This nine chapter volume explores creativity in art teaching through contemporary craft. A variety of artists, educators and historians share with readers their wealth of practical resources and frameworks for utilizing craft media (fiber, ceramics, baskets, needlepoint, knitting, etc.) and craft approaches (grassroots projects, digital communities, craftivism, etc.) within contemporary K-12 art education, museum and community programming, and teaching artist residencies. Authors representing a variety of specialties in craft, art, and education examine the resurgence of the handmade and homemade in contemporary youth culture, digital implications of how we define and teach craft creatively, and the overlap of design, function, and beauty in artists’ work.

The anthology also describes the challenges and potentialities of working with craft in education settings, including the overarching craft of teaching practices. Each chapter provides a range of creative frameworks and practical models that educators can use comprehensively: from dynamic digital resources, to community groups, and lesson plans and activities in craft with art classes and special needs classes. The book serves to propose a working definition and rationale of the functions of craft in daily life, popular and youth culture, and larger social issues (including craft, D.I.Y., and activism/‘craftivism’).
Crafting Creativity & Creating Craft
ADVANCES IN CREATIVITY AND GIFTEDNESS
Volume 8

Advances in Creativity and Gifted Education (ADVA) is the first internationally established book series that focuses exclusively on the constructs of creativity and giftedness as pertaining to the psychology, philosophy, pedagogy and ecology of talent development across the milieus of family, school, institutions and society. ADVA strives to synthesize both domain specific and domain general efforts at developing creativity, giftedness and talent. The books in the series are international in scope and include the efforts of researchers, clinicians and practitioners across the globe.

Series Editor:
Bharath Sriraman, The University of Montana, USA

International Advisory Panel:
Don Ambrose, Rider University, USA
David Chan, The Chinese University of Hong Kong
Anna Craft, University of Exeter, UK
Stephen Hegedus, University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth, USA
Kristina Juter, Kristianstad University College, Sweden
James C. Kaufman, California State University at San Bernardino, USA
Kyeonghwa Lee, Seoul National University, Korea
Roza Leikin, University of Haifa, Israel
Peter Liljedahl, Simon Fraser University, Canada
Paula Olszewski-Kubilius, Northwestern University, USA
Larisa Shavinina, University of Quebec, Canada

Editorial Assistant:
Claire Payne
Crafting Creativity & Creating Craft

Edited by

Courtney Lee Weida
Adelphi University, New York, USA
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overview</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prologue: My Beginnings With Craft</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Nick Jaffe</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Foundations of Craft in Education</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Courtney Weida</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Crafting Popular Culture: A Hands on Approach</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Celia Caro</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Craft Objects and Storytelling</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Dolapo Adeniji-Neill, Tara Concannon-Gibney &amp; Courtney Weida</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Critiquing Consumption Through Craft &amp; The International Fiber Collaborative</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Pamela Koehler, Jennifer Marsh &amp; Courtney Weida</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Remixed/Unstitched Digital Communities of Contemporary Craft</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Jennifer Marsh &amp; Courtney Weida</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Crafting Inner Space: Guided Visualizations for the Creative Classroom</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Diane Caracciolo</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Lesson Plan on Tools for Everyday Life</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Shari Zimmerman</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Lesson Plan for Handmade Art Cards</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Shari Zimmerman</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Conceptual, Biological and Historical Analyses of Craft</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Nanyoung Kim</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
OVERVIEW

This nine chapter volume will explore creativity in art teaching and contemporary craft. It will provide the reader with a wealth of resources and frameworks for utilizing craft media (fiber, ceramics, baskets, needlepoint, knitting, etc.) and craft approaches (grassroots projects, digital communities, craftivism, etc.) within contemporary K-12 art education, museum and community programming, and teaching artist residencies. Authors representing a variety of specialties in craft, art, and education will examine the resurgence of the handmade and homemade in contemporary youth culture, digital implications of how we define and teach craft creatively, and the overlap of design, function, and beauty in artists’ work.

The anthology will particularly:

* Describe the challenges and potentialities of working with craft in education settings, including the overarching craft of teaching
* Provide a range of creative frameworks and practical models that educators can use: from dynamic digital resources, to community groups, and lesson plans and activities in craft with art classes and special needs classes
* Provide a working definition and rationale of the functions of craft in daily life, popular and youth culture, and larger social issues (including craft, D.I.Y, and activism/“craftivism”).
PROLOGUE: MY BEGINNINGS WITH CRAFT

In college and graduate school, I worked as the director of summer arts programs at sleep-away and day camps near the ocean. A paint shortage halfway through one summer led me to sort through seemingly ancient art supplies boxed and forgotten from a predecessor’s supply stash. It was there that I located several dusty half-made baskets and additional unwoven reeds. One of my staff members expressed great joy at this finding. Obliging her interest and initiative, our students trailed out of our art cabin later that afternoon, into the cool and shallow water along the shore, equipped with reeds and her helpful guidance on basket-weaving. That day, a calm washed over us as we wove water-softened reeds into baskets and discussed the history, use, and look of them along the sun-bright beach. Weaving in beads, shells, and scraps of colorful paper over subsequent sessions, we were spellbound by preliminary explorations of the process Meilach (1974) described as “revising creative methods used centuries ago” (p. 1). I have since encouraged pre-service teachers to explore basket-weaving to create practical, beautiful objects for their classrooms. Craft enables us to explore some important themes as artists and educators. As you work with craft media, you may wish to explore some preliminary questions about your own practice as an artist and educator. Questions and examples are listed along with each chapter in this volume to connect the authors’ work to implications for your own teaching and art making experiences:

1. What is your unique craft history and experience to bring to teaching? (For example, many craftspeople or artisans come from traditions of making baskets, pots, jewelry, and other objects within families or collectives, others are drawn to the DIY or Do-It-Yourself movement, while others have been trained within schools and craft leagues. You might ask an elder relative and be surprised by the hidden artistic lineage that brought you here.)

2. How can particular craft materials teach us something special about form, color, texture, value, harmony, and other elements and principles? (E.g. How is clay work particularly suited to texture explorations, or how can embroidery teach us about pattern and color in a very rich way?)

3. Issues of form and function – How will you lead students in creating objects that explore both process and product, that serve a purpose/function or are beautiful (or grotesque or spooky or quirky etc.) for their own sake?

4. Roles of tradition and innovation – Where will a repeated technique or process be adhered to (e.g. stitching, knotting, coiling, etc.) versus a new way of doing or intentionally subverting a technique (think of a pot that’s meant to be off-center, a basket with intentional holes in it, or a garment that’s not meant to ever be worn).
INTRODUCTION

Humans are makers; craft has always been at the center of our making. Whether consciously or unconsciously, our subjective way of seeing the world becomes part of anything we make. We cannot make things without in some way embedding ourselves.

By “craft” I mean a combination of function-driven design and aesthetics; a direct connection (real or imagined) between the maker and the user; and an implied universality—we are all constantly engaged in some type of “crafting,” whether we acknowledge it as such or not. There are and must be specialists in crafting, but it has never been the province of specialists alone.

In his exhaustive, brilliant and provocative book The Nature of Paleolithic Art, biologist and artist R. Dale Guthrie (Guthrie, R. D. (2005). The Nature of Paleolithic Art. Chicago: University of Chicago Press) makes a compelling argument that cave and other Paleolithic art, far from being the province of shamans or specialists was made by children, adolescents and likely everyone. Functional art was part of the picture from the beginning too. His book is full of illustrations of arrow-straighteners and other tools decorated with tremendous skill and often a great sense of humor. Ancient makers would use the shape of tools or the cracks in rocks to create visual double-entendres and depict such absurdities as animals eating their own tails. Life for people living 30,000 years ago appears to have been full of craft and art in spite of what must have been a very difficult and often precarious existence.

The development of agriculture and some measure of material surplus made a division of labor in society both possible and necessary. Technique in such areas as pottery, weaving, wood and iron working became more complex and craft became a more specialized activity. In many cultures an artisan class emerged along with codified methods of production that could be passed on through generations. But even as the production of some objects became more specialized, design and aesthetics became ever more generalized. Abstractions, symbols, and specific design elements often served to unite and even define, social and political groups—villages, clans, tribes and kingdoms—even as these same groups began to divide along gender, vocational and class lines. Style emerged as a way of defining the collective, and as an element of culture. Style also functioned as way for even the non-artisan/specialist to create personal objects that could relate to the larger cultural context.

So, from the dawn of class society there has been both a synergy and tension between “art” and “craft.” The naturalistic and often humorous art of Paleolithic people seems to have flowed almost effortlessly between the “canvas” of cave walls
and the surfaces of all-important, highly functional tools. With Mesolithic and later agricultural societies both naturalistic and increasingly abstract signs continued to adorn functional objects but also began to serve other social and aesthetic purposes as religious or magical symbols, and as symbols of power and status. The emergence of mercantile capitalism meant that the expertise of the craftsperson became an economic factor and the objects he/she produced became commodities with an economic value and significance that might bear little relationship to their utility. The ritual and secrecy of the guild system in medieval Europe, or similar institutions elsewhere were the expression of an economic tension—if everyone is potentially a “maker,” then the only way to convert expertise and technique into exchange value is to hold it very closely.

Industrial capitalism brought even greater changes to both the methods and meanings of artisanship and an increasingly radical division between “art” and “craft.” Ruling classes were no longer content to simply possess the most rare, valuable and labor-intensive products of artisans; they began to elevate “non-functional” aesthetic expression to an exalted, even divine status. Just as technique and production methods in the crafts in many cultures and places were reaching unprecedented levels of refinement and complexity, the craftsperson was increasingly debased as “less than an artist.” The advent of mechanized mass production threatened to do away with artisanship all together except perhaps as an exotic luxury for a very few.

The early days of working class struggle against capital also saw a reaction by the artisan class and its champions in the intelligentsia against the marginalization of craft. In the early 19th Century the Luddites—militant textile artisans in England—smashed the new power looms in protest. The Arts and Crafts Movement of the late 19th and early 20th Century united artisans and designers from England to America and Japan in a cultural struggle to restore the dignity and artistry of artisanship with the goal of providing finely made functional objects to the working masses. Many innovations in design and objects of breathtaking beauty and elegance came out of the Arts and Crafts Movement. But ultimately the desperate struggle of the Luddites and the utopian visions of a William Morris were doomed to failure. Industrial production may be under the control of a capitalist class that sacrifices the artisan’s artistry on the altar of profit without a second thought; but industrial production does not exist because of those capitalists. Rather industrial production exists as a consequence of humanity’s struggle to satisfy its basic, human needs—food, shelter, life, freedom and the leisure time with which to do things that satisfy and fulfill us. In the hands of the many industrial production can be a tremendous force for human liberation, and therefore also for artistic and craft innovation and expression.

In the 1920’s the artists, architects, designers and students of the radical Bauhaus School in Germany and the Vkhutemas State Art and Technical School in the early USSR took up the banner of the craftsman on a new plane—that of embracing industrial production as a means of producing beautiful, high quality, functional objects on a mass scale so that they could be used and enjoyed by all working people.
The profound impact that the Bauhaus and Vkhutemas have had on art and design can be seen everywhere in the world today. Walk down the aisles of a “big box store” and with virtually every “modern” product of industrial design, no matter how half-assed or how brilliant, odds are you can trace at least part of its aesthetic and production lineage to the Bauhaus or a related modernist school or movement.

It is no coincidence that the Bauhaus and Vkhutemas were based on the premise that all men and women are “talented” and capable of effective work and expression in any medium given time and practice. It is no coincidence that these schools and movements explicitly fought to erase the artificial schism between “high art” and craft. It is no coincidence that modernist movements like these closely studied the craft traditions, aesthetic methods of many different societies and cultures including those of contemporary hunting and subsistence agricultural societies, and Paleolithic art. And finally it is no coincidence that even through the repressive political regimes of the Stalinist era, arts and crafts training was a central part of virtually every child’s education in the USSR with no reference to the capitalist question of whether such training was appropriate for kids who might not become professional artists or craftsmen.

These are not coincidences because industrial production has exploded the lie that art is the product of divine inspiration and craft is for the “simple folk.” That is not to say the this lie isn’t still given currency by the rich and powerful—we see it borne out in a thousand ways every day in American society, where public education is increasingly viewed by the ruling class as a necessary evil—job skills and disciplinary training for the poor, the brown and the black. The ruling class may see education as a means to a profitable end, but the rest of us know better. Throughout this history of the marginalization of craft in many cultures, we have all continued to make things; things that matter to us; things we can use but things that also express our shared subjective experience. And as craft becomes less and less a part of increasingly mechanized, computer-controlled production, it becomes clearer to us that the value of a crafted object has never been measurable in dollars or even just in terms of its utility. Humans make things beautifully, interestingly, expressively because that is what it means to be human. Making is satisfying; it is fun; it can be shared. What the painter does is what the potter does; what the car customizer does is what the sculptor does; what the weaver does is what the photographer does.

And now we are in a strange, fascinating and unprecedented time. This collection of insightful, engaging and highly useful articles make that clear in so many ways. We have not solved the problem of putting industrial production in the service of the many, of want, of freedom, of life; craft will not do that for us though art and craft will certainly play a role as they have in every human struggle. But just the same, amidst the oppression, war, hunger and environmental destruction a strange and wonderful bridging of the technological gap is taking place between the centers of mass production and the places “ordinary people” find themselves outside of work—home, school, community center, library, hospital, prison. Craft has always
existed in these places, often in great depth and richness. But something is new. Mass production and new technologies have given us unprecedented access to some of the most advanced methods of making. Alongside the potters wheel we find a relatively inexpensive laptop computer with enough processing power to operate 10 space shuttles simultaneously. For less than a dollar we can obtain super bright LED’s; for twenty dollars a microcontroller that can automate a home or damn near anything else you can think of. With a 3D printer costing less than $700.00 our most fanciful pencil drawings can emerge in space as objects we can hold and use. Every image we make, every piece of music we record, has an instant potential audience of billions via the web.

And, as if by magic, the ethos and techniques that are driving the way these objects are understood, used and enjoyed by “regular people” is the timeless one of craft. Far from displacing artistic values or older methods, these new technologies and approaches are giving them new life and new potential. Far from alienating young people from cultural traditions of the past the DIY movement and maker spaces seem to be hotbeds of old-school and new school—scratch that! They are crucibles in which such distinctions are evaporating along with the false division of art and craft. Old and new tools are just tools and all making is potentially artful and expressive. The work of both “newbies” and experts, in maker spaces, in rich and poor neighborhoods, in cities and remote villages, asserts over and over the essential truth of craft—that all people are makers and all people are artful in their making.
1. FOUNDATIONS OF CRAFT IN EDUCATION

As educators, artists, and craftspeople (and by this I mean both craft media like crochet or baskets as well as the craft of teaching), we celebrate practice of working with the handmade perhaps as much as the resulting well-crafted work. However, I have often overheard ceramics and craft mourn the loss of students’ ability to crochet or model clay – and to even express concern for adult students who have scarcely ever worked with their hands in a direct engagement with tactile art media. As Elizabeth Garber notes (2013) “affectively, there are pleasures in making and completing and in the use of the senses.” (p. 56). Considering the senses and emotions as well as cognitive lives of students is a good place for teaching artists and other art educators to reflect upon how we can justify the use of craft materials in the schools. You may wish to list your top three rationales for craft: from motor skills, to cultural traditions, to experiencing design. Learners who encounter warm, soft, and time-honored materials of craft can engage not only with craft histories and hand-made sensibilities, but can also “get in touch with” a sense of their own development and the embodiment of internal transformations. To discuss craft in art education is also to touch on issues of teaching about:

* sensory materiality,
* collective and individual consciousness, and
* a balancing of histories and traditions with the individual maker’s constructed meanings.

Another important aspect of teaching craft is its potential it as an approach and a philosophy. Teachers may wish to include the concept of craft in their teaching philosophies or their teaching approaches. For example, in what way is teaching a craft? In what way is life a form of craft? Historian Glen Adamson (2007) describes the term craft as one that applies not only to objects, but also to approaches, attitudes and actions of craftspeople that make those objects. Craft works can be strongly linked with the functions, cultures, and traditions of their makers and users. As a teacher of craft, it can be helpful to begin designing your curriculum by identifying the intersection of a few materials, makers and goals. Examples of how craft might include many materials and media for curricula are included in Figure 1.
We should also consider how the practice of craft relates to the hand and the body, encouraging sensory and fine motor development. Or in more practical terms, how does craft help us learn with the body and the mind? Dating back to Seonaid Robertson (1961), we can see an art education interest in not just the hand (as in handicraft), but the entire body in “expressive rhythm relating mind and material” (p. 27). Craft can be the meeting place of cognition and coordination of the body. John Howell White (2004) also contextualizes 19th and 20th century education in the U.S. as a period of interest in the human hand in its connection with the mind. At this time, the paradigm of craft’s therapeutic potential extended to special populations of children, women’s clubs, and veterans. Within K-12 schools, crafts were contextualized in programs for Manual Training, Industrial Arts, and Applied Arts. (Campus buildings at Teachers College Columbia University, for example, still bear signs referring to the Manual Arts.) Craft has often straddled many areas of human experience and terminology, from mind to body to heart. Today, “life skills” programs for students with disabilities and special needs are often accompanied by “creative craft” courses, making this area of learning particularly relevant for the teaching artist. All of this history is basically to say that craft has a distinguished role in education of the past, and that we take part in diverse traditions as we take up craft as part of teaching art.

We can also look at how craft relates to who we are as people, socially, historically, and even spiritually. Artistic development expert Judith Burton (2009) has also noted the historical interest of Viktor Lowenfeld in creative practice “as the place where the thinking, feeling, and perceiving of the whole individual could be attended to and developed” (p. 329). The writing of Howard Rissati (2007) similarly draws attention to the sustained bodily connection observable in craft, of doing and communicating with craft materials. During the 1970s and 1980s, my older siblings and I took public school classes in industrial drawing and woodworking, engaging with line and form as precise and mechanical representations that translated into smooth wooden objects (lamps, old fashioned children’s toys and puzzles, among other odds and ends) intended for
practical use. Even then, these classes were a dying breed of curriculum, (like culinary arts and home economics) which has widely disappeared from the schools in those particular incarnations. How can we bring craft back into the curriculum through toys, hand-made household objects, and new items yet to be discovered?

A renewed interest in craft is observable in the ongoing “Craft in America” series of the National Art Education Association’s School Arts Magazine. This and related art education resources may be of interest to craft artists who are teaching young people. Friendship bracelets and macramé (which I remember from my own camp experiences as a young person) have transformed into some of the fiber art curriculum in school art classes my own student teachers facilitate today. Craft has reemerged with much diversity within interdisciplinary curriculum; re-envisioning itself as practical, sometimes ironic, often personal, and even political. Teaching artists can approach craft from many different perspectives and with a range of goals. We hope that you will locate and enhance useful perspectives and goals through this book. Some introductory considerations of themes or tones in craft might include:

1. When is craft serious and straightforward? (chairs, tables, buildings, or functional objects)
2. When is craft imaginative or ironic? (pink crocheted cozies for military tanks, fiber panels to cover a NASA rocket, or yarn bombing)
3. How are these craft projects alike and different?
4. Why is it important to think like a craftsperson? What can that disposition, habit of mind, or way of thinking teach us about other disciplines?

In the following sections, Celia Caro presents an elementary school curriculum that cultivates craftsmanship blended with popular culture consumption, through comic book characters. Educators might consider the role of youths’ interests, their creative play, and sense of ownership through her examples. Reaching across disciplines, Dolapo Adeniji-Neil and Tara Gibney explore how craft objects and techniques can awaken and inspire students in storytelling activities across cultures. Fiber artists Jennifer Marsh and Pamela Koehler present the large-scale communal craft projects of the International Fiber Collaborative as socially-engaged, interdisciplinary projects that are taking place in a variety of arts settings and across many age groups. Diane Caracciolo considers craft objects in cultural contexts. I write with a call for art educators to consider digital resources and communities of makers as additional spaces of craft learning. Shari Zimmerman provides craft lesson plans for special needs students. Finally, Nanyoung Kim gives us a more detailed history and rationale for craft.

REFERENCES


CELIA CARO

2. CRAFTING POPULAR CULTURE

A Hands on Approach

INTRODUCTION AND GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. PASSION: What is the intersection of your interests in craft and your students’ interests? Can you think of at least three project ideas that combine your passions?

2. GOALS: Caro identifies typography as a teaching goal, to improve her students’ skills in this area. What are 2-3 areas in artistic development/art learning that you want to build your students’ practice and extend their thinking about? Consider especially lost traditions and crafts.

3. PROCESS: Caro posits some of her teaching experiences as product and some as process or play, responding to John Dewey’s notions of education as experience. How much of your lessons are about exploration versus a finished product and why? Can you design at least one session dedicated to experiencing craft materials and at least one other to revising and polishing a final craft object?

4. CRAFT AS REPETITION: The Daniel Webster Elementary students learned about trying out a skill to hone their practice. This process involved making mistakes and locating gradual improvement. How will you encourage students to complete a craft task that is challenging? – plan ahead for problem areas! Pay special attention to tips and sayings that comfort and encourage. (E.g. centering on the wheel, beginning to knit, learning the pattern of basket weaving)

5. POLISH/PROFESSIONALISM: Caro suggests to her students that even popular culture items like stickers and skateboards are created as real, professional work. How can you include not only art history in your teaching, but also contemporary examples of makers? Consider craft resources such as:
   http://www.contemporarycraft.org/The_Store/Splash.html
   http://crafthaus.ning.com/
   http://www.craftforms.com/
   http://www.museumofcontemporarycraft.org/
   http://madmuseum.org/learn/resource-materials

The Daniel Webster Elementary School is the only public Humanities & Arts Magnet School serving grades K-5 in the City School District of New Rochelle.
Its curriculum includes academic and cultural enrichment, including an extensive fourteen-week Studio Arts Program. I began working as a teaching artist for its Studio Arts drawing program in 2009. During that year, I conducted a requested drawing workshop on Henry Hudson’s 400th anniversary of sailing up the Hudson River. However, for my second year in the Studio Arts Program, I decided to create a comics and cartooning workshop because I wanted to relate my teaching to my own artistic practice while also connecting to my students’ interests, and there was no denying that my students were obsessed with cartoons.

Cartoon characters have become part of our consumer culture and are used to sell everything from fashion to fast food. In fact, according to the Licensing Industry Survey released by the International Licensing Industry Merchandisers’ Association (LIMA), character licenses generated international profits of $237.6 billion in 2010 (LIMA, 2011). The majority of those sales were generated from highly sophisticated mass-marketing campaigns aimed primarily at children.

While I found the corporate exploitation of my students’ affection towards their favorite cartoon characters troubling, I also saw an opportunity to counteract the messages being marketed to them by teaching them how to create their own art and entertainment in place of the mass-marketed media and mass-produced global brands that bombarded their daily lives off and on-line (Davis, 2006). Inspired by John Dewey’s concepts of active citizenship and Olivia Gude’s Postmodern Principles, my goal was to encourage students to be dynamic participants in their culture rather than just passive consumers. Yet, weaning them off Sonic the Hedgehog and SpongeBob was going to be tough. What could I use to get them past the allure of these slick, corporate icons?

CRAFT PRINCIPLES GO POP

While browsing in an office supply store, I spotted a package of blank mailing labels and the idea of having the students create their own stickers took shape. My research into handmade stickers uncovered links between the Do It Yourself (DIY) ethos of many street artists and the self-sufficiency philosophy of both contemporary artists who use craft techniques and the Arts and Crafts movement of the 19th and early 20th centuries. If I wanted my students to resist capitalism and consumerism, I needed to demonstrate how much fun taking back the means of production could be. By incorporating DIY street art and contemporary craft principles into my curriculum, my students might learn that they didn’t need corporations to produce their material culture. They could do it themselves.

RESISTING THE STATUS QUO

While I was enthusiastic about my new workshop, I knew there was some resistance in the school to the idea of teaching comics and cartooning in the Studio Arts Program. Would including elements of street art and its associations with vandalism
alienate some of the school faculty even further? When I first proposed the idea during a planning meeting at Daniel Webster, some of the classroom teachers were unimpressed.

Voicing their concerns, one teacher said, “I thought you were going to teach them real art. Comics and cartoons are junk food for the brain.”

This teacher was not only pointing out the use of cartoon characters like Tony the Tiger and Toucan Sam as corporate spokesmen for processed (junk) food companies, but also stating a long-standing bias against comics, which have traditionally fallen within the spectrum of “low art”. Since their inception, comics have been associated with bad taste, semi-literacy and junk culture (McCloud, 1993). Despite the blurring of boundaries between art forms in contemporary practices and the advancements of Visual Culture Studies (VCS) (Ambury, 2003), there still exists an institutional bias against practices that exist outside the realm of traditional fine arts. This conventional bias not only overlooks the comprehensive nature of most contemporary art practices, but also fails to see the great potential of alternative art forms like comics, street art and DIY craft as teaching tools.

The fact that this teacher was voicing the elitist views of the status quo, views that I wanted my students to challenge, only encouraged me to pursue my curriculum. I was reminded of contemporary artist Liza Lou’s experience of being ostracized in art school for using “crafty” materials like beads.

People would actually say, ‘I’m sorry, but that is not allowed.’ But when I saw how much this material upset people, it was so obvious that it was a good thing. (Bagley, 2008)

Inspired by the Postmodernists and VCS theorists, my first goal for the workshop was to question the metanarrative of mainstream consumer culture with (Blackburn, 2000) my students and help them assert their own voices, utilizing devalued artistic practices like comics, street art and craft. Under the VCS umbrella, these once-marginalized art forms have recently been utilized as a way to study issues of consumerism (Poser, 2008), cultural identity (Congdon & Blandon, 2005), community (Stevens, 2008), and social justice (Gude, Postmodern, 2004).

However, while this contextual approach recognizes these mediums’ wealth of cultural and political associations, it overlooks their rich potential for experiential learning by doing (Adamson, 2007). I also wanted students to develop valuable manual, cognitive and social skills (Dewey, 1934) by practicing the crafts of cartooning and DIY street art.

MAKING IS THINKING

I needed a project that helped my students improve their manual and cognitive skills while also developing the work ethic required for the craft of cartooning. Since so much of comic book art and street art incorporates hand-drawn text, I knew many of my students could benefit from refining their typography skills. This was an
area where several of them had expressed interest, but some felt intimidated by the medium because they were insecure about their handwriting.

If I could give them a user-friendly format to work with, I felt strongly that they would be motivated to master the craft of typography. That’s when I discovered Linda Scott’s *How To Be The Best Bubble Writer Ever* and hit on the idea of having the students design door signs for their rooms featuring their original typography. This project would help the students develop their manual and cognitive skills through the dual process of designing and hand-drawing letters and then making a functional object to feature them.

The typography project required students to follow the procedure of creating thumbnail sketches of their handwritten fonts, and then penciling, inking and coloring their final word design, before making it into a sign. They needed to learn how to skillfully use pencils, erasers, permanent ink markers, crayons and collage materials in order to successfully complete their projects.

Mastering these methods and materials is a two-fold process that requires a great deal of motor/muscle skill and technical knowledge about the functions and properties of tools and materials (Risatti, 2007). Technical knowledge is essential, but it is only through the steady application of procedural memory and manual skill that raw materials are transformed into functional objects (Sennett, 2008). Procedural memory, remembering how to do something in sequential order, plays a pivotal role in almost all academic subjects, and is especially important in mathematics and the sciences (Levine M., 2004).

In a craft practice, however, procedural memory must be combined with physical action. According to neurologist Frank R. Wilson, these cognitive/manual skills can only be achieved “. . . through practice or action, rather than theory or speculation” (Wilson, 1993). The cartooning students could have memorized all the procedures for drawing three-dimensional or bubble letters, but wouldn’t have begun to grasp the meaning of the procedures without testing them out through physical action.

The physicality of craft is one of its core strengths as a learning tool. It makes the theoretical real. Often when faced with a more abstract drawing assignment, students will ask me, “Why do I have to do this stuff?” This question is rarely asked when the making of a functional object is involved, and it is the primary reason I had the students turn their typographic designs into signs. Students understand why they need to make a functional object, and the nature of the medium helps them learn “how” to make it. Students with high bodily-kinesthetic intelligence may be especially suited to the physical aspects of making functional objects. The simultaneous coordination of kinetic and cognitive skill has many correlations to other fields such as medicine, music, sports and dance (Risatti, 2007).

Like medicine, music and dance, craft is a discipline. In order to have any impact, practice and action must occur regularly over an extended period of time. This steady practice is essential to mastering any medium. Psychologist K. Anders Ericsson refers to this as the “10,000 hour rule,” meaning that in order to achieve excellence
in any field, at least 10,000 hours of regular practice are required (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Romer, 1993).

Mastering procedures and practicing regularly may also have an impact on the students’ work ethics. When practicing a craft, students begin to understand that there are no shortcuts to success. In opposition to our culture of instant gratification, craft teaches students that they need to practice patience and persistence when faced with frustration and failure (Sennett, 2008). Students also learn how to reflect on their mistakes and review their procedures. These procedures, therefore, are the bedrock of students’ practice and lay the groundwork for all future learning.

THE CARTOON STUDIO AS LABORATORY

Experimenting with new ideas, procedures and materials is often overlooked as part of the craft process (Sennett, 2008). As the quirky and playful fonts designed by my students demonstrate, there is plenty of room for experimentation in the cartooning studio.

The variety of illustrated letters my students designed was astounding. There were skeleton, monster, food and flaming alphabets. Once my students had mastered the basic bubble and three-dimensional forms, many were inspired to try out all kinds of ideas. One fourth-grade student, Ian, struggled with this project for three weeks. Selecting a final design was a real challenge for him because he couldn’t choose from all the original fonts he had created. Since it was October, he had sketched jack-o-lantern fonts, zombie fonts, gravestone fonts, vampire fonts and candy-corn fonts. After much painful deliberation, he finally decided to combine all of them into a meticulously rendered “Keep Out” sign. When I asked Ian why he had persisted with the typography project despite all his frustration, he explained: “Even though it’s hard, it’s also fun to play around with new ideas and try out stuff. You see what works and what doesn’t.”

This physical testing out of ideas is one of the greatest values of craft: its ability to bridge the gap between the abstract and the concrete (Stowe, 2007). But unlike the straightforward applied knowledge of the practice stage, in the experimentation stage, new uses can be found for traditional ideas, techniques, tools and materials (Sennett, 2008).

This connection can be made through manipulating concepts and materials for new purposes. Words, paper, pencils, crayons and markers are not just for making book reports or cartoon strips. They can also be transformed into a room sign – a real and useful object that asserts one’s identity. Through the careful and patient exploration of procedures, novel and elusive ideas can become tangible items. Seeing one’s investigational thoughts materialized is an intellectually and emotionally rewarding experience. Yet, Ian mentioned something else that compelled him to design five different hand-drawn font designs, when only one was required; he said he felt “free” to play with new ideas, and that working with typography was “fun”.
THE POWER OF PLAY

Play is a powerful motivational tool. Neuroscientists have recently discovered that play engages several centers of cognition and perception across the whole brain, and is related to heightened attention and emotional rewards (Brown & Vaughan, 2009). I encourage play and performance in the cartooning studio by giving students projects like trading cards and puppets and through urging them to act out their characters’ facial expressions, body language and stories. I recently introduced Dadaist and Surrealist drawing games like Exquisite Corpse, inkblots and blown ink in order to foster even more improvisation and experimentation in the studio.

These games also create new bonds among the students. By playing and experimenting with methods and materials, students make discoveries that they share with each other. With this open exchange of ideas, a new community develops in the classroom.

CRAFTING COMMUNITY

Art educator Olivia Gude stresses the importance of challenging young artists to create new spaces in which caring, creative communities can emerge (Gude, Possibility, 2007). In some ways, the cartooning studio at Daniel Webster is an example of this type of community, and its street art influences play a pivotal role.

When I introduced the sticker project to my students, I never imagined that it would become part of the culture at Daniel Webster, even though many street artists do use stickers as a form of communication and social bonding. As soon as they were given the mailing labels, the students were hooked. “Really?” they asked, “We can make our own stickers? People do this?”

They immediately started drawing all kinds of stickers featuring their new typography skills, original characters and even cartoon strips that used stickers for panels. Within a week, the sticker underground had formed. Making and trading stickers quickly became part of the playground culture. I also learned of many after-school trips to Staples, Office Max and CVS in search of blank mailing labels and I had a hard time keeping them on my cart.

Historically, craft has often been a social and collaborative practice (Naylor, 1971) that is frequently taught and practiced in communal groups (Bolin, Blandy, & Congdon, 2000). In DIY craft communities, the sharing of information, techniques and ideas is encouraged and rewarded by the collective (Levine & Heimerl, 2007). This is antithetical to our much of our modern, Western culture, which values individuality and competition over community and collaboration (Sennett, 2008), but it is essential for students to learn that they can reshape their schools and communities by questioning the status quo and becoming active participants. In choosing collaborative creative actions the cartooning students have generated a supportive community that offers an alternative to the often isolating and competitive world outside the studio. One of the factors in creating this community is the pride that the students take in their work.
Pride in Work

Inside the cartooning studio, the majority of the students work hard, not because they have to, but because they want to. I’m proud of the high standards they have set for themselves and the fact that many share their hard-won knowledge and skills with their classmates. During my final project for the workshop, this pride in their work was demonstrated to me in several ways.

Because the students had reacted so enthusiastically to the Street Art medium of sticker art, I took inspiration from the giant figurative cutouts of Swoon and Armsrock for the final project. However, I decided to make the cutouts puppets by attaching brass brads to their joints. This way, the figures could be put in a variety of positions and would be able to interact with each other once installed. This also presented my students with the challenge of designing and constructing life size figures that could move without ripping.

Once again, the students exceeded my expectations by taking ownership of this project and constructing complex and engaging puppets that demonstrated creative problem solving, thoughtful planning, collaborative art making, drawing skills and artistic innovation.

The ad-hoc artistic community that had developed around the sticker project flourished during the puppet project. Students helped each other measure, cut, assemble and color in their creations. They reminded each other to use the skills they had already acquired in drawing facial expressions, gestures and typography. They modeled poses for each other to draw. Some went so far as to invent original techniques like using pop-up card engineering to make skateboards, speech bubbles and broadswords stand out from the walls, while others teamed up to create narratives and supplementary comic strips about their puppets. When a group of students insisted on installing their own puppets for the Spring Arts Festival exhibit, I saw their pride in the fact that they could make original pop culture for themselves and their school community.

Pride in one’s work can also transform the way one interacts with the world (Sennett, 2008). I have seen some of my more marginalized students acquire new social roles by exhibiting exceptional skill or innovative thinking in the cartoon studio. One student in particular takes it upon himself to make weekly packs of hand drawn trading cards to give and trade with his classmates. The students look forward to receiving Enrique’s “rare” and “valuable” card packs, which are all wrapped in wax paper and labeled by hand. Stuck on the sidelines in many of his classes, Enrique is a rock star in the cartooning workshop, valued for both his skill and generous spirit. By taking pride in his work and himself, Enrique has found a meaningful and creative way to counteract a lot of the prejudice he faces for being different. His classmates are also changing by learning to encourage and support each other as artists and for respecting people like Enrique for what they can bring to the collective. In small but significant ways, they are crafting their lives with skill.
NOTES

1 As the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) reported in 2006, food companies spent nearly $2.3 billion to advertise to children, contributing greatly to the childhood obesity epidemic. In April 2011, the FTC released sweeping new guidelines asking food makers and restaurant companies to make products healthier or stop advertising them to children.

   By explicitly tying advertising to childhood obesity, the government is suggesting there is a darker side to cuddly figures like Cap’n Crunch, the Keebler elves, Ronald McDonald and the movie and television characters used to promote food (Neuman, 2011).

2 Approximately 70% of children aged 8-11 go online from home. Of those, 37% use instant messaging and 35% play games and video.

3 See Stankiewicz (2001), for a discussion of Dewey’s theory.

4 Particularly resonant was her assertion that “it is important that art classes allow students to have meaningful self-expression in which they become representin’, self-creating beings.” (Gude, Postmodern, 2004).

5 See Carlson & Louie (2010), for examples of street artists who make posters and stickers that critique consumerism and corporate power.

6 In Potts (2007), there is a discussion of contemporary artists, such as Shane Walter, who utilize DIY craft mediums to express their self-sufficiency and reject capitalism and consumerism.

7 Naylor (1971), argues that the Industrial Revolution, the Arts & Crafts Movement rose up in opposition to the degrading and isolating effects of consumer culture and factory life on workers. It stressed that people should create rather than consume their culture.

8 “What or who dictates what we call art and what we call craft?” See Blackburn (2000), for further discussion of the topic.

9 Lyotard (1979) explains that in postmodern philosophy, a metanarrative is a grand unspoken story that totalizes the world, and validates a culture’s power structures.

10 Scott (2011), provides a very easy to understand procedural process for writing both bubble and three-dimensional letters and then demonstrates over 70 variations on these forms.

11 Gardner (1993), states that the core elements of the bodily-kinesthetic intelligence are control of one’s bodily motions and capacity to handle objects skillfully. This intelligence also includes a sense of timing, a clear sense of the goal of a physical action, along with the ability to train responses so they become like reflexes. A high degree of fine-motor control and a gift for using whole body motions is also present.

12 See Carlson & Louie (2010). Sticker art is often the gateway medium for many street artists. Street artists like Obey, Tower and Tika experiment with both form and content and there are sticker exchanges around the world.

13 Following in the footsteps of street artists everywhere, my students became quite “resourceful” in acquiring their materials and I knowingly and unknowingly donated many mailing labels to their cause. See Armsrock (2007), Levine & Heimerl (2007); and Bolin, Blandy, & Congdon (2000) for further discussion.

14 I have a few students who regularly feel the need to rebel against the requirements of certain assignments. Because I want my students to challenge authority, I regard this as a healthy assertion of their independence and will work with them to find more suitable projects.

15 See Carlson & Louie (2010), and Armsrock (2007).

16 I also have an Artist Trading Card project, which has become extremely popular with the fourth and fifth grade boys. As in the sticker project, the students have become makers and traders of their own pop culture objects.
REFERENCES


