COMMENTARY
Revealing Power: A Visual Culture Orientation to Student-Teacher Relationships

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The value of recent theoretical perspectives in art education does not lie in providing comprehensive definitions that include all the artifacts and properties that “count” as visual culture, material culture, or mass arts. Instead, the value of articulating theoretical perspectives lies in mapping the terrain of cultural phenomena. Theoretical maps guide the ways we traverse the terrain of new content in art education, creating rhizomes of possibilities.

Authors in the Spring 2003 issue of Studies in Art Education offer a number of interesting maps to guide the ways in which art educators might approach an expanded range of content in the field. Chapman (2003) characterizes mass arts as arts of “esthetic persuasion.” She recommends we attend to “where and why artistry is amplified, and where and why it is largely ignored” (p. 239). The goal she posits is to reveal how imagery “activate(s) feelings, memories, and unexpected forms of reciprocity” (p. 236). Bolin and Blandy (2003) characterize material culture as “the outward signs and symbols of particular ideas in the mind” (p. 249). They call attention to “materialities that shape and define culture” with a broad definition of material to include the non-materiality of electronic communication. Wilson (2003) holds that, although it is impossible to map the features of visual culture “to suit the specific objective-bound purposes of art education” (p. 223), we should not ignore visual culture in art education. The inclusion of visual culture and contemporary art in curricula “forces us to deal with ideas and issues that have the potential to teach us the most about our lives in the contemporary world” (p. 227). Pauly (2003) notes that visual culture “exists within networks of culturally learned meanings and power relations that surround the production and consumption of images” (p. 264). Her position is that art educators do not explore images as visual culture unless they focus on “when, how, and with whom they learn to construct this knowledge” (p. 265). Tavin (2003), situates visual culture predominately within art history discourse on expanding territories of study into popular culture. He cites Alpers’s (1983) references to mapping “visual culture” into the field of art history. In art education, “visual culture,” has been mapped into the field by founders of the Caucus of Social Theory in Art Education (CSTAE) since
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examples, clearly showed that imagining something visual involved other sensory perceptions.

This connection is also reflected in common everyday language. People say, "I see what you mean." Seeing is metaphorically equated with knowledge from the ENLIGHTENMENT to postmodern PERSPECTIVES and current VIEWS. For example, we might sweat because of "seeing" a threatening person approach. Conversely, we see what we experience in other senses. We might hear approaching steps and "see" in our mind our worse fears of an attacker.

Visuality was the focus of our colloquium exercise as it played out in student-teacher relationships. Colloquium participants made assumptions about what they were "supposed" to do in their roles as students and professors, even when we intentionally disrupted usual expectations by removing all the chairs from the classroom. They looked to us, the teachers, for permission to respond to the unexpected visual cues in the classroom—in this case, the absence of chairs. They also looked to us for permission to behave in ways that might challenge conventional assumptions about status and power, such as getting a chair from the hall and sitting higher than others. Our colloquium exercise was a practical example demonstrating the way subjects' positions are constructed by conventional expectations, and how viewers are led to dominant-hegemonic "readings" of visual culture—in this case, the visual culture of a classroom. Understanding the relationship between visual culture and power is significant to art education because the way classrooms are arranged reflect and shape the interactions between teachers and students. We believe that art educators adopting a visual culture orientation should address the imbalanced power relationship between teachers and students and, as we did in colloquium, bring this to the forefront of instruction.

References


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