

Postmodern Art Education in Practice

**Karen Keifer-Boyd/Patricia M. Amburgy/
Wanda B.Knight***

Review of Olivia Gude, (Ed.). (n.d.). Spiral Art Education.

Retrieved December 15, 2003, from the University of Illinois at Chicago, Art Education Program

Web site: <http://www.uic.edu/classes/ad/ad382>

What does postmodern art education look like in practice? Although there have been many discussions of postmodern art education in the professional literature, there have been few curricular resources that provide concrete examples of content and strategies to help teachers apply postmodern concepts in practice. The Web site *Spiral Art Education* offers practical approaches to postmodern art education with emphases on artmaking, contemporary art, and critical perspectives. We review and critique the *Spiral* projects from a social theory perspective, paying special attention to issues of silence discussed in our article "Schooled in Silence," published in this volume of the *Journal of Social Theory in Art Education*.

We begin with an overview of the components of the site. Sections of the *Spiral* site include information about Spiral Workshop, a Saturday morning art program directed by Olivia Gude at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), and the UIC Contemporary Community Curriculum Initiative (CCC), a project in which art teachers, preservice teachers, art education professors, and other art professionals

collaborated to develop innovative art curricula for middle school and high school classrooms. The Web site also has sections that contain articles about postmodern art education, background information about the UIC Art Education Program, and a profile of faculty member Olivia Gude, the *Spiral* site editor. The largest section and centerpiece of the site, aptly titled "Cool Curriculum," is a collection of art projects that were developed and taught through the Spiral Workshop and CCC. The collection of projects represents a record of experimentation and innovation, rather than a definitive or comprehensive curriculum for postmodern practice. "Spiral" art education refers to "innovative approaches to middle school and high school art curriculum developed by research projects spiraling out from the UIC Art Education Program" (*Spiral Art Education* home page, ¶ 1).

In the Spiral Workshop, preservice teachers in Art Education work with teens from the Chicago area to create forms of art education that are "rooted in the stories and concerns of the students and their communities through connecting the practices of contemporary artmaking with the practices of contemporary pedagogy" (*Spiral Art Education*, Spiral Workshop, ¶ 2). The Workshop is both "a studio where teen artists can explore artmaking in a cultural studies context" and "a laboratory to develop curriculum projects that can be taught in middle school and high school art classrooms" (*Spiral Art Education*, Spiral Workshop, ¶ 3). The Workshop groups, organized around themes and techniques, conclude with a show of the students' work and a community reception. Teen artists in the Spiral Workshop are encouraged to investigate visual phenomena in relation to concepts such as "the real," "the natural," "the normal," and other socially constructed ideas. For example, in 1998 the Chiaroscuro Spiral Workshop group investigated constructions of race and color in U.S. society. In 1999 the Reality Check group considered reality and representation in imagery, and the differences between the teens'

experiences of Chicago and the way the city is represented in tourist-oriented postcards. In 1999 the Thought Patterns group investigated visual patterns and colors as signifiers of masculinity and femininity. From the perspective of UIC faculty and student teachers, Workshop projects are "interventions and additions" to current forms of art education, not a "new orthodoxy" based on current discourse in art. They see their work as educators as "an eclectic, postmodern approach to curriculum construction. We pick through curriculum artifacts, refurbish what is still useful, discard what is no longer necessary, and introduce entirely new contents when needed" (*Spiral Art Education, Spiral Workshop*, ¶ 5).

The Contemporary Community Curriculum Initiative (CCC) is a collaboration between the UIC Art Education Program, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, and the Chicago Public Schools. In 2000, twenty-five urban and suburban teachers participated in a semester-long workshop series at UIC and the Museum of Contemporary Art. The CCC Initiative ascribed to the belief that "teachers who collaboratively contextualize the making, understanding, and valuing of art within larger cultural frameworks of community, identity, agency, democratic control, and quality of everyday life, will create dynamic curriculum that engages students in learning about art through authentically representing contemporary cultural discourses" (*Spiral Art Education, CCC Initiative, Introduction*, ¶ 1). Participants in these CCC workshops developed most of the projects in the Cool Curriculum section of the *Spiral* site.

Art Education Articles, another section of the *Spiral* site, presents theoretical foundations of the curriculum created by teachers in the CCC and pre-service teachers in the Spiral Workshop. The articles present curricular theory, postmodern theory, and semiotic theory. Additionally, a manifesto of what comprises a quality postmodern art curriculum stresses that the curriculum should be rooted in the life

experiences of the students, teachers, and in artmaking. Furthermore, the curriculum should be multi-cultural, fun, organic, emphasize contradictions and complexities; not be "obsessed with comprehensiveness or fundamental skills," develop "aesthetic sophistication, and proactive people"; and be democratic in seeking "input for choosing artworks to be studied" (*Spiral Art Education, Art Education Articles, "Rubric for a Quality Art Curriculum,"* ¶ 25, 31, & 11).

The Cool Curriculum section contains sixteen art projects, four developed in Spiral Workshops and twelve developed through the Contemporary Community Curriculum Initiative. A description of each project is organized into five parts: introduction of ideas or issues that were explored in the project; complete process plans, including handouts used in the project; samples of images and/or installations produced by students or teachers; sources of information about artists discussed in the project; and other contextual information. In some cases, the description includes a sixth part—variations of projects that were tried out with different groups. Materials used in the projects range from low tech to high tech, scratchboard to digital editing. Many of the projects combine text with images. All are related to contemporary art forms and provide accessible language for understanding current practices and concepts such as installation.

Six of the projects seem to us to be especially relevant to breaking the silence in art education, as discussed in our article "Schooled in Silence." At the end of our article, we suggested art education strategies to "expose the unmarked, re-envision how they are marked, reveal what is absent, and critique the prevalent cultural stories in visual culture." We looked for projects that exposed inequality and envisioned a future based in participatory democratic principles and practices. The *Spiral* projects we see as being especially relevant to breaking silence in art education are Elementary "I," Power of Advertising, Big

Questions, Autobiographical Comics, Color Coding, and Drawing Color Lines.

UIC's Contemporary Community Curriculum Initiative workshops began with Elementary "I," a project whose goal was to have teachers reflect upon their elementary school years by creating a "conceptual map" of what they noticed and thought about at that age. The project encouraged introspection of discursive space as "the possible or potential space that exists within various school situations" (*Spiral Art Education, Cool Curriculum, Elementary "I," Introduction, ¶ 5*). These aesthetic investigations into one's early artmaking in school experiences raise issues from personal narratives of school art culture. The Elementary "I" project assumes that "encountering our own earlier selves" will allow teachers to better connect with the lives of their young students (*Spiral Art Education, Cool Curriculum, Elementary "I," Introduction, ¶ 4*). Paying attention to what is marked and unmarked in cultural memories is pronounced when pre-service teachers share and compare their stories. Additionally, the re-envisioning of discursive space surrounding school art curricula prepares pre-service teachers to depart from teaching the way in which they were taught.

The Power of Advertising project was developed by Austin Community Academy students for the CCC Initiative, under the direction of art teacher Tracy Van Dulnen. The project introduced students to contemporary artists who "use the style and sometimes the means of mass media" to make social and political statements (*Spiral Art Education, Cool Curriculum, Power of Advertising, Introduction, ¶ 2*). This process led urban youth, through text and image, to make statements about "education, police brutality, black and white violence, teen pregnancy, fatherless homes, self esteem, and other issues that affect their lives" (*Spiral Art Education, Cool Curriculum, Power of Advertising, Introduction, ¶ 3*). By marking what is commonly unmarked in the media, the students broke the silence about their lived

reality. The artmaking merged new technical and conceptual processes with familiar processes, such as black-and-white digital photography combined with large scale photocopying. Color was added with colored pencils or tempera paint to retell the media stories from the students' perspectives.

Big Questions is a project that was developed in the Portrait of a Young Artist group of the 2001 Spiral Workshop. For this project, teachers wanted students to consider questions of why we are here and why we do what we do in our lives. These important questions are commonly considered by artists, but the teachers recognized that many teens feel shy about revealing too much of themselves in a school environment. To make such inquiry more comfortable, students were offered a position of "deniability" by portraying themselves as superhero characters. Students could say to themselves, "I'm not really asking these questions; my superhero character is" (*Spiral Art Education, Cool Curriculum, Big Questions, Introduction, ¶ 4*). Students altered digital photographs of themselves and placed their superhero characters in dramatic scenes of their home city. They added text to the images to convey their superheroes' thoughts and powers. Voices often absent from prevalent cultural narratives are presented in this project to break personal silences in a way that exposes through an alter ego.

The CCC project Autobiographical Comics was developed by visiting artist Heather McAdams. In this project, art teachers and students created comic strips that explored interesting moments in their lives. Many of the comics had narrative structures, but others were composed as lists. The project gave voice to students' experiences. "Students appreciate being given the knowledge and skills to tell stories about their lives in a medium that they find exciting. ... Comics can be printed in school and local newspapers or used to create shows about contemporary student life" (*Spiral Art Education, Cool Curriculum,*

Questions, Autobiographical Comics, Color Coding, and Drawing Color Lines.

UIC's Contemporary Community Curriculum Initiative workshops began with Elementary "I," a project whose goal was to have teachers reflect upon their elementary school years by creating a "conceptual map" of what they noticed and thought about at that age. The project encouraged introspection of discursive space as "the possible or potential space that exists within various school situations" (*Spiral Art Education, Cool Curriculum, Elementary "I," Introduction, ¶ 5*). These aesthetic investigations into one's early artmaking in school experiences raise issues from personal narratives of school art culture. The Elementary "I" project assumes that "encountering our own earlier selves" will allow teachers to better connect with the lives of their young students (*Spiral Art Education, Cool Curriculum, Elementary "I," Introduction, ¶ 4*). Paying attention to what is marked and unmarked in cultural memories is pronounced when pre-service teachers share and compare their stories. Additionally, the re-envisioning of discursive space surrounding school art curricula prepares pre-service teachers to depart from teaching the way in which they were taught.

The Power of Advertising project was developed by Austin Community Academy students for the CCC Initiative, under the direction of art teacher Tracy Van Dulnen. The project introduced students to contemporary artists who "use the style and sometimes the means of mass media" to make social and political statements (*Spiral Art Education, Cool Curriculum, Power of Advertising, Introduction, ¶ 2*). This process led urban youth, through text and image, to make statements about "education, police brutality, black and white violence, teen pregnancy, fatherless homes, self esteem, and other issues that affect their lives" (*Spiral Art Education, Cool Curriculum, Power of Advertising, Introduction, ¶ 3*). By marking what is commonly unmarked in the media, the students broke the silence about their lived

reality. The artmaking merged new technical and conceptual processes with familiar processes, such as black-and-white digital photography combined with large scale photocopying. Color was added with colored pencils or tempera paint to retell the media stories from the students' perspectives.

Big Questions is a project that was developed in the Portrait of a Young Artist group of the 2001 Spiral Workshop. For this project, teachers wanted students to consider questions of why we are here and why we do what we do in our lives. These important questions are commonly considered by artists, but the teachers recognized that many teens feel shy about revealing too much of themselves in a school environment. To make such inquiry more comfortable, students were offered a position of "deniability" by portraying themselves as superhero characters. Students could say to themselves, "I'm not really asking these questions; my superhero character is" (*Spiral Art Education, Cool Curriculum, Big Questions, Introduction, ¶ 4*). Students altered digital photographs of themselves and placed their superhero characters in dramatic scenes of their home city. They added text to the images to convey their superheroes' thoughts and powers. Voices often absent from prevalent cultural narratives are presented in this project to break personal silences in a way that exposes through an alter ego.

The CCC project Autobiographical Comics was developed by visiting artist Heather McAdams. In this project, art teachers and students created comic strips that explored interesting moments in their lives. Many of the comics had narrative structures, but others were composed as lists. The project gave voice to students' experiences. "Students appreciate being given the knowledge and skills to tell stories about their lives in a medium that they find exciting. ... Comics can be printed in school and local newspapers or used to create shows about contemporary student life" (*Spiral Art Education, Cool Curriculum,*

Autobiographical Comics, Introduction, ¶ 4). The humor and satirical comic format encourages students to re-envision how they are marked.

"Color Coding," an article by Olivia Gude, describes a project that disrupts the "fixed set of descriptive qualities" of the hue circle, value and chroma scales commonly and repeatedly taught throughout the K-12 art education experience, sometimes even into foundation courses in college (*Spiral Art Education*, Art Education Articles, "Color Coding," ¶ 2). Instead, the postmodern color project begins by having students look at works that use double coding informed by "hybrids of various cultural traditions" (*Spiral Art Education*, Art Education Articles, "Color Coding," ¶ 8). In these works examining the systems that verifies and researching for other possible ways of knowing problematize "verifiable" scientific color theory. The Web site provides divergent color theory models, and notes that some colors that can be seen do not fit in any model, such as "the electric blue of a butterfly wing" (*Spiral Art Education*, Art Education Articles, "Color Coding," ¶ 14). The project continues with disruption to commonly accepted knowledge about pure form and explores "cultural conventions of natural symbolism" (*Spiral Art Education*, Art Education Articles, "Color Coding," ¶ 14). Thus, students critique prevalent cultural stories about color from scientific explanations and perceptual observations.

"Drawing Color Lines," another article by Olivia Gude, describes a project that extends the knowledge of diverse cultural color symbolism to a critique for implications of racist intentions. Gude suggests strategies to subvert these unexamined uses of color to mark and unmark Black and White. The Drawing Color Lines project takes students through a critical process to problematize how race privilege is maintained in the symbolism of visual and spoken languages. Through the artmaking process involving black and white reversals of familiar cultural images, students recognize that "racial charged

symbolism is an unchallenged part of our everyday" " (*Spiral Art Education*, Art Education Articles, "Drawing Color Lines," ¶ 33).

The *Spiral* site is useful to art teachers, preservice teachers, university professors, and artist-teachers. The site is interesting, well organized, and easy to navigate. *Spiral Art Education* offers practical examples of postmodern art education that demonstrate ways we might incorporate contemporary ideas into art curricula and help break the forms of silence that protect privilege and power in U.S. society.

***Authors' Note:** This is a true co-authored work with equal contributions from all of us and no first author. The order in which we list authors is based on a rotation we use in our collaborations on publications