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# Narrative Study

An investigation of social and cultural perceptions shaped by contemporary influences,  
personal experiences, and development of self-awareness.

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Searcy (2013) *Perceptions*. 6"x6" mixed media: gesso, matte medium, acrylic paint, ink, newspaper clippings

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***Introduction***

As I investigate art education in our contemporary world, the diverse bodies of thought intrigue me. Throughout this term I have noticed that there is an underlining theme that connects each component of art education. The theme is perceptions; through our own perceptions we gain an understanding of our world in relation to visual culture. Olivia Gude (2009) explains this concept with ease by saying "perceptions of reality...always involve the projections of self into and onto the world" (p. 4). Without interpreting reality in our own way, we would be unable to find meaningful experiences in the world. It is due to this statement that I took an interest in conducting research on human perceptions: how people challenge and interpret their own life experiences and then how they share those experiences with the world through art education. My goal for this study was to develop a narrative inquiry on how my own experiences in life and in art education have prepared me to investigate identity with middle school students through thoughtful curriculum development. In my narrative writing, I have addressed several key components that enlighten the process in which we understand, interpret, and share with others. The areas that I touch upon are visual culture, self-awareness, social perspectives, and how curriculum development allows art educators to cultivate constructive lessons, which promote creative-self-expression, analysis, critical thinking, collaborative sharing and participation, and democratic understanding and meaning.

**Social Perspectives**

Before I can explore the theme of perceptions, I must explain why visual culture impacts social change. Growing up in a rural-Northern town, my access to visual imagery was limited. Much like most of my peers, my visual stimulation came through advertisements on the television, window displays at the mall, or street signs on my way to school. To understand historical events, our teachers would use textbooks and video documentaries to present us with visual representations of the past. At the time, technological advancements in photography were making photography more accessible to the common person, and documentation of our life stories became an important aspect of our life storytelling. In the 1990s into the early 2000s, the Internet was slowly becoming apart of our every day life and we began to see a shift in our

cultural heritage. Cell phones were more of a common personal possession and throwaway cameras and film photography were becoming a thing of the past.

### ***Visual Culture***

Today in 2013, digital media is available to us through the Internet, our smart phones, on flashy billboard displays, and through traditional methods as well, such as, TV shows, advertisements, flyers, newspapers, etc. Our exposure to visual culture is much more apparent today, making it ever more important for society to start questioning how and why our experiences and life perceptions are shaped and changed by visual imagery (Gude, 2009). In order to make this change we must recognize that the world is rapidly changing and our methods of education practices may not be the best methodologies for our time. Since the increased availability of visual imagery, society has become over stimulated by the information that is available to them, making it difficult to sustain students' attention to be focused and engaged in classroom learning. As educators we need to advocate for new methods of teaching in order to insure effective student learning and establish meaningful content and materials for more in-depth understanding. "Strong social structures are required to ensure the development and distribution of ... knowledge" (Freedman, 2007, p. 3) as students require more inventive ways to connect to the world around them.

### **Art Education Reform**

The best way of engaging students in this process is to challenge the methods of teaching by placing a larger emphasis on art education. Art education allows for reflective practices (Bell, 2002) on contemporary topics. It is through art and artmaking that art educators engage students to understand the modes of contemporary communication. Freedman (2007) recommends art educators should "[teach] visual culture for meaning, [emphasize] concepts as well as skills of analysis, critique, and synthesis in expressive artmaking, writing, and speaking" (p. 6). Fundamentally, we must educate students to explore new ways of knowing in order to communicate and connect to the world (Gude, 2010). "Through quality art education, students [should be] introduced to a range of tools and develop the skills needed to represent their experiences in their fullness, complexity, and contradictions" (Gude, 2009, p. 2). I believe it is through critical investigations of social and personal themes that students learn the valuable skills to relate and respond to critical issues. We must challenge them to be constructive in their

process of problem solving, encourage acts of creative behavior, and promote the willingness to interact in classroom activities and conversations.

This process [can be] strengthened when teachers and learners construct learning experiences that assist in critically examining the values and beliefs of the dominant ideology and the students own and other cultural groups, especially in so far as these influence knowledge about values and perceptions concerning art and art making... This kind of critical inquiry expands teacher and student experiences that inform decision making within and beyond their own cultural context. It provides a sounder base for teachers and students to understand and challenge the values and belief systems of the dominant ideology as well as those of their own and other cultural groups. This base can form multiple cultural perspectives in the students and teachers that are a prerequisite for engaging in the task of looking at, responding to, and talking about the art of diverse cultures. (Stuhr, 1994, pp. 17-18)

Freedman (2000) encourages art educators to challenge perceptions of “art and art education as [a way to aid curriculum development to make] life meaningful, as reflections of liberty, and as means through which people might pursue constructive forms of happiness, [ultimately] art education is a sociopolitical act” (p. 3).

### ***Self-Awareness***

When putting an emphasis on personal experiences, students have the ability to find personal connections to relate to the course content. I have found that making human life the centerfold for learning, makes people more receptive to actively engage in artmaking. Coherent self-discovery is possible when given a range of opportunities to investigate personal experiences through the creative process of understanding and interpreting of how our experiences shape our opinions and interests (Milbrandt and Milbrandt, 2011, p. 2). According to Kent (2010), in her lecture at the TEDx Warsaw conference, we must think like artists in order to be artists. She introduces the audience to the idea of learning to not only love this idea, but to think through the mind of an artist. She touches of seven areas of how artists think, process, and apply culture to their artistic motives. She stresses that artists see well, they problem find, they are self-aware, they are experts of play, they embrace difficulty, they are multidisciplinary, and finally, artists reflect and critique (<http://youtu.be/BM3Orh5eJNw>). Her recommendation for thinking like an

artist is important in constructing curricular that is engaging and meaningful to not only our students but to ourselves as artists.

As a learning art educator myself, I find the opportunity to process my creative ideas is an empowering step for producing meaningful artwork. By discussing and sharing my ideas for artmaking, I have become aware of the emotional consequences that creative activity has on me as an artist. This dialogue of thought has allowed me to address and “accept the complexity of [my] emerging feelings” (Gude, 2010, p. 6) as well as it has allowed me to interact and connect with others in my creative community. My

experiences in creating my body of work, *Perceptions*, along side this research, has helped me in my reflective process of making valuable connections from my own life experiences to the world in which I live today. Through the investigative process of learning how my personal perceptions affect my outlook on life, I find it to be an important milestone to becoming an affective art educator. With this new appreciation in the creative process I have come to realize that if I want “to engage in making art, [I] must begin by surrendering [myself] to the process of making” (Gude, 2010, p. 2). It is in that process of making that I learn to become self-aware of my own life influences. As stated by Freedman (2007), “people can come to understand the characteristics and the influence of identity through the visual arts and it is through the arts that identity is often constructed” (p. 8). As an artist, I have learned that artmaking provides me the opportunity to express myself in a creative way. Up until recently I was unable to understand why; I accepted the process as a way to experience self-satisfaction. I never questioned my process, my interests, my experiences, or my materials. I have learned since, that “creativity remains an elusive concept where discussion, definitions, procedures, and expressions of the term may be regarded superficially unless broad understandings about creativity can be broken down to manageable and assessable specific operations” (Milbrandt and Milbrandt, 2011, p. 1).

### *Cultivating Creative Expression and Understanding*



Searcy (2013) *Perceptions: Self- Image, Self-Judgment*. 12"x12" mixed media: gesso, matte medium, acrylic paint, ink, newspaper clippings

Gude (2010) suggests that we should “[create] a climate in which the [students] experiences [are] valued and understood, a climate in which the individual is not judged for how well he/she meets a pre-determined model of process or product” (p. 4). It is also essential that we recognize that “no matter how much content we cover, if students are not given time to discover, reflect, to probe the significance of and judge the validity of ideas, the serious content will go unlearned” (Stout, 1999, p. 5). As suggested by Stout (1999) the goals for instituting contemporary art education practices are:

To raise awareness of the visual arts as unique forms of human experience; to teach students the processes of art criticism toward the end of finding meaning and value in art for themselves; to teach the kinds of affective and cognitive reasoning that enable students to view art from multiple perspectives; to broaden understanding and appreciation of art across cultures; and to increase the propensity for aesthetic experience and nurture a desire to make art integral to daily life. (p. 5)

### ***Turning Perceptions into Action***

As a way to make the connections between perceptions and self-awareness I have developed a short curriculum unit that investigates perceptions. My goal is to have students embrace self-identity through artmaking. By allowing students to critically reflect on their experiences through shared classroom conversations, I will provide students the opportunity to develop quality knowledge needed for deep critical thinking (Gude, 2007). By affording students with firsthand accounts given by contemporary artists, my hope is for them to learn how others experience the world through artmaking (Stout, 1999). These shared experiences are crucial to the students’ ability to become divergent thinkers in a democratic society (Gude, 2009). In context to the lessons, students will be encouraged to work in collaboration with their peers to investigate their personal belief systems. They will be instructed to explore one perception that they hold and will create Altered Books to represent that belief system. The students will determine where the belief originated from and how it impacts their opinions as well as how it influences their interaction with others. In addition to this lesson, the students will take interest in deconstructing social labels through the creation of a cartoon or comic strip. Students will investigate how labels affect society and how some labels have become stereotypes. Students will also learn how labels can be damaging to a society and on a more individual basis; how these labels become lifetime struggles for people. Finally, students will be encouraged to

investigate how perceptions change and evolve overtime. The goal of this curriculum unit is to promote awareness through a sociocultural dynamic.

### Conclusion

It is through my own self-discovery that I find it necessary to develop a curriculum that allows my students to become critical thinkers. Through this process, my aim is for students to value the emotional constraints of becoming aware of life circumstances and personal experiences. To me, it is imperative to provide students the range of opportunities to challenge their perceptions in order to understand how their personal experiences shape their individual identity.

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