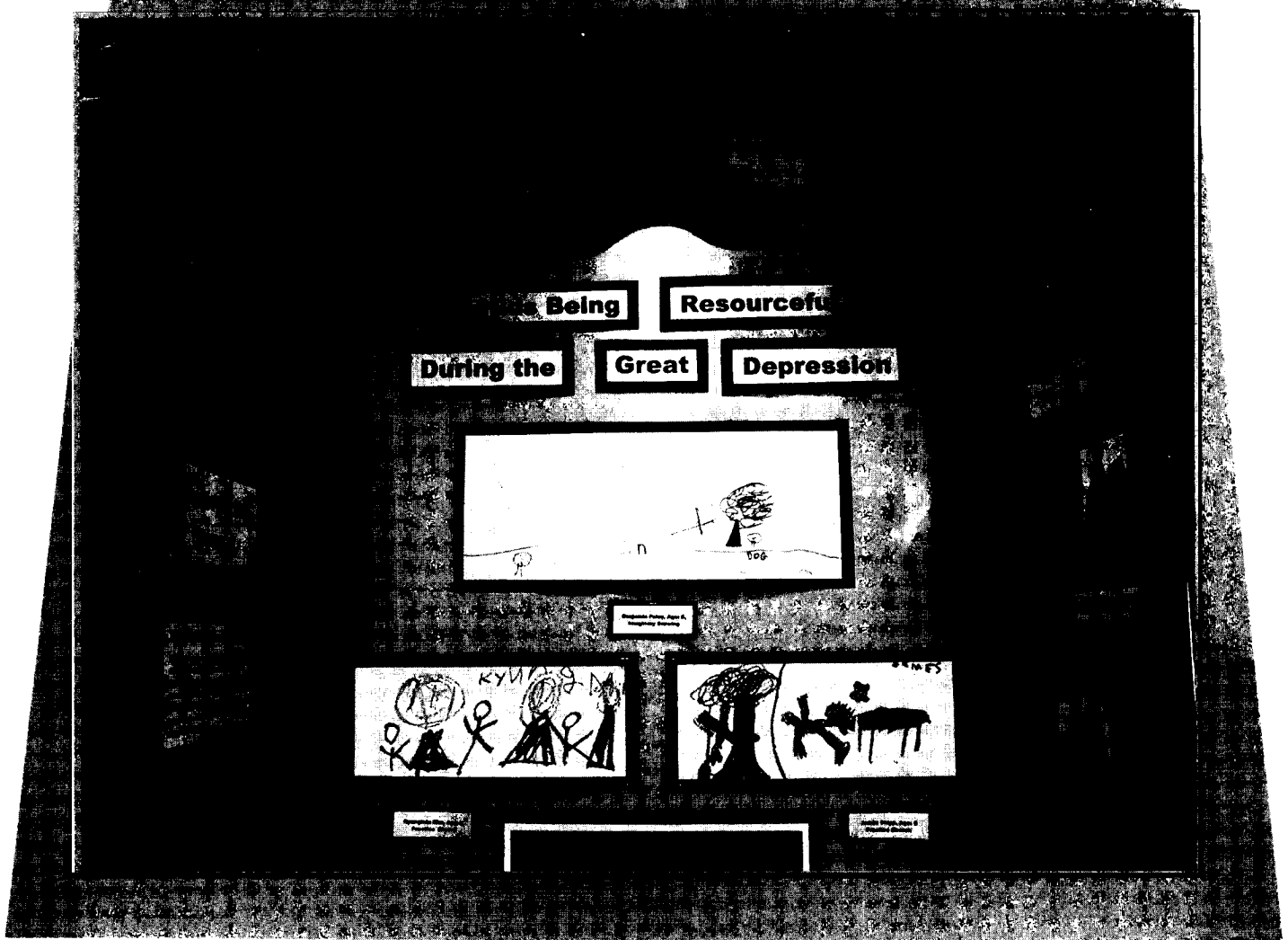


What is Exhibition For?

Considering the Purposes of Art Display in a Saturday Art School Context



BY LARA M. LACKEY

The Indiana University Saturday Art School is both an early field experience for preservice art specialist teachers¹ and an important community service² for the small Midwestern college town in which our university is located. Each fall the program offers eight to ten simultaneous Saturday morning art classes in which



"What is exhibition for in particular educational contexts?"

85-120 local elementary school-age children (Kindergarten to grade 6) participate. Preservice teachers, 24-30 in total, work in teams of three to plan a range of art educational experiences related to a common theme. The program takes place over eight Saturday mornings and culminates on the final week with a large open house and exhibition within School of Education classrooms and display cases. In addition to the student teachers and child artists, the art exhibition is attended by several hundred of their friends and family. Always a joyful electric event, the exhibition also offers a most appropriate vehicle for introducing preservice teachers to the purposes, practices and impact of children's art exhibition.

The display of children's art is a regular part of many teachers' work, and is especially significant and consuming for art education specialists. For a variety of reasons, however, art exhibition is often approached less analytically than other aspects of educational practice. A lack of careful attention to the purposes of an art exhibition can result in missed opportunities to make use of a display's significant communicative and educational potential. Moreover, the objectives of exhibition in educational arenas differ from those in other kinds of settings, and the ways in which exhibition can or should be 'educational' may be unclear. Before embarking on an exhibition, therefore, I suggest the need to consider not only how, but why art should be displayed, what the exhibit's communicative messages should be, and to whom it should attempt to speak. Briefly, we need to ask: "What is exhibition for in particular educational contexts?"

In this article, I draw on the ideas of curators and art educators to consider this question. I also describe aspects of the exhibition assignment posed to the preservice art educators involved in the Saturday Art School at Indiana University, Bloomington, and share some issues, solutions, and reflections related to the implementation of a children's art exhibition in that venue.

Defining Exhibition

What is meant by the term *exhibition*, and what is exhibition for? Two authors writing from the lens of museum studies provide the following definitions:

- Designing museum exhibitions is the art and science of organizing the visual, spatial, and material elements of an environment into a composition that visitors move through. This is done to accomplish pre-established goals. The presentation of exhibitions in museums should never be haphazard or left to chance. (Dean, 1994, p. 32)
- The dictionary defines an 'exhibition' as a showing and in this sense all the world is an exhibition of some sort or another. However, in the context of our discussions, 'exhibition' should be defined as 'a showing for a purpose,' the purpose being to affect the viewer in some pre-determined way. And, as a medium of communication, the possibilities afforded by exhibitions are boundless. (Belcher, 1993, p. 37)

Each of these statements offers wide scope for what might count as an exhibition. The authors, however, concur on key points: An exhibition should grow out of carefully considered intentions that include attempts to communicate as well as to create conditions in which others may respond to and learn from the display. In these senses, the design of curriculum and the design of exhibition have some common aims. Exhibitions within schools or other educational environments, however, can have goals and functions that are unique to those settings. In the next section, I highlight some ways that exhibition has been explored and conceptualized by authors in the field of art education.

Art Educators on Exhibition

Although the body of literature dealing with exhibition in the field of Art Education remains relatively small, it has grown in size and scope in recent years. Richard and Lemerise (2001), for example, described ways in which school exhibits have been used over time for purposes not directly related to students' instruction. They note the use of the exhibit to demonstrate to administrators that standards are being met; to decorate the school and celebrate holidays; and as means of advocacy or challenging prevailing views of art education.³

Berghoff, Borgmann, and Parr (2005) suggested that exhibitions should be understood as integral to arts education, and as part of an ongoing cycle of learning in the arts. Focusing on the power of aesthetic experiences in fostering student learning related to universal themes, they proposed that exhibition is not merely a sharing of the final product but an "aesthetic experience in and of itself" (p. 103). Moreover, the exhibit is a vehicle through which multiple learner viewpoints expressed in and about a unit of study can be "synthesized ... into a bigger picture" (p. 103). As such, **the exhibit is a statement depicting that which has been collectively learned about a topic as well as an opportunity for new learning.**

Gooding-Brown (2001) contrasted the common practice of displaying the 'best' of student art based on a teacher's subjective preferences, with selection based on evidence of successful achievement of learning objectives or as examples of rigorous processes of artistic inquiry. Such exhibitions can, in turn, be used to introduce younger or novice art students to the kinds of approaches, processes, and standards expected at more advanced levels.

Taylor (2001) suggested that because postmodern curricular ideas emphasize meaning making and the multiple perspectives of a pluralistic society, such ideas should also be reflected in exhibition practice. She argued that students who engage with contemporary curricular practices *want* to share the complexity of their artistic research:

These students want the people who view their artwork to know more about their progress. They want them to know about their research and study of other artists. They also want viewers of their work to see the importance of wider influences such as popular culture and how this affects the formulation of their ideas, thoughts, and creations. They want to inform and they want their viewers to understand. (p. 60)

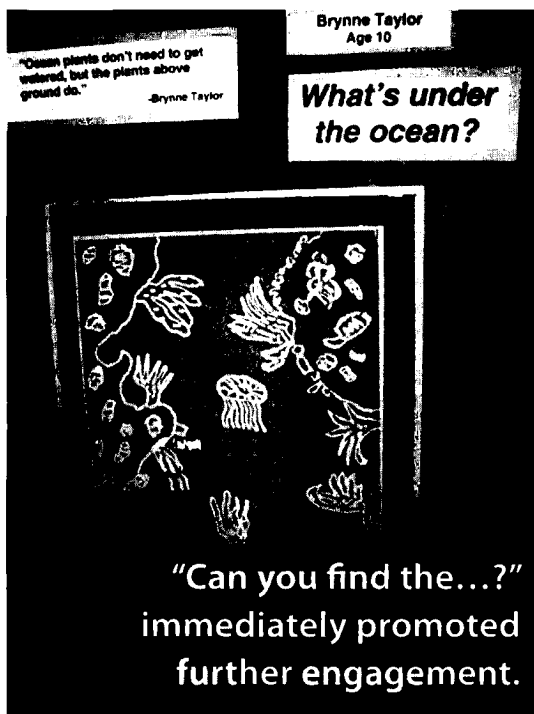
Burton (2004, 2006) pursued the practice of involving students in the design and implementation of exhibitions, arguing convincingly that learning to 'be curators' should be as much a part of school art curricula as learning to be art historians, art producers, aestheticians, and art critics. His emphasis, therefore, is less on what the exhibition communicates to audiences and more on the inherent educational value of the curation process itself.

Zuk and Dalton (2001), editors of the volume in which the works of Taylor, Gooding-Brown, and Richard and Lemerise appeared, summarized by stating that the school art exhibition is "a text that conveys a great deal about the ideas and accomplishments of both teachers and students" (para. 1). As such, art exhibitions in educational arenas can suggest educational philosophies and learning intentions; share artistic processes related to inspiration, image development, and technical exploration or strategies; and convey both the progression of learning and learners' synthesized meanings related to art experiences.

Exhibits as Educational

Belcher (1993) noted that although the exhibition should be viewed as a "medium of communication" (p. 37) and inherently educational, there are advantages and disadvantages to the use of exhibits for instruction. A key advantage is that exhibits allow us to experience objects directly and unmediated by technology. As such they can be perceived with multiple senses—sight, smell, and sometimes touch and hearing. An exhibit allows us to experience objects in their actual scale, and, in the cases of three-dimensional objects, from multiple perspectives and in real space. Such encounters offer potential for emotional connections that can enhance learning in powerful ways (Berghoff, Borgmann, & Parr, 2005).

Disadvantages to the use of exhibition for instruction include the fact that people can only learn from a display if they actually visit and pay attention to it. In addition, exhibitions are often encountered during leisure time when learning may or may not be a key motive or expectation for the visit. (An alternative motive might be simply spending time with one's friends or family.) People may lack strategies for engaging with visual



objects, move too quickly through an exhibition to absorb its messages fully, or become fatigued before completing a tour. As such, those who would use exhibition for education must consider the multiple reasons that people may be in the vicinity of the display and take the various ages and visual knowledge bases of people who may be viewing the exhibition into account. They must also use particular tactics for attracting and enticing people's attention, so as to encourage them to linger and engage with the exhibit.

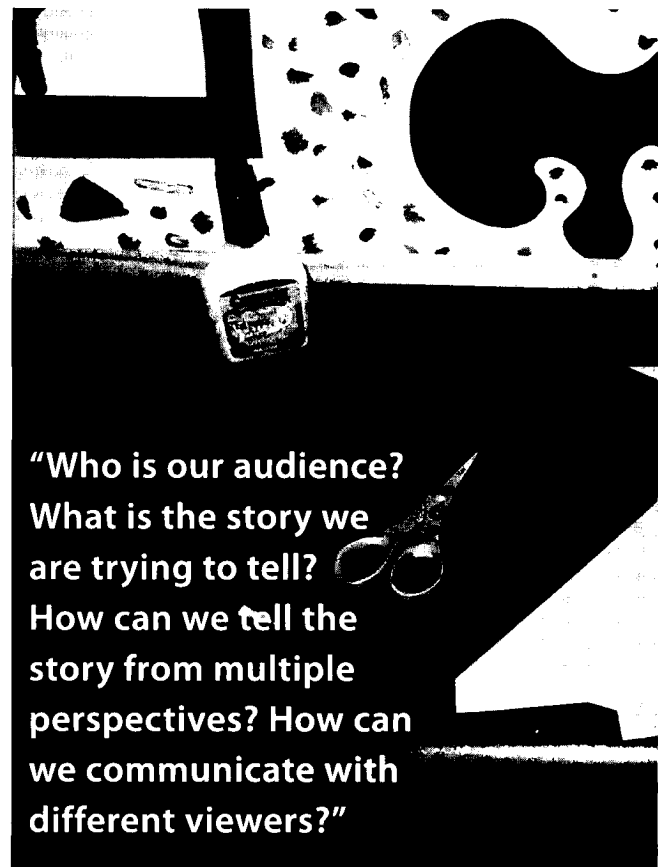
There are, in addition, many different kinds of exhibitions. Each suggests different educational intentions and implies a variety of uses for exhibition within educational practice. In the work of Belcher (1993) and Dean (1994), for example, one finds the following exhibition types:

- the object-centered exhibit, which generally incorporates minimal contextual information, relies on objects to 'speak for themselves,' and is a traditional approach used in many art museums and galleries;
- the interactive or participatory exhibition, which involves audience members in activities and is often used in children's museums;
- the evocative or theatrical exhibition, which attempts to arouse emotion through recreating an atmosphere or environment, and which is often used in historical museums;
- the systematic exhibition, which displays objects by type or category, as often used in scientific or anthropological exhibits;
- the didactic exhibition, which intends explicitly to impart information;
- the entertaining exhibition, with the primary purpose of amusement or recreation, such as in a theme park; and
- the thematic or narrative exhibition, which attempts to tell a story.

Any given exhibition may, of course, include more than one of these approaches.

The Saturday Art School Exhibition Assignment

Although the object-centered exhibit is still the most common type used for both professional art and student art displays, its de-contextualized approach does not take full advantage of an exhibit's educational potential. Indeed, object-centered approaches sometimes perpetuate mystification about art and art education by omitting bridges between artworks and audiences who may not understand how to 'read' or engage with visual form. For purposes of the Indiana University Art School Exhibition, I discouraged the sole use of object-centered approaches and instead encouraged students to draw on ideas from several different exhibition types to communicate messages. In particular, I emphasized the all-inclusive narrative/storytelling orientation in the following statement in planning and developing the exhibit:



**"Who is our audience?
What is the story we
are trying to tell?
How can we tell the
story from multiple
perspectives? How can
we communicate with
different viewers?"**

The goals of the exhibition are to *tell the story* of the Saturday Arts School by

- communicating the aims, themes, inspirations, and processes of instruction—including what you were hoping children would learn, what they did, and how they did it;
- communicating the comments and reflections of the children as they participated in activities—including quotations from class discussions and explanations or comments children made about their work; and
- providing evidence that art activity involves children in meaningful, thoughtful, educational activity.

In other words, the task is not simply to display children's visual products in an attractive way, but to make the nature and value of children's artistic activity more transparent and understandable to parents and other viewers in the School of Education. The display should be a vehicle through which we advocate for art education and demonstrate what and how artistic learning occurs in Saturday School. In planning your exhibition, student teaching teams should ask, "Who is our audience? What is the story we are trying to tell? How can we tell the story from multiple perspectives? How can we communicate with different viewers? How can we encourage viewers to linger over the work and to interact with the display in order to enhance its communicative potential? How will we know if the exhibition has been successful in achieving its goals?" (Excerpt from Exhibition Assignment, Saturday Art School Fall 2006).



They want to inform and they want their viewers to understand.

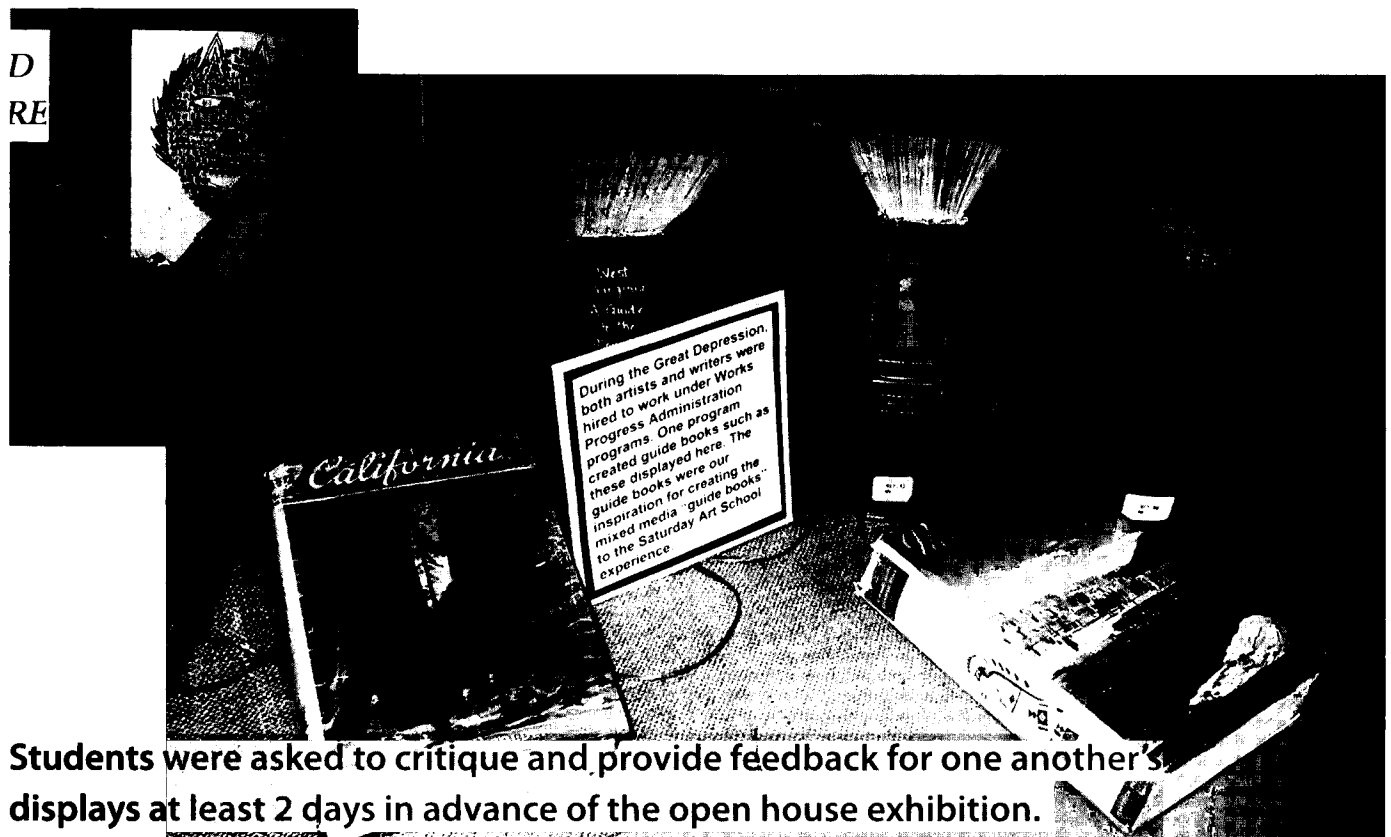
Some Issues and Strategies

Although space prevents a full discussion of exhibition practices used in mounting the Saturday Art School display, some general issues and solutions can be noted. One dilemma faced by the student teachers, for example, involved fairness, and how to represent each child artist with equal care and respect. This was especially difficult if children had not all produced the same amount of work or if some work was unfinished. Some parts of the display area may also be viewed as having more prestige, so that work displayed there could be assumed to be more highly valued. Solutions could include ensuring that every child had one work displayed in the most prominent part of the exhibition area, and making rationales for grouping works in particular ways as clear as possible.

Craftsmanship, in terms of the way in which the exhibit was presented, was also important. Sloppy mounting, for example, drew attention to the mounting rather than the artwork. Text authors needed to compose clearly and attend carefully to spelling and grammar. Text looked far more professional when typed, and choosing a single font for all text throughout the display lent unity. Size and style of font needed to be considered, as did ensuring that viewers could understand which text related to which artwork.

One of the most interesting problems of the exhibit involved the challenge of enticing people to pause and linger in order to absorb the exhibition's information more fully. Students used a range of strategies. One was the use of music to create a welcoming ambiance, potentially encouraging people to remain longer in the vicinity of the display. We found that providing places for people to sit down was helpful. A simple but effective strategy involved posing a question in text above the art: "Can you find the...?" immediately promoted further engagement. Students found that setting up opportunities for hands-on exploration of media near the displays was among the most useful ways to encourage people to stay around. Student teachers noted that parents seemed to find talking about technical procedures a comfortable entry to a discussion about the children's artwork. Children also took on the role of teacher, sharing their knowledge with parents and siblings.

Attempting to display the overall process of artmaking rather than just the end product was another challenge. Student teachers incorporated artists' images used for inspiration and discussion, preliminary drawings, the results of explorations with media (like paint-mixing papers), examples of tools and materials, and children's reflections about the process into the display. Student teachers also included narrative descriptions of



Students were asked to critique and provide feedback for one another's displays at least 2 days in advance of the open house exhibition.

unit plans, learning objectives, and sometimes samples or demonstration pieces they had made themselves. Still photos, changing slide shows, or even videos that depicted children working at different stages of the project were also helpful.⁴

Student teachers spent a great deal of time and effort converting the sometimes barren classroom spaces in which they teach into open galleries or magical spaces. On the day of the open house, the visual appeal and surprise of the transformed space generated excitement about the display. Rolls of paper and lengths of fabric were used to create new room divisions or cover unsightly areas. The planning theme for the term was presented through props and visual metaphor. The year we explored Community and a Sense of Place, for example, a nighttime skyline of the local town square appeared on one of the walls, complete with tiny lights hovering above. The year we explored People and our Interconnections with Plant Life, a wall was lined with life-sized silhouettes of children, their outstretched arms morphing into bushy tree branches overhead. The year we explored The Arts and the Great Depression, artifacts from the 1930s intermingled with the children's artworks, and a shantytown was built in relief, using scrap cardboard and found objects.

I think it is important to mention that although the displays we used were exciting, problems sometimes occurred when the display overwhelmed or merged with the artwork. We found that it was and is always necessary to emphasize again and again that a key purpose of the display is to enhance and draw attention to the art and to encourage people to look at it, not

the display, more closely. To maintain the necessary balance, students were asked to critique and provide feedback for one another's displays at least 2 days in advance of the open house exhibition.

Some Reflections

At the close of the open house, having experienced and observed the morning's events, the student teachers came together to reflect, first in writing and then in a group discussion, on the meaning of the exhibition in the context of art education. Elated by our experiences, we first shared memorable moments and stories: a parent who held a student teacher's hand for a long time and gave heartfelt thanks for her daughter's experience; a grandfather saying enthusiastically to his pleased grandson, "That was cool!" as they emerged together from one of the classroom displays; a grandmother leaning down to tell her granddaughter, "I'm SO glad I came down this weekend!"; and a student teacher who found herself in tears at having to say goodbye to children she was just getting to know.

In their reflections, student teachers express surprise at the amount of time and work that mounting the display entailed, and noted the implications for art teachers' work. They suggested that the exhibition was a way of unveiling what may be mysterious content to parents, especially those who may have had less than positive experiences with art education themselves. The exhibition, one student teacher wrote, "exposes the many layers" of art education (S. Lauffer, personal communication, December 2, 2006).

Student teachers emphasized that watching and listening as children talked about the display with friends and family allowed a better understanding of what children learned. They were pleased when children seemed to remember and share with family sophisticated ideas from instruction. Student teachers also pointed out that the display was evidence of the many different ways that an art problem can be solved. In the case of our Saturday School, the exhibit was also a demonstration of the many ways that a broad theme might be interpreted as art curriculum. As such, student teachers could see how the exhibition "spoke" to parents, but also recognized it as a vehicle for communicating with the general School of Education audience, for sharing with peer teachers, and as a site for reflection on the success of their instruction.

The most frequent comment that student teachers made, however, concerned insights about how **the display seemed to foster both children's individual pride and an awareness of being part of something special and larger than themselves.** Before planning the display, the student teachers and I talked about the importance of the exhibition as a social ritual of celebration, one which publicly demonstrated the value of artistic practices in ways similar to sporting events, concerts, or other public performances. What student teachers initially believed was primarily the promotion of 'self-esteem,' however, can now be seen as an engine of education. They noted in their reflections, for example, that experiencing the display might be motivating for children and could fuel a drive to learn and improve in the future.

Perhaps more significantly, however, student teachers observed how the exhibition was also a means through which adults and child artists could interact, and that some of the most potent evidence about the value of the exhibition could be discovered in these interactions. Certainly, the exhibit, in a variety of ways, communicated experiences that occurred during Saturday Art School and told stories about art education. In combination with the open house, however, another educational context emerged in the three-way encounters among the child artist, the adults who care about her or him, and the exhibition itself. Beyond creating a record of what went on and advocating for art education, therefore, another of the purposes of the educational exhibition was to facilitate opportunities for additional dialogues among viewers to occur. Keeping these multiple outcomes in mind as a display is planned can help teachers maintain a focus on the unique purposes and practices of exhibition in educational settings.

Lara M. Lackey is Associate Professor, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, Art Education Program, School of Education at Indiana University in Bloomington.
E-mail:llackey@indiana.edu

REFERENCES

- Bass, K., Eisner, E., Hanson, L., Conter, T., & Yacoe, T. (1997). *The educationally interpretive exhibition: Rethinking the display of student art*. Reston, VA: National Art Education Association.
- Belcher, M. (1993). *Exhibition in museums*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Berghoff, B., Borgmann, C.B., & Parr, N.C. (2005). *Arts together: Steps toward transformative teacher education*. Reston, VA: National Art Education Association.
- Burton, D. (2004). Exhibiting student art. *Art Education*, 57(6), 41-6.
- Burton, D. (2006). *Exhibiting student art: The essential guide for teachers*. New York & London: Teachers College Press.
- Dean, D. (1994). *Museum exhibition: Theory and practice*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Gooding-Brown, J. (2001). ARTEXPRESS: Made in Australia. How A Student Art Exhibition Becomes a 'Blockbuster'. In B. Zuk & R. Dalton (Eds.), *Student art exhibitions: New ideas and approaches*, pp. 1-17. Reston, VA: National Art Education Association.
- Lackey, L. (2006, Fall). Unpublished assignment for Indiana University Saturday Art School.
- Richard, M., & Lemerise, S. (2001). School art exhibitions, critical and reflective approaches. In B. Zuk & R. Dalton (Eds.), *Student art exhibitions: New ideas and approaches*, pp. 8-20. Reston, VA: National Art Education Association.
- Taylor, P.G. (2001). Creating exhibitions that tell the story of art students' and teachers' education. In B. Zuk & R. Dalton (Eds.), *Student art exhibitions: New ideas and approaches*, pp.58-64. Reston, VA: National Art Education Association.
- Zuk, B., & Dalton, R. (2001). Introduction. *Student art exhibitions: New ideas and approaches*. Reston, VA: National Art Education Association.

ENDNOTES

¹In this article, the term "student teacher" refers to university students taking on the role of teacher within the Saturday Art School early field experience. Their students, the young people who attend and participate in Saturday Art School activities, are referred to as "children."

²Although the Saturday Art School is a vehicle for training our Art Education students, it is also viewed as a public service through which the university gives back to the community. Fees are kept very low or are waived in order to encourage participation by those who might not otherwise afford to enroll.

³An example of this kind of exhibition is documented in the *Interpretive Exhibition* (Bass et al., 1997) which challenges misconceptions about art production as non-cognitive activity. It uses a careful selection of art works to illustrate the different intentions, problem solving skills, and levels of understanding demonstrated by children's image production.

⁴The taking and display of photographs of children is, of course, a delicate matter. Prior permission is always obtained from parents or guardians. Photos can be limited to hands or back views to avoid identifying children involved.

All photos by Lara M. Lackey, used with permission.