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# Looking to the Future of Education: A Social Art Practice Pedagogy

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Looking to the Future of Education:  
A Social Art Practice Pedagogy

by

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# Introduction

## Intent

America's public educational system fails, in some respects, to teach students the knowledge that is necessary to succeed in higher education and in later life. We have become a society that values quantifiable, profitable intelligence most of all. What we fail to recognize is that the hierarchy of intelligence is socially constructed and deeply shaped by capitalism. What content is more valued and more supported in the public education system are within subjects that lead to jobs that are viewed as more societally applicable and have a higher earning quotient. The students who are being educated today are being thrown into a society that forces them to believe that the only way to make more than minimum wage for the rest of their lives is to give in to this system. In terms of public education, students whose families are impoverished have little time or ability to spend time on the abstract, or the concepts and ideas that will help them obtain a higher standing in the system. This is why the children of the elite are funneled into Ivy League educations while the children of the poor are funneled into retail jobs after high school graduation. This is an example of symbolic violence built into our linguistic markets and interactions that perpetuates inequalities. Theory, lexicon, abstractions, and aesthetics are tools of the privileged. Without change to this through the educational system, we will fail to change the disparities and focus of education today.

Our educational system needs to address these inequalities as it has led to a decline in graduation rates and the number of students continuing and completing higher education. Depending on collection methods, sources, and definitions, the U.S.

graduation rate is claimed to be anywhere from 66% to 88% in recent years.<sup>1</sup> The range of estimated minority rates is even less: from 50% to 85%.<sup>2</sup> That a simple educational statistic about the number of students who graduate from high school has such a wide range that exemplifies the disparity in our educational standards and application. Our system has a difficult time determining its standards - not just for what defines a high school graduate in an educational statistic - but for what information is being taught to the students and how it is being taught. This robs students of growth in critical thinking and a more thorough engagement and analysis of the way the global capitalist structure will affect their lives and how they may prepare themselves.

Currently, the standards of the American educational system vary from state to state, district to district, leading to a disparity in the curricula, and thus in student's overall preparation for higher education. State testing standards tend to focus on Mathematics, Science, and English comprehension. This focus is partially due to the global ideology of intelligence that primarily values logical and linguistic intelligence over any other form. These intelligences, defined as separate intelligences by Howard Gardner, deal with how the brain processes language (verbal or written) and how the brain approaches problems.<sup>3</sup> This is partially due to how global capitalism affects educational content and how these subjects relate to careers. The focus our educational system has on these principles forces educators and educational institutions to base comprehension of knowledge on assignments and exams in order to measure a student's ability. Educators teach students to do well on the exams to meet state standards, resulting in the rote memorization and regurgitation of just enough knowledge for the student to obtain a passing score. This mode of education does not advance

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<sup>1</sup> Heckman, James J., and Paul A. Lafontaine.

<sup>2</sup> Heckman, James J., and Paul A. Lafontaine.

<sup>3</sup> Gardner, Howard.

society in progressive or creative ways. These under-educated students will be the leaders in the future of our society as a whole.

The intent of this paper is to persuade educators and those within fields of education to re-examine our current educational structures. America's system of education is floundering: high school and college graduation rates have been declining since the 1970s<sup>4</sup>. The current structures enforce a highly logical/linguistic pedagogy and are swayed easily by financial loss or gain of the individual school. Educational funding is based on the subjects that are most valued, and those programs that do not fit this value system are cut.

The implementation of social practice art pedagogy would redefine and strengthen our educational ideologies by introducing effective, alternative learning modalities, and provide new lenses through which to examine problems. The social practice art pedagogy that I will describe would enhance critical thinking skills, social awareness and engagement, and help students to develop a personal *modus operandi* that fosters success, both in the American system of education and in later life.

The main purpose of America's educational institutions is to assist parents in developing high-functioning, capable, intelligent adults that can flourish in - and improve - society. To realize this goal, Americans need to reexamine the standards our students are held to—standards that are currently failing to prepare our children for the future. The first step in the education of future generations is the education of this generation.

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<sup>4</sup> Heckman, James J., and Paul A. Lafontaine. "The American High School Graduation Rate: Trends and Levels." *Review of Economics and Statistics* 92, no. 2 (2010): 244-62. doi:10.1162/rest.2010.12366. Pg. 244

# Project

This paper utilizes two eight-week after-school art class sessions at a local middle school in Portland, Oregon to explore different methodologies that can help contribute to a social practice art pedagogy. By applying different pedagogies within the classes taught, I attempt to create a guide for other educators wishing to apply these pedagogies in their classrooms. This guide is to be continually improved upon by educators and educational institutions, using current research into methods, psychology, and education. In each class a single medium or method of application was used: the first four weeks focused on building technique, and the last four focused on a project that combined a social issue or idea with the techniques that they learned.

The first eight-week session consisted of a one-hour session, one day a week. During this period, the class played with clay - honing skills and techniques by practicing pinch and coil pots to learn how to join and shape. Throughout the course, I engaged the students in discussions about current news surrounding such topics as race, gender, sexuality, and environmental issues. I expanded upon information supplied to them in their regular classes by asking students if they had been learning anything about those subjects outside of school, and supplying my own knowledge, if applicable. In the last four weeks, I presented the students with a project that asked them to take one of the topics we had discussed in class, or another topic off of a list, and respond to it with clay. After the projects were finished, I asked students to reflect on their pieces and to examine what did or didn't work about their pieces. The students then discussed their work as a group.

In the second class, we met for one hour, two days a week. The technique we applied within the class was drawing using graphite and charcoal as our medium. This class followed a similar structure as the first with a few notable changes. The students

still engaged in a technique-focused initial immersion into the class, but before the transition into the social project we had a visiting artist come to speak. This was for the purpose of engaging the students in a personal experience with art, as well as to expose them to ways of representing content and meaning through their art. It was also socially engaging: the guest artist spoke about identity culture, the gender binary, being transgender, and how they addressed these controversial topics through their art. The students were shown works of art, given a brief explanation of the works meaning, examined techniques of representation and abstraction, and then had a Q&A session with the artist. The students were then given their final project, a self-portrait that had to represent their identity.

My application of this was within a small sample size, and over a short period of time, if so the example's ability to be approached objectively is diminished. However, as a model of methodologies that fall into a social practice art pedagogy, this application provides an insight into how a social practice arts pedagogy may be approached beyond theory.

# Purpose

## Current Education Practices

### American Values in Education

The contemporary American education system maintains that the most effective learning modalities use logical and linguistic instruction, and knowledge that supports those modalities is paramount. These modalities fall into topics called “STEM” (science, technology, engineering, and math) subjects, which are generally coupled with a focus on English literacy. The metrics used to evaluate the performance of students in these subjects - and the ideology of Western education - perpetuates an uneven emphasis on STEM subjects while simultaneously belittling other fields of study. Students who do well in STEM-focused schools are typically congratulated and encouraged, while students who cannot color within the lines of the STEM picture are discouraged and labeled as defective.

This system trains students to ascribe greater value to subjects used in occupations that have a higher anticipated future income. Students are encouraged to follow paths that lead to more lucrative careers, based on the assumption that wealth leads to a more prosperous life. Medical professionals, scientists, and engineers are considered to be more valuable to society because the connection between their vocation and the betterment of our world is readily apparent. Professionals in these fields garner more respect, funding, and privilege.

STEM subjects and the metrics used to measure student success rely on an incomplete definition of intelligence. In global capitalist culture, this definition is exclusive to STEM subjects and the associated skills: logic, objectivity, methodic problem solving, and the assimilation and regurgitation of facts and figures. The hierarchy of intelligence is socially constructed and deeply shaped by capitalism. French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, wrote a great deal about the way in which education replicates the capitalist class structure, and also how it has power to change the class structure. Bourdieu believed that most inequalities center around distance from necessity, those with a small distance from necessity will be provided practical knowledge for navigating the concrete nature of society. Meanwhile, those who do not struggle for necessities will be more concerned with abstractions and aesthetics. This means that the education system currently focuses on these abstract concepts that are helpful in such fields as the STEM subjects, but do not address knowledge needed to tackle the day to day necessities of life.<sup>5</sup> However, a large percentage of the population does not fall into this category. These students lack the skill sets, or the help to obtain the skills needed to be able to succeed in the current educational system. These students may not succeed in the conventional way, but often have other merits worth refining: different intelligences that Howard Gardner defines in his Theory of Multiple Intelligences. While the people who excel at these fringe skills are respected, their accomplishments are rarely recognized as useful or worthwhile in the context of building a better society. This degradation of these skills detracts from the value placed on such skills, making them appear less intelligent. On the other hand, students who have an innate ability to succeed according to current metrics are labeled as intelligent and hardworking. This system values a single type of intelligence, ignoring the possibility of other forms.

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<sup>5</sup> Bryant, Lee

## Theory of Multiple Intelligences

In 1983, Howard Gardner published his book *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, which proposed that the accepted, dichotomous model of intelligence was inadequate. Gardner posited that the aptitude of a human brain could not be measured on a single sliding scale (the Intelligence Quotient (IQ)), rather, there are multiple quotients that must be considered holistically. In his original theory, Gardner defined eight different intelligences: linguistic, logical/mathematical, musical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalistic. Since then, he has defined two other types of intelligences: existential and pedagogical. The theory of multiple intelligences defines an intelligence as “the biopsychological potential to process information in certain ways, in order to solve problems or fashion products that are valued in a culture or community”. Simply, American society gives the highest value (in monetary terms) to products and solutions that require STEM field knowledge and, as a result, the intelligences associated with those fields have the highest perceived value.

Every person has some inherent faculty in each of the ten categories defined by Gardner, any of which may be stronger or weaker than the same faculty in another individual. Linguistic intelligence is associated with verbal and writing skills and is usually attributed to authors, poets, and writers. Logical-Mathematical intelligence is usually associated with the scientist, the logician, the mathematician, or the doctor. Individuals who excel at Linguistic and Logical-Mathematical thinking are—in the American milieu—typically considered to be the *most* intelligent individuals. Despite this primary ideology, Garner suggests that investing research into different intelligences and how to develop them is important to our educational system.

The other types of intelligence that Gardner defines are those that are less valued in society as supplemental intelligences are musical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic,

interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalistic. Musical intelligence is that of the composer, performer, or acute listener. There is Spatial intelligence, like that of the aviator, the astronaut, the artist, or the chess player. Spatial intelligence has to do with how we perceive and understand things such as volume, distance, height, or relation of object to one another. The fifth type of intelligence is Bodily-Kinesthetic, such as that of a dancer, athlete, or surgeon. This type of intelligence focuses on using the body to solve or make things. Interpersonal, or Social intelligence is the intelligence that has to do with relationships between people, reading body language, or speaking persuasively. The jobs that fall into this kind of intelligence are actors, politicians, teachers, therapists, and sales persons. The seventh type of intelligence is Intrapersonal, or self-intelligence. This is having a good working model of yourself, a good understanding of how to achieve it: what you lack and how to gain and nurture those qualities. This kind of intelligence is very important for everyone, as it is the source of self-motivation and willpower. The eighth kind of intelligence is Naturalistic intelligence, which is being able to make distinctions in nature between food that is safe or poisonous, different animals, rocks, or plants. This intelligence was grown for our hunter/gatherer society, but in today's culture naturalistic intelligence helps us make consumer choices to better our lives.

Gardner has since proposed the idea of two more types of intelligence, Existential intelligence and Pedagogical intelligence. The first, Existential intelligence is the intelligence in critically addressing the large questions in life such as why do I live? Who am I? What is death? What is love? These are questions that inspire philosophers, artists, and writers. The second other new type of intelligence is Pedagogical, which is the ability to teach information to others. The ability to explain in different ways how to complete a project, describe criteria, or transfer information is a mode of intelligence that is not dependent on the information a person has. Two people may have the same

knowledge on a subject, but one is better able to communicate that knowledge or how to apply it than the other.

These different modes of intelligence are accompanied by a few claims by the author regarding intelligence and education. The first two, which can be scientifically tested, are that every person has these intelligences and that no two intelligences are exactly alike. The second two claims are to the educational sphere, the first that we should individualize education to each learner's individual array of intelligences. The second is that, whenever possible, we should pluralize, taking each subject deemed important and examining it through different lenses. Gardner defines pluralization as defining the important topics to teach and teaching and assessing them in multiple different ways. This will help students fully understand a subject as well as create pathways for different intelligences to understand the material. Pluralizing can mean using a game of pool to learn geometry and probability, using angles and force to predict where the ball will end up, as well as teaching it the traditional way, in a classroom. Approaching the same subject from multiple angles allows students to learn the subject inside out, catering to all the different types of intelligences. In order to do this, using modalities that play to these different intelligences is imperative.

## **Learning Modalities**

One way to address these differences in student's intelligences is to invest in different learning modalities. Learning modalities are methods of learning that are based on the different intelligences. Our current educational systems uses logical and linguistic modalities. In studies as early as 1987, it was found that individualizing learning styles

can increase student achievement and decrease discipline problems in as little as six weeks.<sup>6</sup> An arts-integrated multimodal approach to education will help students retain information by exploring it and presenting it to students in various ways.

The current modalities of learning are based on linguistic and logical intelligences, using symbols (letters, words) and icons to deliver information. Every subject has a textbook that provides the information the student is to know about the subject, and many educators teach to the textbook. These texts are reinforced by lectures in class, many times accompanied by text visuals that provide minimal supplementary information. This information is then repeated through assignments, many focusing on written responses that ask students to examine the information again. Exams then ask this student to present their comprehension of the subject through multiple choice or long answer questions, with some exceptions in art, fitness, or music. There are few examples of other types of learning modalities currently favored in public schools, and this system alienates students who do not favor these methods. Modalities currently favor single-minded approaches to information, which denies creation of links and patterns between social issues and self. This alienates the students from the world and creates a divide between education and the world the student entered upon completion of their education.

## **Current standards in Education**

Our society currently enforces the logical and linguistic modes of intelligences and learning as the most valuable and most respected intelligences. It not only values them on a scale of intelligence but on an economic level. It is a simple idea: to put emphasis on science, math, and language, but in doing so, it neglects other areas where

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<sup>6</sup> Dispelling outdated beliefs of student learning

students may develop skills to last a lifetime. The development of standards in this manner place the most value on logical and linguistic intelligences within primary education and directly or indirectly devalue other subjects that don't cater to this intelligence primarily. The current education standards are varying across country depending on the district, but all have developed mathematics and English reading and writing standards. There are minimal to no standards regarding sex ed., arts, or music, and highly varying standards regarding history, science, and electives. There have been attempts to ratify the disparity within standards, both on a local and national scale. One of the most successful in terms of participation is the Common Core Initiative.

The Common Core Initiative was intended to raise the percentage of students who successfully managed the transition from high school to college and obtained a degree. The Common Core standards were created to provide clear and consistent goals to prepare students for college, a career, and life. The idea behind this was that the way we prep our students within elementary, middle, and high school does not match up with the criteria or material covered within secondary institutions. These provided states with clear, in-depth standards that give educators goals and benchmarks to guide students education. This principle itself is not poor, it is the application that needs work.

The Common Core standards only have standards written for English Language Arts standards; which covers writing, reading comprehension, literature, speaking, history, and social studies, and science and technological standards; and Mathematics standards. Choosing to apply and develop standards for solely math and English literacy in our education system is reinforcing these values at the expense of many students who do not fit this particular academic profile.[2] This system highly values the logical/linguistic modes of intelligence and devalues, through lack of consideration, the other modes of intelligence. Educators begin to teach to the test in order to help students meet the standards. This puts a high emphasis on the memorization of facts and specific

styles of comprehension (the logical/linguistic modalities), which caters to only a few students. This emphasis causes educators to feed information that has been subjected to privatized exam review boards who choose the information considered valuable. This lacks the engagement of critical thinking or consideration for the multiplicity of intelligence.

## **Evaluation**

The focus on score based learning rather than experiential learning causes issues in learning modalities but also in student's psyche. Failing to reach the necessary scores can be degrading to a student's self-confidence and prevent them from feeling a sense of accomplishment for what they have learned. Self esteem has a major impact in one's persona and academic success over a lifetime. Students who receive poor grades and scores due to not working well within the current pedagogy receive negative attention from teachers, peers, and family members. This can lead to apathy about learning, and lack of participation from the student. A discouraging experience in primary school can cause students to disengage within secondary institutions.

Giving attention to emerging trends in psychology, childhood development, teaching and learning methodologies will help educators to develop a pedagogy that better meets the needs of society. These methods should be re-evaluated so all students are able to learn practical lessons that are continually applicable in their lives. We should focus on methods that integrate social issues with life lessons, as well as multiple teaching methods that cater to different learning styles.

Placing all blame for lack of these skills on the Common Core standards is foolish, and neglects a large population of educational institutes. The American

educational system needs an upgrade, one that caters to our growing need for social change. The methods we are using in all educational institutions should constantly be re-evaluated in order to fit our adapting world. Building critical thinking skills from a younger age, skills that allow students to examine their studies objectively, can help reshape the educational system from the inside out. The current methods should be re-evaluated so all students are able to learn practical lessons that last. We should focus on methods that integrate social issues with life lessons, as well as multiple teaching methods that cater to different learning styles. Self-directed education and methodology that caters to individual identity is an important part of the learning process. Dynamic education should take into account the diversity of students, their intelligences, their skills, their cultural and social identities.

## **Social Practice Art Pedagogy**

### **Intention of A Social Practice Art Pedagogy**

The Social Practice Art Pedagogy explained in depth (below) will help the current American education system develop a conscious, evolving, multi-disciplinary pedagogy. The main principles behind what I define as a social practice art pedagogy is a socially active, up to date, arts-integrated system of methodologies that foster growth in all different intelligences. This pedagogy focuses on building critical thinking skills by pluralizing and individualizing curriculum. Through the examination of a subject through multiple lenses and methodologies more students retain, reproduce, and critically analyze information given to them. In theory, applying this system will increase high school graduation rates, GPA and exam scores, and student readiness for higher education. It will help equalize the information being taught country-wide by emphasizing

the inclusion of new methods, current social events, and delineation from capitalist influences that force the focus on logical and linguistic intelligences. It will also help individual students by approaching each subject through a variety of lenses and methodologies, allowing each student to make connections to the information in more than one way. The integration of current events and societal trends into the lessons will better prepare students to engage critically with the world.. The implementation of this pedagogy will advance the American education system and help students succeed.

## **Defining Social Art Practice Pedagogy**

### **Public Art's Role**

In order to define social practice art pedagogy, it is necessary to explain the role that public art plays within social practice art. Defining public art is difficult due to contradictions about what is public space, what public art is intended to be, and how it is applied. Public art can be used as an all encompassing term for community art, ecological art, activist art, and social practice art. Public art is described as “art which has as its goal a desire to engage with its audiences and to create spaces—whether material, virtual, or imagined—within which people can identify themselves<sup>7</sup>. These forms of art are all focused on the public sphere, whether applying to it physically such as a public installation, or in virtual spaces such as social media platforms. The differences within each practice comes down to specifics, many of which are in debate.

Community art can be defined as specific community based art that focuses on a primary feature of the community, such as identifying community values, ideals or

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<sup>7</sup> Wildemeersch, D., & von Kotze, A. (2014).

identity. This type of art is meant for community connection or awareness of specific communal problems. Community art has been referred to as the less fashionable version of social practice art<sup>8</sup> but deals with many similar issues, within more local scopes. An example of community art is the kid's mural in West Belfast, inspired by the Kid's Guernica Mural in Tallahassee, Florida. This mural in Belfast was intended to unite the small Suffolk county - Protestant, unionist, and loyalist – with the surrounding larger Lenadoon county of Catholic, nationalist, republicans.<sup>9</sup> They approached this project with the concept that peace is constructed both within individuals and those working on something greater. With this idea, they approached the opposing sides of the community to create a community mural.

Ecological art within the public sphere is art that typically focuses on a local, communal problem with the surrounding environment. This can be a form of community art, however it is typically more focused on the environment. It transcends disciplines, as it encompasses science, aesthetics and sociology, as well as using various types of media. Murals are one way of connecting ecological art to the community, as the mural serves as a “site of social interaction”<sup>10</sup>. A mural can serve as both a means for engaging the public with art and the intent behind the art, as well as a methodology in education. [needs transition sentence here]. This type of methodology can help students develop critical thinking, and an arts-informed notion of being a citizen of the world.<sup>11</sup>

Activist art is applying art in forms of critique that are mainly social or political in order to make a statement. Art that falls under this category are works such as Felix Gonzalez-Torres work *Untitled (billboard of an empty bed)*, 1991.<sup>12</sup> This piece was the image of an empty bed, the pillows obviously indented by past sleepers. Gonzalez-

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<sup>8</sup> Gogarty, Larne Abse.

<sup>9</sup> Anderson, Tom, and Bernard Conlon.

<sup>10</sup> Song, Young Imm Kang, and Jo Ann Gammel.

<sup>11</sup> Song, Young Imm Kang.

<sup>12</sup> Needs a citation

Torres had lost his partner due to AIDS, and was making a public statement about the effect of loss. Many of his pieces had to deal with the effects of the AIDS epidemic and were interactive, bringing the audience in by engaging them with the work, connecting them to their own experiences of loss and the AIDS epidemic. As a billboard with no text, it caused viewers to take another look and truly consider what the ad was about. Another example of activist art is Adbusters, a non-profit, anti-consumerism artists organization that critiques social systems through programs such as culture jamming. Culture jamming is anti-consumerist art movement that is intended to subvert or disrupt media culture and mainstream cultural institutions to foster progressive change. Adbusters does this by creating spoof ads; *Joe Chemo (1996)*, a mock of the Camel cigarettes ad subverted existing corporate ads into ads about the cancerous effects of smoking.<sup>13</sup>

The purpose of integrating these arts with schools is that it has been found that engaging schools with artists and their works that deal with social issues, can initiate discussions and cultivate new perspectives among individuals. These discussions are imperative, as it fosters critical thinking amongst individuals and grows our collective social knowledge. Many of these arts are interdisciplinary, so they engage different intelligences in the different modes that they are represented in. This will help all students be able to be an active participant of their classroom and their education.

## **Social Practice Art**

Social practice art is art that deals with social constructs, biases, and relations. This ever-growing sector of the art world has been characterized by writers, artists, and

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<sup>13</sup>"Adbusters | Journal of the Mental Environment."

curators creating works about social relations.<sup>14</sup> Pioneers of social practice art such as Suzanne Lacy began to explore complex social dynamics and political issues while using art as a source of imagination and as a catalyst of change.<sup>15</sup> From 1991 to 2000, Lacy engaged in a series of installations, performances, and political activism with the youth in Oakland. These projects involved working with local youth, beginning with a unscripted radio documentary where students spoke openly about family, sexuality, drugs, culture, education, and the future in a live show.<sup>16</sup> This project took over two years to prepare for as it was intended to create a media literacy curriculum on youth identity and politics, as well as creating an advanced training program for teachers from eight Oakland public high schools.<sup>17</sup> These works combined art theory and social problems in order to create a dialog about youth identity. It opened up discussions about the Oakland youth and the police and began projects involving discussions between youth and police. This project bridged arts-integration education with social issues of the local youth and government to create a community interest in these problems as well as provide means for solutions.

Social practice art delves into issues that fall on the communal, local, national, or global scale. A few artists who have really become forerunners of social practice art are Theaster Gates and Rick Lowe. These artists have both made large strides in social practice art and have become commercially valued as well. Theaster Gates exposed the racist structures in the art consumer world by creating a fictional tale that he was apprenticed to a Japanese ceramicist who had survived the Hiroshima bombing. He began dinners in honor of his mentor, serving soul food on the ceramics of his mentor. These dinners sold out, funding Gates work. He had little success until he began

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<sup>14</sup> Gogarty, Larne Abse.

<sup>15</sup> Donovan, Thom.

<sup>16</sup> "Website." SUZANNE LACY.

<sup>17</sup> "Website." SUZANNE LACY.

presenting his work in this way, playing off of how people viewed his work as an African-American artist before he constructed the idea of an art mentor that had passed on his valuable knowledge, experience, and wisdom. By playing into the gimmicks of the art world, he exposed the racial lines beneath them.<sup>18</sup>

Rick Lowe is an artist who started Project Row Houses, renovated shotgun housing in the mainly African-American Third Ward of Houston, Texas into community spaces, artists' residencies and a young mother's program. This project was partnered with a Community Development Corporation that buys properties in order to maintain them as low income housing. Lowe created spaces for people to live and act in ways that foster communal growth and arts integration within these areas that don't have the financial ability to participate with art. Gates cited Lowe's project as inspiration for his Dorchester Projects, a series of community art buildings that have been bought using funds from his art that continue to support his cause through the use of the spaces for cultural events.

These examples of social practice art bring understanding of how social problems such as racism can be shown through art. The integration of these ideas within the art world brings the injustices that exist in the global society to a visible platform. It also provides an opening in the space and time between an experience and our habitual response to such issues. This can be defined as a transitional space, or another way of being in relation to a particular moment.<sup>19</sup> Art and social practice art creates such transitional spaces, allowing viewers or participants to engage with the subject matter in ways that they have not typically approached before. Social practice art brings current social issues such as racism, identity, or sexuality to the forefront of conversations.

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<sup>18</sup> Saval, Nikil.

<sup>19</sup> Wildemeersch & Von Kotze 2014

## Education and Social Practice Art

The integration of the principles behind social practice art into our educational system will help the system develop a tie to the current social issues in our world. This will help both educators and students have access to current information from multiple sources (as opposed to a textbook) and address it through various lenses to critically examine the subject. The critical examination of current events, structures and trends, comparing such topics to history, local attitudes and the issues around the world will allow students to make observations about the world they will enter upon completion of their primary education. These topics would be explored through different methodologies that engage different intelligences and effectively pluralize<sup>20</sup> the student's education. The social practice art pedagogy does not only integrate arts based methodologies, but introduces topics that help the student build critical thinking skills about the world they live in, versus history or literature as the building blocks for critical thinking skills. These skills are essential to providing a student the means of tackling their own lives and a means of being an aware and active member of the world. It will help more students gain the knowledge that is demanded by state and national standards by addressing topics in a multitude of ways. This can be accomplished by defining guiding principles of teaching, and researching emerging methodologies.

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<sup>20</sup>Gardner, Howard.

# Integrating social practice art and Methodologies

## Defining Principles

"Reflecting on Our Beliefs and Actions: Purposeful Practice in Art Education"<sup>21</sup> defines fifty reasons to engage others in learning art. This is order to help art educators define their principles for teaching art and education in general. The first is growth in independent and divergent thinking. By engaging in art pedagogy within educational curriculum we can foster growth in independent ways of thinking outside of our current systems that are oppression driven, monetarily and individually focused, and breed mistrust and hatred. The second is to be provided social and emotional growth. Exposing students to art created by peers and the global community causes social and emotional growth, and encourages students to process information and respond in new, worthwhile ways. The students are given an opportunity to respond to their education in an emotional sphere that cannot always be obtained through writing or verbalization. The discussion with classmates and others about their art provides positive interactions that increases social skills and a positive mentality. It introduces the students in a more informal, casual setting, to consider other students perspectives

The third principle is to engage in the exploration of contemporary social issues. Art pedagogy, specifically social practice art pedagogy, allows for the exploration of contemporary social issues in a method that can help with the controversial and more sensitive aspects of talking about such things as racial violence and other forms of discrimination. The fourth principle is to engage in meaning-making through the analytical interpretation of art and ideas. Engaging students in making connections

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<sup>21</sup> Bolin, Paul E., and Kaela Hoskings.

between symbolism, movements in the art world, and the current state of the world can bring students to make lasting memories of educational methods of critical thinking to apply later in life. Teaching different ways of thinking versus giving answers and premade conclusions will forward thinking and allow us not to repeat mistakes of the past by engaging students in a different way. The fifth principle I chose for my reasons for engaging others in learning art is to investigate big ideas, critical themes, essential concepts, or big questions in the world. This will bring students and educators to critically analyze our world and the current state of affairs.

I believe the combination of these principles will give a sense of direction to educators wanting to employ these ideas and help move education towards an engaged learning system versus a memorization and score based system. The application of such principles will result in an education system that focuses on the whole of the educational sphere, not solely the linguistic, logical and mathematical subjects and intelligences. Defining such principles gives direction to the instructors on how to address problems, what subjects to address and the means to do so.

## **Identifying Methodologies**

Arts-integrated learning folds right into Gardner's idea of pluralizing. Integrating arts into other subjects helps approach those subjects from different lenses. These methods can involve bodily-kinesthetic, spatial, musical, inter- and intrapersonal modalities. In a first grade classroom, the teacher created a unit around bodily-kinesthetic modalities. They provided the students with supplies to create marble runs out of paper tubes, pieces of wood and other materials. They explored the objects by

rearranging them, turning themselves over to look at the ramps and tunnels, placing the ball at the beginning and discovering problems as the ball ran through the track. This project engaged the students bodies and movement through their interaction with the building blocks, pretending they were the ball, or following it through the track as the ball. It also engaged the students critical thinking skills in building ramps that moved the ball forward, up ramps, and around curves. They tackled the problems of momentum, gravity, and direction through this seemingly simple activity. They used different intelligences, such as spatial intelligence to gauge whether or not the next link in the run was spaced correctly. Using methods that cater to the different intelligences to teach students critical thinking skills will help engage students in their education. This will help prepare students for the rest of their education by pluralizing how students are taught. Using multiple learning modalities can help reinforce lessons for students who do not learn well in the logical/linguistic modalities the American education system favors. Pluralizing utilizes different learning modalities, which helps individualize learning and make it more applicable and understandable to each student. This also helps build critical thinking skills, for engaging a subject through different modes of thinking builds different pathways of thought. Application of pluralization creates critical thought processes that are subconsciously and knowingly applied throughout life.

A fantastic example of arts-integrated pluralization is a program applied in Highland Park High School, in Highland Park, Illinois.<sup>22</sup> The educators and students used a series of fresco panels made during Illinois Federal arts projects era to integrate art into the lessons. The students in Art History investigated the panels, study the names they were given by the high school's Art Club in 1934 and student involvement in the project. They studied why the panels had been given to the school, discovering that in the 1930's their school had a strong vocational program. They studied the means of

representation and style within the panels, glean information such as why the panels have no women in them, why the artist was chosen to complete these works, and why this particular era in American art has been considered insignificant compared to others. The Chemistry students took a trip to the Chicago Conservation Center where the murals had been restored after they had been taken out of storage, and learned about the chemical processes of degradation and chemical restoration used on the panels. The Advanced Placement Studio Art class explored and then replicated the techniques the artist used to paint the frescos, the use of color, and the influence from different muralists at the time.<sup>23</sup>

This exploration of a singular subject, in this case the murals, through different methods or lenses allows for students to engage more critically within a subject. The students at Highland Park high school were able to thoroughly explore avenues of thought brought up by the fresco panels, relating the panels to a multitude of subjects, interweaving them into a cohesive narrative of the frescos. This kind of exploration of topics is what Gardner defines as pluralization and an integral part of arts-integrated learning. It helps engage different intelligences by handling the same topic in different ways, hands-on, like in the AP Studio Art class which utilized spatial and linguistic intelligences, as well as being taught in a bodily-kinesthetic modality. The students would discuss the reasons why they placed their subjects in their composition and used their hands and bodies to paint.

These modalities are all part of a growing range of arts based modalities that are being developed everyday, and should continue to be developed in order to best suit the students and society's needs. This will help progress education towards a student-catered system that supports learners through their education and into a positive

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<sup>23</sup> Kieffer New Deal Murals

successful environment upon graduation. It will better prepare students for life outside the educational system.

## **Benefits of Social Practice Methodologies**

Utilizing an arts-integrated pedagogy can help students address more difficult subjects such as politics or genocide from a younger age. This will help students be able to address their surroundings with less emotional confusion and more critical thought. Providing means for students to break apart difficult concepts allows students to actively critique and discuss the structures at play in the world around them. A social practice arts-based pedagogy can help open a space that allows for an atypical non-habitual response to what is being experienced.<sup>24</sup> Art allows students to address emotion and meaning through representation in color and form. It can be more difficult for students to respond in a verbal or written manner to these issues as arguments in these modes are heavily structured and do not allow much flexibility for students to address the topic at hand. Utilizing art-based lessons to address different subjects allows what are commonly perceived as “age sensitive” subjects to be more easily approached. The utilization of a social practice arts pedagogy will bring social issues and structures to the forefront of education, preparing students for life outside the educational system and the roles they will be playing in the future of the world. It will give students the opportunity to critically engage with social issues that they will have to deal with later, in a manner that allows them to safely explore the topic. It will allow students to see different sides to subjects and more fully comprehend the subjects brought to them.

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<sup>24</sup> Wildemeersch & Von Kotze 2014

Arts-integration means that subjects already taught in school do not have to change drastically in order to take effect. Utilizing smaller arts projects or culmination projects for lessons taught in History, English literature will give students the opportunity to explore these subjects within different intelligences and modalities. Classes can utilize arts-based methodologies for a unit, and then move to a more traditional style for the next unit. Even small integration will benefit students' ability to approach and retain information from lessons. Social practice arts integrates social issues with arts-based methodologies in order to provide a gateway for students to learn both subjects within school and outside of the institution.

# Application

## Defining Class Direction and Methodologies

To begin to define the direction of my class, I needed to define what I wanted the class to learn and what principles would be my guides in my methodology search. I wanted the class to engage critically with the way art could represent issues in the world. I wanted the class to approach art with a new perspective, one that valued art as a learning tool for external and internal learning. I wanted the class to learn about the techniques of the medium we were applying, as well as a brief history of that technique. I wanted the students to respond to in-class discussions verbally, written, and within their art. I wanted each of the students to walk away having learned something new about art, about themselves, and about the world they live in.

I used Bolin & Hosking's list of principles to help me narrow and refine my principles for engaging others in learning art. Out of these fifty principles that were defined, I chose five that represented the direction I wanted my teaching to take. These principles are growth in independent and divergent thinking, the fostering of social and emotional growth, engagement in the exploration of contemporary social issues, the application in meaning-making through the analytical interpretation of art and ideas, and to investigate larger ideas, critical themes, essential concepts, or major questions in the

world.<sup>25</sup> These principles helped me define the purposes behind what I was planning on teaching the students, as well as give direction when plans were derailed.

Once I had defined my principles, I began looking at modalities of learning in order to apply the method of teaching that would best fit the situation and the students needs. Within my class I attempted to apply methodologies that fall into what I have defined above as a social practice arts pedagogy. I intended to pluralize the information and individualize the lesson plan to best suit each student's abilities. One method of pluralization I chose was to present techniques and concepts through powerpoints, images, words, visual example, and student experimentation. In the initial meeting, I gave a powerpoint presentation that held images and keywords of the medium we were exploring in class. I included in each presentation the basic information about the class such as the medium we were going to use, the basic steps we were going to take to learn the medium, and what was expected of them (in assignments and behavior). After I discussed these details with the class, I showed the students different applications of the techniques that they were going to learn. For ceramics, I used examples such as Ai Weiwei's *Sunflower Seeds 2010*, showing how each seed was made of clay and how this use of clay critiqued consumerism in China by the use of porcelain (a traditional Chinese product) and the mass production process in which the seeds were made. In the drawing class, I had a guest artist present their work to the class, looking at details of shading, contour, abstraction, and representation within the paintings. The artist's work focused on personal identity in our current society's binary gender system. The inclusion of works that address contemporary issues through art can make challenging and complex subject easier to comprehend. It also exposes students to new experiences and thoughts that may not have been formed otherwise.

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<sup>25</sup> Bolin & Hoskings

The formation of new thoughts and experiences helps develop critical thinking skills, as a student must learn to sort and process the information through different modes. During each class I facilitated conversation about the topics the students had learned about in their life that week. This covered topics of experiences they had in and out of school, information given to them by family, friends, or educators. We discussed reactions (of students or audiences) to the information, what different people these subjects affected, what could possibly be done to change the situation. We looked at different angles, reasons people supported, believed, or dismissed in different social causes, and how the students themselves responded to the information. These methods of discussion while the student is working with their hands, exploring the medium and practicing techniques, engages multiple intelligences at once (linguistic, bodily-kinesthetic, spatial). Engaging multiple intelligences at once creates connections between these seemingly different topics, and helps student cross-examine subjects and find different solutions to problems.

These discussions also facilitated a means for the children to grow socially. Engaging in an open discussion about contemporary social problems, community issues, or personal experiences fosters new perspectives, empathy, and introspection. Having the students explore this through art and discussion required the students to come up with creative solutions for expressing their values and interests through their art. This allows them to come up with a new format to engage with subjects. These discussions also helped prepare them for our visiting artist. The visiting artist's works dealt primarily with trans-identity, or the identity of those who do not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth. The exploration of this sense of self delves into personal childhood experiences, the socially constructed gender binary, and how to build an identity one can be happy and comfortable with. These topics were deemed sensitive by the head of the after-school program, so I spoke to the students about these subjects

beforehand. This was to address what topics were positive (such as the discovery of the true identity), and what topics were inappropriate or intrusive (name changes, history of previous identity, or changes to the body). Discussion of the topic before the artist arrived allowed the students to address the subject in an open, positive manner that was not destructive to others. This also gave students an opportunity to engage with their ideas of identity, identification, and perception of others. This was to help introduce the students to ways of addressing their identity within art, or other subjects and meanings through representation and abstraction.

The final projects were approached with a handout and a discussion of what was expected and what they could make. For the clay class, I asked the students to address one of the topics on the list on the handout, a topic we had discussed in class, or a social topic that they had personal experience with. The drawing class was assigned a project that required a self-portrait using the techniques of charcoal or graphite with a focus on representation of their identity. These projects were completed and then discussed on the last day of class.

## **Observations**

Within my application, I noticed a few trends. For the final project, students in the clay class all made pieces that had to do with environmental issues, an issue I had not put on the list of topics for the project. It was not one of the prevalent topics of discussion within our class either, so the reasoning behind the choice was unclear. Another trend I noticed was minimal application of the art-making techniques I attempted to have the student utilize. This was mainly in the drawing class, particularly with sighting their drawings or blending the use of shading and contour line.

The visiting artist did help clear up some of the confusion of techniques and concepts. Their art was an excellent example of how the students could blend meaning into their art as well as some of their technical difficulties. The students looked closely at shading and contour lines. They asked questions about the how the artist came up with abstract shapes and what careers are possible for students pursuing art degrees. The concern that was held at the beginning that inappropriate questions would be posed to the artist, but throughout the presentation, such thoughts were dispelled. Most students expressed that they did not care what a person identified as, they were more interested in the art or the personality of the person. This felt like progress in that the students were willing and accepting of a person different than themselves, and someone who is stigmatized within society as well. By integrating these social issues within the class, I saw a growth in the students ability to address subjects of a more difficult nature.

# Discussion

The social practice arts pedagogy is a system of learning that will help develop the current educational system into an evolving, socially conscious system that fully prepares students for life. It accomplishes this monumental task by focusing on a few critical points. The first is integration of arts-based methodologies, and methodologies that cater to multiple intelligences. The application of methodologies that include intelligences such as musical, bodily-kinesthetic, or spatial alongside and just as prominently as linguistic and logical-mathematical intelligences will help more students gain and retain knowledge from their education. This will also pluralize the students education, engaging them in multiple ways of approaching a subject, allowing the students to analyze and critically examine the subject from numerous perspectives. Pluralization of modalities immerses learners in the subject fully, rather than be provided a specific course of thought or analysis of the topic. This allows students to critically address the topics they are exploring, as it forms critical thinking skills in multiple modalities, allowing learners who do not fit the current standard of intelligence to make the same connections through different means.

The second point of a social practice arts pedagogy is the integration of social practice critique. This is the integration of current social events, structures, and ideas into the daily curricula. Integration of these topics allows for students to approach more of the world surrounding them, and prepare them for the world by allowing them to critically approach the structures and ideas in the world. By pluralizing these topics within the educational sphere, student's critical thinking skills will be heightened, as it is both applicable in the real world around them and in academia.

These two principles within a social practice arts pedagogy will create an educational system that not only prepares our students for their secondary education, but also for their own lives and careers. This pedagogy will help students of all abilities be able to succeed in school and increase individual and systematic statistics on grade point average, graduation rates, and standardized test scores. It will help progress the American educational institution to a self-conscious system that grows with the students.

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