Art Nights: Reimagining Professional Development as a Ritual

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Abstract
Art teachers’ need for connection, passion for artmaking, desire for mentoring, and quest for renewal led me to ask, what happens if we reimagine professional development as ritualized artistic practice? What would occur if our ritual was collaborative and intergenerational? How might ritualized professional development aid the quest for renewal? Pulling imagery and quotes from a larger qualitative and arts-based research study (Willcox, 2017), this visual essay shares what happened when an intergenerational group of art teachers met and engaged in artistic inquiry about their teaching practice. Specifically, it weaves together imagery and quotes to illustrate how our ritual, art nights, recognized and celebrated the everyday tasks of art teachers, connected isolated and alienated art teachers, replenished the emotionally exhausted, and privileged the practice of art making.

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Grunting slightly, Sarah struggled to open a container of paint. Unsuccessful, she tried again; this time, two grunts were heard at the table. Over the next few seconds, all the art teachers sitting around the table (and one who joined through FaceTime) grunted in support. While it was only Sarah who physically touched the container, the bizarre, supportive community of art educators worked together to overcome the obstacle. What many administrators fail to understand is that sometimes what art educators need most is a community of like-minded people and a container of paint.

**Art Teacher Burnout, the Quest for Renewal, & Professional Development**

The core dimensions of art teacher burnout (i.e., emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, reduced self-efficacy) are ignored by most professional development programs. Because of this, I sought to reimagine a professional development program for art teachers seeking renewal. Art teachers’ need for connection, passion for artmaking, desire for mentoring, and quest for renewal led me to ask, what happens if we reimagine professional development as ritualized artistic practice? What would occur if our ritual was collaborative and intergenerational? How might ritualized professional development aid the quest for renewal? Pulling imagery and quotes from a larger qualitative and arts-based research study (Willcox, 2017), this visual essay shares how a ritualized professional development program supported teachers in their quest for renewal.

**Ritual**

To develop an alternative professional development program for art teachers, I borrowed three interconnected ideas from Dissanayake’s (1992) conception of ritual: 1) aesthetic experiences can be used to arouse awareness; 2) artistic inquiry can be used to transition into the unknown; and 3) teacher communities can be used to socially reinforce behaviors and beliefs. Together, these ideas provide a philosophical orientation for an ongoing, content-specific form of professional development for art teachers, which we lovingly referred to as *Art Nights*.

First, aesthetic experiences can be used to arouse awareness. Borrowing from Dewey’s (1934) description of aesthetic experience, I believe that making art can interrupt habitual ways of being in the world and invite a holistic experience. Further, I adopt Greene’s (1978; 1980) connection between wide-awakeness and making art to help art teachers discover, see, and learn. A ritualized artmaking practice invites aesthetic experiences for art educators and opportunities to see what they did not see before.

Second, artistic inquiry transitions us into unknown spaces. Rituals pursue transformative experiences and therefore are capable of moving participants from mechanical routines into uncharted and exciting territories (Dissanayake, 1992, p. 70). Barone and Eisner (2012) argue that arts-based research helps us illuminate our experiences, broaden human understandings, and “extend beyond the limiting constraints of discursive communication to express meanings that otherwise would be ineffable” (Barone and Eisner, 2012, p. 1). A ritual revolving around making art and re-examining new ways of being can support teacher renewal.

Third, teacher communities can bolster behaviors and beliefs. Because rituals are formalized, socially reinforced, and bracketed from everyday life (Dissanayake, 1992, p. 48), they can help participants understand their lived experiences in relation to their community. Gates (2010) argued...
that art teachers need professional development to overcome professional isolation and alienation. Similarly, Hochtritt et al. (2014) illuminated the need for ongoing and formalized professional development programs. A ritual that socially reinforces shared beliefs has the potential to remind teachers about the joys of teaching art.

A ritualized professional development program, then, can empower art teachers to see their everyday experiences as significant and special; invite teachers to be wide-awake in their own lives and classrooms; and connect with others experiencing similar struggles. Through ongoing, community-driven meetings—like *Art Nights*—teachers can engage in their own artistic practice, feel supported, and linger in liminal spaces of the unknown.

**Our Ritual**

Held monthly on Friday nights between six and eight, our ritual allowed art teachers to finish their weekly teaching duties, gather their art supplies, and meet in the quest of renewal. Our community consisted of six female art teachers with two or more years of teaching experience and me. We came from public and private schools; elementary, middle, and high schools; suburban and urban schools; and affluent and underserved schools. Attendance was encouraged but not mandatory. Each meeting, we shared a simple dinner, worked in our visual journals or on larger art projects, and discussed our lived experiences as teachers. Below, I visually and verbally share what happened when an intergenerational group of art teachers met and engaged in artistic inquiry about their teaching practice. Specifically, I weave together imagery and quotes to illustrate how our ritual, *Art Nights*, recognized and celebrated the everyday tasks of art teachers, connected isolated and alienated art teachers, replenished the emotionally exhausted art teachers, and privileged the practice of art making.¹

**Ritualized Professional Development**

During our meetings, we recognized the everyday conundrums of being art teachers and organically explored curriculum inspiration and pedagogy questions. We asked for advice about classroom management, after-school commitments, and assessment practices. These conversations were not superficial like most traditional professional development programs. Teachers told stories, discussed passionately, and shared moments from their classroom in ways that illustrated vocational vitality. For example, when sharing strategies used to engage high school students, Sarah visually expressed and animatedly described one “Sketchbook Friday” in her class to the group (Figure 1). She shared,

> I brought out an opaque bag and I started fiddling in the bag and doing stuff and getting stuff ready, and the kids were like, ‘What's in the bag? What's in the bag?’ [Laughter] ‘Ms. D., what's in the bag?!! Ms. D., I'm scared! Ms. D., this is cool! What's in the bag?’ [Laughter] And then all of a sudden, I started blowing bubbles out of the bag because I had an electric bubble wand. And they were like, ‘AHHHH!’ I told them to ‘Go get out colors. Any medium you want. Just get out color. You can get paint, you can get pastels, Prismacolor pencils, a pen, marker, crayons—I don't care. Get it out. You have to draw these bubbles using only color. That's your only direction. Use color.’ I was like, ‘It can be

¹ Imagery includes photographs from *Art Nights* and visual journal entries from the learning community.

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any style. Any medium. The rules are you can't use black, you can't use white, and you have to use the medium that you picked out.’ They were like, ‘Ms. D., you're gonna be Snapchat famous!’ And they started Snapchatting me blowing bubbles in first period.

**Figure 1**
*Curriculum and Pedagogy Share*

During *Art Nights*, we discussed artists for inspiration, shared resources for teaching, and critiqued new art materials. We analyzed the erasable highlighter, the texture of travel watercolors, the use of coffee and tea in paintings, and the importance of a marker or pen tip. The topics of conversation often found themselves depicted in other members’ visual journals. For example, Figure 2 illustrates Li Cho exploring Sarah’s favorite markers.
Together we connected around systemic concerns for art educators. We discussed our principals who do not understand the arts, class sizes that are larger than the rest of the school, and our nonexistent budgets. Li Cho described how the late arrival of elementary generalist teachers to pick up their classes impacted her after-school commitments. She graciously shared, “While I am sure they do not mean it to be, it comes across as very disrespectful... They [the classroom teachers] don’t think about everything we have to do.” In response to this common concern, another teacher was less polite in her visual journal (Figure 3).
Rose and Hazel debated the best strategies for teaching without a sink, an increasingly common concern for art educators. When considering the differences between teaching elementary and high school art, the group explored the overwhelm of differentiating for 1,000 students.

As time continued, the group explored how to expand art programs and revealed invaluable fundraising methods used to purchase their supplies. We shared experiences teaching public and private schools, building schedules for our programs, and organizing art shows.

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Shifting our location from a school to an intimate home studio (Figure 5), we became closer physically, socially, and emotionally.

**Figure 5**
*Home Studio*

Rose shared, “Even though it was in my house at the table where we eat every day, when y’all were here, I felt like I was escaping from my life. I felt transformed.” Our meetings often started with hugs and ended when it was time to nurse. Figure 6 shares the precious moment when baby Cora put the finishing touches on our collaborative painting.
The initial small talk turned into deeper discussions surrounding teaching and life. Conversations seamlessly transitioned from the differences between teaching middle and high school to conversations about being new to motherhood; from unpacking a suitcase to navigating the lines between student and teacher. We vented about students’ inability to use rulers and lamented being the “lonely only” art teacher in a school. These meetings became a ritual that replenished the emotionally exhausted.

Acknowledging the whole person allowed us to understand the enormity of our lived experiences as art teachers. *Art Nights* excelled when the arbitrary lines between professional and personal were blurred. We shared our lived experiences as women struggling for balance. For example, Barb confided that she was exhausted and frustrated when her principal asked for specific work to be completed over the weekend. In response, Sarah sarcastically and sassily responded, “Bitch, I gotta weekend. You don't pay me these hours.” Then, the group discussed ways to support her (Figure 7).
Figure 7
Struggles with Work-Life Balance

We shared how we were coping with constant change in life and the educational landscape. In one meeting, Hazel shared “Change, it is a really big thing in my life. I don’t know what is about to happen, but I know things are about to happen.” She pointed to her huge baby bump and the group responded with laughter. Rose nodded enthusiastically as she just had her first baby. Hazel continued,

I am excited about it, but I am nervous and anxious about it too, and it bleeds over into my classroom sometimes…This year, there are a lot more kids in my room that are more capable and are there for the right reasons, but they make a lot more mess. I was kind of seeing the parallel between taking in the mess and appreciating it for what it is. It’s so much more fun, but it is kind of that jolt of release that you have to let go and kind of let things kind of fly.

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We also shared moments in which we needed different perspectives and support. Li Cho told a story of a student who completely ignored her with the group and then completed a visual/verbal diptych about her experience.

This prompted a conversation about how lonely teaching can be, even when surrounded by 35 students.

Often our vulnerable conversations wove our professional identities with our personal lives. In one meeting, Rose stated, “I’ve been an art teacher for 11 years. It’s like if I am not an art teacher, who

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am I? It's part of my identity you know?"

**Figure 10**
*Exploration of Teacher Identity*

At each meeting, we collaboratively worked to question—and renew—our capacity to be vital, present, and deeply connected to our students. Knowing that we were not alone and that there were alternative ways to teach reduced the emotional fatigue.

Art nights became a space to engage with others who knew a similar experience, an invitation to actively explore teaching practices in relation to others, and a disruption of the mechanical routines prompted by feelings of burnout. Perhaps most essential, art nights privileged art making, which was desperately needed for all of us. The teachers grappled with the need to make art to feel alive and the feelings of guilt when you do. Barb stated, “I have had a hard time finishing [a work of art] ... because I don’t allow myself time to sit and create if it’s not work or service orientated.”

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Rose summed it up nicely saying,

I feel like the thing about our group is that everybody there, part of their identity is being an art teacher. There are probably art teachers who it’s not their identity, it's just their job. So, I feel like if you are with a group of people who part of their identity is being an art educator, they're going to make you better—because they will push you to remember to do things you aren’t doing, that you used to do, or introduce new things. [They will help] to just not be comfortable where you are, but to always be pushing and introducing new ideas.

Engaging in ritualized, content-specific, and democratic professional development enabled learning opportunities in ways that traditional professional development programs disregard.²

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References