

*“... try to live  
the questions  
themselves...”*

# Technology-Infused *Living the Questions* Action Research in Art Education

**C**hill bumps erupt on your arm as you watch a 7th grade student use her finger to trace the cross-hatching on a John Biggers' reproduction while explaining the importance of the artist's mark to a fellow student.<sup>1</sup> A flutter moves in your chest as you listen to three 4th graders in the museum construct the narrative of a soldier's departure and return in a pair of paintings, watching them celebrate their visual analysis skills as they read the title and confirm their vivid interpretation.<sup>2</sup> A warm feeling washes over you as a 2nd grader rushes up to you the day after art class and excitedly describes the patterns in his living room because he had never noticed them before.<sup>3</sup> Wonderful moments like these, evidence of learning in art, suggest that we are indeed doing many things well in the art classroom, but they are unfortunately moments that are difficult to quantify, expect, or reproduce predictably due to extreme variability in art education and its contexts.

BY SARA WILSON MCKAY

Viewing this variability as a strength rather than a weakness, imagine a vast and diverse digital collection of student artworks, art teacher reflections, videos of students explaining an aspect of art in their world, a museum educator's personal reflection on a school tour with 3rd graders, comments from parents, principals and classroom teachers about their observations of a child's art learning. What would be possible if we started collecting a wide array of evidence of student learning in art? What might such a collection show us about learning in art generally?

In Texas, a project is underway to build and use such a digital collection of evidence of student learning in art. Conceptualized at the moment on the state's essential knowledge and skills (TEKS) in art (recently *required* teaching by state legislation), the digital collection will include multiple examples and varied types of evidence to show student learning in art. Using the TEKS as a guiding principle for initially collecting evidence

according to grade level and competency, participants identify and propose their contextualized evidence of learning targeting a specific outcome. For example, a digital photograph of a student's artwork with an audio recording of the student describing her process might demonstrate an 8th grader's ability to "apply design skills to communicate effectively ideas and thoughts in everyday life," (TEKS 8.2b) or a video snippet of a class critique might show Art IV high school students' ability to "analyze a wide range of artworks to form conclusions about formal qualities, historical and cultural contexts, intents, and meanings" (TEKS IV.4b). A scan of a parent's written correspondence might illustrate how a 3rd grader is able to "relate art to different kinds of jobs in everyday life" (TEKS 3.3c). A goal of the project is to have many examples in the collection for each of the TEKS so that there is varied evidence of many ways to show student learning in art.

## Living the Questions in Search of High Quality Art Education

The project described in this article seeks to interrupt the isolation of art educators—a corps of dedicated professionals each trying our best to feel our way into doing good work in art education. But what is “good work” in art education? In a time when numbers and percentiles define much of what counts as learning across the country—*No Child Left Behind (NCLB)*—how is it that we know what counts as knowledge and learning in art? Would we know if we committed to exploring the role of standardized tests in art, or is it better to argue vehemently against such measures because art is such a different animal? Does good art teaching mean a mandate to teach visual culture or rather a strong focus on observational drawing skills? Add into the mix the fact that much about art is considered to be inexpressible and difficult to characterize, especially given the shifting boundary-pushing quality of art. Multiple interpretations of art also yield multiple versions of art education, and what looks like learning in one context may not be the same learning in another. How is it then that art educators can come together to do more than read another article and apply what is relevant to their particular, isolated situation? What might happen if a group of interested art educators came together to address some of the big questions of art education?

We might want to throw up our hands and suggest that all there can ever be is richly textured storytelling and all we can ever do is glean and apply what we learn in the stories to our particularized situation. For a long time I was satisfied that this is all we can do and that it is enough.

*“... try to live the questions themselves... Don't search for answers now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer”*  
(Rilke 1984, p. 136).

Rilke's quotation suggests a need to develop comfort with questions. Good teachers know that questions in teaching are vital, and they spend significant time in their instruction asking good questions of their students. But do these questions translate into our everyday lives, or as Brent Wilson (1997) suggests, do we write them into the text of our lives? What does Rilke mean by “living the questions”?

The questions that frame this special issue of *Art Education* are the questions of art education.<sup>5</sup> How do we recognize exemplary content or curriculum in art education? When and how do we know that students learn in art? What are the forms of knowledge that matter in art education? As a teacher of preservice art teachers, as a researcher interested in representing the multiple perspectives that emerge in art learning, as a collaborating lifelong learner in the arts who advocates dialogue, I have many questions about how art education functions in people's lives. The purpose of this article is to share my efforts to live the questions of art education, particularly in designing a technology-infused action research project addressing these questions, because it is in such shared efforts that our endeavors can become meaningful.

Sharing this framework for an action research project in art education is important for several reasons. If we are to move art education research beyond the models of the past and investigate future possibilities for research, I heed the encouragement to share research (its questions, plans and design) *before* it has been done to draw upon the wealth of knowledge of many perspectives (Burton, 2000). As a collaborative endeavor, this project

requires an attitude of openness and a commitment to meaningful dialogue. This can only happen if the framework is transparent and inviting to all from the very beginning. Thus, throughout the following explorations of big questions in art education, I suggest some of the elements of the research project design that are born of living each question.

### Question: Are we all talking about the same thing?

*Critical Links* (2002) suggested that a major difficulty in research in art education is a lack of agreement and consensus on terminology. We are all trying to describe the very complex scenarios that occur under the guise of art education as best we can, and unfortunately that complexity creates a variety of terms that often muddies the waters for building understanding in the field. For example, is *engagement* the same as *learning* the same as *transformation*? Unquestionably there is much richness preserved and explored by avoiding artificial definitions in art education—we arrive at more richly textured descriptions of art experiences and attend to the subtleties and particularities of any given learning exchange. However, perhaps we could conceive of a lexicon of terms functioning like Wikipedia, definitions continually evolving through multiple voices. Showing how the keywords we use to make sense of our field morph to take on new meanings, particularly revealing the politics and social values embedded in such changes, would suggest ongoing revision of the contested terms.

Such attention to terminology and its use brings into focus an important and often under-emphasized aspect of art education. Art asks us to revise our view of the world. Occasionally it upholds our current view, yet points out nuances not previously considered. Thinking of our dialogue in art education as something more than just an employment of words to some end, but rather as a tool to help us see new things in art education could be a very useful outcome of living this particular question about terminology in art education.

Through the new seeing that evolving definitions encourage, it is tempting to suggest that all the various perspectives contribute even further to the contested

nature of ideas in art education. We might want to throw up our hands and suggest that all there can ever be is richly textured storytelling and all we can ever do is glean and apply what we learn in the stories to our particularized situation. For a long time I was satisfied that this is all we can do and that it is enough. But lately I wonder further, might there be some consensus that can be born of highly contextualized descriptions, and is it worth a search for such? In short, are there generalizable indicators of learning in art?

### **Question: What does high-quality art education look like? or How do we know when students learn in art?**

In exploring these questions, I conjure up many snapshots in my memories—the image of a teacher pushing herself to explore new subject matter with her students or the look on a student's face when he has clearly been transported to another space by thinking about an art lesson, for example. These mental pictures require organization and re-organization to make sense of what connective threads might exist among them. They require careful editing and attention to arrangement in order to make meaning from the many visions of high quality art education and student learning in art. The kind of documentation accompanying each form of evidence looks like a Reggio-inspired<sup>6</sup> approach to making learning visible; details and display matter. Such a mindful process resembles the interpretive approach to the display of student art developed by Eliot Eisner and colleagues at Stanford University (1997). Positioning the *Creation & Cognition* educational exhibition as a model, I conceptualized a similar approach to asking art educators and their students how learning in visual art occurs. Drawing from the exhibition's methodology,<sup>7</sup> I have envisioned a research process that foregrounds the deliberative process of selecting examples of evidence of student learning in art, collecting relevant reflections, and making connections with art educational theory. The resulting interpretive document could be available for use by anyone interested in examining how theory bridges to practice in visual art learning.

Like any art collection, the digital collection of evidence of student learning in art requires a curatorial process as exhibitions are developed. In this project, the curatorial role is shared among those interested in putting together the exhibition. Questions of purpose, such as state level art advocacy or regional classroom teacher education in the visual arts, drive how the curators organize the multiple forms of highly contextualized evidence. Arranging the multiple forms of evidence will reveal disparate threads that could be meaningfully connected and encourage discussion about what *is* good evidence of student learning and what is not.<sup>8</sup> More importantly, the curatorial process of creating exhibitions of varied evidence of student learning in art will concretely facilitate dialogue about *why* some art teaching and learning is qualitatively stronger than others.

Additional questions persist: Would this process lead us to a better understanding of the multiple ways that people mobilize the concept of art education? Would a strong innovative example from a museum-school collaboration challenge the veteran teacher to rethink his/her ways? Would a shared dialogical process of determining how evidence could be arranged lead us to think in new ways, see fresh ideas, and allow important threads to emerge? Would all of this lead us closer to representing more suitably the previously thought inexpressible qualities of art teaching and learning?

### **Question: How can we do research in art education?**

*Critical Links: Learning in the Arts and Student Academic and Social Development* (2002) raised many questions for me about our field especially in terms of problems with research. Of the 62 studies which met the strenuous review criteria for sound research studies, only 4 were visual arts research studies, suggesting that in 40 years' time, since concerned art educators first met at the research conference of 1965 at Penn State, very little cumulative work has been done in visual arts research despite the naming of a research task force and the development of an NAEA-sponsored research agenda. The researchers involved with *Critical Links* call for "more research that reveals

the unique and precise aspects of the arts teaching and learning" (Deasy, 2002, p. iii). How do we best do this when much about art learning is perceived to be messy and ineffable? Can we identify characteristics of those "ah-ha" moments in art teaching and learning that we typically think of as being beyond words?

The question of what actually represents good art teaching and learning is an important one, but not one that is easily investigated. Thus, the technology-infused research project I propose acknowledges the problems of research in art education and yet looks to innovative methods of digital data gathering and collaborative inquiry and interpretation to attempt a cumulative notion of research. Burton (2000) suggests, "If research in art education remains predicated on the model of the individual as researcher, the quality and quantity of our research will be self-limiting, and ultimately, lack the impact and credibility to influence actual practice in the artroom or in the field." This project employs a participatory action research methodology as a way of interrupting the usual shortcomings of research in art education.

Action research requires that we start with the questions—not my questions alone as the principal investigator, but our questions, some of *the* questions in art education. Living the questions discussed in this special issue, in addition to others that may surface within the collaborative project, requires that action research is not a way to impose any single researcher's agenda on a group, but rather a time to invite mutual, reciprocal willingness to put everything on the table, up for discussion. In this way, we—as a field—are all searching for strong methods, excellent evidence, and sound research for better understanding and better practice.

Directly responding to the call in *Critical Links* for "better and more creative research designs that probe the complexity of the arts learning experience" (Deasy, 2002, p. iii), this participatory action research project, particularly as it will be dialogically enacted in this study through technology, ensures that the complexity of learning in art will not be reductively represented; it may in fact reveal much about how learning in art occurs through connections that have not been seen or made before.

Much of my research hinges on an understanding of *dialogic looking*—a concept based on admittedly limited conceptions of vision and consequential richer seeing once other viewpoints are genuinely considered (Wilson McKay & Monteverde 2003). The variable interpretative exhibitions of the digital data produced through this project can be considered a kind of hypertextual dialogic looking. Hypertext is more than a computer-enhanced linking tool; it is akin to a way of thinking. Carpenter and Taylor (2003) suggest that “an interactive, hypertextual experience” can alter our ways of knowing by promoting “the visualization of connections in and between various meaningful texts, experiences and sources” (p. 2585). The ways the data are arranged and interpreted will function as a forum for the intersections of voices that do not normally intersect resulting in new kinds of seeing as it pertains to learning in art. For example, what more do we see about learning in art when the 2nd grader’s voice intersects with the district superintendent’s?

This project encourages participants to think broadly about sources of learning in art. The nature of interactive computer technology supports the use of visual images, video clips, audio files as well as written interpretations as such evidence. Linking hypertext to action research in this project ensures that the process of its construction will yield rich and varied data for long-term research about the research questions.

### **Question: How can art educators overcome isolation to share ideas and negotiate meaning in our practice?**

What if there were a mechanism for art educators to come together, both electronically and in person face-to-face, to discuss when and how we see learning in art? How valuable would it be to arrange an electronic exhibition of student learning in art, including all the accompanying curatorial dialogue around such an exhibition? What if the exhibition were changeable because this digital collection is searchable by media, by grade level, by geographic region, by state or national standard? Could this exhibition then serve as a powerful voice of advocacy

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for art education? Could it function as a forum for teacher education and re-education? Could it be a space to show student growth over time? How valuable a research tool could this kind of evidence of student learning in art be for the overall field of art education?

These questions are inspiring to me, and yet so many things conspire against art educators joining together to really overcome isolation in our work. Whether it is the perpetual state of being in the service of others, or simply the sheer numbers of students we see in a day, we rarely are afforded the opportunity to connect with each other. Some larger districts are able to support an active visual arts group, including specific in-services for art educators, building bridges across the district and sharing ideas. However, the more likely scenario has the art educator attending yet another workshop on test-taking strategies, relegating the art educator to the role of support system only. District encouragement for art educators to improve their specific craft is rare. In living the question of isolation for art educators, this proposed project aims to drastically interrupt this reality.

Technologically, there are several ways this interruption can occur. One way is to add a component of dialogue and inquiry within the realm of technology. Acknowledging the possibilities that are born of teacher knowledge (Bresler 1993) and providing stakeholders with the proper tools to participate fully in this inquiry—including digital cameras, an open-source web authoring system, and blogging, for example—participants will be prepared and supported, hopefully even with a small stipend for participants’ time, to reflect critically on their practice. In such a supported virtual and actual community that I foresee as a necessary component of this project’s success, I wonder how the dialogic process will affect what we see and value as evidence of learning in art? How will we construct our digital

contributions and what hypertextual connections will we claim to be central in this process? Will we be able to recognize the value of disagreement—because we will bring so many different views to the table—as we make meaning together of student learning in art? Will we be willing to be persuaded by others’ points of view and also care enough to advocate for an idea that personally matters deeply to our practice?

At no time should the evidentiary submissions be considered singular examples of having achieved learning objectives in art. If they are in fact seen this way, I believe it would defeat the purpose of the project. One of the project’s goals is to provide multiple forms of evidence of student learning in art. I am interested in broadening the pool of how we know students are learning so that we can broaden our focus beyond blue ribbons as the communal indicator of good work in art. Additionally, I hope we can multiply the ways people regard art’s role in learning generally. Most importantly, I hope as participants we will want to live the questions of art education and grow while we do.

### **Conclusion**

Bringing this idea of a multi-layered dialogic research project into reality will occur in the face of many logistical difficulties and challenges. Will I secure funding to support teachers and graduate research assistants during the tenure of this project, one to five years at best? Will the evolutionary nature of this project be one that is manageable throughout the process or will I and other participants ultimately desire to constrain the project in predictable ways so that we maintain some recognition of familiar territory? How will we resist and delay the urge to superficially apply order to the disorderly? Will my university support my efforts with dedicated server space to house the digital database and what kind of database skills will I need to develop, and help teachers understand, to make the best use

of a content management system? Such questions indicate the range of complexity this project entails, but they also hint at the complexity preserved by facing such challenges. Research that strives to represent such complexity seems worth doing in spite of the logistical hurdles.

In *Dialogue: The Art of Thinking Together* (1999), MIT lecturer on organizational leadership William Isaacs describes dialogue, from its etymological roots, as the flowing of meaning, particularly through relationships. The intention of dialogue is to reach new understanding and, in doing so, to form a totally new basis from which to think and act. Thinking together requires that our own positions cannot be regarded as final; rather we must live our questions, and live them together, attending to the possibilities that result from being in relationship with others—possibilities that might not have occurred otherwise. Our willingness to inquire into the unknown, to live the questions of art education, revises our goals to simply do “good work” in art education; we, instead, can push forward into the uncertainties of what we care deeply about to make new connections and reveal new knowledge about teaching and learning in art.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup>Thanks to Roberta Sajda, retired art educator, for her vivid description of this wonderful kind of moment.
- <sup>2</sup>Thanks to Samantha Melvin, Houston interdisciplinary art educator extraordinaire, for this recent example in her experience.
- <sup>3</sup>Thanks also to Alicia Austin, and many others on the Houston-based Grassroots: Art in Action listserv, for their inspiring ideas and examples of student learning in art.
- <sup>4</sup>Of course, I do not believe in such a false dichotomy of either/or situations in art teaching and learning. Rather, I wholeheartedly believe in the pedagogical practice of intertwining relevance to student knowledge, big idea concerns of social theory, and creative development of art content, techniques, and skills. However, I frequently witness discussions of art pedagogy that devolve into an either/or discussion (theory or practice, visual culture or DBAE, Elements and Principles or Big Ideas, etc.) thus warranting my offering of this position as an example of art teachers' genuine concerns. How does one make sense of this kind of landscape?
- <sup>5</sup>Obviously there are more questions than these about art education, but I argue that these are some of the most important ones facing our field at the moment.
- <sup>6</sup>Reggio Emilia is a region of Italy in which early childhood experiences foreground creative art expression valuing the child's knowledge and attending to the lessons taught by the environment of learning. Visible documentation and reflection of student learning is paramount. For those wanting to know more about this philosophy, I recommend

*The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Approach Advanced Reflections* (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, Eds. 1998).

<sup>7</sup>This exhibition was a collaborative and critical effort among graduate students, art teachers, and higher educators. Connections to theory were displayed amidst the students' works of art. The deliberative process of those organizing the exhibition was reportedly a transformative experience for all involved.

<sup>8</sup>Clearly, the question of “good” for whom is part of the discussion and will figure prominently in the curatorial process.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Special thanks to Dr. Chris Bain for her conversations at the beginning of this project. Dr. Wilson McKay invites teachers and researchers interested in being part of this research effort to contact her.



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