

# Opening the Door to Possibilities: Research Journals in Pre-Service Art Education

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Preparing to be an art educator is a time when future teachers anticipate the endless possibilities the profession has to offer. Unfortunately, many leave teaching within a few years of service because of lack of support and preparation. This qualitative study investigates how preservice art education students enrolled in their first university art education course used the *Art for Life* method to create research journals. The research question that guided this study is: What themes drive student research journals and how does the exploration of these themes espouse preservice art education? After coding student journals, I discovered three major themes including self-reflection, what it means to be an art teacher, and creative ways to connect the disciplines of art education to social issues. The discussion identifies strategies for faculty to consider when using journals in preservice education including communicating objectives, providing feedback, ethical considerations, and means to improve teaching.

Preparing to be an art teacher is a time when future educators anticipate the endless possibilities the profession has to offer. Many look forward to the day when they will have their own classrooms filled with youth who are eager to learn about art. While teaching is a noble and rewarding career choice, sometimes preservice art educators enter college art education programs with an idealistic view of the profession (Gibson, 2003; Roland, 1995). Being a teacher of art includes working with youth who have different learning styles and educational needs, administrators, fellow teachers, and parents as well as coping with possible budget shortfalls, and feelings of isolation and/or lack of respect. To begin the journey of becoming an art educator who is better prepared for the realities of the classroom, I teach an Introduction to Art Education course where students learn

about art theory, practice, and curricula. Research journals play a significant role in this course because they enable students to self-reflect on their responsibilities as future teachers and contemplate how their thoughts on teaching relate to educating youth about the greater community and the disciplines of art education.

Many educators leave teaching within five years of service (Day, 1997; Galbraith, 1995; Gradle, 2006). To survive, teachers need more than academic knowledge. Factors such as stress and lack of preparation and emotional support lead to teacher burnout. This astounding truth causes some people to believe that universities need to do a better job preparing teachers (Bain, 2004; Gold, 1999; Schoonmaker, 2002). As Goodland (1999) observed, "An ill-prepared beginner is likely to be the ill-prepared experienced teacher" (p. 5). Gold (1999) and Bain (2004) argue that fostering preservice teachers' psychological needs can help assuage this pandemic. Teacher psychological needs are not typically a major component of teacher development programs. By addressing psychological needs of preservice teachers, successful education programs teach students the value of being an authentic instructor—one who is caring, understanding of others, flexible, and able to manage stress (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005). Authentic instruction addresses the necessity of fostering student-teachers' psychological needs and teaching individualized problem solving skills. With effective training, student-teachers and practicing teachers are capable of searching for solutions to specific problems through divergent courses of action (Schoonmaker, 2002). If preservice teachers are unable to solve problems and manage stress by the time they begin teaching, Gold (1999) observed that they develop decreased self-confidence, which can become so severe that it causes promising educators to leave the profession.

What makes teacher education so challenging is that there is no single comprehensive model to teach a student how to teach properly

(Gradle, 2006). Many researchers believe that teaching preservice educators how to become self-reflective is an important component of teacher training (Bain, 2004; Belmonte, 2003; Campbell, 2005; Schoonmaker, 2002; Susi, 1995). Belmonte (2003) explains:

Teachers who have a grasp of their own lives, who have reflected on what has occurred and how it has shaped their persona, are able to succeed. They are more comfortable in their own skin, know who they are, and reflect to students a confidence and assurance that offers students directions.

(p. 75)

When used regularly at the university level, many preservice teachers discover how self-reflection assists them in constructing what type of teacher they want to become. Being self-reflective requires that they examine what works and what needs to be improved upon. By understanding themselves, teachers can effectively project the passions that drive them and use these passions to spark student interest. Additionally, teachers must reflect upon how their personal biases and worldviews shape their teaching philosophies (Campbell, 2005). Throughout their careers, teachers' professional identities, likes, and dislikes continue to grow and reshape. Reflective teachers repeatedly contemplate their actions and decisions (Hatfield, Montana, & Deffenbaugh, 2006; Susi, 1995).

As preservice educators gain practice in their field, it is essential that they learn how to respond to their personal intuitions and challenging situations. Lowenfeld (1964) noted that intuition is a part of being a creative teacher because it enables an educator to adjust appropriately to the many changes that occur throughout the school day. Teaching is challenging because instructors need to master both curricula needs and have a passion for working with people (Belmonte, 2003). Curricular standards require educators to teach youth how to become empathetic to others as they investigate social issues (Cohen-Evron, 2002; Goodland, 1999; Leshnoff, 2003; Serre

& Fergus, 1998). While investigating global topics in the classroom, students listen to others' opinions and learn how to become more flexible and open-minded (Gradle, 2006).

In teacher preparation, journals provide a format for individuals to communicate personal beliefs, reflect on life's circumstances, and record observations (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005; Mueller, 2003; Russell, 2005). Many educators have used reflective-learning journals in their classes to involve students in creative approaches to learning (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005; Pedro, 2005; Thorpe, 2004; Tsang, 2003). Both Thorpe (2004) and Tsang (2003) concur that reflective learning journals in teacher education programs work best when developed over a significant period of time. When structured as a meaningful class activity for preservice and practicing teachers, students gain insights into their own self-awareness as they explore numerous concepts about themselves, teaching, and the worldwide community. Roland's (1995) research on journaling with preservice art educators calls upon art education faculty to use journals to aid preservice art educators in examining why they want to become teachers and how their desire to teach can endure the test of time by earnestly contemplating the profession's many challenges and rewards. In line with this thinking, Bain (2004) argues: "Preservice students must play a larger role in examining their own suitability as art teachers because no one knows them better than themselves" (p. 46). Honest, reflective journals provide a constructive space for individuals to let out their frustrations and assess inner feelings as they develop their own teaching styles (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005; Larrivee, 2000). They can also assist students in better understanding their strengths and weaknesses and how this relates to their teaching. Through self investigation and research on how others connect to the human story, we learn that we are not alone and that other people face similar experiences.

## Methodology

This qualitative study was based on the *Art for Life* method of creating research journals<sup>1</sup> (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005). Anderson and Milbrandt's model of creative research journals fuse art and writing to engage students in meaningful learning about topics that are important to them. Within their journals students analyze, interpret, and evaluate how interdisciplinary knowledge corresponds to their lives. The research question that guided this study is: What themes drive student research journals and how does the exploration of these themes espouse preservice art education?

*Procedure.* This study was conducted with undergraduate students enrolled in Introduction to Art Education during the 2005 and 2006 spring semesters. Out of forty-four students I selected six students' journals as suggested by Hodder (2000) to study in further detail based on their descriptive contents and varied themes. Participants were at different stages in life. Four were traditional undergraduate students, while two had previous careers before deciding to pursue art education. The students' names have been concealed to ensure privacy due to the personal nature of research journals. As part of the class curriculum students created research journals that were approximately 100 pages long. They turned in their journals five times a semester in two week intervals. Each section was approximately twenty pages long. For the first section, students described who they are through art, text, and photographs. In the second section, students selected three topics that were important to their lives. Next, they chose one of the topics and researched it in depth through subject integration, art history, aesthetics, art criticism, and art production. The final two sections provided the students with a format to fine tune their research and make general conclusions about the process.

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<sup>1</sup> In *Art for Life*, the sample journals were developed by high school students enrolled in an International Baccalaureate program.

Throughout the semester I provided students with feedback on the progress of their journals as suggested by Anderson & Milbrandt (2005) and Bain (2004). I wrote remarks in student journals on sticky notes that provided them with suggestions on how to further develop their journals through research. In addition, I talked to students during class and office hours to go over any questions that they may have had about the journaling process and the development of themes. Since this form of journal writing was a new experience for the students (and me during the 2005 semester), we had many discussions about the route the journals could take and sharing sessions in which students could walk around and look at other students' journals and ask them about their work. We also used Chapter 10 *What Drives You? Research Notebooks and a Sense of Self in Art for Life* (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005) as a guide. During the 2006 semester, students could view photocopied examples from the previous class. Because journals are personal in nature, students who did not want to share specific information with the class had the option of using bulldog clips to mark off private pages. All students respected other students' privacy.

*Qualitative data analysis.* This qualitative study of student research journals represents my interpretation of how the preservice art education majors used personally driven themes to reflect on their lives and the field of art education. I collected student journals and coded them into themes. When working with these documents, I followed Hodder's (2000) method of evaluation. First, I interpreted the context in which the journals were made. Second, I looked for individual similarities and differences in student journals. Third, I used my review of literature and knowledge of teaching to determine how this data is relevant to the field of art education. Upon completion, I submitted my interpretations to the students for a member check. Lastly, because it is my job to prepare

preservice art education students for work as teachers, I reflected on my own teaching and interpretation of the journals.

### **Presentation of the Data**

After coding the data I observed three common themes in the students' journals. First, each of the students pondered what it meant to become an art teacher. Next, all students used the disciplines of art education to research a variety of social issues, yet students had different comfort levels when learning how to connect their topics to art production, aesthetics, art history, and criticism activities. Lastly, all students used the journal as an instrument to self-reflect, problem solve, and ask questions. The following paragraphs provide a glimpse into the students' thoughts about teaching and what is important to them.

*Mary: "Do I have enough skills to teach art?"* Mary, a junior, is the first person in her family to attend college. Throughout the beginning sections of her journal she repeatedly asked: "Do I have enough skills to teach art?" (p. 33). She questioned her ability to teach because she had limited exposure to art in school (see Figure 1). While observing a special needs school she came in contact with an art therapist who worked as the lead art instructor. Mary explained that she felt uncomfortable with her drawing skills. The art therapist listened to Mary and assuaged her fears by explaining that she too had fears about teaching, yet she loves her job. All Mary needed to do was practice drawing and she would be fine.



*Figure 1.* Collage served as a safe, fun and creative means for Mary to explore her artistic skills.

Due to overwhelming stresses in her life including going to school and work full time and family and social commitments, Mary had difficulties finding a research topic. She remarked that she had spent more time venting in her journal about her overwhelming stresses than researching and admitted: “It does feel better to get some of this out of my mind and off my chest” (p. 79). To help her select an appropriate topic, we talked about her personal stresses and how both teachers and students have stress. If she wanted, she could research this topic and relate it to her own experience. Mary was finally satisfied with her topic and went over the required 100 pages. Her research identified the reasons behind teacher and student stress. She also learned stress reduction strategies. Near the completion of her journal, she articulated what she learned:

In the beginning the journal was okay! But as the sections went on I was not happy with my topic. Thanks to help from an understanding teacher! I am now working in a new direction! I am happier with this topic because it relates to me, what I am feeling, thinking, and wondering. (p. 89)

She further added that she is learning about good stress and how to use stress to her advantage. Moreover, she wants her classroom to be a place where children learn how to manage their own stress and partake in lessons that assist them in becoming successful in life.

*Chris: "I am constantly in the process of reinventing myself."* Chris, a sophomore whose journal theme is self-discovery, describes himself as a story teller. On the first page of his journal, he professed that while art was a form of expression to most people, for him it was a means to create his own identity. "In writing and visually [through art], I am constantly in the process of reinventing myself, hoping that with each incarnation I will be another step closer to understanding myself and my relationship with the world" (p. 1). Like many students in the class, Chris questioned his ability to teach others as he is still in the process of developing his own identity. Yet, he realizes that others have asked this same question. His journal is filled with original comic book characters that are based on different aspects of his personality. Delving deeper into his journal, he states that he has a better understanding of who he is and how different aspects of his personality connect him to others.

As a teacher Chris wants his students to be able to convey their ideas creatively. He argued: "Everybody has a story. But not everyone believes in their ability to express themselves." To make his case, he interpreted research on teaching art through writing and comic strips (see Figure 2). In the process, Chris voiced his frustration with the standardization of American schools because it limits a student's individuality and creative expression.

It is believed that art is just ornamentation to the standard repertoire of English, mathematics, and the sciences. This makes art seem like it is unnecessary, when in reality, art is vitally important to the development of a well-adjusted person. (p. 25)



Figure 2. Chris developed comic strips to interpret his research on teaching art.

Chris strives for an educational environment where children can critically analyze materials and come up with their own interpretations. He will use his art classroom to promote this. Within his journal, he argues that students can choose whatever means they are interested in to express themselves. For instance, Chris validates comics as a relevant art form that is useful in the classroom by comparing a Manga<sup>1</sup> to Picasso's *Guernica* (1937).

“We need to get past the idea that comics are only meant to be funny. They can be philosophical thought experiments. Good cartooning, like any art, is about the message as much as the skill of the artist” (p. 103).

*Irene: “I am struggling on the art history, art criticism, aesthetics, and production activities.”* At the beginning of her journal Irene, a junior, writes: “My mom teaches first grade. She hates her job and discourages me everyday from teaching” (p. 4). Irene chooses not to heed to mother’s warnings because she is convinced that her mother only feels that way because she does not like the paperwork. Irene has a passion for both children and art and wants to make a positive difference as a teacher. She selected eating disorders as her research topic based on her high school experience when several of her friends

<sup>2</sup> A Manga is a Japanese style comic.

on the track team suffered from them. At first Irene found it difficult to connect her theme to the disciplines of art. “My topic is very defined by this point, but I am struggling on the art history, art criticism, aesthetics, and production activities” (p. 61). Through class discussions and brainstorming, she was able to relate her research to art by identifying how body types have been portrayed throughout history. In her search, she discovered identical twin sisters whose artistic mission was for the two of them to equal the weight of one healthy woman<sup>1</sup>. Irene felt shocked by this art form and used aesthetics to question whether their work was indeed art, an illness, or a combination of the two. Ultimately, she decided that their art

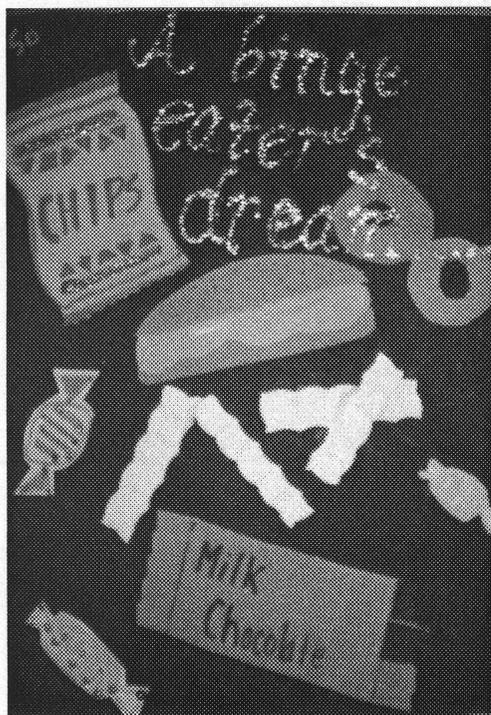


Figure 3. Irene's collage *A Binge Eater's Dream* is filled with french-fries, chips, a hamburger and sweets.

was an illness. Irene enjoyed the journaling experience because it was the first time that she learned how to unite art with real life issues (see Figure 3).

Vanessa: “As a teacher I can make a difference.” Like Irene, Vanessa’s mother is also a teacher. She developed her research topic based on a lesson plan called *Art: It Takes a Village*<sup>2</sup>. In her mid thirties, Vanessa left a higher paying job to teach. As part of a global village, Vanessa wants to make a positive impact on children

<sup>3</sup> Visit <http://www.guardian.co.uk/Archive/Article/0,4273,4357763,00.html> for more information.

<sup>4</sup> Visit <http://www.pbs.org/teachersource/prek2/issues/pflesson/art.shtm> for more information about this lesson.

and wrote in her journal “As a teacher I can make a difference” (p. 31). To do so, she observed practicing art teachers who shared lessons and talked to her about relevant pedagogical issues (see Figure 4). One teacher described a time when a student’s artworks revealed trouble at home. After hearing this Vanessa felt it was her responsibility as a teacher to help. She then reflected on the situation in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina and how so many people suffered while waiting for assistance. She collected children’s artworks and poems that she found on the Internet that told of their experiences in the storm. Concurrently, she connected the present situation with the city’s rich cultural traditions. She selected and analyzed numerous artworks including jazz, fine art, folk art, and poetry.

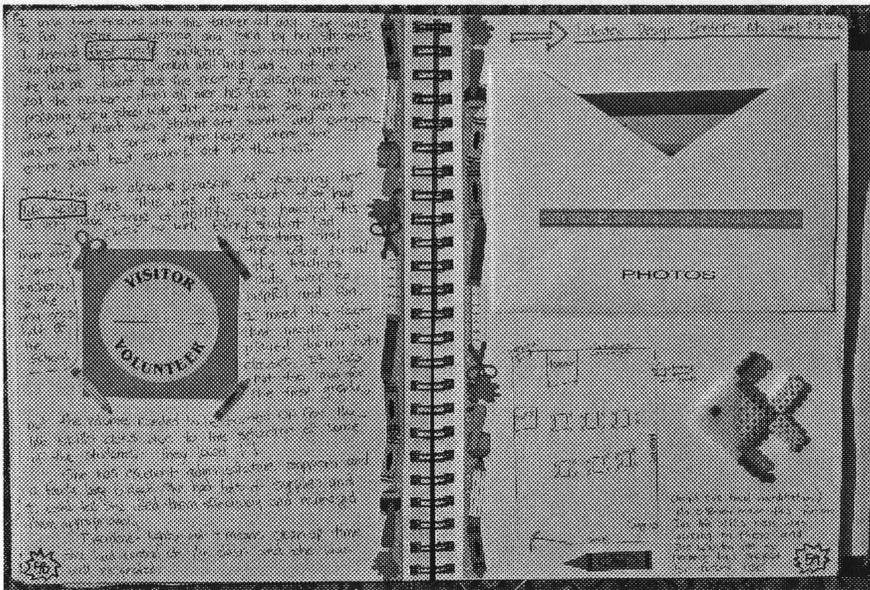


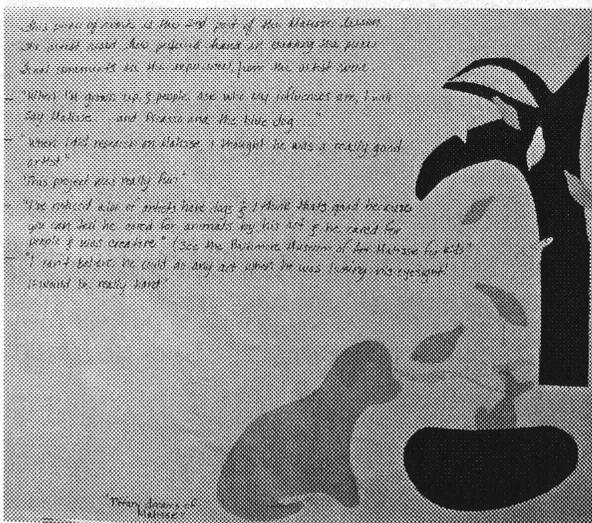
Figure 4. Pages from Vanessa’s journal.

In her quest to make a difference in students’ lives, Vanessa observed practicing art teachers who made a difference in their students’ lives. Of the teacher she observed in these pages of her journal, Vanessa described her experience: “I could have stayed with this teacher all day. She was so fun, creative, welcoming and loved by her students.”

After learning about the community’s history, she questioned

whether or not New Orleans should be rebuilt. Despite the massive destruction, she discovered that there had been several improvements made since the hurricane. At the onset of her research, she felt that New Orleans was beyond reconstruction. However, after learning about the city, she decided that New Orleans had no choice but to rebuild. New Orleans is a part of the American village and too many people's lives had been interrupted by the storm. To conclude her journal, she wrote: "Every time I tried to find a reason for people to give up, I found three reasons not to" (p. 100). Her discovery has provided her with a resource to teach children that even if it takes a long time to rebuild persistence and hard work do pay off.

*Kennedy: "Can art help overcome ... obstacles?"*. Kennedy is also in her mid thirties and chose art education as a second career choice. She wants to be a teacher to provide students with a richer art experience than both she and her daughter had in school. She used her journal to pinpoint how to make it better. Before returning to college, Kennedy worked as a counselor for a homeless shelter and volunteered



with animal rescue (see Figure 5). Her experience brought her in contact with people and animals who were challenged by obstacles. When pondering her research theme she asked herself: "Can art help overcome some of the obstacles?" (p. 33)

Figure 5. Kennedy worked with her daughter to create a collage combining their passion for animals

Her research led her to the artist George Rodrigue, whose dog

Tiffany died at the age of twelve<sup>1</sup>. Rodrigue missed his dog terribly; she always sat by his side as he painted. As a way to connect to her he started painting her image. Kennedy admired Rodrigue because he used his art as a positive way to deal with Tiffany's loss. Furthermore, in honor of Tiffany, he promotes awareness and raises money through his art for animals living in dire conditions.

The journal experience combined issues Kennedy cares about and taught her about herself. At first, she felt that journaling would provide her with an opportunity to try a project she would do with her future students. Then, her feelings changed:

The journal has taught me that no matter how old you are, there is always a little something left to learn about yourself. I have learned that although the road I took to get where I am today, was long and sometimes tumultuous, nonetheless, it was meaningful. I can only benefit from a deeper understanding of myself and allow this benefit to trickle down upon my students. I am confident that my personal experiences, beliefs and desires will compliment my teachings. Unforeseen by myself earlier, it is now clear that obstacles as a theme is not just a unit I will teach, but an underlying theme in my philosophy of teaching. (p. 98)

*Eric: "If I can teach one student ... I have changed the world."* Eric, a senior, described the restrictive art experience he had had in school. Many of the assignments seemed useless to him because they did not connect to his personal interests. When choosing his career he stated: "I'm not going to let that [my negative school art experience] stop me. I'm going to grow from the experience" (p. 26). Eric acknowledged that giving a child a paintbrush cannot solve world hunger; however, he is aware of art's benefits and how a good teacher can beget positive changes in the young people (s)he will teach. He feels that a teacher should show students their potential through guidance, facilitating

<sup>5</sup> To learn more about George Rodrigue visit <http://www.georgerodrigue.com/> and <http://www.art4now.com/biogr.htm>.

their creativity, and mentoring. Eric selected the topic of the healing

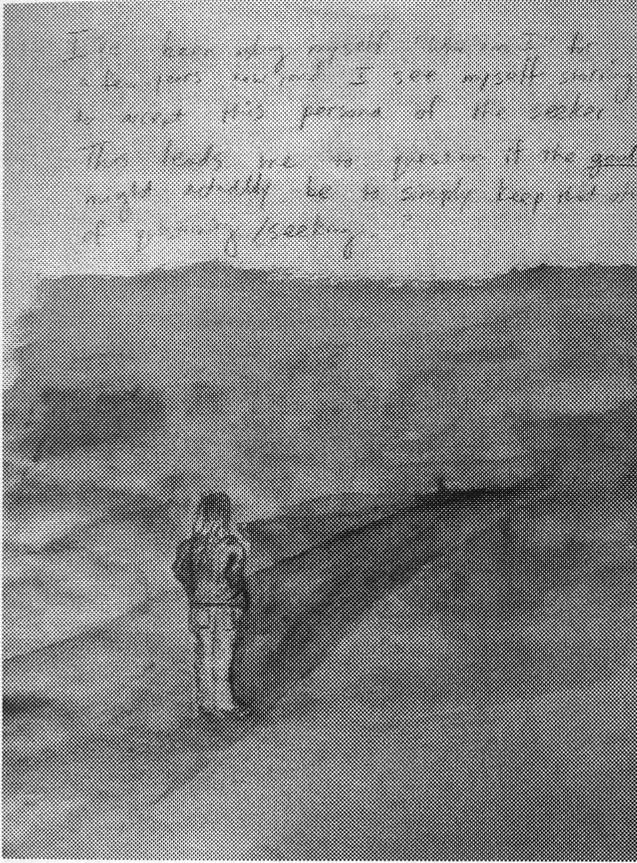


Figure 6. In this image Eric ponders “Who am I?”

powers of art based on the positive role that art has played in his own life. In college, Eric was introduced to the artist Joseph Beuys and felt an immediate connection.

“Through Joseph Beuys I see my potential. If I can teach one student to understand themselves, their world, their fellow human beings, then I have changed the world” (p. 44). Eric

has a solid grasp of the disciplines of art. He enjoys discussions on art. As a teacher he wants his students to be able to talk about art as well. In his journal, he critiqued Beuys’ *Felt Suit* (1970) because he believed that he could use it in class to pique student interest and allow them to explore their unique viewpoints.

At the end of his journal, Eric reflected on the type of teacher he would like to become.

I feel like I have set out some clear reasons for me to teach. I feel like I have explored teaching on a personal level in order to bring about a personal desire to teach. In my life, I want to do things that are meaningful—things that help people. Art is one of my favorite things, and I really think

that it has the power to change the world and individuals.

(p. 99)

Even though he cogently presented his goals as a teacher, he still questions how his philosophy of teaching will change once he enters the classroom. He desires to remember the big picture of what teaching means to him and why he wants to teach.

### **Implications for Instruction**

This study demonstrates how students have used journaling to cogitate about their roles as teachers, self-reflect, and identify topics that are meaningful to them by interpreting them through art. Following Thorpe's (2004) recommendations for reflective learning journals, the following paragraphs address the need to (a) communicate journal writing objectives clearly; (b) provide constructive feedback; (c) remain cognizant and observant of ethical considerations; and (d) use journal writing to improve teaching.

As previously stated, teaching research journals was a new experience for me. Similar to Roland's (1995) and Bates's (2000) studies, I understand that some students prefer to communicate orally, while others prefer written and visual formats. By clearly explaining the journal's objectives and providing students class time to talk about their journals, I was able to meet both types of learners' needs. However, I observed that even though my objectives were clear and broad enough to encourage students to creatively interpret them, some students had difficulties applying their research topics to the disciplines of art. For many, my Introduction to Art Education course was the first time they connected the disciplines of art to social issues. While developing their research journals, most students were in the process of learning how to fuse these ideas. In essence, journaling was an exploratory, learn-as-you-go process. In the future, I plan to attenuate student stress levels by explaining that many people have difficulties learning how to connect themes to art. Furthermore, I

will provide students with additional class time so that they can work on the specific artworks they selected for their research journals, view class examples, and talk with fellow students and me. It helps have peer and teacher support as well as see how others have successfully connected their research themes to art production, criticism, history, and aesthetics.

On a positive note, I felt that I was able to provide students with constructive feedback throughout the journaling process. Working with students' journals, I was able to discover their strengths and where they needed additional assistance. I also had an open-door policy and let students know that I was available to help them. While providing feedback, I discovered how open and trusting many of the students were as they revealed personal information and shared their hardships. A few felt uncomfortable discussing deeply personal issues. I remember one instance when a student wrote that she had to decide how much she wanted me to know. I agree that it is the student's choice. Under the guidance of a caring teacher, journals provide a constructive space for individuals to let out their frustrations, assess inner conflicts and feelings of isolation as they develop their own teaching styles (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005; Larrivee, 2000). Therefore, students need to have the option of closing off pages that they do not want to share. As art educators we are not trained therapists and need to respect a student's right to privacy. When their remarks seemed troubling to me and/or weighed heavily on a student, I talked with each student privately and provided professional references such as therapists who are available free of cost at the university health center. I also stressed when using research journals with youth a teacher cannot send a child back into a potentially harmful situation. The teacher must report suspected abuse to the proper authorities immediately.

The aim of the research journals was to teach my students how to become effective teachers. Roland (1995) maintained that

journaling can assist students in overcoming the assumptions and misunderstandings they have about teaching; however, it is not a panacea. I agree with this argument. In teacher preparation programs knowing oneself is an important part of becoming a teacher and journaling is an effective mode to teach students about self-reflection. Journaling provides students insight into their worldviews and how their likes and biases shape their teaching philosophies. While enhancing their self-knowledge, I encourage preservice teachers to see how their own identities relate to society. The journals used in this study demonstrated that students' ideas and perceptions changed and strengthened over the semester.

To be better prepared for teaching, I argue that journaling should be combined with a variety of school observations, where student-teachers can engage in meaningful conversations with teachers. Additionally, preservice teachers need to accrue experience teaching children before they begin their student-teaching. Likewise, preservice art educators should be aware of the various regional, state, and national organizations available to teachers. Leaving the university is often a lonely experience for beginning art teachers because they miss the embracing environment that authentic art education programs provide. When students are given choices and taught how to self-reflect and reach out to others for support, they go from limited possibilities to endless ones.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, these six research journals provided a glimpse into the minds of preservice teachers who are at different stages in life. Each student selected his or her journal theme as a means to learn topics that were important to them. Using the *Art for Life* philosophy (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005), it was my aim to teach preservice art education students who were enrolled in their first art education class about the value of teaching meaningful art curricula through

authentic instruction. Those who used the journal experience to its full advantage grew from the process and contemplated their belief systems. This project has opened the door to the many possibilities that they can call upon to begin a prosperous career as an art teacher. The students have pondered what it means to become an art teacher, connected a variety of social issues to the disciplines of art education, and used their journals to self-reflect, problem solve, and ask questions. Thus, they can apply this knowledge to teaching their students that they too can cultivate their own talents through engaging student driven curricula that challenges and sparks their imaginations. Because this study examines students' use of the *Art for Life* journal method in their first university art education course, further studies could investigate how their thought processes develop and change throughout their studies and into their teaching careers

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