Designing and Implementing
Exemplary Content, Curriculum, and Assessment in Art Education

BY KAREN POPOVICH

A comprehensive, well designed approach to curriculum and assessment is fundamental to effective teaching and learning in the field of art education. Exemplary curriculum and assessment is evolving, non-linear, and responsive to students' interests and current events. This article addresses key components of effective visual arts curriculum based on my 10 years of experience designing and implementing curriculum and assessment in the visual arts and current research in the field.

Interdisciplinary integration, authentic assessment, and the contemporary curriculum discourses of postmodernism, phenomenology, and autobiographical text are the main focus of current research in the field. My pedagogical practices for curriculum, assessment, and instruction in the art classroom are supported by authentic examples provided within the context of interdisciplinary integration, authentic assessment, and contemporary curriculum discourses.

Standards/Goals

According to Stewart and Walker (2005), art teachers must ensure that the curricula they develop align with local, state, and national standards. These standards and goals speak to both content and achievement in the visual arts. In addition, art education standards and goals speak to the quality and accountability of art curriculum and programs. The national standards are a statement of what every young American should know and be able to do in the arts (The Consortium of National Arts Education Associations, 1994).

Indian Prairie School District 204 (IPSD 204) in Illinois is in their first year of a new K-12 visual arts curriculum. The curriculum is built on both national standards and Illinois state standards (http://www.isbe.state.il.us/ils/fine_arts/standards.html) and provides a comprehensive art curriculum that empowers teachers and students to take an active role in the development of local curricula and assessment. The mission of IPSD 204's visual art curriculum is:

to develop an essential understanding of art and visual culture in our students. Through our comprehensive visual arts curriculum, we believe students should develop their creative abilities in order to acquire knowledge, communicate ideas, and to synthesize information. (Popovich, Vandeleur, Mills, Davis, Fries, Zayat, & Silerzio, 2004, p. 3)

This curriculum does not dictate specific projects that must be completed at each level. However, the curriculum development committee established six essential understandings that would frame the curriculum and act as building blocks:

- Art as an awareness of Diversity and Culture
- Art as Personal Expression, Reflection, and Response
- Art as a Record of History
- Art as an Avenue for Aesthetic Awareness
- Art as Development of Creativity and Problem-solving
- Art as a Form of Communication (Popovich et al., 2004, p. 4)

Teachers are empowered with creative choice and decisions in developing local curricula as they utilize essential understandings as a framework for content and assessment.

National, state, and local standards provide a framework of educational effectiveness but do not constrain art programs to a particular mold. Art teachers are empowered to develop local curricula that meet national, state, and district standards while meeting the growing needs and interests of students, teachers, and the community. One of the fundamental goals of the standards is to guide students to effectively make connections between concepts and across disciplines (Stokrocki, 2005). These connections directly relate to interdisciplinary integration which I believe to be an integral component of an effective visual arts curriculum.

Interdisciplinary Integration

Interdisciplinary integration is a student-centered pedagogical approach to education that helps students understand concepts and ideas across multiple disciplines. The Progressive reform movement of the 1930s embraced interdisciplinary integration and a constructivist approach to teaching and learning (Etim, 2005). Research supports the fact that students will learn more when opportunities are meaningful to them (Anderson, & Milbrandt, 2005; Etim, 2005; Parsons, 1998; Stokrocki, 2005). Interdisciplinary integration in the visual arts provides students
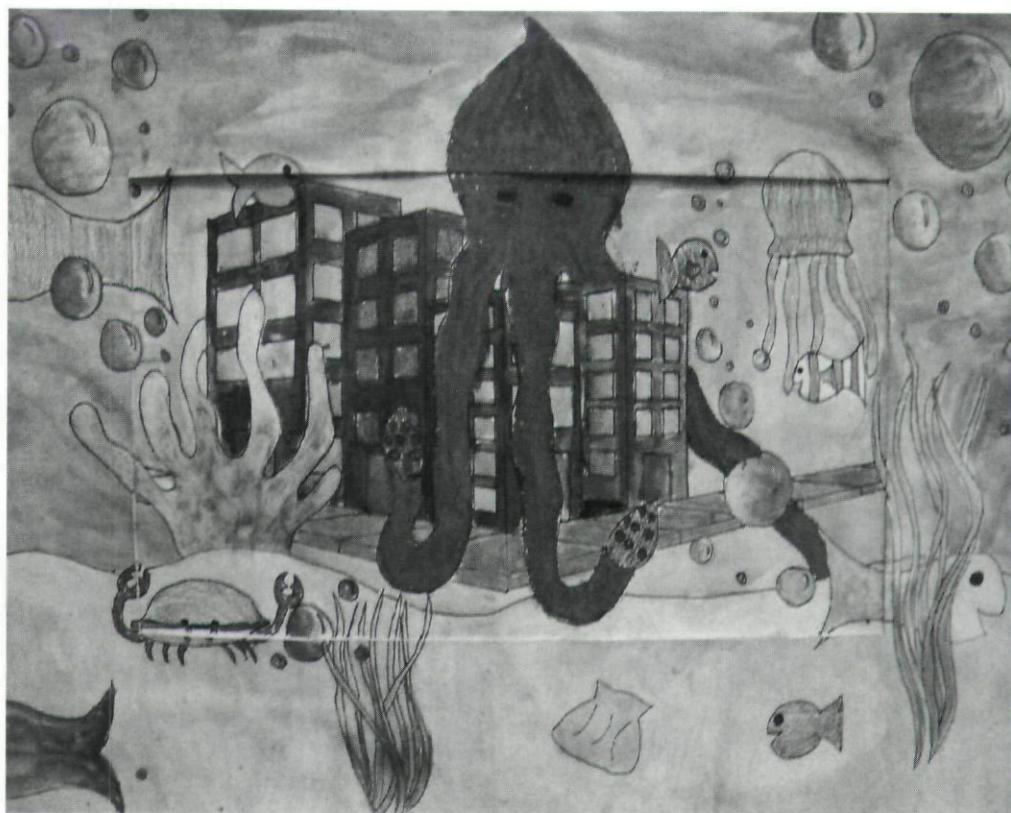

Figure 1. Tessa S. *Where Will the Growth Take Us?*

with an opportunity to make meaningful connections. Anderson and Milbrandt (2005), Parsons (1998), and Stokrocki (2005), list personal identity, freedom, independence, self, social structures, heroes, and the environment as suggested themes that help connect students with the larger world.

There are many opportunities to support an interdisciplinary approach in the visual arts. In social studies class, for example, seventh grade students learn about world and U.S. populations, and the effect of growing populations on resources and economic development (Sager, Helgren, & Brooks, 2003). In art class, these concepts and ideas are applied to a 2-point perspective drawing. We then examine the population clock (http://www.census.gov/main/www/popclock.html) and analyze the predictions for our growing population. Students learn to draw buildings in 2-point perspective and use a variety of media to complete the composition by placing their city in an environment that currently has a vast amount of space. The student artist, through this futuristic composition entitled *Where Will the Growth Take Us?*

communicates the concern that we are running out of space and will soon run out of resources if the population continues to grow at this rate.

Another authentic example utilizing interdisciplinary integration is a unit that focuses on environmental issues. Students research an environmental issue of importance to them and create scratchboard compositions reflecting this message. Through this interdisciplinary unit, students often investigate endangered species, oil spills, natural disasters, mad cow disease, energy resources, and other interests. A key component to this project is the reflective artist's statement that describes an understanding of the environmental issue, creative solution to the problem and the process of the artistic product. By integrating literacy as a key component to this unit, students are able to communicate knowledge and understanding of subject matter in visual and print formats.

According to Daniel, Stuhr, and Ballengee-Morris (2006), the "first step in developing integrated curricula is to identify a big idea" (p. 6). *Big ideas*, themes, or issues help provide a context

for understanding content. The previous examples utilize growing populations and environmental concerns as big ideas. Teachers and students should work cooperatively to develop big ideas into meaningful content (Daniel, et al., 2006).

A key component of interdisciplinary integration is research. "Art that is devoid of content, thereby devoid of research, is not meaningful" (Keifer-Boyd & Smith-Shank, 2006, p. 150). Students conduct research on a topic or big idea through a variety of means, including sketches, online resources, observations, reflective journaling, library research, and reading (Keifer-Boyd & Smith-Shank, 2006). Process-journals and electronic portfolios are integral components of my local curriculum. Through this process, students gather research, investigate ideas, develop artistic skill, reflect on meaning and organize their knowledge. Howard Gardner (1996) provided a model for process-folios that focused on the process of learning as an integral component of the art experience. Process-journals, along with the use of electronic portfolios, directly relate to the contemporary discourses of postmodernism, phenomenology, and autobiographical text.

Contemporary Curriculum Discourses

A comprehensive and effective art curriculum is grounded and supported by current research in the field. The following sections take a look at effective curriculum and assessment in the visual arts within the contexts of postmodernism, phenomenology, and autobiographical text. Student and teacher voice play a vital role in each of these contemporary curriculum discourses.

Postmodernism

According to MacGregor (1992), postmodernism "means realizing that art, present as it is in different situations for different reasons, will provide material for discussion and sharing, but not for resolution in absolute terms" (p. 2). Proponents of postmodernism agree that there is no absolute truth and "advocate forms of knowledge characterized by multiple perspectives and cultural diversity" (Gaudelius & Speirs, 2005, p. 25).

Visual culture is a postmodern discourse that represents a paradigm shift in the field (Eisenhauer, 2006). The historical, cultural, and critical context from which the content derives becomes a starting point in unit development in the visual arts. According to Freedman (2005), visual culture is a postmodern approach to art education that "embraces the diversity of cultural identities, the interdisciplinary character of knowledge, and the influence of technology" (p. 8). Encouraging "learners to reflect on the relationship of visual culture to the construction of identity, the richness of global cultures, and the integrity of natural and human-made environments" (Boughton, Freedman, Hausman, Hicks, Madeja, Metcalf, Rayala, Smith-Shank, Stankiewicz, Stuhr, Tavin, & Vallance, 2002, p. 2) is a fundamental goal of visual culture as a postmodern discourse.

With the purpose of introducing students to a broader definition of art, I propose the question: *What is Art?* Students think creatively and answer the question through images, drawings, and text. Every montage provides a different answer to the question. All views are reviewed and discussed. Students recognize many different elements of art present in our lives. An important element of postmodernism and visual culture is the de-emphasis of high art over popular art. Students engage in meaningful discussion about art and individual views through this project.

Art lessons and units should no longer be developed and implemented for the sole purpose of learning a skill or an application of the elements and principles of design. According to Freedman (2003), the development of artistic skills should follow the integration of concepts and ideas. The content and formal qualities work together in the development and understanding of meaningful artwork. According to Carpenter and Sessions (2002), *concepts* (big ideas, issues or concerns), *contexts* (information and perspectives that inform the meaning) and *techniques* (approaches and methods) are all essential areas of content in art education. Visual culture exemplifies the postmodern curriculum discourse and it is also related to phenomenological text and the *lived experience* of the individual.

Figure 2. Catherine B. *Environmental Issue*.

Figure 3. Laura J. *What is Art?*
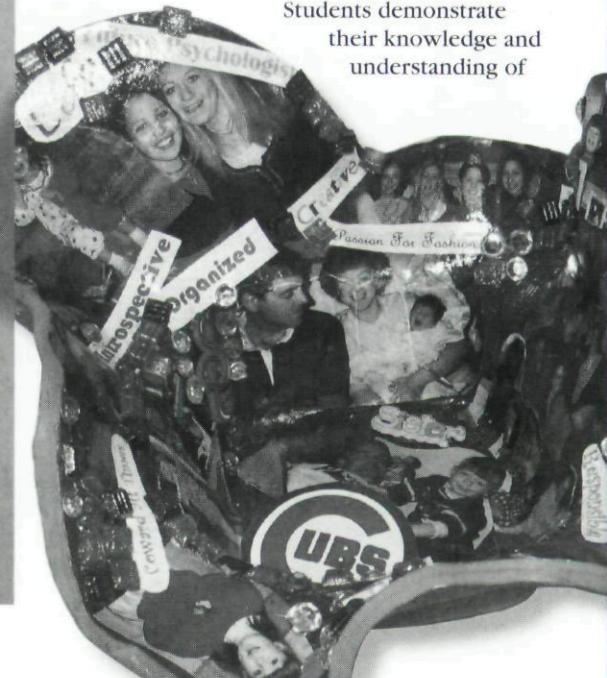
Figure 4.
Kelly Ann H.
Hero Montage.

Phenomenological Text

Eisner (1982) advocates a curricular structure that encourages multiple forms of representation in the construction of meaning. One such example is the enduring idea of heroes, the focus of a unit of study in my middle school curriculum. Students study heroes in historical artwork, define heroes, and list characteristics of heroes in history and across cultures. Through the creation process, students use multiple forms of representation to exemplify a personal hero. A reflective artist's statement is also a critical element of this project. This reflective writing piece by students expresses the characteristics their hero possesses, and describes the impact their hero has had on their lives. According to Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery and Taubman (2000), phenomenology is a study of the "lived experience of the individual" (p. 405). Students construct their own meanings of heroes and learn to recognize a hero in their life.

Another example of using the ideology of phenomenology in the visual arts is a unit that builds on the big idea of *identity* to construct meaning of self and create a sculpture to express individual identity. Identity is about what is on the inside and on the outside (Walker, 2001). Using this analogy, students create a vessel as a metaphor for identity. In this unit, students examine factors influencing their identity formation such as environment, family, friends, cultural heritage, interests, and popular culture. Students demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of

personal identity through the construction of an identity vessel and a written reflection. Students construct their vessels based on their "lived experience" with the topic, an important element of phenomenology. By linking conceptual ideas to individual interests, background knowledge, and experiences, students are able to make meaningful connections between the subject matter and their own life.

The personal hero project and the identity vessel project are just two examples that take a phenomenological approach to help students understand meaning in the visual arts. These authentic examples of curriculum share characteristics that could also place them within the contemporary discourses of autobiographic text and postmodernism.

Autobiographical Text

According to Pinar et al. (2000), *currere* is a concept used in the effort to "understand curriculum as autobiographical and biographical text" (p. 518). "Currere seeks to understand the contribution academic studies makes to one's understanding of his or her life" (p. 520). The study of autobiographical text or the method of currere for example can be best described through the *Looking Ahead to the Future* unit. In this example, students create a composition that is a combination of text and images depicting their vision of the future. At the forefront of the composition is a digital image of the back of the head to further support the conceptual idea. The reflective writing statement accompanying the piece explains the use of symbols and ideas in their artwork. Currere consists of four steps: (1) regressive, (2) progressive, (3) analytical, and (4) synthetical (Pinar et al., 2000). A component of this drawing requires students to use symbols to represent their career aspirations. The *Looking Ahead to the Future* composition encompasses the progressive step that looks at

Figure 5. Lindsay P. *Identity Vessel.*

> Interdisciplinary integration, phenomenology, postmodernism, and autobiographical text all utilize big ideas. Students' understanding and interpretation of the big idea lays the groundwork for assessment and evaluation (Walker, 2001).

what has not yet happened but is shaped by past and present events. The students' drawings depict future symbols and written reflections describing a continuation of current interests and activities as well as a vision of future events in their lives. Interdisciplinary integration, phenomenology, postmodernism, and autobiographical text all utilize big ideas. Students' understanding and interpretation of the big idea lays the groundwork for assessment and evaluation (Walker, 2001).

Authentic Assessment in the Visual Arts

Assessment is a natural and integral element to the teaching and learning process. "The arts when properly taught promote individualized learning, purposeful investigation across disciplines, and risk taking by students which frequently results in work that is difficult to assess" (Baker, Boughton, Freedman, Horowitz, & Ingram, 2004). Authentic assessment is directly connected to the

process of teaching and learning and involves students and teachers in the process (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005). Critical thinking and reflection are vital components in integrating curriculum and assessment. It is imperative that students have time and opportunities to reflect on content and processes. The following section provides examples of authentic assessment of student learning and examines ways to use student achievement as a means to evaluate the art program.

Electronic portfolios and process journals are a key element of my middle school visual arts curriculum. I first developed a system for using electronic portfolios in the classroom while working with Stan Madeja at Northern Illinois University. This process is explained further in *Assessing Expressive Learning* (Dorn, Madeja, & Sabol, 2004). A fundamental aspect of electronic portfolios and process journals is the student reflection component. Electronic portfolios, along
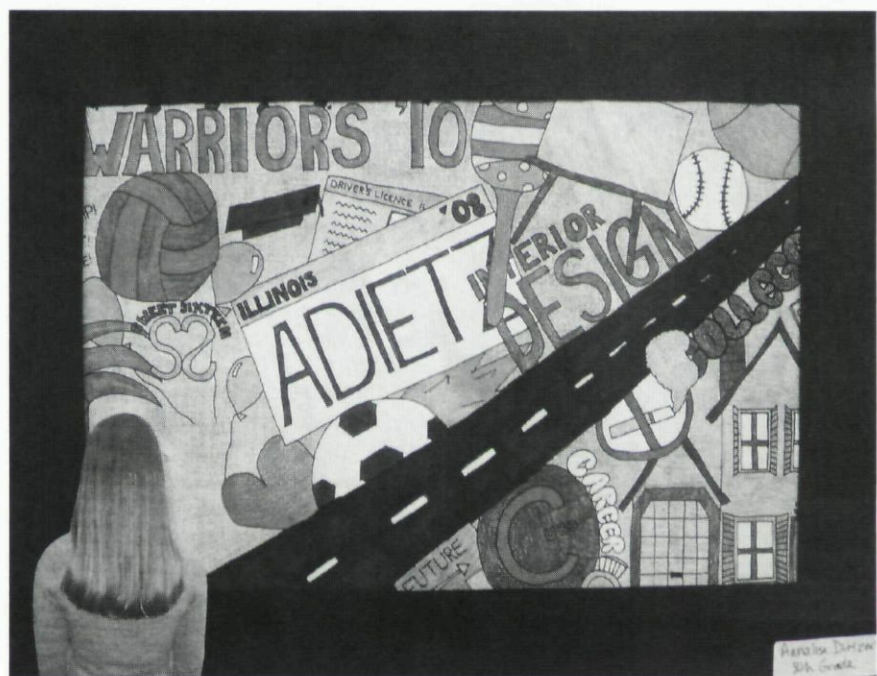

Figure 6. Annalise D. *Looking Ahead to the Future.*

The time has come for art educators to move beyond traditional teaching in the visual arts and strive to develop their own pedagogical approaches to curriculum, instruction, and assessment that draw inspiration from best practices and contemporary curriculum research.

with process-journals, provide students with a venue to showcase their achievements and to conduct self- and peer assessment through reflective writing (Brough & Pool, 2005). Judging and assessing these process-journals and electronic portfolios is not easy, but definitely a worthwhile endeavor. Together students and teachers assess the use of historical and cultural materials, growth and improvement over time, development of artistic skill, expression of personal meaning, and their conceptualization and development of projects (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005; Dorn, Madeja, & Sabol, 2004). Boughton (2002) emphasized the importance of using criteria developed collaboratively to assess student work based on reflective methods as a component of visual culture in art education. Through this process, students are empowered to take ownership of their educational experience. Electronic portfolios created by students demonstrate their lived experience through documentation and reflection.

Formative assessment examines student learning outcomes through the process of the learning experiences (Noonan, & Duncan, 2005). This form of assessment may be conducted through a variety of means such as interviews, journals, critiques, and conversations. Summative assessments are often used to assess end products completed during the course of study (Boston, 2002). This end product is most effectively assessed using scoring rubrics. Scoring rubrics establish the criteria for student performance at different levels of achievement and can help clarify teaching objectives and promote clarity and consistency in the evaluation. Assessing student learning and outcomes is only one element of an effective assessment and evaluation component to curriculum. School districts and teachers need to develop efficient means of measuring the effectiveness of their overall curriculum and instructional approaches.

Doll (1993) discusses the challenges of assessing and evaluating a curriculum that has no set canon of knowledge to exist as a reference point. As discussed earlier, IPSD 204 has recently developed a K-12 visual art curriculum that fits these parameters. As a committee, we understood the challenges of evaluating such a curriculum and designed four components of the curriculum evaluation: (1) individual evaluation and goal setting; (2) student exit surveys; (3) peer curriculum communication team; and (4) visual documentation (Popovich, Davis, Silerzio, Thrush, & Smith, 2005).

In the individual evaluation and goal-setting component, art teachers formulate two goals that directly relate to improving the implementation of the district's art curriculum. In addition, they utilize the curriculum construct scope and sequence form to aid as a working assessment as they continually assess the effectiveness of the curriculum and student learning. Student exit surveys are utilized as an authentic tool to evaluate the connection between the taught and learned curriculum and the written curriculum. The third component of IPSD 204s curriculum evaluation plan is the peer curriculum communication team. Teachers are divided into teams and meet periodically during the school year to assess their local art curriculum based on data from the individual evaluation and goal setting, student exit surveys and the final component of visual documentation. The team emphasizes communication and curriculum improvements as two primary goals. Visual documentation of student work as a result of the curriculum can provide evidence of student achievement, program development, and can be used to establish benchmarks for the district. Organizing visual documentation electronically through an electronic portfolio can promote easy sharing of best practices across the district. Portfolios representing curriculum achievements are an effective means to analyze and reflect upon the

developed curriculum (Hausman, 1993). Once again, the teachers are empowered in the process of evaluation and making decisions about curriculum, assessment, and instruction.

The student and program assessment examples illustrate an assessment model that is evolving and responsive. Karyl Silerzio, visual arts curriculum coordinator for IPSD 204, describes this curriculum and evaluation plan as a "working-living document" (personal communication, June 27, 2005) that has the ultimate goal of educating the whole child.
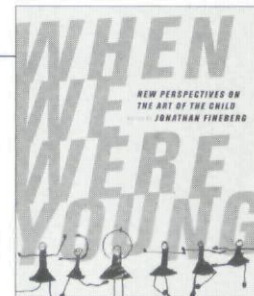
Conclusion

Phenomenology, postmodernism, autobiographical text, and interdisciplinary integration share many characteristics relating to both curriculum content and assessment. These curriculum discourses look at the individual's interests as the center of learning and personal experiences as a method from which to draw meaning. In each of these discourses, the teacher's role is that of a facilitator and guide for the journey of learning. Students are active participants in the learning experience. Environmental issues, identity, heroes, the future, and populations are just a few examples of how big ideas can frame a unit while providing the students with the freedom and creative choice to construct their own meaning. Although described in the context of postmodernism, phenomenology, autobiographical text and interdisciplinary integration, these enduring ideas can stretch across multiple discourses.

The time has come for art educators to move beyond traditional teaching in the visual arts and strive to develop their own pedagogical approaches to curriculum, instruction, and assessment that draw inspiration from best practices and contemporary curriculum research. I challenge art teachers to develop local curriculum and assessment measures that are evolving, responsive, and shaped by current research in the field.

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