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## ARTICLES

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# Constructivism in the Art Classroom: Praxis and Policy

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Constructivist thought and practice connect easily with forms of art education that emphasize choice and student agency. This article traces the contemporary forms of constructivism that vie with more structured pedagogical approaches in American schools and recommends policies and procedures that may preserve the qualities of constructivist teaching in the arts in an era of restricted possibilities for educational innovation.

**Keywords:** art education, choice, constructivism

Arts education lends itself very naturally to constructivism, and constructivist learning is described much like arts learning. . . . Constructivism is not about rote memorization or the regurgitation of information. Philosophically, arts and constructivist learning dovetail nicely. (Saraniero n.d.)

A strand of constructivist thought and practice weaves through contemporary art education and teacher education in that field. Contrasting with intermittent threads dedicated to the transmission of established cultural knowledge and practices, the constructivist impulse continually reemerges in art classrooms and in art education theory and research. The (proto-constructivist) methods of teaching promoted by Viktor Lowenfeld following his emigration to the United States in 1938 transformed the practice of art education in American schools in the years following World War II, moving it toward a modernist and expressionist mode. In the years since, more loosely woven constructivist practices and tightly discipline-based and teacher-determined instructional methods have continued to alternate in dominance in the field, producing variegated textures in art classrooms across the nation. Discipline-based approaches to art education, ascendant in the 1980s and 1990s, continue to influence practice and remain inscribed in state standards written and approved in that era across much of the nation. Even the more recent emphasis on visual culture education,

with its interest in research and interpretive and critical discussion, tends to be adult directed, leading students toward certain preferred conclusions about the objects and phenomena they examine: children are rarely allowed to persist, for example, with their love of Disney princesses or violent video games unchallenged. It is possible to imagine constructivist approaches to the study of art history, criticism, and aesthetics, or of the mass-produced goods that constitute our shared visual culture. In practice, however, the educational movements that prevailed in art education at the turn of the century tended to resurrect transmission models in which the established knowledge and perspectives of adults were favored over the independent construction of meaning by students.

While certain dominant movements in the field recommended adherence to established chronologies and induction into practices perfected in the adult world, the cyclical resurgence of more experiential and exploratory ways of working suggests that there may be something about art, and, perhaps, about children and youth as art-makers and audiences, that is best represented to learners as “in the making” (Ellsworth 2005, 151), not yet constructed, still to be explored. This constructivist strand in art education, and its implications for policy in the field, is the basis of this article.

### THE CONSTRUCTIVIST IMPULSE IN ART EDUCATION

Children have real understanding only of that which they invent themselves, and each time that we try to teach them

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something too quickly, we keep them from reinventing it themselves. (Piaget, qtd. in Papert 1999, 105)

Never let a child copy anything. (Lowenfeld 1957, 15)

It seems significant that Lowenfeld, who so profoundly shaped the practice of art education in the United States in the second half of the twentieth century, was a contemporary of the two most renowned constructivist theorists, Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky. Lowenfeld's writings include few citations of other writers, but the unacknowledged kinship between Lowenfeld and Piaget is apparent in Lowenfeld's faith both in the agency of children and in the predictability of their development and learning under what he considered normal circumstances. In retrospect, however, Lowenfeld's pedagogical methods related more closely to Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivism in their recognition of the value of adult intervention in the process (and preservation) of children's innate learning trajectories: Lowenfeld's motivational dialogues, after all, were structured to guide students toward the next developmental step, to move them along in something resembling a zone of proximal development. Writing in the postwar years, Lowenfeld did not believe that it was possible for children to discover what they needed to know unencumbered by the influences of culture. But, like Piaget, Lowenfeld was skeptical about the beneficence of these influences.

Piaget and Vygotsky sought to understand the nature of learning, offering only incidental (and sometimes facetious) pedagogical advice: Piaget is said to have described the ideal school as one in which children are in one room and teachers in another. Lowenfeld focused on teaching art as a pursuit informed by social justice, in response to a world that had recently demonstrated the capacity of evil to overwhelm the good. Ultimately, Lowenfeld asserted the rights of children to their childhoods, a belief in the innate goodness of young human beings, and the hope that preservation of the creative impulse would crowd out the destructive, a notion broadly shared at that historical moment (see, e.g., Ashton-Warner [1963] 1986; Read [1943] 1974).

A constructivist perspective on learning positions children as innately equipped with the curiosity to explore the world and the capacity to find meaning in the objects, images, relationships, and events they encounter. Ultimately, constructivism questions the taken-for-granted relationship between adults and children as masters to apprentices, or filler to pail. Constructivism shifts the balance that transmission models of instruction leave unquestioned, moving from convictions about the adult responsibility to share knowledge accumulated by prior generations to belief in the ability of each new generation to produce knowledge of their own. Envisioning children as knowledge producers, as capable creators of values and meanings, constructivist pedagogies situate the child, or the children, at the center of the process of learning. This view

of childhood relies upon the understanding that children do more than consume the knowledge conveyed to them; they actively reassemble and create knowledge through their own explorations of a world replete with people, images, ideas, and objects.

This "image of the child" (Malaguzzi 1994) combines with an understanding of the process of art-making that emphasizes personal agency, idiosyncratic meanings, and the intentional production of forms to express these concepts, a view articulated by Kenneth Beittel (1973), Marilyn Zurmuehlen (1990), and many others. Even during periods when more teacher-directed practices dominated art education, as they did in the heyday of discipline-based art education, a more artistic perspective persisted as a minoritarian view in the field, drawing attention to the centrality of making in art learning and the importance of preserving the child's agency within the social sphere of the art classroom. In the 1990 text *Studio Art: Praxis, Symbol, Presence*, for example, Zurmuehlen argued for the primacy of personal meanings and shared subjectivities as the embodiment of meaningful art learning for students of all ages, the foundation from which curiosity about cultural artifacts produced by others originates and grows. Constructivism, like art education taught in this tradition, prioritizes concrete experience, relies upon problems posed and pursued in real life, and encourages personal exploration and active learning.

## VARIETIES OF CONSTRUCTIVISM

Although constructivism has deep roots in Socratic method and Kantian philosophy (D'Angelo, Touchman, and Clark 2009), Davis and Sumara (2002) indicate that the term "constructivism" first appeared in educational literature in the early 1970s. Since that time, constructivism has been linked to a range of pedagogical perspectives and practices, united by their common emphasis on the presence of uncertainty and the process of inquiry as the basis of learning. Constructivism is not a well-defined brand: it can be described and implemented in many ways, as Davis and Sumara suggest when they state, "In our readings of some of the theoretical and research literature, for example, we have encountered radical, cognitive, situated, social, cultural, sociocultural, and critical constructivisms" (2002, 409). Just as there are multiple traditions in art teaching, based not only on disciplinary focus but also on the relationship that is created between tradition and innovation, student and teacher, there are varieties and offshoots and camps of constructivism, some more closely allied with art education than others.

There is generally agreement that at least two major branches of constructivism exist, variations that Phillips (1995) identifies as the psychological and the sociological, distinguishing the radical constructivism associated with

Piaget—which maintains that the transactions that matter most profoundly occur between the learner and the world of objects and events—from the forms of social constructivism, associated most prominently with Vygotsky, which recognize the essential role of adults or “more capable” or experienced peers in mediating learning and guiding practice. Davis and Sumara (2002) refer to these strands as “nontrivial constructivisms,” the subject-centered and the social. Richardson (2003) suggests that there is a growing convergence between the two as the psychological approach, initially focused on the ways in which meaning is created within the individual mind, expands to consider the ways in which shared meaning is developed within groups and within the structures of power that operate there (1625). Remarkable on this growing recognition of context and collaboration in all forms of constructivism, Richardson acknowledges a concomitant interest in constructivist practices emerging in teacher education since the early 1990s, when constructivist teacher education served as a focus for workshops at the annual conference of the American Educational Research Association.

Davis and Sumara (2002) insist that the distinctions among forms of constructivism are seldom as clearly defined as they are made to seem, while D’Angelo, Touchman, and Clark (2009) suggest that it is equally inaccurate to position constructivism as the polar opposite of transmission models of education. These authors emphasize the multiple identities of constructivism as an epistemological theory, a theory of learning, and/or a form of pedagogy, and they caution that this ambiguity can and often does lead to simplistic understandings and distortions of the theory. Davis and Sumara (2002) point to the complications that appear in what they refer to as “trivial constructivisms.” Citing the “obvious problem” with most attempts to translate educational theories into practice, they note that educational theories, including constructivism, are meant to be descriptive rather than prescriptive and were never intended to serve as sources of practical advice:

Applied to matters of formal education, subject-centered and social constructivist discourses operate more as critiques of any deliberate, institutionalized attempt to affect individual knowing or collective knowledge. Subject-centered accounts, for instance, have been used to argue that the explicit project of teaching, conceived in terms of guiding learners along marked out paths to pre-specified ends, is naïve and impossible. . . . In many social accounts, schooling is reduced to an aspect of some other project or phenomenon, such as the generation of new knowledge or the perpetuation of certain social injustices. (Davis and Sumara 2002, 417)

In practice, constructivism is often reduced to the maxim “Don’t tell” and set in opposition to direct instruction (Davis and Sumara 2002). Yet all teachers do (and probably must) use direct instruction to facilitate student learning:

some things cannot be intuited in the time available, such as the amount of time needed to fire a kiln to cone 6 or the name of an art movement or period. It is fairly common to caricature constructivist approaches as being laissez-faire, but constructivist pedagogies are not necessarily unstructured or isolating, throwing each student back upon his or her own resources with little or no intervention on the part of adults. In exemplary constructivist practices in art education, the teacher structures, interacts, suggests, observes, and responds to students’ activities and expressions of understanding or confusion. As Tiziana Filippini describes the pedagogical relationship that is cultivated in the pre-schools of Reggio Emilia, Italy, where art-making is the heart of early education, “we must be able to catch the ball that the children throw us, and toss it back to them in ways that make the children want to continue the game with us, developing, perhaps, other games as we go along” (in Edwards 2011, 151).

All constructivist practices begin with the conviction that “the resolution of cognitive conflict drives learning” (D’Angelo, Touchman, and Clark 2009, n.p.). This conflict often emerges between ideas newly encountered and the learner’s existing understandings: for example, a student’s understanding of what art is, or is not, may be challenged in dramatic ways when she is exposed to a piece of contemporary performance art or engaged in a collaborative community project involving materials scavenged from the neighborhood and not purchased from an art supplier. While learning of this type may result from an encounter with objects or images in the material world, it may also be introduced by others, peers or teachers, who are intentionally or unintentionally in dialogue with the student. Both the world of objects and the world of social relationships can be sources of newly constructed understandings.

According to Richardson (2003), the constructivist pedagogies of the 1990s involve the following characteristics: (a) teaching is student centered, attending to the individual and respecting his or her background, beliefs, and understandings; (b) students engage in group dialogue to build shared understandings; (c) ideas are introduced, in planned and unplanned ways, through discussion, exploration of texts, and participation in situations in which questions emerge; (d) students are prompted to engage in tasks that offer opportunities to question, change, or expand their beliefs; and (e) students develop meta-awareness of their own learning and processes of understanding over time (1626). She identifies these as “imperatives, approaches to teaching toward which one initially aspires and which then become fundamental features of the teacher’s praxis. These elements play out quite differently depending on content domain, age level of students, students’ experience as learners prior to coming into the specific classroom, school context, teaching/style, and so on” (1626–27).

How do these imperatives play out in contemporary art education?

## RECENT INCARNATIONS

Like good arts classrooms, constructivist classrooms are learner-centered and, often, collaborative among students. Constructivist learning frequently engages the student by using real-world contexts. (Saraniero n.d.)

Constructivism is more frequently practiced in art education than it is explicitly invoked as an approach to curriculum or pedagogy. References to constructivist theory are rare in the literature of art education, while implementation of constructivist principles and practices is common. An exception is found in a consideration of implications for art education of post-Piagetian theory by Japanese researchers Hatano, Inagaki, and Oura (1993). They distinguish between Piagetian and post-Piagetian theory primarily on the basis of the post-Piagetian interest in the role of socio-cultural constraints in facilitating learning as teachers attend to the ways that students' interests might be pursued and propose inquiries that lead students toward deep knowledge of a particular domain. These ideas are explored in an essay by Walsh (2002) on the development of children's "artistic selves" through guided immersion in an interest area chosen by a particular child from among the domains valued and made available through his or her culture.

When constructivism is mentioned in examinations of curriculum or pedagogy in art education, it tends to be equated with approaches to studio instruction that emphasize student choice. Choice of subject matter, medium, and technique—and the preservation of those aspects of the creative process that are considered the artist's prerogative—has traditionally been a strong emphasis in art education that prioritizes students' personal expression (see, e.g., Eisner 1972; Gaitskell and Hurwitz 1970; Lowenfeld and Brittain 1964). The issue of choice remains central to contemporary art education in the writings of many theorists and researchers, including Zurmuehlen (1990), Chalmers (1996), Barakett and Sacca (2003), Sullivan (2005), Anderson and Milbrandt (2004), and many others. Milbrandt, Felts, Richards, and Abghari (2004) point out that approaches to art education that favor choice often exist in tension with issues of accountability, creating a tangible misalignment between the culture of the art room and the culture of the school as a whole. The difficulty of living within this state of tension may account for persistent gaps between theory and practice in the field. Contemporary art education is distinguished by the dominance of postmodern theoretical perspectives that favor active social participation in the construction of knowledge within specific contexts and an understanding that this knowledge emerges "in the making": it is not already established and ready to be transmitted by an expert. At the same time, a modernist paradigm continues to prevail in schools, where the focus on accountability and measures of student comprehension leads teachers to seek verifiable facts, measurable outcomes, and standardized procedures (Milbrandt et al. 2004).

In contrast to the carefully crafted technical exercises and well-orchestrated visual productions that we recognize as representing the "school art style" (Efland 1976; Wilson 1974), constructivist learning engages students in the development of problems, as well as their solutions (Johnson, Kieling, and Cooper 2013). Phillips (1995) identified three roles for students in constructivist classrooms: active learners, social learners, and creative learners. As Milbrandt and her colleagues observed, "studio processes that actively engage students in the creative artistic process or creative problem solving are constructivist by nature" (Milbrandt et al. 2004, 35). When students are engaged in the production of meaningful works of art in a classroom setting, they are actively involved in the creation of images and objects that communicate personally relevant ideas to others with whom they share a space and opportunities for exchange of ideas, collaboration, and response. When the outcomes of a project or an encounter are not prescribed beforehand, the journey becomes a true exploration in which discoveries can be made and shared and knowledge produced. Degrees of freedom exist here that eclipse the possibilities of more structured learning.

Art educator and blogger Jason Gray (2013) explains constructivism in the art classroom as something intrinsically different from constructivism in other subjects, in ways that demand a distinctive approach to curriculum and pedagogy:

Unlike in mathematics, where the instructor follows a set of concrete steps and the student's role is to memorize and utilize, in art, the art educator is a guide to whatever world the student unfolds. Constructivism applies favorably to this tendency because it encourages alternative thought (for content delivery) and individual approaches (for student engagement). In the Constructivist [art] classroom, the student learns the wide gamut of "art" by navigating choices, with the aid of a community of peers, toward a dynamic and fluid curriculum. For the teacher, this means assuming the role of the student (to a degree). The teacher must feel accountable to the student, and should foremost understand that why they teach is directly linked to who they teach. The Constructivist realizes that the goal of education is to produce individuals with the self-efficacy to become moral and cultural contributors (not necessarily compliant) to society; content alone is meaningless in the face of this.

Gray's musings on the applicability of constructivism to art education suggest that the relationship between teacher and students in this approach varies radically from the traditional classroom models in which direct instruction prevails. In a constructivist environment, the teacher becomes student, he asserts, someone who is obligated to develop familiarity with those who inhabit the classroom and to become somewhat subservient to their needs and desires, assuming the role of facilitator and fellow-traveler rather than of authority. This is compatible with the concept of



“emergent curriculum” as practiced in Reggio Emilia and early childhood education around the world (Jones 2012; Jones and Nimmo 1994).

Other models of art education are also seen to have a constructivist basis. Marshall (2005) points to “substantive” arts integration as a postmodern approach to teaching art in which “art is contextualized, boundaries between domains are blurred, and emphasis is placed on content in relation to form” (227). Identifying the approach she describes as present in “issues-based art education” (Gaudelius and Speiers 2002) and visual culture, Marshall locates this cluster of thinking in cognitive theories of art education that see learning as situated, socially constructed, and culturally mediated, a process of making meaning (Efland 2002; Freedman 2003). Marshall acknowledges Efland’s (2002) identification of art as a “hub for integrated learning . . . the location where subjective and cultural interpretation (meaning-making) are most openly celebrated and practiced” (228). The forms of deeply integrated learning that Marshall proposes look well beyond the visual representation of concepts drawn from other disciplines toward an understanding of the connections among disciplinary concepts that underlie and unite the visual arts and other modes of inquiry.

Constructivism in art education is frequently associated with studio teaching, although there are certainly methods of studio instruction that rely on more direct methods of instruction, such as step-by-step processes and the copying of existing images, drawn from popular culture or the fine arts. These are time-honored ways of learning to draw and mastering the conventions of representation, practices that children often pursue in their self-initiated work. Direct instruction of this kind also exists in classroom teaching. Direct methods of instruction—showing and telling—are associated with traditional ways of teaching art history, criticism, and, often, visual culture, as when discussions are structured by the teacher in order to lead students to a specific conclusion about the meanings conveyed by the objects they are studying. Traditional art history instruction, adapted from the models of the large university lecture in which facts, dates, styles, schools, countries of origin, and historical content are conveyed from professor to students, hews closely to the concept of education as the transmission of agreed-upon knowledge. When art history was taught at all prior to the emergence of discipline-based art education in the 1980s, it was taught as a series of facts to be memorized in order to place works of art in their chronological and aesthetic contexts.

This method prevailed in museums and classrooms for many years until more constructivist approaches were adopted by museum education (and teachers) in the mid-1990s. George Hein (1991) was an early and consistent proponent of this move toward more socially constructed meaning-making and experiential learning. Acknowledging that constructivism was not new, but newly accepted, in the last decade of the twentieth century, Hein distinguishes between

an approach to museum education that embraces the underlying conceptual foundation of constructivism and the simple provision of hands-on learning in museum galleries:

If we believe that knowledge consists of learning about the real world out there, then we endeavor first and foremost to understand that world, organize it in the most rational way possible, and, as teachers, present it to the learner. This view may still engage us in providing the learner with activities, with hands-on learning, with opportunities to experiment and manipulate the objects of the world, but the intention is always to make clear to the learner the structure of the world independent of the learner. We help the learner understand the world, but we don’t ask him to construct his or her own world. . . . Constructivist theory requires that we turn our attention by 180 degrees: we must turn our back on any idea of an all-encompassing machine which describes nature and instead look towards all those wonderful, individual living beings—the learners—each of whom creates his or her own model to explain nature. If we accept the constructivist position we are inevitably required to follow a pedagogy which argues that we must provide learners with the opportunity to: a) interact with sensory data, and b) construct their own world.

Hein admits how difficult he and his colleagues in museum education found this call to relinquish their control in museum tours, hesitating to set their own understanding of works of art aside in order to allow others to construct their own meanings in a more “visitor-centered” manner. This loss of control is certainly an issue that all teachers who move toward more constructivist methods confront. However, Hein continues to consider the ways in which learning is represented in constructivist theory and the ways in which museum activities and exhibitions are structured to encourage social interaction and movement through the zone of proximal development that accompanies each visitor to the museum.

In a more recent reflection on aesthetic experience in constructivist museums, Lankford (2002) presents the choice facing museums as a decision between “information or inquiry” (142). Emphasizing the ways in which programming has shifted toward shared control as museums move toward more visitor-centered paradigms, Lankford suggests that “a constructivist model of education requires that museums yield a large measure of authoritativeness in favor of trying to make the most of infinitely diverse and unpredictable audiences” (145). As visitors come to determine the nature of their own experience in the museum to a greater extent than before, “the museum is no longer a dictator but a *collaborator* in the meaning-making process” (146).

## CONTEMPORARY CONSTRUCTIVIST PROJECTS

The complexity and diversity of influences that have shaped views on the teaching of art can be understood as a

“palimpsest.” A palimpsest is a term that describes the way in which the ancient parchments that were used for writing were written over, but new messages only partially obliterated the message beneath. Both the new and the old messages still stand, albeit partially erased and interrupted. (McArdle and Piscitelli 2002, 11)

The history of art education is a densely layered palimpsest, with traces of forgotten methods surfacing, intermingling, and sometimes becoming intertwined with the dominant approaches of the day. Despite the enduring influence of discipline-based and visual cultural approaches in art education, many teachers continue to favor a studio-based approach to teaching that is strongly rooted in constructivist traditions and beliefs. Art educators, particularly those who work with young children, have been impressed and affected by the work of the preschools of Reggio Emilia over the past sixty years and more. In addition, a hardy grassroots movement known as Teaching for Artistic Behavior (TAB) emphasizes a choice-based approach to teaching art that is grounded in constructivist pedagogies that simultaneously subscribe to an image of the child, an understanding of the nature of art, and a sense of the relationship between tradition and innovation in the arts that value the individual and social complexities of learning. These approaches have been inscribed in the complex palimpsest of art education in recent years and serve as exemplars of contemporary constructivist practice.

### Reggio Emilia: Art and the Hundred Languages of Children

The preschools of Reggio Emilia have been in operation since shortly after the end of World War II, when the people of the city determined that the education of their young children was the first priority to be addressed in their efforts to recover from the devastations of war. Spearheaded by Loris Malaguzzi, the municipal preschools and infant centers of this northern Italian town demonstrate a complex and unique educational philosophy in action and serve today as an exemplar of constructivism in action. Drawing upon the epistemologies of Piaget and Vygotsky and the pedagogical proposals of Jerome Bruner, David Hawkins, Howard Gardner, and others, the preschools of Reggio Emilia are known for their recognition of the potential of every child to “speak” in multiple languages using a vocabulary far more advanced than the verbal and quantitative lexicons favored by contemporary schooling. Recognizing the particular richness and early accessibility of graphic and constructive languages, the affordances of art media and the insights and understandings that are made available through each, the schools provide extensive opportunities to work with art materials and to use them in service of expanding and representing children’s understanding of everyday experiences of light and shadow, portraiture, crowds, rainy

days, and so on. While many latter-day proponents of the Reggio approach deny that the work of the children in these schools is art (Hertzog 2001), it is difficult to imagine that these schools would have captured the degree of international attention they have had the work produced in their ateliers been less accomplished and impressive.

Critics are correct, however, in maintaining that the work children produce with art materials and processes does not reflect the understandings of art experience, activity, or teaching that prevail in most American schools. In Reggio Emilia, for example, the definition of a project is different from the conventional understanding of an art project in American schools (Gude 2013). Whereas conventional American education understands art projects as being relatively short-term investigations leading to the creation of a finished product that is similar in many respects to those created by others in the class, projects in Reggio Emilia are extended investigations that emerge from the children’s interests and proceed in multiple directions as teachers observe, document, share, and respond to the children’s inquiries. These projects frequently lead to the production of a series of provisional images and objects, as children exploit the special affordances of clay, wire, fine black markers, or electronic animation programs to increase and to represent their understandings. Occasionally, participating in the impulses of contemporary artists, they produce installations and performances, collaborative sculpture, and paintings.

Basic to the pedagogical approach practiced in Reggio is an image of the child as rich, strong, and powerful, as a curious being who is ready from birth to explore and make sense of the world. Reversing many of the clichés that constrain our understanding of young children, teachers in Reggio Emilia guide children toward projects that are viewed “as a sort of adventure and research” (Rinaldi 1993, 108). As Cook (2006) explains, “the constructivist teacher begins to relinquish their right of being the ‘all-knowing adult’ and acts as a facilitator or guide, helping the children to engage into authentic learning that is based upon the interests of the child” (2). The relationship between adults and children shifts as this image of the child is taken seriously in curriculum planning and pedagogy: “The desire of the constructivist teacher is to ‘scaffold’ children’s learning process in such a way that the teacher becomes a ‘co-creator’ of knowledge, creating a partnership between the child and/the teacher” (Cook 2006, 3–4).

The Reggio Emilia approach has been influential in American early childhood art education. However, the emergent project-based curriculum exemplified in these settings resonates at other levels of art education as well. In describing his response to high school students’ complaints about lack of choice and the absence of personal relevance of the work assigned in his art classes, Hesser (2009) reflects that becoming a constructivist teacher requires a rethinking of the teacher’s role in the classroom:

A constructivist teacher is more of a facilitator than an instructor, guiding students to appropriate information with which they may develop answers to their questions themselves. A constructivist classroom should be a place where knowledge is not transmitted from teacher to student, but *constructed* through the cooperative efforts of teachers and students together. (42)

Hesser notes that project-based learning becomes less common as children grow older, but the approach is still championed, in pure or related forms, by educators and art educators. Describing a unit designed for high school art students, Hesser highlights the loosely drawn parameters that encourage exploration of personal content. He reports that classroom “control,” a problem frequently cited in relation to constructivist approaches, became increasingly irrelevant in his classroom as students’ excitement and involvement in their work replaced efforts to subvert the given order. Gradually, students began to take the lead as they were involved in all phases of work, from planning to assessment.

### Teaching for Artistic Behavior (TAB): Choice-Based Learning in Art Education

Another constructivist movement influencing contemporary art education is Teaching for Artistic Behavior, popularly known as TAB or choice-based art education, a program founded by art educators Katherine Douglas, Diane Jaquith, Clyde Gaw, and Nan Hathaway. Formed in 2001 and incorporated in 2007 with the support of MassArt, the National Art Education Association, and the Education Alliance at Brown University, TAB allows students to experience the working process of artists in the classroom through authentic artistic explorations and responsive teaching. Like Reggio Emilia, teachers who follow a choice-based approach envision children as artists: by “offer[ing] them real choices for responding to their own ideas and interests through the making of art. Choice-based art education supports multiple modes of learning and assessment for the diverse needs of students” (<http://teachingforartisticbehavior.org>).

While TAB classrooms may incorporate choice to varying degrees, a fully committed choice-based art class begins with a five-minute mini-lesson introducing a new or refined process, technique, artist, or concept; proceeds as students disperse to centers in the classroom to begin or pursue individual projects; and ends with clean-up and the sharing of works in progress. As the TAB website explains, “these centers function as mini art studios, complete with instructional information, menus, resources, materials and tools. Students move independently between centers, utilizing materials, tools and resources as needed in their art-making. Centers are arranged to provide students with independent learning opportunities” (<http://teachingforartisticbehavior.org>).

TAB classrooms, then, practice a form of constructivism in allowing students to construct meaning about and through art as they work with materials in the company of other students and a teacher who is ready to respond to individual needs and questions. Collaborative projects are encouraged, and peer tutoring is likely to emerge. The process is reminiscent of writing process classrooms from the later decades of the last century, in which children’s interests and explorations became the focus of the curriculum and the basis for identifying works of art, concepts, and practices that relate to children’s self-initiated projects. There are also variations of the TAB approach in which some of the curriculum remains under teacher direction but students are granted choice in an ever-expanding number of ways. Even projects that are proposed by the teacher may be designed to allow relatively expansive degrees of freedom for students in the choice of subject matter, medium, scale, and other factors that artists encounter when working in their studios.

TAB aligns itself with the position of such policy documents as *21st Century Skills* (<http://www.21stcenturyskills.org/>), and practitioners often invoke the eight “studio habits of mind”—develop craft; engage and persist; envision; express; observe; reflect; stretch and explore; and understand art world (Hetland et al. 2007)—in discussing the strengths of the approach.

### DEBATES ABOUT THE DRAWBACKS OF CONSTRUCTIVIST ART EDUCATION

How might important constructivist insights be preserved and troublesome aspects challenged? A key issue here is the tendency of educational researchers to borrow theories and discourses from other domains. On the one hand, such acts are necessary and appropriate. One must keep pace with advances in relevant areas, especially in a field that lies at the crossroads of so many disciplines. On the other hand, such acts of borrowing require that the theories be removed from contexts in which intended meanings, philosophical commitments, and particular cautions and concerns are more fully articulated. (Davis and Sumara 2002)

Despite the longevity of interest in constructivist practices and theories in education, Richardson (2003) identifies a number of “unresolved issues” that remain in the second decade of the twenty-first century. Among these is the simple recognition “that students also make meaning from activities encountered in a transmission model of teaching such as lectures or direct instruction, or even from non-interactive media such as television” (Richardson 2003, 1629). Some things, including many skills and much knowledge involved in art-making and the apprehension of visual images, are best learned and taught through direct instruction. The characteristics of Cubist painting could be discovered, but the process through which this might occur would be slow and haphazard.

Every teacher makes use of direct instruction for some purpose; it is sometimes necessary and more efficient to convey information to students rather than to allow them to discover or construct an understanding for themselves.

Equally important are issues of cultural difference and the possibility that constructivism is neither an inclusive philosophy nor a pedagogical approach that is equally conducive to all students' learning. Richardson (2003) suggests that is imperative to look "at constructivism, itself, as a concept that is constructed and practiced within our current cultural, political and economic constraints and ideologies. It connects with a small but powerful literature that expresses concerns about the use of constructivist pedagogy with minority students, and questions whether this is an imposition of an inappropriate pedagogy on students who are not a part of the dominant culture" (1632–33). The work of Lisa Delpit (2006) on the perils of teaching "other people's children" participates in this critique. She remarks that psychological constructivism, in particular, is often seen in its most radical forms in elite schools, but this approach may hold little appeal for parents or teachers in economically tenuous communities where more teacher-centered models of instruction are intentionally chosen as most effective by parents and teachers.

In its contemporary manifestations, constructivist practice exemplifies the progressive inquiry- and project-based learning that dominated many American classrooms before government mandates regarding the Common Core school standards and high-stakes testing took hold. Popular and well regarded in American education, constructivist methods are considered the gold standard of progressive educational practice, widely understood as "the dominant view of how people learn" (Hesser 2009, 46).

Replaced by more conventional methods of direct instruction in classrooms dedicated to test preparation and memorization, the more leisurely methods of constructivism have vanished from many American schools. Art education has been marginalized by the current reform movement to an extent unprecedented in recent memory, jostled unceremoniously to the very edges of schooling. And yet this circumstance has not affected visual arts pedagogy nearly as dramatically as it has altered what occurs in self-contained classrooms. Constructivism remains a viable pedagogical option in many art classrooms, one that continues to attract considerable interest and lively debates (see, e.g., the Teaching for Artistic Behavior Facebook page).

Still, criticisms of constructivist pedagogies and the theories that support them remain. Teachers may find that the aesthetic quality of children's work is inferior to that of the work produced when teachers are more directly involved in defining problems and guiding technical and formal decisions. They may believe that constructivist learning lacks rigor and defies the wisdom of sequential learning, that it may work best for mature students who have mastered the basics of craft and technique (Milbrandt et al 2004).

Saraniero (n.d.) grants that there is learning—and perhaps unlearning—involved, for students as well as teachers, in moving toward a constructivist classroom:

Being a constructivist learner is a skill that students must master. Constructivism helps students learn "how to learn" as well as how to manage themselves. Arts teachers may find scaffolding these skills is necessary for success. In constructivism, students have to learn how to problem-solve, collaborate, and manage themselves—all assets to be fostered in arts education.

Many of these critiques are rooted in fundamental disagreements about the balance and relationship that should exist between adults and children, teacher and students, tradition and innovation. The objection that constructivism rests upon "an implicit assumption that the learner cannot be wrong" (Richardson 2003, 1642) leads us toward serious questions about the role of the teacher in constructivist theory and practice, and the ways in which these understandings might inform or buttress policies that actively diminish the presence of art education in the schools.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

In the current era of federal and corporate measures leading toward the privatization of public schooling and the deskilling of teachers, the transmission model of teaching and learning features prominently in public policy discussions in American education. A more conservative, adult-centered view, it is also one that lends itself more readily than other models to the enumeration of content and specification of skills that standards imply and testing requires. Constructivism, with its focus on individual and social learning, is emergent, site-specific, unpredictable, and concerned with fostering divergent and surprising thought and action. It is difficult to imagine a set of standards that capture constructivist goals in ways that lend themselves to being tested and measured. The Draft National Core Arts Standards, now under public review, attempt to incorporate constructivist perspectives into a policy document—with what degree of success remains to be seen.

It is crucial to acknowledge the natural antagonism that exists between constructivism and standardization. Constructivism relies upon an image of the child, and an understanding of intergenerational relationships, that is intrinsically fluid and reciprocal. Ultimately, constructivist theory requires a belief in children's capacity to construct meaning, to understand without being told, to master content, and to recognize connections without overt adult guidance. This requires a very different way of thinking about children than is typically reflected in curriculum policies, or certainly in the tests designed to measure their effect.



Constructivism strikes many adults, teachers, and parents, as well as those engaged in the creation of policy, as counterintuitive and at odds with their own experiences of schooling. Not only does it imply that learning is a far less predictable process than we might like to suppose, it often seems to downplay the role of the teacher as it emphasizes the capabilities of the learner. Education blogger Bill Boyle (2013) suggests that “the discourse of learnification . . . literalizes the banking concept” of education proposed by Friere and Ramos (1993), the idea that knowledge is deposited in the mind of the child by the culturally and intellectually more affluent adult. Drawing on Gert Biesta’s (2005) critique of “learnification,” Boyle suggests that the reduction of the teacher’s presence in our conceptions of the learning process may well fuel neoliberal policies designed to minimize the role that relationships play in an increasingly technological version of education. Biesta writes:

The quickest way to express what is at stake here is to say that the point of education is never that children or students learn, but that they learn *something*, that they learn this for particular *purposes*, and that learn this from *someone*. The problem with the language of learning and with the wider “learnification” of educational discourse is that it makes it far more difficult, if not impossible, to ask the crucial educational questions about content, purpose and relationships. In other words, the language of “learning” allows for the assumption that the relationships between learner and content, learner and purpose, and learner and teacher are irrelevant. (Boyle 2013)

This tendency to minimize the contributions of the teacher in order to highlight the capacities of the learner often reflects the best of intentions: many of the more recent publications originating in Reggio Emilia erase the teacher from the documentation of experiences that were clearly guided and facilitated by the questions adults posed to children and the experiences teachers provided. As Malaguzzi acknowledges, learning in social contexts such as schools and museums is not a solitary game of handball, but a game of catch, requiring a reciprocating presence. The role of the teacher may be subtle in a constructivist classroom, but it is significant and artful, consisting of problems posed at a critical moment, questions interjected, materials provided, and experiences structured in such a way that the likelihood of meaningful discovery is heightened. The teacher—observing, documenting, and reflecting on students’ experience and the directions in which understanding is growing or stunted—offers timely interventions, thoughtful comments, and new directions for thought and action. This is the core of what we have long recognized as authentic practice in art education.

How does policy support and sustain these approaches? The following suggestions may help to bridge the gap that

yawns in times such as this, when standardization dominates the institutions in which art education exists:

- Art teacher education should continue to emphasize practices that are appropriate to the production and understanding of visual images and objects, while providing students with an understanding of the contexts of schooling that they are apt to encounter that are incompatible with their approach to teaching. Strategies for communicating with parents, colleagues, and administrators in order to advocate for progressive approaches to art teaching should be central to the undergraduate art education curriculum.
- At the school and district levels, art educators should find allies within their own field and related areas of the curriculum in order to actively build alliances and affect school policies and understandings of the range of pedagogies that are traditional and effective within the arts and across subject areas.
- Art teachers should join with university-based researchers to document examples of progressive practice, wherever it occurs, in order to squarely address concerns about sequence of instruction, quality of work, student engagement, and learning. Video and social media are promising ways of gathering and disseminating this information.
- Art educators at all levels should become politically engaged at the local, state, and national levels in order to inform and influence policies that help preserve the possibilities of making art in the schools in ways that support personal and social learning, mastery of media, and engagement with issues that matter to children and youth.

In short, art educators need to articulate the case for methods that go against the grain of current public policy for education. In doing so, we may convince policymakers that respect for the concerns and capabilities of our students must be the premise that underlies all teaching and learning, and that the teacher’s work may well be most complex when it is least obvious. This is a message that runs counter to the dominant rhetoric of the day, increasingly inscribed in federal policies that mandate a very different form of education for American children.

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