A Space for Dialogue: 
Including Students in the Art Exhibition Process

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After the Head's opening remarks, I turned to find Sarah at my side. She was watching the small woman making her way towards us. Her eyes were wide, and I could tell she was nervous. When she looked at me, I tried to give her a reassuring look, a "I remember the secret code and so don't be scared to use it" look. She smiled weakly. She knew the secret code, and after five minutes she was going to use it. "The octopus is interesting," she would say, and then I would find a way to artfully extract her from her docent responsibilities. She was convinced of this. She was bracing herself for five minutes; she could only promise me five minutes. "Mrs. Smith, this is Sarah, your sixth-grade docent for the afternoon, and Sarah, this is Mrs. Smith, the Chair of the Art Department. I have a feeling you two are going to have a lot of fun talking about Sarah's artwork." In her charming, welcoming way, Mrs. Smith reached out her hand and smiled wide at Sarah while saying how excited she was to meet her. Sarah's shoulders relaxed, just a little bit, and I exhaled a deep breath. Sarah was going to be just fine.

Lara Lackey (2008) defines an art exhibition as "the art and science of organizing visual, spatial, and material elements of environment into a composition that visitors move through in order to accomplish certain pre-established goals." That definition means one thing in the context of a museum, another in the context of a large high school, and yet another in the small setting of an elementary school. Each exhibition is a unique expression of those who establish and carry out the goals.

Like most art teachers, the other art teacher and I install a year-end annual art exhibition showcasing student artwork in our small elementary school. After many years of carrying this out without reevaluating our goals, we realized that we needed to make some changes. It had become a routine, and while there was appreciation for the student artwork, there did not seem to be much interaction with the work, even at the short opening. Parents, teachers, and administrators would make an appearance, talk briefly with a few students, and then breeze through the galleries, stopping to admire one or two pieces, but nothing more. Students primarily used the opening to socialize, admiring the work of their friends and pointing out what they liked, but would not dig deeper or talk with students outside of their social group. We wanted to open up the process to more student involvement and repurpose the exhibition from a static event to a dynamic space where conversation and interaction took place between adults and students. In doing so, we hoped to rejuvenate the school community's connection to this annual celebration of student creativity. Over the course of the school year, I conducted a qualitative research study in my classroom and documented the dialogic inquiries of my sixth-grade students as they became increasingly involved and invested in the annual art show.

What I discovered was the importance of creating spaces for dialogue about the meaning behind student artwork and of the role of art exhibitions in a school community. Through participation in various aspects of the exhibition-planning process and
the conversations that occurred throughout that process, students and adults were able to establish a deeper connection with and understanding of their own artwork and the artwork of their peers.

Over the course of the school year, students practiced curating their artwork in the hallway galleries, discussed the needs of the audience, and planned a smaller mid-year exhibition. As the year-end art show drew near, the students brainstormed possible ways they could help install and promote the art show and then broke into small groups based on interest. I stepped back to allow students to have more control over the planning and implementation of their vision for the show. They became curators and art installers; educators and sign designers; arts columnists and moviemakers; and performers and docents. In embodying these identities, they learned to talk about their artwork in different ways. These roles created the spaces for dialogue, and each conversation was a little different. In a school where there previously had been very little communication about the artwork on the walls, student involvement in the exhibition process and space for dialogue at the exhibition opening were the impetus for a school-wide renewal of energy and enthusiasm for talking about art. What follows are three snapshots of this transformation.

**Newspaper Columnists**

*Cora the Columnist: “In what ways does art [at the school] inspire you?”*

Principal: “I think what inspires me the most—well, some of it is just absolutely beautiful and so it is inspiring because it is really beautiful—but mostly it inspires me because of the creativity.... I think one of the wonderful things about art is that it is an opportunity to express yourself... and another thing is that while for some people, art just comes naturally and they want to do it, for other people, it's not that easy to do and it pushes you to do things you might not otherwise do and hopefully helps you to take risks and try things that you might not do otherwise.”

*Cora the Columnist: “If you were a student here, what would you look forward to doing in the art program?”*

Principal: “I have always, always wanted to take ceramics and I have never taken ceramics... although I really do love photography. The other thing I have learned is, I once took a drawing class— I am not very artistic— when I was in high school, and I actually learned that you can learn how to draw—you might not be a great artist, but you can learn how to draw.”

---Interview of the school principal by arts columnists.

During an early brainstorming session about how to promote the annual art show, one student came up with the idea of writing a story about it for the high school newspaper. She and a partner figured out an angle, listed possible interview subjects, and wrote interview questions. I scheduled the interviews they requested with the principal and elementary school head, and they worked together in the evenings and on weekends interviewing parents, other elementary school students, and recent graduates of the school.

What they ended up writing was an engaging piece on a broad range of perspectives on the importance of art and the annual art show at our school. They captured the school community's interest in this long-standing tradition and, in the process, became more passionate supporters of the arts program. These were two students who always were engaged in art class. I noticed, however, that after they wrote this piece, their reflections on why they love art, why they think it is important, and what they see in their peers' artwork became more thoughtful and nuanced.

**Conversation Partners**

“A big difference I think from the art show this year and last year’s art show was the interaction that we did. Last year mostly we just wandered around and fooled around with friends more than actually talking about the art. [This year] there was a lot of discussion about the art and barely anyone saw the majority of the artwork.”

---Holly, Grade Six.

“At first it was a little awkward, I was mostly worried about having a lack of things to say. After a little while though I felt not so pressured to always have to be talking and found myself interested in my partner’s art.”

---Ellen, Grade Six.

Inspired by a sixth-grader's idea to have some kind of partnered conversation about the process that went into the artwork, the other art teacher and I decided to try pairing students by grades, third-graders with fifth-graders and fourth-graders with sixth-graders, and dedicate one part of the exhibi-
ation opening to having them talk about each other's artwork. Parents, teachers, and administrators who attended were invited to join these student-led conversations. In preparation for this, we asked our students to think of questions that the viewer could ask the artist and how to move beyond compliments to get at the artist's intent, inspiration, process, and outcome. I asked my sixth-graders how a fourth-grader might think about her artwork similarly and differently from them. What kinds of questions would they like to answer and what kinds of questions might they ask? Discussions in preparation for these conversations were animated. Some expressed deep concern about working with a younger student. Some wanted to make sure there were "rules" to follow so that the conversation went smoothly. Some could clearly remember how much they loved making a specific fourth-grade project and were eager to talk to their partner about it. Some questioned how to shift the conversation if a parent or teacher joined them. All of these questions and ponderings were evidence that the students were thinking about the audience of their artwork in new, specific ways. Their artwork was no longer a static object on the wall—it was a prompt for an interaction with members of their community.

Docents

"I was just tickled that the way that I was going to see the show was to share it with a student, I just thought that was a fabulous idea that she and I walk around together. It was crowded, which was great, there was such a sense of buzz, excitement and engagement and it was so clear that the adults were all enjoying this interaction with the kids... We walked around to each of her pieces... and she talked about them and I asked her a lot of questions about them, which she was very happy to answer. And I asked her questions like how she did certain things... like why she had mountains in the background and she talked about how she loves to ski and so I ended up learning quite a bit about her in the process."

--Principal, describing her experience with a sixth-grade docent.

To create opportunities for dialogue between students and adults, a few fifth- and sixth-graders volunteered to be docents. They acted as guides to our "special guests"—members of the school community we invited and offered an individual tour. These special guests included the school principal, the director of the elementary school, the chair of the art department, art teachers from the middle and upper schools, and other teachers from the lower school community whom I thought would work well with these specific fifth- and sixth-grade students.

There was a certain amount of anxiety about being a docent, particularly for those students I asked to guide prominent members of the community. Students were most worried about running out of things to talk about or forgetting something important. To help relieve their trepidation, the students created docent cards with information about the show and with conversation topics to prompt them if they felt at a loss for words. We discussed what they thought the adults might find interesting to learn through these conversations. Some students thought that recounting the step-by-step process of their artwork would be most interesting; others wanted to make sure they shared personal meaning and symbols in their artwork. Like the preparations for the partnered conversations, students were imagining what these conversations might sound like and, in doing so, were looking at their artwork from another perspective.

Constructivist Theory and Dialogic Inquiry

Creating an authentic experience within which to construct meaning is a pedagogical approach that is widely supported in education literature. My willingness to try this new way of approaching student art exhibitions was heavily influenced by Constructivist theory and methodology.

John Dewey believed that "schools should be social centers where groups of children explored subject matter selected with their interests and local community needs in mind" (Stankiewicz, 2001, p.33). Similarly, Gordon Wells (2009) writes about the importance of language and dialogue in "arriving at a richer, shared understanding" (p. 294), and key to this shared understanding is constructing an environment in which the students can relate what they were learning to their personal experience and talk about it with their peers and teacher. Maxine Greene (2005) writes specifically about constructivism in art education.

There will be difficulties as we create our communities and deal with conflicts between and among such communities. But the end of constructivist thought in
the arts and in education is not the attainment of harmony and coherence. It is to open perspectives, untapped perspectives; it is to look out windows never opened; it is to climb stairs never attempted and look for keys to unknown doors. (Greene, 2005, pp. 129-130)

Cultivating this openness to different perspectives on artwork and artmaking was one of my primary interests in changing the way I approached the year-end exhibition. I wanted this openness of thought and interest in multiple perspectives to manifest in my students as they make their artwork as well as the school community as they view the finished work.

If broad constructivist pedagogy was going to guide my shift in teaching style, what does a constructivist classroom look like? Individuals do not construct knowledge within a vacuum, and if the teacher is not feeding the information to the student, the student must have another means of exploring new material and building knowledge. Dialogic inquiry is the primary, and some would argue only, means through which knowledge can be actively constructed. Applying these broad definitions of dialogic inquiry within a classroom means structuring the learning environment to encourage protracted periods of inquiry as a way of constructing meaning. It also means treating dialogue as a goal in and of itself (Wegerif, 2006).

By providing students the opportunity to bring their unique skills and knowledge to a collaborative problem and ask questions as they themselves deem fit, teachers not only create an environment that is much closer to the larger world in which students operate, but they also foster a classroom community where dialogic inquiry is the norm and deeper learning can take place (Wells, 2009, p. 294). Learning and community participation are inseparable—each feeds the other—and language and dialogue are the most effective means of enabling learners to engage with new information, to relate it to their personal experience, and, through knowledge building, to calibrate their initial understanding of this information with the understandings arrived at by their peers and teacher, thus arriving at a richer, shared understanding. (Wells, 2009, p. 295)

Ultimately, this deeper understanding of the material also results in a deeper understanding of one's community and how to act within that community. Wells describes what he sees as the most important lessons that can come out of this type of dialogic inquiry within a classroom, that "learning is about full personal engagement in an effort to achieve understanding that guides effective and responsible action" (Wells, 2009, p. 298). In other words, the learning of the subject matter is important, but the learning about how to learn, how to contribute, how to interact with one's larger community is what will empower the student in future, more complex inquiries.

Mercer, Wegerif, and Dawes (1999), and Bourdage and Rehark (2009) see the key to promoting this type of discourse as giving students specific ground rules for exploratory talk, defined as "that in which partners engage critically but constructively with each other's ideas... [to ensure that] knowledge is made publicly accountable and reasoning is visible in the talk" (Mercer et al., 1999, p. 97). These rules include the following: share your thought process; give reasons for your opinions; challenge others' ideas; ask questions; listen to others; and include everyone in the discussion (Bourdage & Rehark, 2009). Bourdage and Rehark (2009) further argue that this framework allows students to take on dialogic identities that "foster collaboration and help children sustain inquiries of text" (p. 270). These identities support students in becoming more invested in the inquiry to the point where they no longer see themselves as simply class participants but as a "community of inquiry" (Bourdage & Rehark, 2009, p. 270) who "ask questions, share and back up thinking, give reasons, build onto others' ideas and challenge ideas" (p. 277). These deeply imbedded identities allow for the dialogic mode of thinking to continue through multiple lessons and even beyond the classroom.

Dialogic inquiry, as a tool of constructivist pedagogy, takes an investment of energy and effort on the part of both the teacher and the students. Because of this input from both sides, the result is often deeper learning and a greater sense of community, where every individual's contribution is important. It does not happen without careful planning, however. The teacher must find the balance between guiding and directing; empowering and enabling; facilitating and mediating. When that right combination is struck, the students are inspired to make the effort
to collaborate in constructing meaning not only for themselves but also for the larger community.

**Significance for Teaching Practice**

I have observed that many students and adults in my school are uncomfortable talking about art because they think there is a "right" and "wrong" way to do so and that they often only focus on the superficial aesthetics of the piece. Art can be a powerful method of communication, but it is vital to a community when it stimulates dialogue rather than when it is viewed as a static object within a certain inherent aesthetic framework. As art educators, we have the ability and the responsibility to give the community opportunities and tools for more meaningful interactions with student artwork, and one of the best ways to go about this is to start by providing these tools and opportunities to students.

**Why Change?**

Art educators and researchers have written about the potential and importance of including students in the art exhibition process, and my students responded to this inclusion in ways they described. With that said, I think there are still many teachers who face this struggle with the role of art exhibitions, specifically year-end art exhibitions, in their schools. Using constructivist and dialogic inquiry-based teaching practices to guide students allows the creation of exhibitions that reflect student priorities and interests. Only through these methods of authentic meaning making can spaces for dialogue about student artwork exist and thrive.

As I walked around picking up programs and returning the performance masks to their display spaces, Mrs. Smith walked with me. "Sarah was a wonderful docent! I can't believe you said she was nervous—she was so talkative! She described every project to me in great detail and about the meaning behind each piece. When I asked her what her favorite art material was she immediately said clay. She talked about how much she loved the feeling of it in her hands and when I told her that was what I taught in the high school, her face just lit up. When we finished looking at her work, we walked around and talked about some of the projects the other grades had done. All I can say is she was very impressive and delightful to talk with." When I shared Mrs. Smith's reflections with Sarah the next day, she just grinned and said, "Yeah, she was really nice and easy to talk to. It wasn't so bad."

**References**


