Introduction

Sculptor Joel Shapiro once remarked: "Design just does not interest me... The process does and the development of the idea."

Why have students make artworks? Although art-making is the primary enterprise in most elementary, middle, and high school artrooms, do art teachers ever ask themselves "Why am I having students paint landscapes, fashion clay pots, construct collages, and render self-portraits?"

In 1943, Abstract Expressionist painters Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, and Adolph Gottlieb, in a letter to the New York Times, declared: "There's no such thing as a good painting about nothing." As a former art teacher, an art-education professor, and a painter, I also feel that artmaking is foremost a meaning-making endeavor and that students—besides manipulating media, developing technical proficiencies, or learning good design principles through their artworks—can and should explore and express meaning. The intent of this text is to explore artmaking as a meaning-making endeavor, which is exemplified by the work of professional artists and may be translated into classroom practice.

From Creative Self-expression to Meaning Making

In contrast to meaning making, the creative self-expression approach to art education, which dominated from the 1940s until recently, offered a limited notion of the complexity of the artmaking process. Students created from intuitive urges that required little overt instruction. The primary responsibility of art teachers was to provide students with opportunities to encounter various kinds of media and techniques. A more recent approach—comprehensive art education—offers a more complex understanding of the artmaking process. Scholars Clark, Day, and Greer describe this development:

In the early 1960s, at the height of the popularity of creative self-expression, several conferences were held at which art educators questioned the fundamental assertions of the self-expression approach and suggested alternatives. Since then, theorists, scholars, and researchers have developed a body of literature that has moved consistently away from the creative self-expression approach.

Comprehensive art education contends that, in addition to art production, art instruction should embrace art history, art criticism, and the philosophy of art. Implementation of comprehensive art education not only expands the content of art instruction but also—according to Clark, Day, and Greer—significantly alters the notions of such factors as the learner, the teacher, creativity, and adult art within the context of the classroom.

Whereas in the creative self-expression approach, the focus had been on developing creativity, self-expression, and an integrated personality; in the knowledge-based comprehensive approach, instruction has become less about nurturing and more about teaching valid art concepts at the student's level. Adult art, no longer seen as inhibiting self-expression, becomes of primary significance for student expression. Creativity is no longer an innate attribute that requires only encouragement and opportunity, but, instead, one that benefits from overt instructional intervention.

The knowledge-based approach of comprehensive art education offers a less romanticized view of stu-
dent artmaking, contending that instructional inter-
vention is both desirable and necessary. Based on
this approach, this text embeds artmaking instruc-
tion within a context of learning that derives from
an integration of art criticism, art history, and the
philosophy of art, thereby informing students' artist-
ic expressions.

**Artmaking Informed by Big Ideas**
The approach in this text also extends somewhat
beyond comprehensive art education to embrace a
more interdisciplinary character, through an empha-
sic on big ideas—the overarching notions that reach
beyond any particular discipline. As discussed in
Chapter 1, big ideas are broad, important human
issues. Examples of big ideas are power, identity,
community, nature, and conflict; and big ideas such
as these have become useful tools for linking the
various subject areas in the interdisciplinary curricu-

Professional artists' use of big ideas to motivate
and direct their artistic expression provides another
reason for focusing art learning on them. In this text,
sculptor Claes Oldenburg, in his colossal monuments,
pursues the big idea of changed meanings in every-
day objects; installation artist Sandy Skoglund
explores the big idea of human behavior in contem-
porary society; and sculptor George Segal expresses
the big idea of alienation in the urban environment.
The big ideas in these and other artists' work are so
significant that they sustain the artists over years of
artmaking. And, all importantly, the focus of student
artmaking around big ideas makes the process rele-
vant. By using big ideas, students find that artmaking
is more than creating an interesting design or learn-
ing a particular technique with a specific medium:
artmaking also becomes an expression of important
ideas related to their own life and the lives of others.

**Organization of the Text**
So as to develop the reader's understanding of the
artmaking process and the importance and function
of its parts, each chapter in the text focuses on one
component. Chapter 1 explores the concept of big
ideas and lays the foundation for the subsequent
chapters; Chapter 2 considers the importance of
establishing personal connections to big ideas;
Chapter 3 argues for building a knowledge base for
big ideas; Chapter 4 investigates problem solving
with big ideas; Chapter 5 looks at the setting of aes-
thetic boundaries with choices of media, formal
qualities, subject matter, styles, and techniques to
express big ideas; Chapter 6 examines the use of big
ideas in designing artmaking instruction into a holis-
tic learning experience for students; Chapter 7
addresses less concrete aspects of the artmaking

---

### The Artmaking Process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Big Ideas</th>
<th>Problem Solving</th>
<th>Knowledge Base</th>
<th>Personal Connections</th>
<th>Boundaries</th>
<th>Ways of Working</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>conceptual foci</td>
<td>conceptual</td>
<td>general</td>
<td>past experience</td>
<td>formal choices</td>
<td>risk taking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>technical</td>
<td>artistic</td>
<td>individual interest</td>
<td>technical choices</td>
<td>playing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>visual</td>
<td>technical</td>
<td>social context</td>
<td>media</td>
<td>experimenting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>practical</td>
<td></td>
<td>heritage</td>
<td>styles</td>
<td>delaying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>subject matter</td>
<td>closure</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

*Introduction*
process (such as risk taking, postponement of meaning, and experimentation) that have implications for classroom instruction, and offers guidance to teachers for implementing the artmaking process in a manner that encourages inquiry and discovery. All the chapters explicate these practices with big ideas by artists, in artworks, and in classroom artmaking.

**Characteristics of Constructivist Teaching**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authentic activities (instruction that has strong connections to the real world)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student collaboration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deep knowledge of a topic or discipline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of prior knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increasing complexity of understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to content experts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**A Constructivist Approach**

Highly visible in current school reform literature is the notion that students be engaged with understanding and meaning making. This constructivist approach to teaching and learning argues that the goal of teaching is students’ understanding and that students construct knowledge, not simply reproduce it through memorization, recall, or routinized application. Artmaking conceived as an exploration and expression of big ideas reflects a constructivist approach. The implications of this are that students not produce artworks from rote formulas or create products that have little meaning beyond the exploration of media or the development of technical skills, but, instead, that students make artworks to investigate and express ideas; and, based upon constructivist practices of authentic learning based upon the real world, that students model their artmaking on that of adult artists and thereby learn how adult artists make art. The goal, however, is not to develop students into professional artists, but to structure classroom artmaking into a more meaningful activity, one based upon real-world authenticity.

**Professional Artists’ Practices in the Classroom**

Comprehensive art education advocates instructional modeling based on the professional practices of art critics, art historians, aestheticians, and artists as a way for students to learn about art. For instance, art critics describe, analyze, interpret, and evaluate artworks; and the adoption of these same practices as standard procedures for conducting art criticism in the classroom encourages students to become more-skilled viewers of art. In theory, the professional artist’s practices should have become a rich resource for classroom instruction but, to a large extent, this has not occurred. Therefore, the purpose of this text is to consider the professional artist in light of practices that can have significance for classroom artmaking.

The professional artists examined in the text are contemporary artists working in the context of current ideas, trends, values, and beliefs that inform a particular art world—the one most often addressed by Western professional critics and art historians. This is not to say that other art worlds—those that are community-based or self-taught or non-Western—cannot contribute models for classroom artmaking, but that such worlds exceed the scope of this text. Additionally, the selection of contemporary artists reflects my belief that students find contemporary artworks more compelling than those of the past. I have found that students are often more open and ready to embrace the unaccustomed, and frequently are not as disturbed as adults by new art forms and practices. Further, although contemporary artworks often challenge traditional artistic forms, they are more likely to depict visual imagery and
subject matter that students find familiar, providing useful connections to the artworks.

Research for the Text
In conducting research into artmaking practices at the elementary, middle, high school, and university levels, I observed classroom practice, held formal interviews, conversed informally with art teachers and art-education students, and instructed graduate and undergraduate studio methods courses with the ideas that inform this text. Other research—which I most often conducted through published artist interviews and art criticism—involved examining the works and practices of professional artists, especially those of international installation artist Sandy Skoglund.

From this body of research about the professional artist, I derived practices that have meaning for the classroom. The questions I pursued revolve around the artist's exploration and expression of meaning: What allows the artist to explore and investigate ideas? What permits the artist to find new perspectives and insights, push boundaries, and delve into ideas at deeper levels? How does the artist emphasize the process over the product? How does the artist make artistic decisions? Such questions—and professional artists' answers to them—developed my understanding of the artistic process and how professional artists use it to create not only products, but meaning too. My desire is that this text, which resulted from this research, will serve not as a recipe or a formula for designing classroom artmaking, but as a guide for implementing artmaking as a meaning-making endeavor in the classroom.

Notes
3 M. Rothko, B. Newmann, & A. Gottlieb, Letter to the New York Times, 1943.
5 These characteristics were compiled by the author as a general guideline to current educational understandings of a constructivist approach to teaching and learning. The list is not comprehensive (other characteristics could be added), nor is it meant to imply that constructivist teaching and learning must always include all of these characteristics.
6 The reform literature is extensive. A useful bibliography can be found in F.M. Newmann & Associates, Authentic Achievement: Restructuring Schools for Intellectual Quality (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996).