Engaging in Materiality: Issues in Art and Design Education

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In the training of art and design educators, we must not overlook modes of engagement that can build capacities for connecting theory to practice through creative research and connections to the physical materiality of art. Whether online or on-the-ground learning, artist-teachers must not disconnect from the power of engagement with and the materiality of art. This paper places a focus on ways that teacher training programs can anticipate and activate attitudes of new materialism and design thinking, providing a much-needed anchor in the digital age. With a contemplative view of art practice as research, projects in an art and design education program elevate opportunities for exchanging understanding, promoting dialogue, and approaching learning and research as relationship. Intentionality in the ways that the practice of teaching itself is also materiality, as a living practice, along with the training teachers as designers and facilitators of cultures of making, thinking, and learning are discussed.

Keywords: art and design education, new materialism, materiality, teacher training

Introduction

Drawing from the maker movement and literature surrounding digital media learning, Justice (2015) refers to the relational aspects of digital materiality, a paradox that he calls “decentered embodiment” (p. 6). In absence, there can be a greater ability to be ‘present’ or attentive. He believes that in this digital age, agency is not reduced to a person’s will but is rather dispersed among networked systems.

Digital materialism, as Lankshear and Knobel (2011) argue, is second nature to today’s learners. Even those who acknowledge not being artistic in the sense of drawing, painting, or photography or having formal technology training quickly learn to create collages on their smart phones, use editing software to crop or alter images—all within a series of mouse-clicks. At the same time, Lankshear and Noble warn that “without a change in ‘ethos’ within education, the benefits from addressing ‘the new technical stuff’ will remain seriously constrained” (p. 88).

Thus, within this new ethos of materiality and the maker mentality surrounding technology, there is a concern that we not lose the core dimensions that support an aesthetic relationship to creativity such as, “participation, collaboration, distribution and dispersion of expertise, and relatedness” (Lankshear et al., 2011, p. 68). Mills (2009) suggests:

*While in the past, viewers were assumed to be present in order to experience the mediated form, now viewers themselves mostly mediate through digital technology. Viewers, as well as the many*
works of art they can encounter at the click of a computer mouse, exist in a non-physical state, a state of disembodiment in relationship to the work of art. (p. 35)

While rapid technological changes of this digital age and the tools through which we perceive art and design could distance us from the created object, we must be purposeful about engaging our senses and deconstructing Western notions of hierarchy that exist between human and non-humans (Hood & Kraehe, 2017).

Material Notions in Training Art and Design Teachers

Particularly in the training of art and design educators, we must not overlook modes of engagement that can build their capacities for connecting theory to practice through creative research and connections to the physical materiality of art and design practices. Artmaking engages our senses through materiality, and we mustn’t disconnect from the intangible power of the qualities of artworks as things, or what Bennett (2010) refers to as “thing power”—“the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle” (p. 6). This contemplative view of art practice as research elevates the shared materiality of all things and practices in new materialism (Barrett & Bolt, 2012; Bennett, 2010).

People’s capacity to instantly view images online suggests a need for thinking about ‘being present’ with things (in this case, visual art and artmaking) as more than just objects, and as more of a dialogue. New materialism in art and design education also offers a much-needed perspective on co-creation of knowledge, adopting a stance of ‘with-ness,’ and adopting artmaking and research as co-creative inquiry—providing a much-needed anchor to managing digital technology (Hood & Kraehe, 2017).

In the training of teachers, we must be intentional about the ways that the practice of teaching itself is also materiality, as its own sort of living practice (Justice, 2015). As described by (Ingalls Vanada, 2013), training teachers as designers and facilitators of cultures of making, thinking, and learning is appropriate for 21st-century education (Ingalls Vanada, 2014, 2016). There is a needed merger between beings and “materiality of ‘things,’” as jagodzinski and Walling (2013) argue—toward change and a blurring of the boundaries of arts-based research in the field of art and design education (p. 32).

In what has been called “an age of disembodiment” (Mills, 2009, p. 7), this paper places a focus on ways that teacher training programs can anticipate and activate attitudes of new materialism and the material qualities in art and design practices. Through an action research methodology (Sagor, 1992) that emphasizes opportunities to exchange understanding and approaches research as relationship and knowledge construction, rather than just imparting information, preservice teachers engaged in arts-based inquiry alongside collaborative practices involving design-based problem solving.

Online Learning: Making the Immaterial, Material

Through the lens of a professor of both on-the-ground and online art and design education programs in the U.S., this paper reports on real-world practices that connect theory with practice and allow students to learn more deeply through active engagement with materials and concepts. In developing an online Masters of Art Education course that incorporates design thinking, called “Thinking in Art Education,” the researcher also reports on the challenges of creating collaborative, digital learning opportunities for art education candidates that simulate the purposeful encounters or “enacted encounters” of a physical art classroom where making with others supports agency (Justice, 2015, p. 14).

Amidst the challenges of online learning, cohorts of students develop very tight emotional and supportive bonds with peers through the process of their online coursework, discussion board chats, and in live classroom sessions supported by Zoom ©, for instance. In introducing teams of artist-researchers to web-based platforms they could use to create and share ‘sticky notes’ during a collaborative action research project using design thinking methodologies, they worked together digitally as if they were in a room together. Not surprisingly, these digitally savvy students, comfortable within a new ethos of learning (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011), found many more of their own ways to collaborate online and engage with new digital materials. This is the type of letting go and learner-centered pedagogical practices necessary to teachers of online, art-based classes, as new literacies soon cease to be new. We must empower 21st-century learners to connect digitally, materially and socially. “It’s time to shift our thinking from the old model of teaching to a new model of learning,” as Thomas and Brown (2011, p. 34) have aptly advised.
Design Thinking and Collaborative Inquiry

With the reality that 21st-century life demands greater interdependence and collaboration, it is important to rethink preparation programs in art and design to better support preservice teachers’ hybrid identities and capacities as agents of change, along with developing their abilities as collaborators and facilitators of materiality. In a university course designed by the researcher, undergraduate and graduate preservice teachers (both online and on-the-ground) engaged in collaborative action research assignments as teams through a design thinking model and toolkit called the T-H-I-N-K model © (Ingalls Vanada, 2011). Developed by the researcher, students used the T-H-I-N-K model to investigate real-world educational issues of concern to them in art and design education. The problems they are to solve are not predetermined, as is often the case in project-based or active learning scenarios. Problem finding is in itself one of the most valuable part of the process and provides opportunities for defining educational problems with greater empathy, intention, and depth.

The T-H-I-N-K process (Figure 1) served as a framework and methodological research structure for these new researchers; it guided them to collaboratively identify problems they observe in art and design education, think in more nonlinear ways, and develop empathy. Candidates brainstormed and synthesized ideas, then developed prototypes towards research solutions, all of which encouraged their inductive (thinking wide), deductive (synthesizing), and abductive capacities (using intuition and imagination).

![Figure 1: The T-H-I-N-K model ©](image.png)

As typical of learner-centered processes, there is often push-back as many preservice teachers are somewhat fearful of ambiguous problems to solve, and their skills for ideation are often low (admitting that even in their studio classes very exact parameters determine success). Positive outcomes exist also, as increased motivation and engagement are reported in learner-centered art and design education classrooms that foster personal voice and choice (Ingalls Vanada 2011, 2016). One student commented on their experience with the T-H-I-N-K process:

*It was energizing and invigorating to know that I can have a hand in change! This process definitely helped me to think outside the box in everyday problems. It also gave me a chance to work with different personalities in a corroborative setting. It was great to hear others’ opinions and really listen and discern answers. The skills of thinking, creating, listening and evolving will be used throughout the rest of my career as well as in my personal life (Student participant, personal communication, May 1, 2017).*

In using the T-H-I-N-K model © or any design thinking process (Ingalls Vanada, 2014) art and design candidates may collect both qualitative and quantitative data, based on their research questions. One team in the “Creative and Critical Thinking” class, conducted observations and survey students in art classrooms that led them to realize that “students want to learn about social justice issues in the classroom... sexist dress code[s], offensive words, women’s rights, emotions/feelings - developing empathy, LGBTQ, religion, politics,
and gender awareness and equality.” They found that a large percentage of the students favored the process of creating over the final product, leading these teacher-researchers to ask:

Why? Why do we not engage in more discussion and reflection on social justice issues in our schools today? Why do we take the student voice out of planning and curriculum building? Why do we place such a strong emphasis on the final product and what aesthetic values does that give our students? (Student team 1, personal communication, May 1, 2017)

Followed by brainstorming and prototyping solutions, more questions arose such as, “How can we show teachers ways of using social justice issues in the classroom? How can we develop teachers’ skills to discuss social justice issues?” To address these questions—after more mind mapping and ideation—they developed a professional development workshop entitled “Meaning Matters, An Empathy-Driven Curriculum Symposium,” creating a website and thinking through the advance planning to allow their ideas to be realized.

Along with the learning to ask better questions, the researcher observed how collaborative action research supports candidates’ dispositions, such as: (1) risk taking, “failing forward” and the courage to share one’s ideas; (2) self-direction with a make-to-learn approach; (3) managing ambiguity and learning to solve problems along with others and the ideas that differences bring; (4) openness to experience and stronger group trust amidst diversity—race, culture, gender, age, etc. Students self-report these attitudes also (Student team 1, personal communication, May 1, 2017).

On-the-Ground Learning: Materiality in Preservice Training

Art and design educators give expression to ideas through art processes and art making. They support their students’ abilities to interact with and transform materials in ways that are both bodily and emotional. Contemporary art and its integration into the art and design education classroom is vital (Marshall, 2014), as it provides physical and connected investigations into the nature of things and object’s materiality. Teachers sense and experience the material qualities of art, design, and visual culture—interpreting them and inviting young students to be transformed, through imagination and aesthetic inquiry (Mills, 2009).

In on-the-ground programs in art and design education developed by the researcher, students engaged in active learning investigations surrounding critical issues and enduring ideas of humanity, visual art, and
society. In particular, students learned about and created visual responses to works by contemporary artists in the context of deepening dialogue surrounding social justice issues (Ploof & Hochtritt, 2018).

Envisioned was the importance of preservice artist-teachers engaging with, and making art as a way to inquire deeply into topics affecting their future careers as educators and their identities as artist-teachers—an art-as-experience approach (Dewey, 1934). As described in the work by Ingalls Vanada (2017), “interacting with art provides opportunities to disrupt preconceived notions and is a way to challenge students in how they are not just consumers, but also creators—change agents for a better society” (p. 112). The following sections provide examples of student work in a teacher training program that support the intersection of digital and physical materiality.

**Art-based Research and Teacher Identity**

Arts-based research practices and methods such as action research, visual inquiry and reflection, and a/r/tography are arts-based research movements involving the topic of materiality (Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegsmund, 2007; Irwin & Springgay, 2008; Klein, 2012; McNiff, 2013; Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009; Rolling, 2013).

A/r/tographic inquiry, as a type of practice-based research, “offers a materiality, a physicality, and embodied approach to learning, that isn’t addressed by many teacher education researchers” (Gouzouasis et al., 2013, p. 9). It also offers processes—ways of thinking and knowing—that are grounded in art and design, such as questioning, observation, interpretation, and analysis in what is known to a/r/tographers as “living inquiry” (Springgay, Irwin & Kind, 2008, p. 902).

In this section, strategies for self-study are explored which can support layers of materiality and layers of identity. Preservice teachers followed trails of inquiry that led to becoming more visually reflective practitioners, with a critical approach to dialogue as a culminating part of this work—often related to intersectionalities of their identities such as “race, ethnicity, religion, economic status, social class, gender, nationality, chosen interests, sexual identity, politics, and personal history” (Pfeiler-Wunder, 2017, p. 31).

**Anna’s Identity Triptych**

In a “Contemporary Issues” course, students were challenged to create a triptych—an exercise in materiality and identity—that combined (1) a self-portrait (choosing to focus on relationships with others, their emotional lives, or issues they care about); (2) sense-of-place context; and (3) physical things and material “stuff” that define them. These three aspects or layers of self worked together to dramatically and visually portray their stories and demonstrated how art-based research adds to the diversity and complexity of a learning community and culturally relevant practice.

Throughout this course we discussed how a/r/tography intertwines the artist, researcher, and teacher as a holistic entity; it embraces an undivided life of artistic expression, reflective and reflexive inquiry, and pedagogy (Gouzouasis, Irwin & Miles, 2013). Students engaged in provocative issues such as depression, suicide, homelessness, gay and gender adversity, pornography, sexual harassment and rape, racial profiling, immigration, and more. Through personal inquiry and artmaking, they investigated their personal identities as also related to teaching, as a way of connecting with their multiple roles.

One student, who we will call Anna, used the assigned triptych project to conceptualize multiple aspects of her identity through performance art from a feminist perspective. From a gender focus on living inquiry, this candidate activated embodied engagement regarding her identity as a woman, through personal performance photography as a form of interpretation and representation. Anna researched the work of Marín and Roldán (2010), who examine the use of photography as a research tool by questioning or problematizing. She used image content relevant to her investigation about personal experiences as a woman and being “body typed,” or identified by body parts. Painting her body blue and arranging herself among the plastic limbs and parts of used retail store manikins—also painted blue—she instructed a family member to specifically photograph herself as a series of body parts. In this way, her work was both an engagement with the materiality of her art, as well as a digital provocation of her intended identity statement. The following image is one of three in a series that depict her identity in triptic form (Figure 3).
In the case of Anna’s artwork as a performance piece, she benefited from the physical embodiment of her inquiry and being photographed as a part of that work. While not physically present to engage with her performance art, her peers engaged with the materiality of her photographed experience, made more engaging because of the large size of the printed artworks and Anna’s presence in the room. In a real sense, the materiality of her work was evidenced in both her lived experience and the large printed photographs. As contemporary art, her choice of materials significantly informed and enriched her concept. Her work exemplifies embodiment of the ethos of digital making and learning.

An essential outcome of this assignment happened in the classroom as students shared their work with each other. Preservice art and design teachers become critical makers, but they also serve as critical viewers when they engage with the materiality of what one of their peers has created—not just its physical properties, but their bodily perceptions and senses, understood through their own personal lenses, yet also through the lens of the makers. As future teachers who will soon navigate the questions and ensued dialogue of their own students, this is essential preservice practice; yet often only happens in the studio classroom and not the art and design education classroom. Artist-teachers gain practice in navigating the various viewpoints of materiality: their own point of view and the view of their peers. In most cases, the content of students’ visual reflections were highly personal, adding to the depth of learning and conversations that ensued. They created quality works of art because they cared deeply about what they wanted to communicate through their artwork as attached to identity, which in turn altered the materiality to the viewer.

Self-Study and Visual Reflections with Materials

Self-study is a qualitative research strategy that fosters teacher identity and awareness toward becoming more visually reflective (Klein & Miraglia, 2017; Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009). Self-study is known as “the study of teaching practice that explores identity, expectations, and the emotional side of teaching through any number of points: critical incidents, practice over time, and/or exploring assumptions, beliefs, and attitudes” (Klein & Miraglia, 2017, p. 25). In engaging in self-studies, preservice artist-teachers blend creativity with critical thinking and practical skill—supporting the reality that the artist-teacher’s identity is dependent upon their personal life story as an artist/designer and a teacher—along with many other roles.

Sometimes students’ deep inquiries were based on issues or incidents that they observed while in schools for their clinical observations, creating artworks and written reflections that connected their artworks to and sometimes they reflected on artists’ works. This issues-based approach to art and design education offered insight into ways they might foster dialogue in their own classrooms and engender the courage to take risks in that regard, rather than skirt around differences of opinion or belief systems (Gaudelius & Speirs, 2002). One student’s self-study engaged material processes that led to this response during a practice teaching experience (see Figure 4):

I began the day terrified and self-conscious wondering how in the world I was qualified to be in front of a classroom of malleable minds. I wanted to hide my face under a paper bag so to speak, so no one would know just how intimidated I was. I felt like insecurity was stamped across my
forehead and it kept me from interacting with the students in any meaningful way... Upon
realizing that my insecurities did little to gain the ears and respect of my students I tried to
muster my confidence. “I AM QUALIFIED TO BE HERE!” I told myself and I tried to carry that
attitude into the next class period. This act of “mustering” nearly turned into a mantra of
pretending (Student participant, personal communication, May 6, 2015).

Figure 4: Student Self-Study, “I AM HERE”

Visual Inquiries with Contemporary Art

Students in the “Contemporary Issues in Art Education” classes developed by the researcher read chapters in
Quinn, Hochtritt and Ploof’s Art and Social Justice Education: Culture as Commons (2011) and conducted art-
based research projects in response to contemporary artists’ works. They created artistic or design-based
visual reflections that were accompanied by creative writing, poetry, new design media, or narratives about
their work. In this process, they connected theory to practice by envisioning practical, postmodern strategies
for use in their future classrooms connected to materiality.

An essential outcome of this assignment happened in the classroom as students shared their work with each
other after being coached regarding Lerman and Borstel’s Critical Response Process (2003). One student
reflected upon Blandy’s article (2012) that reports on the creation of a commemorative community garden in
response to a gang shooting. In response, this candidate created artwork that helped him to process a
childhood friend’s suicide. He collaged physical memories (pictures, objects of shared hobbies, etc.) to honor
his relationship with his friend, becoming its own piece of material culture. In reflecting further, this preservice
teacher also imagined using their “method of collecting and sharing stories to help bring healing to students
whose lives have been effected by drug use” as a way to bring change in their future classroom (Student
participant, personal communication, October 30, 2016). Certainly, professional identities are tied to our inner
worlds, as well as outer. (Pfeiler-Wunder, 2017)

Opening up the classroom to dialogue surrounding issues requires reflexivity and vulnerability, but one benefit
to preservice teachers was evidenced in a note I received from a former student after she started teaching:

Thank you for modeling how to facilitate and engage in critical and difficult conversations. Because of
our Contemporary Issues class, I have had the courage to navigate difficult conversations about issues
that have arisen in my high school art classes. I was scared, but you showed me how taking this risk as
a teacher is worth it (First-year teacher, personal communication, June 3, 2018).

Provocations and Where to Go from Here

In these critical times, preservice art programs must be concerned with co-constructionist ideals of preparing
teacher-leaders who understand the shift needed from disconnected theory toward authentic, real-world
practice connected to materiality. In looking at the field of art and design education, there is concern that if we
are to support socially engaged, culturally relevant and informed practices that prepare candidates as needed agents of change, the meeting between the digital and materiality are necessary.

In some cases, art and design education programs may have moved in the opposite direction from punching holes in traditionalism and embracing new materialism. It makes sense that we must find ways to support the identity and effectiveness of artist-teachers by fostering their abilities as researchers, awakened by their connections through direct experiences with materials—whether in online or on-the-ground learning. Using design thinking models to support collaborative action research that fosters a constructivist, maker mentality along with art-based, visually reflective work in preservice teacher training can advance preservice teachers’ dispositions as “innovators and future artist-leading toward success and socially responsible action” (Ingalls Vanada, 2014, p. 4). Their ability to cooperate with material ways of knowing should not be separated from aesthetic experiences with art objects and art making, as ways that humans sense the world and make sense of the world aesthetically. In art and design education, we can shift and change as digital beings, while keeping a vital connection to materiality.

References


