

Chapter 16

The Art of Climate Change: Art Education for Global Citizenry

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ABSTRACT

A multi-faceted assignment in a course, Feminist Perspectives of Craft, guided students to investigate the thesis that global warming and climate change are feminist concerns using research, debate, studio inquiry and critique. After team debates, students created individual art pieces; the criteria were that the piece must articulate some aspect of the implications of climate change, human interaction with and responsibility for the environment, and include one or more aspects of the textile techniques that we were exploring in class. Living in a New England coastal community built upon fiber craft, textile and seafaring industry, these elements guided visual art exploration and lesson planning questioning how human interaction with the environment sustains the economy and how societies, in turn, must sustain our earth that provides for the community. Critiques of process and final artwork informed lesson planning about how decisions have far reaching impact extending to the global community.

INTRODUCTION

Our world encompasses natural and manufactured visual constructs. The ability to make, read, and interpret visual images is critical for 21st century beings. Now more than ever, art teachers must cultivate visual abilities for interpretation and communication, develop and teach lessons that guide artistic development, and also increase social awareness to complex problems and relationships.

The overarching goal of this chapter is to inspire art teachers to consider their opportunity to purposefully plan lessons creating and exploring art as social activism, particularly with respect to environmental issues. Such lessons afford students the opportunity to learn more than just visual arts concepts. They also will help students to focus on and learn about:

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1. The power to influence societal conceptions and attitudes about critical and complex issues;
2. A means to confront such issues at a human level and in personally meaningful ways; and
3. Art's potential to enhance awareness, prompt debate, and promote social responsibility and activism.

The study and critical exploration of conceptually-based art inquiry related to social activism by pre- and in-service teachers prepares them to develop meaningful lesson plans concerning the use, misuse and interpretation of visual culture, and to address environmental issues in the classroom. Beyond raising awareness of environmental issues, thoughtfully constructed lessons can serve as a springboard to develop methods, approaches, and techniques geared toward both the creative imagination and critical thinking.

By shifting priorities from the visual product to participatory social process investigating critical societal issues through art, art teachers can provide structures for students to see possible pathways toward art activism (Wyrick, 1996). Therefore, teacher training programs need to help pre-service teachers develop strategies and competencies for engaging with important (and potentially controversial) social topics (Clarke, 2005). Such training will empower them to introduce relevant real world concepts in their curricula. These pedagogical skills facilitate bridge building between the learning, understanding, and communicative power of art and art exploration on the one hand (Church, 2010) and the natural and social sciences on the other, guiding students to make interdisciplinary connections (Marshall, 2009; Smilan & Miraglia, 2009). In this way, art educators can help achieve our ultimate goal of educating socially literate and responsible citizens through developing perceptual and socio-political awareness (Hicks, 1990; NAEA, 2015; Wyrick, 1996).

Confronting Controversial Social Justice Issues Through Creative and Critical Analysis

According to the advocacy position statement of the National Art Education Association (NAEA), art education has an important role to “raise critical consciousness, foster empathy and respect for others, build community, and motivate people to promote positive social change” (NAEA, 2015). Consistent with this mission, conceptually-based art lessons focused on environmental issues can provide students with opportunities to develop a sense of ecological stewardship (Bequette, 2007; Graham, 2014). Teaching art emphasizing “green issues, such as sustainable land use, conservation, recycling, slowing global climate change and others [similar issues] may lead to greater civic engagement” (Bequette, 2007, p. 362) by students and the viewers of their art.

Beyond teaching skills and techniques, art teachers have almost unlimited opportunity to guide their students toward creative development through criteria-based lessons to investigate socially relevant content (Smilan, 2015), along with our environmental responsibility (Miraglia & Smilan, 2009). According to Graham (2014), “Ecological art inquiries ground research in a caring, relational view of life bound to specific places and communities” (p. 186). Making and viewing art concerning ecological inter-dependency empowers art students as artists to identify critical concerns and issues, working as proactive change agents and stewards of the environment (Anderson & Guyas, 2012; Graham, 2015; Krug & Siegenthaler, 2006; Randazzo & LaJevic, 2013).

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