

COMMENTARY

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

Wanda B. Knight, Karen Keifer-Boyd, and Patricia M. Amburgy

The Pennsylvania State University

Correspondence concerning this commentary should be addressed to the authors at 207 Arts Cottage, School of Visual Arts, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA, 16802-2905. E-mail: wbk10@psu.edu, kk-b@psu.edu, and pma5@psu.edu.

Author's Note:
This is a true co-authored work with equal contributions from all of us and no first author. The order in which we list authors is based on a rotation we use in our collaborations or publications.

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 “aesthetic 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 “materials 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 (CS-TAE) since

1980 (Hobbs, 1980; Lanier, 1980; Sherman, 1980). Tavin (2003) links visual culture with critical pedagogy and calls attention to popular culture as a site of educational and political struggle. He recommends that art education focus on “privilege, power, representation, history, and pleasure within the intertextual circulation of images” (p. 208).

From our perspectives, power is a central feature of visual culture. In thinking about theoretical constructions of power and culture (e.g., Carson & Pajaczkowska, 2001; Freedman, 2002; Hall, 1997; Sturken & Cartwright, 2001), we considered how theoretical discourse on power and privilege might be relevant to practice. During the fall semester of 2002, we planned a colloquium session for graduate students and faculty at Penn State to reveal how power operates in practice within student-teacher relationships. This colloquium focused on issues of diversity significant to understanding, appreciating, and experiencing visual culture.

Seven faculty and 17 graduate students arrived at colloquium expecting to discuss an article we were then in the process of writing (Keifer-Boyd, Amburgy, & Knight, 2003). Instead of finding the classroom with chairs organized in rows, colloquium participants were perplexed when they found the room empty of chairs. We wondered: Would the removal of chairs serve to raise awareness of power relationships that exist in colloquium? Our purpose was to create an experience that would enact one of the central points of the article that we were working on—that visual culture is a particular way of investigating and understanding the visual as it is situated in cultural contexts of power and privilege.

We asked colloquium participants to focus on visual culture by, first, imagining a shared space in which there were objects and qualities with shared meanings for the group. Ironically, the first object suggested for the space was a chair. In “Deep-Seated Culture,” Keifer-Boyd argues “chairs and sitting reflect cultural values and influence what we learn, through disempowering or empowering us” (1992, p. 73). Initially, colloquium participants said they were uncomfortable sitting on the floor, but simultaneously indicated they did not want to bring in a chair from the hall and sit higher than others. They expressed fears of not fitting in, or displaying a pompous attitude suggested by a superior position. For this group, sitting in an elevated position clearly is a strong shared visual code for power over others.

We continued to solicit details of the imagined space and what the details meant to the group. Responses reinforced our assumption that visual culture is intimately connected to full sensory experience, as colloquium participants helped the group imagine beautiful creative spaces with sounds, temperature variations, physical environments reflecting emotional states, and cyborgian transformations. For example, one participant envisioned a floor that was sensitive to body temperature causing the color to change as we walked across it. This, among other

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, to give them 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

- Alpers, S. (1983). *The art of describing: Dutch art in the seventeenth century*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bolin, P. E., & Blandy, D. (2003). Beyond visual culture: Seven statements of support for material culture studies in art education. *Studies in Art Education*, 44(3), 246–263.
- Carson, F. & Pajaczkowska, C. (Eds.). (2001). *Feminist visual culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Chapman, L. H. (2003). Studies of mass arts. *Studies in Art Education*, 44(3), 230–245.
- Freedman, K. (2002, August). *The world is not enough: Contemporary life and the visual arts*. Presentation at the InSEA World Congress, New York.
- Hall, S. (Ed.). (1997). *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*. London, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hobbs, J. (1980). Established ways of thinking. *Journal of Social Theory in Art Education*, 1, 3–11.

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

- Keifer-Boyd, K. (1992). Deep-seated culture: Understanding sitting. *Journal of Social Theory in Art Education*, 12, 73-99.
- Keifer-Boyd, K., Amburgy, P. M., & Knight, W. B. (2003). Three approaches to teaching visual culture in K-12 school contexts. *Art Education*, 56(2), 44-51.
- Lanier, V. (1980). Statement for Social Theory Caucus. *Journal of Social Theory in Art Education*, 1, 17-18.
- Pauly, N. (2003). Interpreting visual culture as cultural narratives in teacher education. *Studies in Art Education*, 44(3), 264-284.
- Sherman, A. (1980). Needed: A new view of art and emotions. *Journal of Social Theory in Art Education*, 1, 12-16.
- Sturken, M., & Cartwright, L. (2001). *Practices of looking: An introduction to visual culture*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University.
- Tavin, K. M. (2003). Wrestling with angels, searching for ghosts: Toward a critical pedagogy of visual culture. *Studies in Art Education*, 44(3), 197-213.
- Wilson, B. (2003). Of diagrams and rhizomes: Visual culture, contemporary art, and the impossibility of mapping the content of art education. *Studies in Art Education*, 44(3), 214-229.