

# Reflections on Social Justice Art Teacher Education

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*Teacher education needs to be conceptualized as both a learning problem and a political problem aimed at social justice.* (Marilyn Cochran-Smith, 2004)

A decade ago, teacher education caught the attention of policymakers, media, private interest groups, and the public. One of the reasons for the failed public education system cited by various education and media pundits was the lack of qualified teachers. How teachers are trained became the focus of much debate. Nine years ago, in an attempt to raise the quality of teachers in public schools, the New York State Board of Education required all teacher education programs, including the arts, to redesign and register their programs based on certain guidelines in an attempt to ensure rigor and accountability. This directive by the State was an attempt to change the way we prepare teachers, still conceptualized as a problem of training and testing, rather than as a problem of politically situated learning (Cochran-Smith, 2004). The primary focus of teacher education programs in New York was to ensure that “all teachers have basic subject matter knowledge and the technical skills to work in schools devoted to bringing pupils’ test scores to certain minimum thresholds” (p. 1). New York’s call to action created an opportunity for the faculty involved in teacher preparation at New York University (NYU) to re-conceptualize what was meant by teacher education. In this essay, I explore the journey that was undertaken to design a social justice based art education program that embodied NYU’s teacher education mission. I also reflect on the questions, issues, and challenges that have emerged as this program grows and

## KEY CONCEPTS

- Social Justice
- Critical Pedagogy
- Contemporary Art
- Teacher Education
- Critical Race Theory

our teachers begin their teaching careers in schools, museums, and other alternative educational environs.

## Rethinking Teacher Education

For a year (1998–1999), the faculty involved in teacher education and faculty from various departments at NYU’s Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development met to discuss and debate what teacher education meant. These discussions led to the creation of a Vision Statement that provided the framework for all curriculum revisions—a framework that conceptualized teacher education as a process that is simultaneously a political problem as well as a learning problem that involves “intellectual, cultural, and contextually local activity” (Cochran-Smith, 2004, p. 2). NYU’s commitment is to train teachers “whose practice is informed by broad and deep understanding of their disciplines and specializations, and by a moral commitment to equity and social justice” (Taub, Tobias, & Mayher, 2006, p. 4). Thus, education is understood to be a moral and political endeavor rather than a neutral, value-free process. Grounded in this understanding, the complexity of teaching and learning is viewed as a series of dynamic tensions that our students learn to mediate (Table 1). The five tensions in the NYU/Steinhardt vision statement will be briefly outlined to set the stage for how the art education program is currently conceptualized.

## The Five Tensions

The first tension that periodically may emerge is the divide between those who argue that pedagogy should focus on transmitting subject

knowledge and those who believe that pedagogy should focus on how students learn. Our position is that NYU teachers need to simultaneously acknowledge their content area and understand the way their students learn (Taub et al., 2006). Teaching and learning are inseparable, as two sides of the same coin.

The second tension suggests that teaching and learning is not a neutral act that takes place in insular classrooms. Rather it is influenced, shaped, and responsive to social, cultural, political, and economic contexts. The notion that teacher education is simply a technical problem that can be solved using a set of methods, techniques, and evaluative measures is a pervasive viewpoint in society. Instead, our teachers strive to explore their classroom in a wider context (school, community, society, nation, and world).

The third tension addresses the need for teachers to “function in the real world of urban and suburban classrooms while simultaneously being committed to striving to improve them, to bring them closer to their potential as democratic learning communities” (Taub et al., 2006, p. 6). Tension four is based on the understanding that teaching and learning are collaborative social activities that require working with both the needs of individual learners and the classroom community to ensure fairness and social justice for all learners. It is necessary to respect “diversity of ideas as well as backgrounds ... Such mutual respectful democratic classrooms must be exemplary learning communities that both enact and are explicitly committed to anti-bias education” (p. 6).

The fifth and final tension requires teachers to mediate between caring for their students and caring for themselves so that “all aspects of the learning transaction can be mutually beneficial” (Taub et al., 2006, p. 7). This final tension is based on the ethic of caring advocated by Noddings (1992); our teachers “create caring learning environments where each participant can reach their full intellectual, moral, and human potential” (Taub et al., 2006, p. 7).

### Envisioning the Art Education Program

Keeping the NYU mission for teacher education at the forefront, the challenge faced was to design a master’s program that allowed prospective art teachers to *embody a social justice perspective* in an *integrated manner across the entire program*. Forever mindful that embodiment and commitment to a social justice perspective is a lifelong endeavor, we first had to be clear about how we understood social justice art education. Similar to

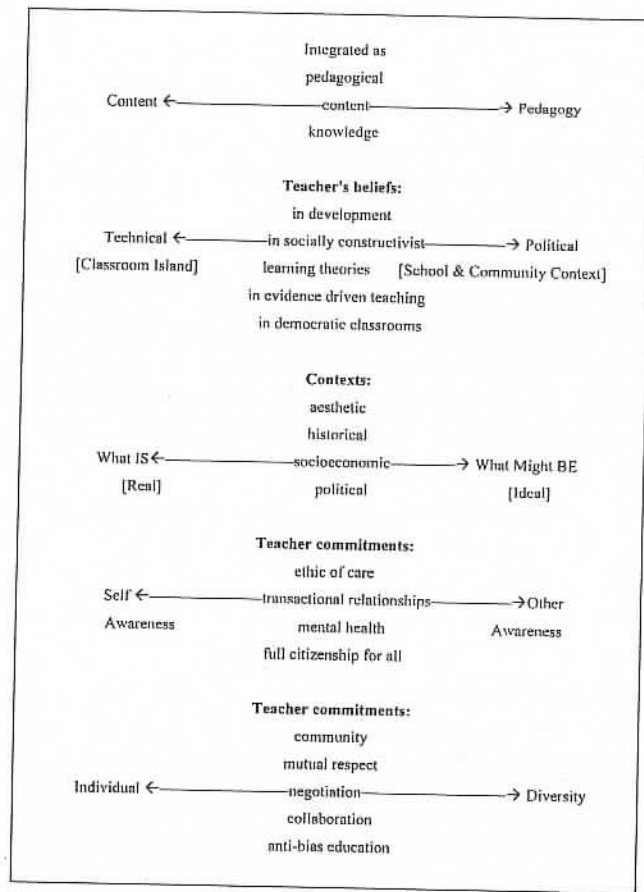


Table 1. Chart of Vision Statement.

Bell (1997), social justice art education was to be viewed as a process and a goal that involves working in a collaborative, participatory, and democratic way to change the unequal distribution and access of resources that hamper equal participation of all social groups in society. It "involves social actors who have a sense of their own agency as well as a sense of social responsibility toward and with others and the society as a whole" (p. 3). It follows that a social justice perspective requires a fundamental personal transformation in the ways that teachers understand their own world, their place in it, and their relationship to others in an unequal society.

As many educators have noted, this personal transformation cannot be achieved by one or more courses, or over a few years, but takes place over a lifetime of active, conscious, critical, reflective, and mindful teaching and learning (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Darling-Hammond et al., 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Nieto, 2000). Thus, the challenge was creating an educational experience rooted in social justice over a 2-year period (the length of our program) that teachers can internalize and make their own.

First, it was necessary to understand that social justice education requires self-actualization to take place in order for students to commit to it for the long haul. Research in social justice programs has shown that prospective secondary teachers revert back to their own high school teaching experiences in their first year of teaching because it is familiar among the unfamiliar multiple facets of teaching that they have to consider. This meant not only thinking about the theoretical framework, but the dispositions art teachers would require in order to pursue social justice art education in schools that remain, for the most part, focused on skill-based art education. The program had to be coherent, which meant weaving key ideas of social justice pedagogy together and across each of the courses, field experiences, seminars, and readings. Two aspects immediately became clear. First we had to interview students applying to this program to make sure they understood what they would be signing up for if admitted, and to assess their disposition toward working for social change. Unlike Kohl (2002), who pounded the pavement to recruit new teachers with a social activist agenda to enroll in the new social justice teacher education program at San Francisco State College, we had to accept a range of students, many who chose the program simply because of the NYU credential and had no prior experience or commitment to social activism.

Second, it was necessary to create a cohort of students who entered the program together and took many of the same courses collectively in

order to create a community of learners who could support each other while at NYU and during their first few years teaching in urban schools. The challenges of balancing the wide spectrum of students in our program will be presented in a later section as it raises pressing questions regarding the ability to embody and practice social justice art education.

The preservice curriculum required by state guidelines and developed by many art education programs is based on art education methods, aesthetics, child and adolescent developmental, and art history. These curriculums provide little room for socially relevant content and remain virtually unchanged. Too often in art teacher education programs multiculturalism is associated with social justice and included in a single course to fulfill the state requirement of acknowledging diversity in the classroom. A social justice approach to art education departs from this one-course deficit model of cultural diversity and pluralism and instead is informed by critical or social reconstructivist multiculturalism.

Social reconstructivist multiculturalism encourages a "critical understanding of how race, class, gender and culture structure the life chances and school experiences of both individual school children and large groups of people who are not part of the cultural, racial, language, and socio-economic mainstream" (Cochran-Smith, 2004, p. 17). This critical lens challenges students to look at their own biases and the ways oppression gets internalized and embodied. Eventually the goal is that these notions will become common sense. Thus, it is important, as Boler (1999) stressed, to conceive of "how structures and experiences of race, class and gender ... are shaped by the social control of emotions" (p. 5). Emotions are collaboratively constructed and historically situated; therefore, a pedagogy of emotion is "not confession, not therapy or spectating and voyeurism, but witnessing" (Boler, 1999, p. 18). Witnessing requires both students and teachers to be aware of and express our feelings and emotions—those that might be uncomfortable, horrifying, disquieting, fearful, contradictory—regarding the complexity of race, gender, sexuality, and social class that for the most part are deliberately kept from entering the classroom. Teaching for social justice requires witnessing in order to work toward social change.

Art pedagogy is "a form of cultural politics and not a science of knowledge transmission" (Goldfarb, 2002, p.2). Critical pedagogy is one of the foundations of the program that encourages students to not only care about the "savage inequalities" (Kozol, 1991) that exist in urban schools

and society, but to understand how society is structured in a hierarchical manner that impacts our daily social relations. This understanding is essential in order for students to imagine social change in their classrooms and communities. Freire's (1990) problem-posing approach to education makes the participants in the learning process responsible for each other's development. This is crucial to creating a community of learners.

The other foundation of the program is contemporary art and its relationship to critical theory. Contemporary art is understood as a social practice that shapes an understanding of the world and also serves as a site for the production of new knowledge. As the NYU Art Education website indicates:

The Art Education program is designed for students who wish to pursue graduate-level professional training as artist-teachers in public and private schools, museums, community-based programs, and other alternative educational sites. It also prepares students to be innovative researchers and strong advocates of the arts in schools. NYU's program in art education combines a foundation in critical theory with a solid grounding in practice. With special focus on contemporary art and its social context, the program conceptualizes the artist-teacher as cultural producer, intellectual, and activist. Through a sequence of core courses that incorporate a critical multicultural approach, students examine the making and teaching of art as a social act, considering it within philosophical, historical, political, and sociological contexts. ([www.nyu.edu/education/art](http://www.nyu.edu/education/art))

It is through a sequence of courses that the students learn how to use critical inquiry, dialogue, and reflection. These courses may also prompt the development of moral and social responsibility that allows students to work toward changing art education practices in schools. The following section presents two interconnected ideas: teachers' socio-political consciousness and contemporary art as a pedagogical process that shapes the art education program. Then I discuss the challenges they pose.

### Teachers' Socio-Political Consciousness

In order for teachers to foster the socio-political consciousness of their students, prospective teachers need to explore how their own social position shapes their understanding of the world and their relationship to society. It is beneficial to respect graduate students' experiences and use that

knowledge in dialogues, readings, observations in schools, and discussions that move toward a critical perspective of how oppression functions in our daily experiences and within social institution. Such understandings need to lead to social responsibility, to a commitment to the welfare of others (Berman, 1997). As Freire (1990) argued, it is only through praxis, what he defines as "action and reflection of men [and women] upon the world in order to transform it" (p. 66), that students will develop the critical skills necessary to become thoughtful citizens willing to engage in social action.

"Learning to teach social justice then requires not only learning about and struggling with issues of racism, sexism, class and homophobia but, rather 'unlearning' racism and other problematic stances that are often buried in teacher education courses and curricula" (Cochran-Smith, 2004, p. 13). This means critically reflecting on the assumptions and biases we have about teaching and learning art that are shaped by social positions. For a majority of the students who are typical of the teacher education demographics—white, female, and middle class—the ideology of color-blindness (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Frankenberg, 1993; Winant, 2004) informs their worldview. This ideology asserts that racism is a condition of the past, that the struggles of the Civil Rights movement have led to racial equality, and that society is now witnessing "reverse racism" (Bell, 2003; Bonilla-Silva, 2003). The common claims to color-blindness, that "I do not see race, I just see individuals," by many of my white students is an assertion of "a race-neutral social context," that "stigmatizes attempts to raise questions about redressing racial equality in daily life through accusations such as 'playing the race card' or 'identity politics' which imply that someone is trying to bring race in where it does not belong" (Lewis, 2003, p. 33). This colorblind notion of race hinders students' ability to see how the content and methods in schools, including art curricula, textbooks, lessons, and disciplinary practices may be based in race, gender, and social-class. Moving students to deconstruct such biases in school practices and texts cannot be accomplished if students do not first acknowledge how white privilege functions in their lives, schools, and society and how a color-blind ideology might support racism. Educating for socio-political consciousness in art education means getting student to ask: How does my race, class, and gender privilege impact the lives of others? How is my daily life connected to the lives of others in our nation and the world? What can I do to create a more just society and world through art?

Teachers support or challenge injustices through their daily action in schools (Zeichner, 1993). The challenge is to move the students from the state of paralysis and guilt that often follows the realization that despite the abolishment of legalized racism in this country that race still matters, toward a non-essentialist understanding of race and racism. It is only through this process of self-actualization that prospective teachers can design art practices and curricula that will allow their students to examine their lives through multiple and critical lens in order to imagine other ways of being. This socio-political awakening of the complexity of social relations is necessary for prospective teachers to think about ways they can engage children and youth in their classrooms to address issues that affect their lives through art practices to develop their emerging sense of empathy and social responsibility. "Social consciousness and social responsibility are not behaviors we need to instill in young people but rather behaviors we need to recognize as emerging in them" (Berman, 2004, p. 110). Children and youth are constantly trying to negotiate their relationship to society. Engaging youth through the arts to take social action requires thinking about the role of art in today's society. This process often requires questioning notions of art that prospective art teachers bring with them from their own art educational experiences.

### Contemporary Art as a Pedagogical Site

Understanding the interconnectedness of the world and our relationship to it requires us to think about art and its role in society in a different way. By highlighting the relational process of contemporary art and pedagogy, art education "shifts in focus from teaching 'about' contemporary art to an understanding of contemporary art 'in the making'" that produces "new ways of understanding experience" (Springgay, 2008, p. 23). We learn about ourselves always in relation to others. It is through embodied experiences that we learn about our world.

The first step for prospective art teachers is to examine how their past educational experiences and current relationship to artmaking has shaped their ideas about art. In other words, students are encouraged to explore how they embody art practices. This self-reflection lays the groundwork for examining the ways art practices are contextual and fluid, and connect to society in particular ways. For the majority of the students who come from undergraduate art programs, art is described as a universal language that requires exploring a set of formal skills, manipulating different materials

and mediums, and a form of self-expression. Art is considered a solitary act and the autonomy of art is taken for granted. This view of art shapes their view of art education. Therefore, teaching and learning is considered an individual endeavor that is unconnected to society and is not a relational process. School art is more about illustrating or analyzing existing knowledge rather than a practice that sparks new forms of knowledge about our world (Desai & Chalmers, 2007). Most of the students do not think about art as a space where meaning is constructed about the world. The notion that one of the roles of the artist is to ask critical questions that can "unframe" both personal and social, cultural, political issues of our times (Rogoff, 2005) is rarely considered by many of our prospective art teachers. Contemporary art practices embody "knowledge in the making" (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 2) and can be pedagogical pivots that provide the opportunity to rethink how we teach art in schools.

Contemporary artists use a wide range of tools, materials, and sources of inspiration to critique, explore, and comment on pertinent issues from the personal to the global. Some artists envision new possibilities designed to generate dialogue and engage people to imagine "new forms of civic engagement constituted with, in, and through the body" (Springgay, 2008, p. 22). Often, contemporary artists "create social spaces—temporary and permanent opportunities for people to connect and interact" (Gude, 2007, p. 13). Some artists deliberately work as part of collectives, thus challenging the process of how we make art and the notion of authorship. Socially engaged artists, such as Suzanne Lacy, Krzysztof Wodiczko, and Peggy Diggs seek to involve broader audiences thus taking their artwork out of galleries and museums into public spaces in order to create strategic interventions (Thompson, 2004) that are pedagogical in their intent.

It is through various courses that build on each other that we explore the relationship between art practices, critical theory, and critical pedagogy. Through this sequence students are encouraged to consider contemporary art as a pedagogical site that can inform their teaching practice. This exploration of contemporary art requires moving beyond the development of prescriptive art lessons and curricula that simply re-present the work of an artist, such as creating a silhouette after learning about the work of Kara Walker. Instead, the goal is to explore a topic or theme and then find the most appropriate medium and range of artists' work and methods to realize it. Although much is written in art education about including contemporary art (the March 2008 issue of *Art Education* is devoted to this topic), the

reality is that most art schools still teach from a modernist perspective and little contemporary art is part of art history courses. Thus for our students, a majority who come to our program with a BFA from various schools, the initiation into contemporary art can be intimidating, challenging, and unsettling.

### Looking Ahead: Challenges and Possibilities

The art education program at NYU is a work in progress. We continually try to address the challenges of conducting social justice based art education. Many of the students choose to enroll in our master's program because it is NYU and not because of its social justice perspective. The majority of prospective students have no prior background in this kind of work and the immersion in this philosophy can be overwhelming. Often the students' entire worldview is challenged, often resulting in defensive attitudes. Several years of implementing this social justice art education program at NYU it is not clear whether or not we can encourage students who come with no socio-political consciousness and no knowledge of contemporary art to embody a social justice perspective in art education and integrate these ideas in their teaching practices in 2 years, which is the length of time of the program. What we have witnessed is that we are more successful with those students who enter our program with an existing socio-political consciousness. For those students who come directly from art schools with little consciousness of the politics of art and education, the challenges at times seem un-surmountable. These students often learn to use the terminology and may even understand the ideas intellectually, but may not embody the social justice perspective.

Another challenge faced has been breaking the theory and practice divide that shapes the students' common-sense understanding of teacher education. The pervasive notion is that learning to teach requires obtaining a set of skills and techniques (Cochran-Smith, 2004). To begin to address this chasm, several courses require students to go into the field (schools, museums, community centers) and place their practical experience in dialogue with the theory that they read in class. For instance, when they read Paulo Freire's (1990) work or *Critical Race Theory* (Dixon & Rousseau, 2006) the intention is that they observe how race, class, gender, and sexuality is presented in schools, museums, and other educational spaces. These works question how location and social position shape their understanding of the world in particular ways and how that might be different for the

students they will teach in inner city schools. Yet, a majority of our students complain that there is too much theory in the first year of the program that is unconnected to real, observable, examples. This, in turn, encourages the students to see the student teaching that is accomplished in the second year of the program as practice devoid of the theory they struggled with the first year. The understanding that theory and practice are interconnected, that theory informs practice and practice needs to be theorized, seems hard to grasp despite readings, discussions, and assignments. It is these notions of teaching that have to be dismantled in order for students to envision new possibilities for educational change and their place in that change.

A comment we often hear from the students is that they want to see some models of social justice art education in practice. The lack of these models in both public and private schools makes it hard for students to imagine what teaching from this perspective might look like. Lessons from Olivia Gude's Spiral Workshop ([http://www.uic.edu/classes/ad/ad382/sites/SpiralWorkshop/SW\\_index.html](http://www.uic.edu/classes/ad/ad382/sites/SpiralWorkshop/SW_index.html)), books such as *Art for Life: Authentic Instruction in Art* (Anderson & Milbrandt 2005) and *Finding Art's Place: Experiments in Contemporary Education and Culture* (Paley, 1995), socially engaged art projects done by contemporary artists in schools, examples from local and national art educators, and some examples from NYU alumni seem to be the only social justice based art education models available. Although we use many written resources, the lack of classroom experience or a social activist background makes it difficult for many of the students to translate these ideas from other subjects into art lessons. It has become clear that the students need more opportunities to practice social justice art education. To this end we are currently planning a Saturday program that will offer thematic art classes to high school students from around the city and simultaneously provide a chance for the graduate students to conceptualize and implement curricula.

### Final Thoughts

Much like an art project, the social justice perspective of our program requires us to engage in our own learning—it is a transformative process. We are constantly thinking and rethinking the program. I still view art education as a radical place of transgressive possibility—one that takes risks. In moment of doubts and despondence, I remind myself "to open our minds and hearts so that we can know beyond the boundaries of what is acceptable, so that we can think and rethink, so that we can create

new vision, I celebrate teaching that enables transgressions—a movement against and beyond boundaries. It is that movement which makes education the practice of freedom” (hooks, 1994, p. 12). Reading the newspaper everyday, spending time in inner city schools, and witnessing the power of art to prompt dialogue reminds me of not only the need for socially engaged educational practices but its possibilities to move us beyond apathy and imagine other possibilities for living together.

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