Shortly after the tardy bell rang, I asked my middle school art students to come to the front of the room and to gather around me in a semi-circle. Commotion accompanied this shuffle, but the students quieted once seated. I climbed onto the demonstration table and sat with my legs crossed just a few feet away from the onlookers.

I began speaking softly: “Late Sunday night I was surfing the Internet and discovered a new website called Fantasy Facebook. While on this site, I realized that I had the opportunity to potentially friend anyone, from the past to the present.” I then passed around some of my favorite Grateful Dead ‘bootleg’ cassettes and tattered ticket stubs. I showed my art students a few 8”x10” photographs of lead guitarist and singer, Jerry Garcia. The Grateful Dead paraphernalia smelled like Nag Champa incense and reminded me of my college years.

In a whisper, I continued speaking to an attentive class, “I was able to search for and to locate the late Jerry Garcia on Fantasy Facebook. After posting a very unique image and description of myself, I asked Jerry to be my friend. He accepted.” By that point, the students realized I had made up the story, and smiled.

“Each of you will create your own unique image by constructing a self-portrait sculpture, which will serve as your profile picture on an imaginary website called Fantasy Facebook.” Finally, I asked individual students, “Who would you like to friend on Fantasy Facebook?”

During the last 2 years, I have been reconnecting with friends and acquaintances from my recent, and not so recent, past on Facebook. Fond memories have filled my head while perusing familiar photographs from as far back as the 1980s. I have also experienced a hint of anxiety when reminded of that tumultuous and unsettling developmental stage we know as adolescence. Influenced by the cultural standards of my middle-class upbringing, I first conformed with, and then later rebelled against the status quo. Thinking back, I wish I had been given the freedom and opportunity to really explore my values and beliefs during adolescence.

When examining my middle school art students, I questioned the ways in which cultural sources might have impacted their aesthetic choices with regard to personal appearance. I also wondered how these cultural sources might have inspired students' aesthetic choices when constructing art. Specifically, I asked: What kinds of cultural sources influence the aesthetic choices middle school art students make when constructing a self-portrait sculpture to communicate self-identity to a chosen friend? I consider cultural sources to be information “framed by established systems of shared meanings, beliefs, values, and understanding” (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005, p. 48) developed through social groups or establishments like family and friends, academic institutions, and the popular media of entertainment and marketing (Banks, 1993). In short, social groups and their transmitted messages inform a culture’s values and beliefs. Second, aesthetic choices are “the conscious arrangement of selected sensory elements that communicate an intended meaning” (S. Johnson, personal communication, December 19,
Andrade Grade 3-D Arts Students (2009). Third, to communicate means the way middle school art students transmit messages or exchange information in order to feel connected. Lerner, Freund, De Stefanis, and Habermas (2001) define self-identity as “a psycho-social construct that represents the meshing, or integration, of personality and the contemporaneous (situational) and historical context” (p. 34). Self-identity relates to the way middle school art students want to be perceived by someone they value. (S. Johnson, personal communication, March 28, 2009). A chosen friend is an individual viewer from Fantasy Facebook whom the middle school art student values and would like to befriend. This friend could be real or imagined; from the past, present, or future; and famous or unknown.

I have been deeply committed to shaping an art curriculum that offers students a more meaningful and authentic experience. In addition, I have been interested in the notion of students as victims of their popular culture pronounced by many contemporary art education scholars. Young people seem much more complex than this. I tested these assumptions by carefully considering the artmaking processes and final artwork of my middle school art students. The Fantasy Facebook: Self-Portrait Sculpture instructional unit served as the case for an investigation of the kinds of cultural sources that influence students’ aesthetic choices. Seventh- and eighth-grade 3-D Art students worked on this unit each day for 8 weeks and seemed to love every moment of it. Learning outcomes emphasized: (1) designing preliminary sketches and interpreting plan worksheets to develop ideas for artwork; (2) drawing from observation and applying this knowledge to new applications (i.e., sculpting); (3) synthesizing and analyzing media, techniques, and processes to create a unique and expressive self-portrait sculpture; and (4) formulating responses to artwork from thoughtful, empathetic, and analytical points of view. Using authentic assessment, the students and I examined their preliminary sketches; plan worksheets; observational drawings; media, technique, and process integration; and group discussions developed within the Fantasy Facebook instructional unit.

Authentic assessment is identified as a meaningful, collaborative process whereby students and teachers work together to evaluate student performance and knowledge gained during and after the artmaking process (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005).

The Big Idea

At the beginning of the instructional unit, I asked individual students, “Who would you like to friend on Fantasy Facebook?” In doing this, I exposed students to the big idea of fantasy. This gave them an opportunity to communicate self-identity to a chosen friend. When communicating self-identity, students also revealed influential cultural sources. According to Walker (2001), “Big ideas—broad, important human issues—are characterized by complexity, ambiguity, contradiction, and multiplicity” (p. 1). She continues, “Because they provide artmaking with significance, big ideas are important to the work of professional artists—and of students if student artmaking is to be a meaning-making endeavor” (p. 1).

During 8 years as a middle school art educator, I have realized that art students are thirsty for meaning and substance. They crave and deserve more than:

- media-specific instruction and production;
- technical, skills-based instruction and production; and/or
- prescriptive and formulaic “how-to” instruction and production.

Please do not misunderstand. Art students should obtain knowledge and understanding of media, techniques, and processes. When introducing big ideas, students want to learn these processes so that their artwork accurately and successfully delivers an intended message. Instead of structuring a unit around lineouts or line, for example, art educators may want to consider promoting big ideas and artmaking experiences that allow students to communicate their values, beliefs, and self-identity. In the next section, I will outline two opposing theories within our field: formalism and pragmatism. In addition, I will present a historical perspective on aesthetics while revealing my aesthetic philosophy through the Fantasy Facebook instructional unit. I will then introduce three of my middle school art students and images of their artwork created as part of the instructional unit.

A Tale of Two Theories

Formalism

Many art educators realize that students’ artwork often informs how outsiders (i.e., parents, faculty, administration) view the success of our programs. Desai and Chalmers (2007) state, “Formalist notions of art that still emphasize conformity and obeisance largely govern the kinds of art projects assigned in school today” (p. 7). I consider this and wonder: Do our instructional approaches continue to hearken back to the 18th-century origins of art education? Stankiewicz (2001) states, “One motivation for art education became the desire to emulate one’s better by cultivating and demonstrating good taste, aesthetic sensitivity, and artistic skills” (p. 3). During the 18th century, for example, upper class North Americans “aspired to emulate European aristocracy by creating and living in a world of beauty and refinement” (Stankiewicz, 2001, p. 3). In turn, the middle class studied and imitated the upper class. Throughout art education history, formalist ideals have molded and influenced aesthetics, while neglecting to acknowledge visual art as a means of communication, expression, and/or social change. However, noteworthy art educators have attempted to resolve this disconnect by examining the context surrounding artmaking and artwork. In the following section, I will discuss these art educators and introduce the study of art and context.

Pragmatism

During the late 19th and early 20th century, John Dewey’s pragmatic theory established a connection between aesthetics and context. Dewey believed that aesthetics were communicated, understood, and examined by using knowledge gathered from relationships and environments (Efland, 1990; Freedman, 2003). It is within this social context that viewers assign meaning and value to a work of art. According to Anderson and Milbrandt (2005), pragmatism
“focuses on the context in which a work is made, seen, or used. An extensive examination of context is the most important factor in determining the nature and value of a work” (p. 84). In other words, pragmatism supports the notion that aesthetics exist socially and subjectively as values are transmitted through viewers' unique experiences and interpretations.

Beginning in the 1960s, pragmatic ideology was again emphasized when Vincent Lanier, Corita Kent, and June King McFee combined visual arts with the sociology of art and popular culture (Chalmers, 2005). These progressive leaders changed the course of art education by introducing everyday objects as topics for discussion and by re-introducing art as a form of meaning-making and of communication. At that time, scholars also began to debate the aesthetic qualities of both the popular and fine arts. Conversations surrounding context fueled such debates.

As we moved into the 21st century, Dewey's views of aesthetics and context have continued in visual culture art education (VCAE). VCAE is the study of attitudes, beliefs, and values from visual artifacts and performances found in popular culture and across other disciplines (Duncum, 2001; Tavin, 2003, 2005). When examining such attitudes, beliefs, and values, the viewer gains access to the social meaning as part of the artifact and/or performance. Here again, aesthetics exist within a social and subjective context. Formalists, on the other hand, believe that the value of an artwork depends upon its ability to successfully utilize various elements and principles of design. From this perspective, aesthetics become objective and emphasize power and beauty.

Distinguished from formalism, VCAE promotes empowerment as students examine meanings associated with their influential cultural sources (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005). Under the realm of VCAE, I introduced students to the big idea of fantasy (Facebook), which allowed me to explore students' influential cultural sources. During the instructional unit, the students and I investigated concepts that were personally significant and relevant through dialogue.

Through artmaking, the students engaged in risk-taking by solving open-ended art problems without predetermined solutions or outcomes. In what follows, I introduce three of my students and their artwork.

**Mary, Almanzo, and Nellie**

During the Fantasy Facebook instructional unit, I closely studied three 3-D Art students (via interviews, observations and written responses), their artmaking processes, and final artwork. After presenting each of the three students, I identify the influential cultural sources discovered during the instructional unit. Using purposeful "maximum variation sampling" (Merriam, 1998, p. 62), I chose Mary, Almanzo, and Nellie (pseudonyms) with the following criteria in mind: (1) gender diversity, (2) economic diversity, (3) ethnic diversity, and (4) levels of class participation. Such diversity would allow for possible differences in artmaking processes occurring in the students' artwork during the Fantasy Facebook instructional unit.

**MARY.** Mary's (see Figure 1) classmates thought she was an excellent artist; certainly, the number of drawings in her sketchbook demonstrated hours of practice. These sketches tended to be very colorful, wild, and expressive. Mary chose to befriend Albert Einstein on Fantasy Facebook. Her self-portrait sculpture reflected this choice (see Figure 2). Mary valued originality, which she learned through conversations held and visual media seen within her academic and creative culture.

Using authentic assessment, the students and I examined their preliminary sketches; plan worksheets; observational drawings; media, technique, and process integration; and group discussions developed within the Fantasy Facebook unit.

**Figure 1. Mary.**

**Figure 2. Mary's Self-Portrait Sculpture.**
ALMANZO. This hardworking, conscientious, and kind seventh-grade boy aimed to please. Almanzo (see Figure 3) had fluffy blonde hair, bright blue eyes, and a big smile. He wanted to befriend football legend Jerry Rice on Fantasy Facebook. Almanzo's self-portrait sculpture reflected this decision (see Figure 4). Almanzo valued both athletics and the relationship with his father. He learned these values through conversations held and visual media seen within personal and popular culture.

NELLIE. Nellie (see Figure 5) was a bright and confident seventh-grader. She participated in the middle school's selective and competitive gifted education program. Nellie hoped to befriend Barack Obama on Fantasy Facebook. Her self-portrait sculpture reflected this selection (see Figure 6). Nellie valued both her ethnicity and conventional (social) beauty. She learned these values through conversations held and visual media seen within personal and popular culture.

Through the Fantasy Facebook instructional unit, I was interested in revealing my students' voices as they expressed the social values that influenced their everyday lives. Anderson and Milbrandt (2005) state that "from a postmodern perspective, any given meaning exists only in a socially constructed web of other meanings. These meanings are constructed in a group context, through dialogue" (p. 6). While observing the three students, I overheard several comments and questions, such as: "No offense, but your skin color is really dark"; "Can I make [my sculpture] skinnier than I actually am?"; and "Why do you want to meet Albert Einstein?".

Contemporary art educators like Paul Duncum (1999, 2001) and Kerry Freedman (1994, 2000, 2003) continue to argue that the popular and visual culture pervading advertising and entertainment media have been increasingly important in shaping students' personal aesthetics. However, it is reasonable to question whether popular culture has created defenseless victims, or subjects of its bombardment of messages (Eisenhauer, 2006). By studying the students and their artwork during the Fantasy Facebook instructional unit, I investigated concerns similar to those raised by these scholars. I also gained greater clarity regarding the kinds of cultural sources that influenced the aesthetic choices middle school students made when communicating self-identity in an artwork. When comparing and contrasting Mary, Almanzo, and Nellie's influential cultural sources, two overarching—yet disparate—themes emerged: (1) visual media from popular culture, and (2) verbal language from personal culture. In the remainder of this article, I examine the themes more closely by providing examples.
By analyzing interviews and final artwork, I learned that my three students became personally empowered when constructing a self-portrait sculpture to communicate self-identity to a chosen friend.

Visual Media from Popular Culture

Visual media from popular culture influenced the aesthetic choices middle school art students make when constructing a self-portrait sculpture to communicate self-identity to a chosen friend. Almanzo and Nellie used visual media from popular culture as a form of visual communication by consciously arranging their physical features and by selecting their media. Through this communication, these two hoped to be understood by and to be attractive to their Fantasy Facebook friends.

Almanzo valued socio-cultural symbols that emphasized an athletic physical appearance when attempting to attract Rice's attention. The life-sized bust (see Figure 4) had a serious and focused gaze and expressionless body language like a trading card image. Notably, Almanzo and his father traded football cards as a favorite pastime. In addition, Almanzo's sculpture's hair was tousled, as if just finishing a workout or game. The sculpture wore one of Almanzo's tee shirts and a purchased football jersey, which he embellished with "80" and "Rice." Trading cards also reveal a player's team number and last name. In contrast, Nellie's feminine sculpture (see Figure 6) stood 13" tall. Her sculpture's physical characteristics, body posture, and youthful clothing appeared to be aligned with qualities common to Barbie dolls. During 3-D Art class—and as part of a teacher-directed response—Nellie wrote, "I want [Obama] to be attracted to me for all of my beautiful reasons." Nellie seemed to believe that Obama would find conventional (social) beauty valuable and attractive. Seemingly, Almanzo and Nellie abandoned their real self-identities in favor of creating what they believed to be more attractive selves.

According to Rolling (2004) and Smith-Shank (2004), self-identities are ever-changing signs "constructed from personal experience, from intersubjective detritus, from cultural debris, [and] from popular residue" (Rolling, 2004, p. 72). With this in mind, adolescents' self-identities are often entirely subjective and in a constant state of flux. These changes occur as they construct new knowledge about their social groups and institutions. Arguably, the act of visual communication and attraction through self-portraiture may be interpreted as an exercise in self-identity exploration and not abandonment. Almanzo and Nellie represented themselves through an evolutionary process that combined ideas from experiences and interactions with objects from personal and popular culture.

I also discovered that all three students became personally empowered through the identification process with their chosen friends. During an interview, I questioned Mary about her sculpture's posture. She replied, "I'm pointing at [the whiteboard] harshly, like... I stand up for what I believe." Through the Fantasy Facebook unit, I learned that Mary valued originality and imagination. Almanzo stated, "Whenever I wear a jersey, it makes me feel that I've encouraged myself to keep on moving and try my best." Also during an interview, Nellie said, "I want to meet Barack Obama. He is the first African American president. He is very inspiring because he beat some pretty steep odds." She continued, "Besides [having similar] skin color, we have a lot of the same views." When sculpting their artwork, Mary, Almanzo, and Nellie all added garments or clothing remnants from home, including: a shirt, a blouse, and blue jeans. To summarize, by analyzing interviews and final artwork, I learned that my three students became personally empowered when constructing a self-portrait sculpture to communicate self-identity to a chosen friend.

Verbal Language from Personal Culture

Verbal (in contrast with visual or written) language from personal culture was the second overarching theme from this instructional unit. With help from Ballengee-Morris and Stuhr (2001), I define verbal language from personal culture as conversations and interactions within one's family, friends, and peers that help define gender, religion, ethnicity, and economic class. Verbal language from personal culture influenced the aesthetic choices middle school art students make, but not as prevalently as the previous theme: visual media from popular culture. Interestingly, it seems that verbal language from personal culture influenced students' aesthetic choices more profoundly, especially when choosing a friend on Fantasy Facebook.

All three students admired, respected, and honored their Fantasy Facebook friends (i.e. Einstein, Rice, and Obama). Both Almanzo and Nellie discovered their friends through dialogue with their parents while Mary learned about Einstein from her third-grade science teacher. Almanzo wanted to befriend the legendary football star Jerry Rice on Fantasy Facebook. He learned about Rice as a young boy through conversations with his father. Early in the unit I discovered that Almanzo and his father had a very close relationship and enjoyed spending time together. This relationship inspired Almanzo to value Rice and to choose him as a friend. Nellie hoped to befriend Barack Obama. Similarly, Nellie learned about her friend from her family. During an interview Nellie stated, "[The Obamas] focus a lot on the family, which is really good. They have a lot of family values in common with [my family]." Like Obama, Nellie is biracial. I also learned that the communication within Nellie's family fueled her ethnic pride. This pride appeared to influence Nellie's aesthetic
I argue that there is a more significant, authentic, and balanced understanding of the complex relationship between a variety of cultural influences and the role of aesthetics in students' lives.

choices not only when constructing a self-portrait sculpture to communicate self-identity, but also when choosing Obama as a friend. In summary, verbal language from personal culture deeply influences students' aesthetic choices and choice of friends.

According to Eaton (1988), "Our languages and what we value are tightly interwoven. As we learn to use words, we also learn what our culture considers worth talking about. Thus aesthetic values are transmitted through language" (pp. 143-144). As I have demonstrated, language influenced Mary, Almanzo, and Nellie's aesthetic values. Eaton (1988) has defined aesthetic value as, "the value a thing or event has due to its capacity to evoke pleasure that is recognized as arising from features in the object traditionally considered worthy of attention and reflection" (p. 143). In other words, socio/cultural values and language aid in determining the aesthetic value of a thing or event.

To summarize, popular culture influenced students' personal aesthetics. In this case, students used visual media from popular culture to attract the attention of an individual that they truly admired, respected, and honored. Through the identification process, students became personally empowered. While influential, I do not believe that visual media from popular culture creates defenseless victims, or subjects of its bombardment of messages (Eisenhauer, 2006). When sculpting, Mary, Almanzo, and Nellie seemed to consciously arrange their physical features and select their media in order to transmit messages. Therefore, the students seemed to understand visual media from popular culture as a universal language communicated within and by specific social groups or establishments. Deacon (2006) states, "One of the key elements...that distinguishes art from mere adornment is the enigmatic tendency to communicate a significance or meaning" (p. 29). Because these students' aesthetic choices led to an exhibition of cultural signs that visually attracted and communicated, I have concluded that aesthetics can become socially functional.

Conclusion

Some contemporary art educators have used pragmatic theory as a platform to suggest that students' personal aesthetics are primarily assembled and understood through the visual media of popular culture. However, I argue that there is a more significant, authentic, and balanced understanding of the complex relationship between a variety of cultural influences and the role of aesthetics in students' lives. Ideally, I would like to find more VCAE literature addressing this intricate relationship.

Through the Fantasy Facebook instructional unit, I studied Mary, Almanzo, and Nellie, their artmaking processes, and final artwork. This experience has improved my instructional approaches and has the potential to improve other teaching practices within the field of art education. By striving to translate theory into practice and by suggesting that art educators introduce students to the big ideas that explore values, beliefs, and self-identity, I have advocated for instruction that offers students a more meaningful and authentic experience. Such art instruction may offer art educators new ways to engage students through deeper learning, thus informing and transforming the way visual art is currently taught in schools.

Amber E. Ward is a Middle School Art Educator for Shawnee Mission School District, Shawnee, Kansas. She conducted this research in partial fulfillment of degree requirements for the MA in Art Education at Maryland Institute College of Art. E-mail: rayamber@sbglobal.net

REFERENCES


CALL FOR AUTHORS

Art Explorations in Virtual Worlds:
New Literacy and Learning Platforms

I invite proposed chapters for a new anthology regarding the theme of virtual world (3-DMUVE) explorations with emphasis on developing new literacy (ways of processing knowledge) proficiency in reading, writing, computers, and imagining, among others. Computerized learning platforms involve hardware architecture or software application frameworks. By end of 2011, Gartner Inc. (2007) predicted that 80% of active Internet users would have a presence in some virtual world. As young as six-years-old, children are dressing their avatars, decorating their rooms, and networking with friends on Club Penguin and the Pet Society. Even senior citizens are starting their own Geezer Brigades on Second Life… Virtual world teaching requires “pedagogy for uncertain times...open...daring...risky.” So how do we teach, apply, and assess learning in these new worlds?

Please send a 300-word proposal, working chapter title, short bio and contact information electronically to mary.stokrocki@asu.edu by July 31, 2010. Both short articles (3-5 pages) and longer (12-15 pages) will be considered. Articles will follow APA 6th edition format. Thank you. Dr. Mary Stokrocki, Arizona State University.