helped them negotiate ambiguity and tension in their job environments. These values were non-negotiable elements of the participants' professional identities, pedagogies, and purposes as art educators. When a participant struggled with an aspect of the new job that they did not view as being a part of their existing pedagogical repertoire (e.g., Diana finding it difficult to teach about disabilities and inclusion given her "lack of...experience working with students with disabilities.") or self-concept (e.g., Suzette stating, "I am not an academic"), they drew on their assets and on aspects of identity, knowledge, and values/principles that they were attached to and unwilling to abandon.

For example, Suzette self-identifies as a practice-oriented art teacher who is now expected to "become an academic," or, in her own words, a "blue collar art education professor." In this way, she constructed an aspirational or provisional identity that integrated her strength with what she perceived as a weakness. Her way of trying to reconcile what she started off seeing as disparate identities is to rely on her art teacher identity while working towards a more integrative identity

as a "pracademic" (Posner, 2009). Joanna, Mark, and Brandon also relied on their pre-established artist-activist or "artivist" (Lawton, 2019) identities as anchors that helped them to analyze and negotiate their tensions.

## Professional Knowledge

### Lacking Specific Content Knowledge

Gaps in content knowledge were also an area of struggle for the participants. Content knowledge, here, covers a wide spectrum. Participants' tensions, regardless of the specific type, reflected gaps in the "knowledge of instructional strategies and representations" component of pedagogical content knowledge, or "PCK" (Chan & Yung, 2015, p. 1248).This type of knowledge includes "the most useful forms of representation of those ideas, the most powerful analogies, illustrations, examples, explanations, and demonstrations" (Shulman, 1986, p. 9).

For example, Diana felt unequipped to pass on workable, practical inclusion and accommodation strategies to her students, as she did not have firsthand experience teaching students with disabilities. Melissa also sometimes felt unequipped to give students practical advice about resolving classroom dilemmas, due to her inexperience with PK-12 teaching. She managed this tension by thinking through issues aloud with students or relying on more experienced teachers for advice. Mark expressed awareness of having a "rather sketchy knowledge as regards the 'field' of art education (and art therapy, and education)" due to his interdisciplinary academic and professional background and scholarly interests. He remarked that this gap in his knowledge was most apparent when planning syllabi or consulting with students about research topics. Sandra, having grown up in a non-American culture, felt that she lacked enough of an American perspective to effectively teach about social issues—which she sees as inseparable from art education content—in ways that students will relate to. She felt that inviting students to share about their life experiences as a deliberate pedagogical strategy would help both herself and her students with this issue.

### Lacking Knowledge for Teaching Student Teachers

Joanna's and Suzette's knowledge-related tensions, on the other hand, reflected the other central component of PCK, "knowledge of students" (Chan & Yung, 2015, p. 1248). Joanna shared that she felt insufficiently equipped to help a handful of her students because she sees a likely tension "between what they are actually capable of and what their expectations really are." Suzette also, upon

recognizing that her placement of lesson planning in her course's sequence impeded students from "getting it," realized that she needed to re-strategize. She was frustrated at how long it took for her to recognize the problem and to figure out how to address it. Suzette's and Joanna's situations reflected a need to increase their understanding of what makes learning content easy or difficult for students, and that they needed more knowledge of strategies that were most likely to help students to learn content well.

There was an evident correlation between the participants' responses to teaching-related tensions and their development of PCK for educating art teachers. Across the board, the participants became aware of the fact that their "espoused theories" and/or assumptions about their students and how best to teach them, were inconsistent with the "theories-in-use" in their pedagogy (Argyris & Schön, 1974) The realization that sometimes students did not readily take to their teaching motivated them to reconsider their teaching approaches. This was the case even when participants tended to frame some of their teaching- and assessment-related tensions as student resistance or unpreparedness.

## Limitations and Surprises of the Study

The study was limited as its sample size of eight art teacher educators and eight universities is not representative of the diverse subjectivities and academic/professional backgrounds that art teacher educators bring to their jobs, nor of the diversity of art education program cultures in US universities. Claims could therefore not be made about the generalizability of the types of tensions experienced. Also, because this was not a longitudinal study, there was no way to use its data to make firm claims about that the indicators of participants' changes in thinking and pedagogical approaches were concrete and permanent.

Further, it was not possible due to the Covid-19 pandemic and other reasons, to observe the participants at work. Including observations at intervals over at least a full academic year rather than the few months of data collection per participant, would have allowed for deeper investigation of research question three, which sought to identify insights into their thinking over time to identify concrete indications of growth. Because of this and because they were in the initial stages of a transformational process in which professional identities and pedagogies were likely to shift in response to creative tensions, I interpreted

participants' tension management responses as being possibly impermanent and situationally determined.

A conceptual limitation of the study was that because there are few examples of theorized art teacher educator tensions in art education scholarship, it was difficult to discern the many ways in which professional tensions that are particular or unique to art teacher educators might emerge and what they might look like. Based on the available literature on art teacher educators, I had assumed that most of the participants' subject-area-related tensions would stem mainly from pragmatic difficulties in teaching students about art pedagogy. I was surprised to see that the tensions that participants found most compelling were generally more conceptual than pragmatic and were integrated into every aspect of their work lives (pedagogy, social interactions with faculty colleagues, balancing research with teaching and service, etc.). Across the collective data, there was a strong presence of theories such as feminism, visual culture studies and civically engaged art and art education. They identified with these theories partly because of personal interest and affiliation, and partly because of their recent immersions in doctoral programs that promoted these ideas.

## Conclusions

This study's research questions sought to uncover what factors influence early-career university-based art teacher educators' professional tensions in their workplace contexts, how they experience these tensions, and whether and in what ways their negotiations of these tensions might promote their professional development.

The study's findings indicate that the two most significant influences on art teacher educators' tensions were (1) intensely felt conflicts between their deepest personal and professional values and oppositional attitudes expressed by others, including students and faculty colleagues, and (2) perceived mismatches between the needs and agendas they were expected to fulfill (e.g., student learning, tenure requirements) and the skills, expertise, and working theories that they brought to the job. While there were common tensions experienced by all the participants, these played out in different ways based on individuals' positionalities and specific university contexts. Because the tensions overlapped and permeated all areas of participants' work lives (e.g., pedagogy, social relationships, and adjusting to new workplace cultures and expectations), it was possible, but sometimes difficult to discern and segregate aspects of tensions

that were art-education-specific. However, it was clear that participants' personal and academic orientations towards art education bore a strong influence of on their perceptions of, and approaches to resolving their tensions.

Finally, the findings indicate that through deliberate critical and meaningful processing and negotiation of professional tensions—even in the span of a few months (the period of the research study), early-career university-based art teacher educators begin to develop new skills and habits of mind to help them to deal with uncertainty, ambiguity, and frustration on the job. My dissertation is only a beginning step towards a more fulsome investigation of the tensions of being an early-career art teacher educator, and the kinds of learning that can occur through meaningful negotiation of these tensions.

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