The Personal as Professional: Mentorship, Artmaking, Teaching and Research

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Abstract. Mentorship, artmaking, and arts-based research and teaching assist pre-service and in-service art educators in viewing their personal art practice as an asset to the art teaching profession. Descriptions of qualitative research conducted through narrative inquiry and art-based methods are discussed through ethnographies collected from career artist-educator-researchers. Their stories describe the opportunities and challenges involved in sustaining multiple identities over time and through various stages of an art teaching career. Artworks are also presented as research artifacts and exemplars of living a holistic and artful professional life.

1 Introduction

One of the many reasons I became an art educator was because as a practicing artist I believed teaching others to be art educators would allow me to make art and conduct research with and through art. For me artmaking, research, and teaching are inextricably intertwined, with each activity feeding the others. I see art education as a holistic practice that brings together artmaking/interpretation, research, and teaching in a symbiotic relationship.

As a college professor, I want to assure my students that teaching does not necessitate an end to their art practice. Using myself, my mentors, and some of my colleagues as examples I demonstrate for them how personal artmaking can lead to innovative curricular design and educational research. Lyn Beudert (2006) speaks of the rewarding struggle many of us [in the U.S.] face in balancing the personal (artmaking/research) with the professional (teaching/research). She interviewed several art educators, including myself, about creating balance between scholarly and artmaking activities. A few of the narratives presented in her book, Work, Pedagogy and Change: Foundations for the Art Teacher Educator (2006) touch upon the unique skillset of art educators. For example, some participants’ narratives address how as college-based art educators they often find themselves in a netherworld (Lawton, 2012). Wherein those teaching in colleges of education may not be considered teaching professionals, and those in art colleges may not be considered artists. Many college art educators see themselves as both. Elisabeth Hartung’s narrative speaks to this phenomenon:

Another important aspect related to preparing art teachers is to promote being an artist. Why is it assumed that someone can teach the higher levels of thinking that the arts use, without continually making art themselves is an interesting notion…Skill, meaning, and imagination are not only important in producing art and teaching art, but also in creating active art lessons for students that relate to the art world, to the students’ lives, and to expanding a student’s connection to life. (cited in Beudert, 2006, p. 81)

“Because teaching is so undervalued as a profession [in the U.S.] compared to that of being an artist, many in our field feel the need to clearly communicate that being an art educator means being a maker of art as well as a teacher of art and that a teacher’s personal art practice connects to how and what they teach” (Lawton, 2016, p. 59). For art educators the question of how to balance personal and professional practice is an old one, expounded upon by many in our field (Daichendt, 2009; Zwirn, 2006; Hickman, 2005). I believe that anyone teaching others how to teach artmaking, should
themselves engage in artmaking to better understand the struggles and successes their students will face.

2 Achieving Balance through Teaching

In my teaching I talk with my students about the powerful lessons I have learned through maintaining an active art practice, such as connecting with colleagues in a printmaking collective I belonged to, to provide my high school art students with a more enriching printmaking experience. The collective owned a small traveling printing press and I was able to work with another member creating self-portrait collagraphs with my students. Students were able to print their collagraph plates using a press and experience printmaking in a way they had not previously. My principal loved the large class quilts we created using each student’s collagraph portrait and I was able to convince him to invest in a printing press for the school.

As a holistic practitioner, I move back and forth between scholarly and artistic research and teaching. Some of the ways I have found to achieve balance between my need to create and my desire to teach have been through developing community-based art education (CBAE) courses and museum professional development workshops for educators. Many of my students want to teach, but find that the traditional K-12 classroom is not the ideal place for them. Providing students with field experiences that cover the breadth and depth of art education helps them see the full spectrum the field offers: teaching children and adults in formal (schools) or informal settings (museums and communities).

The CBAE curriculum is facilitated by me with input from all participants. My students and I travel to the community, meet with them in their space, creating works of art together, on common ground, that express their ideas and concerns about community interests or issues from an assets perspective. For example, creating collaborative wood cuts, poetry, and a film with participants aged ten through seventy on the concept of freedom (see Fig. 1); or using refuse to make craft items for sale with communities living in trash dumps to develop and sustain economic independence (see Fig. 2). As the facilitator I am both teacher and artist, sitting side by side with my students and the community making art, teaching, and learning. These experiences demonstrate to students how the art curriculum can accommodate their personal art practice and integrate the community into the classroom and the classroom into the community. They also provide my mostly white female students with exposure to diverse communities, reinforcing the need for educators to learn from, affirm, and support all their learners. These experiences help them design art curriculum that is both culturally responsive and innovative.
3 Achieving Balance through Research

As a researcher I conduct participatory action research with students and community members, where my goal is to observe and record the learning that takes place between and among students and the community as they make art together; addressing social issues through narrative co-inquiry of lived experience. Through Artstories RVA, a Richmond, VA based CBAE research project, my students and I collaborated with middle school students and their teachers making woodcuts about what makes the Richmond community unique and what they would like to see improve (see Figure 3). Another Artstories RVA research project involved working with teens at a youth center making social justice alphabet books that address resistance to gentrification (see Figure 4). Some of the research questions I examine are: How might engaging with and through the arts on themes of human experience create moments of critical discourse leading to personal and communal transformation? In what ways does age-integrated arts learning build rapport among communities? And how can art foster new knowledge about intergenerational, multicultural, community-based teaching and learning? Most of my scholarship has examined these questions through participatory, arts-based action research.
teens and their art teachers. service art teachers and teens.

But, as a printmaker and book artist I wanted to go one step further, creating personal art that is both artistic and academic research. In my teaching I talk with my students about the powerful lessons I have learned through maintaining an active art practice. For example, the visual reflection journal assignment I give to my students in methods courses (see Fig. 4) to record their reflections on class readings and discussions, was inspired by a collaborative altered book I created with two friends from my doctoral cohort (see Fig. 5). Each of us had just begun our college teaching career and were having difficulty finding time to make art. This collaborative piece mailed back and forth between us over the course of a year, became a way to make art while adjusting to our new careers.

Fig. 4. Student’s altered book journal. Fig. 5. Collaborative altered book on college teaching.

Talking with my students about my experiences and those of my friends was impactful but, as I thought about my own artist-teacher-mentors, I began to wish that I could have them speak directly to my students about their experiences balancing their various professional identities over many years. I received a faculty professional development grant that allowed me to combine my creative skills and interests with pedagogical concerns to research how narrative forms (visual, oral and written) of inquiry and expression enhance and transform teaching and learning for pre-service and in-service art educators. This ethnographic research and art project, Artstories: In Their Own Words, captured the stories and portraits of eight of my art teacher mentors. I planned to show the video interviews to my classes to give them a variety of perspectives on leading artful professional lives.

4 Artstories: Personal Art Practice as Research and Teaching

I coined the term artstories to describe both my creative and scholarly research. In my art making, artstories are visual, oral, and written narratives in the form of prints, assemblages, and artists’ books that preserve and reinterpret family history and intergenerational relationships (see Fig. 6). In the context of educational research, artstories are the artifacts resulting from the learning process that occurs when an intergenerational group collaborates on the construction of oral, written, and visual narratives around issues that matter (see Fig. 7).
For *Artstories: In Their Own Words*, I sought to commemorate the life experiences and teachings of my artist-teacher-mentors, older adults, professional educators and artists, through recording their oral histories and creating woodcut portraits of them (See Figs. 8 and 9). My plan was to share with my students the pearls of wisdom I gleaned from these extraordinary people through their own words by showing the videos in my classes as a starting point for critical conversation on what an emerging art educator needs to know to be successful and the role of personal art practice in the art education profession. In creating the portraits, I wanted to honor them and at some point, exhibit the portraits alongside the video interviews. In this way ethnographic and art-based research combine to influence the professional lives of pre-service and in-service art educators.

The research consent form participants signed explained that my research study was designed to examine how oral history in the form of master teachers telling their stories in their words and visual storytelling in the form of their portraits would be used as mentoring resources for pre-service and novice art educators. I also mentioned the possibility of an exhibition. Every teacher I contacted was interested in participating and many mentioned that they would like copies of their videos and of some of the others I planned to interview to use in their own teaching.

### 4.1 Research Protocol

I developed 19 questions for the research protocol. This paper focuses specifically on the following questions: What is your earliest memory involving the arts? Did it take place at home, school, or in the community? How did your family view participation in the arts? Important? Unimportant? What art media do you enjoy most? Are you still making art? If you had an opportunity, through this recorded interview, to advise a novice art educator, what would you feel it most important for them to know/do/believe? The interviews were video recorded and woodcut portraits were created from video stills. The portraits were done in black and white but the colored backgrounds reflect the interviewee’s culture and/or personal characteristics. The interviews and portraits of two interviewees are described in this paper.

#### 4.1.1 Lilian Thomas Burwell

Lilian was a Depression Era child whose parents had been artist educators at the college level. After losing their teaching jobs they migrated to New York City for better economic opportunities (Lawton, 2012). Their decreased finances meant they had to be innovative and creativity was integrated into all aspects of their everyday life. For example, her mother made their curtains and sewed Lilian unique dresses made from discarded fabrics she brought home from her job in the garment district. Lilian absorbed these lessons and viewed art as a necessary part of life. The experiences she had with art and creativity at home and school laid a strong foundation for her future career as an artist educator.
As I studied art education, as I began to teach, it became equally as important to me as making the art. Everything that I did in my art more convinced me that the creative spirit is in every single one of us (in some form). There is no other form of creativity that’s more important than giving another human being hope. (L. Burwell personal communication September 29, 2009)

Lilian spoke about her varied experiences teaching elementary and high school students in Washington, DC. Her first teaching assignment was as a classroom teacher tasked with teaching “hopeless non-readers” in third grade. Lilian conducted her own research with these students using art to help them “recall” words they had already been taught but were “locked away inside of them.” This research allowed her to teach art and use it to successfully teach students to read. Lilian was able to draw upon her own experiences with art as integral to everyday life in teaching her students (Lawton, 2012). At 91 years of age, Lilian still makes and exhibits her work continuing a rich legacy that inspires both emerging artists and educators. A documentary film by Cintia Cabib, Kindred Spirits: Artists Hilda Wilkinson Brown and Lilian Thomas Burwell about her life and that of her artist educator aunt, was released in 2018.

For her portrait I wanted to capture Lilian’s grace and dignity. I selected the Ghanaian Adinkra textile symbol, Mframmadan for the background design. Mframmadan is the stylized image of a wind-resistant house and symbolizes fortitude, preparedness, security, excellence, and elegance, all characteristics Lilian embodies. The red-orange color speaks to strength and spirituality. Lilian credits her faith as instrumental to her accomplishments. Over fifty years have passed since Lilian was my art teacher. She continues to teach and inspire me today through a life artfully lived.

Fig. 8. Woodcut portrait of Lilian Thomas Burwell.

4.1.2 Graeme Sullivan

I first met Graeme when I was a doctoral student at Teachers College, Columbia University. Graeme was doing what I wanted to do, teaching emerging and novice art educators and making and exhibiting art. His childhood education was very different from Lilian’s. Graeme was born and raised in a working-class family in a small Australian country town, population 300. No one in his family went beyond a ninth-grade education. Art was not something he was exposed to outside of school. It was expected that he too would leave school after ninth grade and apprentice in a trade, most likely house painting which is what his father did. However, circumstance and opportunity in the form of his high school English and history teacher, John Turner, changed the course of his life.

Graeme decided to go an additional year so he could pursue his passion, football; being in school meant he could continue to play. But in Mr. Turner’s class, he began studying the poetry of John Donne which intrigued him and he decided to continue on with his studies and football. His senior year-end exam included writing a paper inspired by Donne’s poetry and submitting an art piece to
accompany the paper. As with all year-end exams his was sent to be evaluated and he was awarded a scholarship to art school. This allowed him to leave his small town and move to Sydney.

Shortly after arriving at Teachers College in 1998, a graduate student asked him, “Why do you seem to be so committed to teaching?” Immediately Mr. Turner came to mind and this prompted him to reach out to him 30 years after graduating from high school. He was surprised to discover that his teacher not only remembered him but kept a copy of his final exam and artwork. He continued corresponding with Mr. Turner catching him up on his life and career. His favorite quote from his teacher is, “that’s what happens when teaching becomes reaching” (G. Sullivan personal communication January 11, 2010). Graeme found this reconnection to be a “powerful thing…and it’s been joyous in continuing to communicate with my teacher over these many years” (G. Sullivan personal communication January 11, 2010).

When Graeme was a college student in Australia art and education at that time were two separate entities, and as an art student he was torn between the two, told to give up education to become a serious artist and told that education was a worthwhile occupation, being an artist was not. It was the 1970s and a time of radical school reform. The idea that teaching was a subversive activity interested him. He did a lot of reading by education scholars like Neil Postman and Ivan Illich and he identified with their philosophies. He became curious about the ways in which the arts contributed to these radical education ideas.

The one source Graeme has continued to gravitate to over the years has been contemporary art “which speaks to the power of art to generate conversations” (G. Sullivan personal communication January 11, 2010). Contemporary art was a way to rationalize his roles as artist and educator. As teachers we often take on the role of interpreter of the language of art, this led to him having conversations with contemporary Australian artists. Through these conversations he found that many contemporary artists credit their art teachers for their success. In having these conversations with people making art, he was able to participate in a three-way conversation, finding ways to invite students into these dialogues. “Art as a language has a lot to offer—and this could be translated into curriculum or pedagogical practice, putting artmaking central to thinking” (G. Sullivan personal communication January 11, 2010).

The conversations he had with contemporary Australian artists, and his own experiences as an artist educator led to the publication of Art Practice as Research: Inquiry in the Visual Arts (2005/2010). The book describes “how the instinctive human need to create can be more fully understood as a means of inquiry that has personal and public significance…the unique role that artists play within research communities in educational, social, and cultural settings and how creative and critical practices can transform human understanding” (Sullivan, 2010, p. xi).

Graeme’s art, Streetworks, is made from found objects made into installations in response to the socio-political concerns of the time. He “exhibits” these installations in public spaces leaving them for the public to enjoy and take should they choose. This way of art making is a metaphor for how Graeme views teaching, “you invest in others, create an opportunity, part circumstance, part richness of material and things happen—it goes out into the world. Art becomes a vehicle for this kind of storied communication” (G. Sullivan personal communication January 11, 2010).

As an art educator in graduate school you need to be able to provide an opportunity to allow the students to become very powerfully aware of what it is that makes them tick and how they think, so that when they need to take on other ‘languages’---theory and research—to be successful in a graduate environment these languages are centered around why they wanted to go to graduate school in the first place and why they want to make art. (G. Sullivan personal communication January 11, 2010).

Graeme believes that “people involved in art never retire” (G. Sullivan personal communication January 11, 2010). As I write this Graeme decided it was time to retire from his position as Director, School of Visual Art at Pennsylvania State University. Like Lilian I expect this means he will spend more time creating his Streetworks and collaborative collage pieces with his wife Mary.

Graeme’s portrait captures him in a moment of communicating, teaching, weaving his magic that helped his students, like me, figure out what is important to us as artist-educator-researchers and to
the field of art education. The Celtic knot pattern in the background reflects his Irish heritage as does the color green which also symbolizes growth and the environment. I am extremely fortunate to have been a student of Graeme’s and plan to stay in touch with him—just as he has with Mr. Turner, except I won’t let 30 years go by.

![Fig. 9. Woodcut portrait of Graeme Sullivan](image)

5 Conclusion

As art educators we need to find ways to lead more holistic lives and to support our students in doing the same. Many of the reasons those of us who teach art and art teacher preparation, is because at some point in our lives we enjoyed making art ourselves. Finding ways to make art central to the practice and theory of art education is crucial to our profession, blending social science with art/art making, two different but co-dependent forms of language and communication about what it means to be human and better understand the world we inhabit. Most of us remember at least one educator that positively influenced us, and often that was the art teacher. In art class we learned how the language of art communicates themes of human experience in ways that draw people in to critically connect, question, and think about contemporary issues.

There are many ways for artist-educators to combine the personal and professional maintaining a balance between artmaking, teaching, and research. This paper examines two of those ways: community-based art education practice, and observer/participant art-based ethnographic research, through narrative inquiry with art educators who are the living embodiment of the personal as professional. For those teaching pre-service and novice art educators encouraging them to design curriculum based in their personal art practice may lead to innovative art curriculum, such as the self-portrait collagraph quilt unit discussed in section 2. If college art educators share with their pre/in-service students how they balance artmaking, teaching, and research and provide curriculum assignments in which students connect lessons to their personal art practice, then pre/in service teachers will be more likely to lead balanced, artful, teaching lives.

References

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