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Finding the Connections Between Art and Teaching: A Case Study

Tareq Daher and Stephanie A. Baer

Abstract

Finding the connection between art and teaching can be a difficult task for pre-service teachers who do not have a background in the arts. This qualitative case study explores the journey of a group of pre-service elementary teachers in an art methods course considering what it means to teach and to be an artist. The way in which these students defined the arts and teaching changed over the course of the semester and found connective threads, productively tying together the work of teaching and the creative process. Findings from pre-service teacher course work indicated three important themes: connections between art and teaching, finding connections to self, and becoming a teacher. Data revealed implications for pre-service teachers making productive connections, beginning to see themselves as capable, creative teachers, able to encourage the creativity of their future students. Practicing teachers and teacher educators are also implicated as art and teaching find authentic connections throughout an art methods course.

Keywords: *art education, art methods, elementary teachers, pre-service teachers, online journals*

Introduction

It is fairly obvious that the work of an artist requires at its very foundation, a great amount of creativity. It is perhaps not quite as obvious that good teaching also requires vast amounts of creativity. Even less obvious is the connective tissue that holds together the concepts of art and

teaching. Operating on the assumption that art and teaching are inherently linked (Simpson, Jackson, and Aycock, 2005), these researchers set out to examine the perspectives of pre-service elementary teachers on the subject. While the definitions of creativity, art, and teaching could be debated, the focus of this paper will be to uncover how pre-service teacher perceptions about these ideas changed over the course of a semester in an art methods course.

The context for this case study was a one semester art methods course, *Arts in the Elementary Curriculum*, for pre-service elementary teachers at a Midwestern university. The instructor [secondary investigator] who had been teaching this methods course for several years found that students consistently had difficulty considering themselves as artists, or capable of creativity. Even more, they tended to see art as a thing; a product; an extracurricular activity if there was time after the normal school day. While many students gave lip service to appreciating the arts, their understanding of the arts as a medium for critical thinking and complex experience was not evidenced in what they produced early in the course (e.g. reflective journals, art-making, discussions, etc.). More often than not, students would categorize the arts as a break for elementary students from the rigors of the core curriculum; a soft science; an emotional endeavor. These pre-service elementary teachers are not alone in this assumption. Eisner (2008) asserts that “The arts traditionally have been regarded as ornamental or emotional in character. Their connection to epistemological issues, at least in the modern day, has not been a strong one” (p. 3). He goes on to posit why this may be, which will be examined later.

In any case, it is the change in how pre-service elementary teachers view these ideas that is up for discussion today. For as we teach and encourage a new generation of teachers, these researchers argue that how pre-service teachers think about connecting creativity to their daily practice is of great import and has hefty implications for their future students. This paper focuses on the growth/transformation evidenced when students were asked to consider their definitions of the concepts of art and teaching. Researchers found striking differences in how students defined each of these ideas at the beginning of the semester as disconnected; then in their final paper students were reforming their understandings of how art, teaching, and themselves, were interconnected. The journey, or *how*

they arrived at these new connections, is the work of the creative, reflective practitioner engaging in purposeful explorations in the arts.

Research Problem

The problem researchers encountered was a lack of clarity for how pre-service elementary teachers were defining the arts and teaching throughout *Arts in the Elementary Curriculum*, an art methods course for pre-service elementary teachers. The instructor suspected that students' ideas about the arts and teaching were changing through the work of the course and wanted to collect this evidence more formally. For this case study, researchers sought to elucidate the connections that students were making (or not making) between the arts and teaching based on their course work (e.g. written reflection, papers, journals, discussion, etc.).

Literature Review

Pre-service Teachers' Definitions of Art and Teaching

Pre-service teachers' understanding and perceptions towards the arts have been researched in a multitude of ways. What is most prevalent concerns pre-service elementary teachers' readiness to teach through the arts and how that readiness is (or is not) fostered in a teacher education program (Donahue & Stuart, 2008; Grauer, 1998; Kowalchuk, 2000). There are also quite a few studies out there championing the visual arts as a way into reflective practice both within art and in other disciplines as well as a way to decipher meaning from teaching experiences (Cuero & Crim, 2008; Danko-McGhee & Slutsky, 2003). There are still more studies that examine the reflective practice of pre-service teachers and how that can improve their developing craft (Dianovsky & Wink, 2012; Garmon, 2004; Pedro, 2005; Mortari, 2012; Schon, 1987).

While some researchers speak to the reflective practices of pre-service teachers, others examine how pre-service teachers' beliefs affect their teaching. For example, Grauer (1998) found that pre-service teach-

ers' sense of competence to teach a subject was transformed by their beliefs and knowledge about that subject. While that may seem a natural connection, it is important to note that what the students believed about themselves as competent within art education affected their beliefs about art education. Teacher educators wanting to help develop art advocates should take heed. Garmon (2004) along with others put forward purposeful reflection and self-awareness as factors in changing perceptions and developing identities of pre-service teachers. These changes occurred with guided practice in course settings, not unlike the context we present.

Additional factors focused on in-class activities are presented in the literature. Cuero and Crim (2008) discuss the importance of aesthetic response to enhance literacy in the classroom. Danko-McGhee and Slutsky (2003) collaborated in a study bringing together the arts and their interest in Reggio Emilia, a discovery based approach to early childhood education, as a forum for finding new ways to connect early childhood education and the visual knowledge. They found that requiring their methods student to present new knowledge visually was challenging and productive. Donahue and Stuart (2008) found it important to present pre-service students with opportunities to create and play with art curriculum in order to avoid narrow definitions of learning that they might encounter outside the classroom. They had to become advocates for their own practice.

What is less evident in the research is exactly how pre-service elementary teachers define teaching and the arts, and if those definitions can change during the course of an art methods course. Duncum (1999) suggested that teaching art as basic content isn't enough; art must be taught as a way to make meaning in visual form. This type of philosophy is grounded in a broader definition of art that invites the process and practice of creativity as well as product-oriented ideas. What is of interest to this study is how that philosophy leads to potential changes in how pre-service teachers define art and teaching as well as what connections are made (or not made) between those concepts.

The Connections between Arts and Teaching

Published connections between arts and teaching are growing in the academic field. While much is still to be done in evidencing the multitude

of complex connections between the arts and teaching, many authors and researchers are finding important connections for prospective teachers in considering what the arts have to offer. Simpson, Jackson, and Aycock (2005) describe the connection between art and teaching quite simply: “teaching is a complex undertaking that demands the best artists... “what it takes” can be learned: people do” (p. 4-5). The same authors explore the notion of teacher as artist through the works of John Dewey and the sensibilities that connect identities of teacher and artist. These sensibilities include things like attending to process while in the midst of process, working with knowledge gained from experience and using it professionally, creatively considering perspectives outside of oneself simultaneous to one’s own. These vital connections spell out an integrated process that weaves together teaching with passion and creatively considers how learning works for one’s self and one’s students. This connection to self as artist and teacher is completely relevant as we consider the developing identities of pre-service teachers and how they learn to reflect on their own experiences (Baer, 2013).

Gradle (2007) weaves together ideas of teaching art and creating proof of growth and process, encouraging reflective dispositions in pre-service teachers. She describes connections between students performing their thoughts and long-lasting understanding of reflective teaching and continual practice at being in process. Grumet (1993) talks about “pulling knowledge into new relations” and the necessity of the other in that process. This is not unlike how an artist pulls ideas and inspiration from multiple sources, playing with it until it makes sense in a personal way. It is the reflection not only on our own actions and experience, but that of others’; our students; our peers; the collective human experience. Identity is a continual, creative construction that cannot be done in isolation.

Hansen (2005) describes openness to the potential in educative experiences, asking both teacher and student to look, listen, and feel for the possible. “Rather than a dazzling spectacle or show, creativity in teaching can be understood as a quiet, steady habit of generating and realizing meaning” (Hansen, 2005, p. 67). Hansen describes the creative teacher who knows teaching and learning to be processes only understood through time and creative sensibilities to the nuance of a situation. Eisner (2002) echoes this call for closeness to experience in his arguments for a return of the arts to classrooms in all disciplinary areas (see also

Dewey, 1934). It is an empathic sense of life and desire to participate with others in that visceral experience that can drive together the qualities of good teaching and creative work in the arts. It is also this connection that is the goal of *Arts in the Elementary Curriculum*, seeking to enable pre-service elementary teachers to engage in that connection and seek it out for themselves.

Research Questions

The central question of this study was: Do pre-service elementary teachers' definitions of art and teaching change while taking an art methods course? How might they change? To further understand the process, researchers asked: What, if any, connections are pre-service elementary teachers making between the arts and teaching? How do pre-service teachers connect or distance themselves from the concept of artist/teacher?

Methodology

The purpose of this research was to explore how pre-service elementary teachers' definitions of art and teaching changed while taking an art methods course. This research followed a qualitative case study research design. The phenomenon in this study was the change in pre-service teachers' definition of arts and teaching in the context of an art methods course. The boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly evident; therefore, a case study design is appropriate to this study (Yin, 2003). The case in this study is the process that pre-service teachers used to connect the definitions of art and teaching. The unit of analysis was bounded in the context of an art methods course in the fall 2010 semester at a Midwestern university. The research questions and purpose of the study required an explanatory case study design, as recommended by Yin (2003), to explain the intervention of the art methods course activities.

Sampling

After the course was completed and the grades were turned in, the pre-service teachers in the art methods course were given the option to allow their journal entries, discussions, comments and in-class activities to be used in this research. The sample in this IRB approved study were twenty-three pre-service teachers that participated in an art methods course and signed an informed consent form for their data to be used.

Data Gathering

Data was gathered in two parts: First, in the first class session of the semester, the students were asked to complete the sentences "Art is..." and "Teaching is"... in their own words on their private online journals. Private online journals were embedded in the learning management system (LMS) Blackboard to ensure student privacy and access. The purpose of this activity was to allow students to provide their perspectives on arts and teaching before engaging in class activities that might influence their definitions. Students were not given a time limit to complete this assignment or a word/page limit. Their responses reflected their opinions and previous experiences. Second, succeeding a semester of readings, discussions, journal entries, and in-class activities, students were asked to complete a final assignment that explored the communicative qualities of the arts and their relationship to teaching and learning. This data came in the form of a three-page statement on their understanding of the concepts of art and teaching along with their current definitions for each term.

Data Analysis

Analysis was conducted by mining data from documents (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Merriam, 1998). The term "documents" is used in qualitative research and in this paper as an umbrella term "to refer to a wide range of written, visual and physical material relevant to the study at hand" (Merriam, 1998). Data was obtained from the students' journal entries and final assignment. The open-coding analysis strategy was used as proposed by Creswell (2008) followed by the pattern matching and

explanation building analytic techniques recommended by Yin (2003). Each researcher carefully reviewed the data in each line of text and separately identified ideas, patterns, and commonalities in the text. Then, each of the researchers coded the entries and themes emerged. Data were sorted and coded a second time to group the themes from the first open-coding. Both researchers met and discussed the emerged themes and identified the strongest ones among them.

Results and Discussion

As researchers looked across the data, three main themes were identified as students' definitions of art and teaching changed from the beginning of the course to the end. They were: Finding connections between art and teaching, finding connections to self, and becoming a teacher. What follows are more specific descriptions of each of these themes, accompanied by student data.

Finding Connections between Art and Teaching

The first theme that was identified by researchers as students sought to define the arts and teaching, was: finding connections between art and teaching. In the initial definitions of art and teaching that students provided there was little crossover as they considered the two terms. When asked to define art, students tended to focus their comments in three areas: discipline labeling (painting, drawing, dancing, etc.), self-expression, and creativity. When asked to define teaching, students spoke about the act of teaching, the teaching environment, and a teacher's characteristics/role. Here are some representative examples of what students wrote:[1]

- “Art is something that is pleasing to a person’s senses.”
- “[Art] is a way to be creative and get out your feelings.”
- “[Art is] the expression of language, music, pictures, and dance.”
- “Teaching is a way to pass on knowledge, experiences, encouragement, thoughts, information, ideas.”
- “Teaching can be used formally, such as in a classroom or recrea-

tional setting, or informally, such as in a social setting.”

At the close of the semester, students wrote about the art and teaching as much more interconnected than they had previously. In fact, as researchers analyzed students’ writing, it became more difficult to discern which concept students were defining as they began to draw overt connections between teaching and the arts.

- “With art helping us create ourselves as a person, it is important to think of art and teaching as one.”
- “Both teaching and art use creativity to teach someone else something.”
- “I have started to create a web of ideas for how to create a learning environment that awakens joy in creative expression and knowledge.”

In the first example art is described as determinate of our identity, and then group with teaching “as one”. This link suggests a change from the more disparate, original definitions. In the second example, art has now become a teacher or a tool for teaching. The definition has expanded from a simple aesthetic product to something that functions creatively to interact with another person; to teach. The teaching definition has expanded as well to include creativity. In the third example, the student refers to expression *and* knowledge, drawing together what Eisner (2008) describes as ways of knowing. The terms appear together here, suggesting an understanding of the connectedness between both creative expression and the concept of knowledge.

Finding Connections to Self

The second theme that developed was students finding connection to self. As suggested above, students were beginning to find a connection between art and identity. In the initial definitions, students spoke about both art and teaching as if it existed outside of them; more so with art than teaching, as students had, overall, had more experience considering themselves as teachers rather than artists. They would write things like:

- “Art is something a person creates...”
- “[Art is] a free expression of someone’s feelings...”
- “[Art] can serve as an outlet to people...”
- “[Teaching is] an interaction between 2 or more persons...”
- “Teachers teach because they care...”

They were using their own words (rather than quoting philosophers or artists), but still described the concepts at a distance. In their final definitions, students embodied the concepts more readily. Whereas before, a student might have discussed what a teacher did or should do, they now spoke about what they, themselves, wanted to do in their future classrooms. Many spoke about the artistic process personally rather than listing off different types of media or materials that they thought artists used. They described specific experiences in the arts and teaching that exemplified their definitions. They also individually and collectively identified themselves as developing artists and teachers.

- “I need to appreciate what I can create rather than what I cannot.”
- “We should follow our strengths.”
- “I have developed my creativity.”
- “I need to be both a teacher and artist.”

Even the simple switch from saying “they” or “someone” to saying “I” or “we” identified a shift in thinking. Students were considering themselves as interconnected in this process of considering art and teaching as relevant.

Becoming a Teacher

The final theme that brought synthesis to many students’ definitions of art and teaching was in how researchers saw students describe becoming a teacher. This theme grew out of a developing understanding the students displayed concerning both art and teaching. In experiencing and writing about the arts and teaching, students began to merge their ideas and discuss the experience of becoming a teacher through creativity and a more articulate understanding of process. They were not only describ-

ing characteristics of what they believed a teacher to be, but envisioned their future space and role in the classroom through a developing identification of being an artist as well as a teacher. Here are some representative examples of comments from students:

- “Students should be able to create what they want...they should have a safe environment to do this without people judging others ideas and respecting everyone’s creations. This kind of environment can only exist in a classroom with the help of a great teacher.”
- “I know that I can always learn from my students, and they can learn from me as well. I have a new and different perspective...Now I know that no matter what subject I may teach in the future, that I will let the “creative juices flow” and give my students the experience and practice they deserve in the classroom every day.”
- “My personal transformation is still occurring to this day and will continue until who knows when. My artistic abilities are not the best but my personal outlook is changing...I am learning to enjoy art and not focus on the overall outcome of the product. It is the process that should count most because that is where the transformation occurs. I will continue to work on my abilities and incorporate art into my current and future teachings.”

These comments are reflective of a developing understanding of how art and teaching are interrelated. Students describe a close connection with themselves as teachers and what they envision for their future practice. This consideration, we believe, comes from a growing relationship with self as teacher/artist fostered by engagement with the arts and teaching as connected, relevant ideas. Eisner’s (1991) description acts both an illustration of the outcome of such engagement and the goal of *Arts in the Elementary Curriculum*:

Teaching is artistic in character in many of the ways in which all art is artistic: it provides a deep sense of aesthetic experience to both perceiver and actor when it is well done (Eisner, 1982). It requires the teacher to pay attention to qualitative nuance - tone

of voice, the comportment of students, the pervasive quality of the teaching episode. It requires the teacher to attend to matters of composition in order to give the day or lesson coherence. It often requires flexibility in aims and the ability to exploit unforeseen opportunities in order to achieve aims that could not have been conceptualized beforehand. Teaching is a constructive activity whose efforts result in forms that can provide what the fine arts are intended to provide: a heightened consciousness and aesthetic experience (p. 17).

Thus the goal in investigating and evidencing the connections between the arts and teaching serve many paths. Beginning teachers can begin to build an identity that allows for creativity, self-knowledge, and confidence in the nuances of their experience. This developing identity that holistically considers the self as teacher/artist then serves to better equip future elementary students to consider themselves as creative beings, holding the potential for meaningful experiences in the classroom.

Limitations and Implications

This study included a few limitations in regards to the methodology and procedures. The study was conducted over one academic semester; a longer time period of two or more semesters could be considered in future research. Additionally, the instructor of the course was a co-researcher in this study. However, this study had two researchers which assists in minimizing bias and provides the instructor with familiarity and understanding of the participants. Furthermore, the researchers would have liked the opportunity to conduct individual interviews with the participants; however sufficient data was available from the multiple texts provided by the participants.

Further study and evidence on these topics can give further validity to considering teaching as an artful task and the arts as a teaching opportunity. The qualities and characteristics of both art and teaching deserve the time and offer insight into creating educators with a sense of creative and meaningful purpose. The results of this case study reveal students' growth and transformation of their perceptions of the arts and teaching.

Students began the course with little to no crossover in the definition of the terms “art” and “teaching” and completed the course with a more in-depth understanding of how the arts and teaching connect. They also began to more intimately identify themselves both as artists and teachers, capable of creativity in the classroom. Finally, their ideas began to synthesize for researchers as they described becoming a teacher. This movement in thinking is reflective of a course goal to encourage students to consider the interconnected of the work of art and the work of teaching. Researchers began the study with the assumption that there were connections between art and teaching and suspected that students developed awareness to those connections while taking an art methods course. However, researchers lacked evidence for how students defined art and teaching and through student coursework, found elucidation of those changing and growing ideas.

The implications for this study lie in how pre-service teachers begin to build an identity for themselves as creative practitioners in education. While engaging in a course that sought to encourage students to consider themselves capable of creative, artistic work, they began to merge their ideas for how that creative work played a role in their teacher self. Their definitions became more connected to themselves rather than segregated to what they initially believed was the role of art and teaching. Through purposeful reflection and artmaking (i.e. coursework for *Arts in the Elementary Curriculum*), pre-service elementary teachers made connections between art and teaching, between themselves and their practice, and more clearly articulated the power of those connections. These connections may enable the development of creative teaching habits and attentiveness to one’s practice whether in art or in teaching. In reflecting on this study, practicing teachers can be reminded of the creativity inherent in their daily practice and the potential for meaningful experience when their own teaching/creative identities are called into consideration. Teacher educators are also reminded of the necessity of enabling the development of their students’ (and their own) teaching identity reflective of Eisner’s (1991) description of teaching’s artistic character. It is necessary to continue to ask: What is art? What is teaching? What do they have to do with each other? Why should I care? Even (and especially) seasoned educators can find a renewed sense of purpose when we question the very foundation of our practice.

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