Speculative Fiction’s Contribution to Contemporary Understanding: The Handmaid Art Tale

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The belief that art should not be a handmaiden to social studies has continued in art education discourse since the 1920s. What role does the handmaiden play in this cultural narrative? Who is the handmaiden? We explore the handmaiden metaphor in art education and in popular texts. She is both needed and despised for her metaphorical acts of curriculum integration and for forming partnerships and collaborations. We focus on student discourse about the film The Handmaid’s Tale in our team-teaching two different courses offered at two geographically distant universities connected via the Internet. The film generated critical dialogue among students regarding the “Handmaid” within the context of art education. Informed by the symbolism and speculative fiction of Margaret Atwood’s book The Handmaid’s Tale, upon which the film is based, we revise the narrative of art education towards a feminist position of interdisciplinary content-based and multivocal art creation and critiques.

Margaret Atwood describes her book The Handmaid’s Tale (1998) as speculative fiction, because the story she tells takes situations that actually exist to their logical conclusion if the cultural and political momentum of contemporary times continues on its trajectory. Atwood describes that The Handmaid’s Tale “is a slight twist on the society we have now” (1998, p. 317). In this novel, the Handmaid states, “Like other things now, thought must be rationed” (Atwood, 1998, p. 8). There was, however, no rationing of thoughts as students in our university classes watched the film, The Handmaid’s Tale (Wilson & Schlundorff, 1990), based on Atwood’s story (1998, original 1986). The two graduate courses, geographically distant from each other, discussed the film online in spring, 2004. The film generated conversation about the Handmaid’s role in the socialization of knowledge. Knowledge is clearly connected to its cultural contexts in The Handmaid’s Tale. The film also served as a catalyst for thinking about art education as a Handmaiden within a patriarchal tradition. The following excerpts from this online dialogue are examples of how the film opened discussion concerning agency within institutional expectations of conformity:

The idea of the Handmaid in her silence and struggle to be within the confines of an oppressive dictatorship represents something for me. As an educator, I often find myself seeking desperately to find...
ways in which I may be true to my own beliefs about learning and my own creative self, while at the same time somehow being accepted within an institution that silently strikes out at anything or anyone who might be seen as not conforming. (student, January 18, 2004)

You touched on an idea I thought of throughout my viewing of the film … I kept thinking of how Kate exercised her agency through the (limiting and oppressive) role of the Handmaid. Her “self” was not entirely crushed and she seemed to work with the agency and advantages that she could in the situation. I, too, felt that this was like teaching art. (student, January 20, 2004)

Atwood describes the culture she creates as a “dystopia,” a dysfunctional utopia. In that narrative, a violent war of ideologies is taking place; the world is divided between a conservative religious culture and guerrilla freedom fighters. The conservative leadership has assigned traditional roles to women including wife, cook, and even courtesan. Due to pollution from nuclear fallout, many wives cannot bear living children. Therefore, a new class of young fertile women has been invented for use in the conservative culture as surrogate wombs. These women are called “Handmaids.” If we consider the content and goals of art education from the portrayal of the Handmaidens in art education discourse, we uncover rhetoric that is eerily similar to that of Atwood’s tale. Our own speculative account of the Handmaiden considers the struggle for the meaning, goals, and content of art education. We begin our exploration of the Handmaidens in art education discourse by considering graduate students’ reflections on her current and potential role in education. We conclude with re-visioning art education as Handmaidens.

**Handmaiden in Art Education Discourse**

We find references to the “Handmaiden” starting with Stephen Dobbs’s dissertation in 1972, and continuing through Stinespring’s (2001) publication in *Arts Education Policy Arts Review*. In such publications, art education is metaphorically gendered female and derided, especially when she “serves as a handmaidens to social studies.” Some enduringly support Eisner’s stirring comment, “One wonders whether in the end art education will become little more than a handmaiden to the social studies” (1994, p. 190). Eisner makes light of, and essentially denigrates the role of the Handmaiden. Perhaps he has not considered that Handmaidens have gracefully and honorably served as backbone and heart of many types of communities and cultures throughout history. Dobbs (1972) traces the term “Handmaiden” in reference to art education as far back as the 1920s and states: “Indeed, art so often served the interests of the social studies course that some teachers in the 1920’s referred to art as the ‘handmaiden’ of that subject” (p. 62). Thus art is taught to “merely ‘dress-up’ other subjects” (Dobbs, 1972, p. 63). Furthermore, Dobbs writes, “Art
had served many masters: industry, concept formation, mental health, creativity" and under Lowenfeld, serves "the total development of the child ..." (1972, p. 115). As Dobbs lists the "masters" art has served, he insinuates that this Handmaid is quite promiscuous. We attempt to circumvent the paternalistic-modernist perspective of the Handmaid tale as it has been recounted in each decade since the 1970s (e.g., Dobbs, 1972; Eisner, 1994; Garoian, 1984; Grauer, 1981; Stinespring, 2001).

From our perspectives, art education may function as a nurturing force for social studies, metaphorically, a surrogate womb; but we argue that this is an honorable Handmaid function. When art shares a curricular slot with social studies, why is social stud(ies) assumed to be the dominant partner in this relationship? By joining with social stud, art education (as the mistress) may lose her purity and her reputation as she shares curricular time outside her own discipline. While this dalliance has been considered promiscuous, within a feminist perspective, the Handmaid in art education serves to integrate experiences and thereby continually challenges the art and educational system in which she is situated.

In regard to the Handmaid's designation as a female servant, we recognize "that which is 'feminine' is marginalized and that which is 'masculine' is privileged" (Davies, 2003, p. 116). However, we argue that this cultural construction needs to shift. Pen Dalton (2001) posits that gendering occurs through both overt and subtle ways:

... art education has been formed not only by the explicit, well-documented "big ideas" of modernity or by rational forward moving developments, but as often by hidden, private or overlooked contingencies. It is mainly in these non-explicit, non-conscious pedagogic practices, I suggest, that gender difference is significantly produced. (p. 3)

Gendering art education has been a subtle and yet forceful thrust in education since the Enlightenment. Freedman (1994) refers to Rousseau's gendering of art education in his philosophical tale of Emile, a male student's "natural" education isolated from culture, females, and "other forces represented by Rousseau as detrimental to the growth of the free and independent male" (p. 21). The female's role in Rousseau's view of education, like that of the Handmaid in art education, was to bridge "pure" education with social issues. "Gendering operates complexly as a way of cognitively organizing information, establishing hierarchies, underpinning and legitimizing relations of social power" (Dalton, 2001, p. 10). When objects, jobs, or ideas, including art are considered useful, they are often gendered female and lowered in status. Consider, for example, "master bedroom" versus "mistress bedroom," "man-made" versus "woman-made," and "chairman" versus "chair woman." Parker and Pollock's book, Old Mistresses (1981) presents the historical erasure of
women artists from the Middle Ages to the 1970s by the 20th century practice of gendering valuable art as MASTERpieces.

The label of the Handmaiden has been riddled with derogatory connotations and her role in art education has been denounced as a distraction to art knowledge. Dobbs (1972) describes the dangers of art as a Handmaiden:

This development of art for "artistic" ends would mean that students could learn about and experience critical and historical as well as productive (i.e.-art-making) activities in the classroom. Rather than serve only as a handmaiden to the general curriculum, art would provide a distinct loci of significant experience related to distinctive purposes. (p. 207)

Modernist notions of art privilege significant form as the distinct loci of significant experience. The autonomous object becomes forefront. It has been well established within multi-contextual worldview(s), that modernist notions are not adequate for rationalizing thought, actions, or pedagogy. However, when we shift from modernist notions, reclaim pre-modern, and embrace postmodern and semiotic notions of art as a Handmaiden, we can describe art's worth in terms carrying powerful contemporary relevance within interdisciplinary contexts.

Similar to the reference of the Handmaiden's role in art education as blurring the distinct values and purposes of art, art history texts and methodologies also employ terms typically associated with women to belittle art. For example, art educator, Paul Bolin (1995/1996) notes that when writing about art by women, Janson in the History of Art (1986, 1991), still one of the primary texts used to teach art history in higher education, used terms such as "intimate," "charming," and "gaily elegant effect." Art historian Lisa Bloom (1999) draws our attention to the "disturbing voyeurism evoked in likening the work of art to a female body that will ultimately yield its secrets," in textbooks for aspiring art historians (p. 2). For example, Mark Roskill (1989) describes the art historian's process:

A work of art is affected in the way in which it is seen.... And if it is to give up its secrets, assuming it has some, it most often has to be worked at. Particularly if it is a great work of art, it does not spontaneously lay itself open to us. (p. 9)

Great art, then, can be probed by laying her open to the penetrating male gaze. This normalized art history practice might be seen as a metaphorical rape. Art viewed in this way dangerously equates the viewer as male and the object as female. When art is gendered as female and the creator as male, this cultural narrative strongly endorses the primacy of men. Art education metaphorically envisioned as a Handmaiden to social studies can be viewed as an empowered female role, in that, art education plays a generative, creative role in understanding society.
Many art educators have written extensively on the need to reconsider art education content and goals from a feminist integrationist perspective, including Amburgy (2003, 2002); Collins and Sandell (1997, 1984); Garber (2003, 1996, 1992a, 1992b); Grauer, Irwin, and Zimmerman (2003); Keifer-Boyd (2004, 2003); and Smith-Shank (2001, 2000). Integration curriculum theory supports partnerships, collaboration, and interdisciplinarity in all subjects, especially art. It is “essentially a situated, socially-constructed, and culturally mediated process of making meaning” (Marshall, 2005, p. 227). The content of art education not only interweaves with other disciplines, it is, in turn, produced from these content areas (Chalmers, 2004, 1982, 1981; Garber, 1992a; Hammond, 2000). According to Lowenfeld and Brittain, “Integration in learning means that the single subjects lose their identity and form a new unit within the student” (1975, p. 106). Pearse (2004) argues, “Intelligence, in the holistic sense, requires integration” (p. 44). We believe that by honoring the term “Handmaid” and reconnecting art education with positive connotations within the Handmaid metaphor, she can serve strongly, powerfully, and ably within a context of societal and cultural needs and can be fully integrated into the fabric of our lives. By releasing art (and art education) from a privileged modernist position, enabling her relationships with other subjects and integrating her into the communities from which she came, we encourage a holistic and authentic art education. The Handmaiden serves responsibly to an inclusive society and is multitasking and interdisciplinary. Art experiences are within the realm of everyday decision-making and include a multitude of purposes. Chalmers (2004), a long-time advocate of a “cross-curricular initiative termed ‘social responsibility,’” asserts, “We need art for social critique, cultural survival, and community identity” (p. 51). Many feminist pedagogues (e.g., hooks, 2000, 1994; Kimmel, 1999) emphasize social responsibility, transforming ideas into action, and political struggle as important aspects of feminist pedagogy. Art is not a distinct part of what and who we are, but rather, it is inseparable from our values, beliefs, and sensitivities of how we know the world and ourselves.

Students’ Discourse Regarding the Film: The Handmaid’s Tale

The 12 graduate students in the spring, 2004 course, Artistic Creations and Theories of Knowing, at a northeastern university dialogued in an online asynchronic threaded message board with 17 students in a graduate Women’s Studies course at a midwestern university about the film, The Handmaid’s Tale. Both classes watched the film in their separate locations. We asked students to discuss the Handmaid’s role in the film, and how she is visually and discursively symbolized as a metaphor for art education.
Scrabbles the Text

One woman at the midwest university initiated the discussion with the comment, “I feel the way the Handmaiden is projected in this film is very degrading to women. They treat her like she is nothing more than a baby making machine” (January 17, 2004). A male student at the northeast university responded, “I have to disagree about the existence of the Handmaid as solely a vehicle for reproduction. That might be the party line, but I don’t think the Commander saw that as her sole purpose” (January 19, 2004). The commander in the film asked the Handmaid to play the board game “Scrabble” with him night after night in his office, which was off-limits to his wife. He also required the Handmaid to perform in the fertilization rituals in which she was to lie between his wife’s legs and his penetration in their bed. Two students reflected on the philosophy of scrabble:

Playing a game of Scrabble—seeking to bring order to a confusing set of circumstances—was actually, upon reflection, a metaphorically appropriate activity for these two characters to engage in, given their current living situation. (January 19, 2004)

I did sense some underlying meaning [to the Scrabble game]… Kate [the Handmaid] “was” a librarian, and she was being told “not to think” for herself … [the Handmaid and the Commander] were playing a wicked game of power and control. (January 20, 2004)

These students’ discussion brought to light how the Handmaid was forced to serve the social system for the good of the nation, but she found ways to challenge that system. Atwood’s Handmaid challenges the system by not revealing that she was gathering information and knowledge about the Commander to assist the overthrow of the patriarchal system. The Handmaiden in playing the game of Scrabble learned about the Commander, and he about her. They gradually shed their signifying uniforms to reveal individuality. Such shedding of their color-coded physical uniforms disrupted their expectations of the role and value of the other. In these regular encounters, during the play of Scrabble, social signifiers of rank and worth were lessened and the Commander lowered his guard to develop a companionship with Kate, his household’s Handmaid. Art education as a Handmaiden, like her role in Atwood’s story, can shed assumptions of normalcy by investigating beyond surface signifiers and contextualizing the meaning of the signifiers deep within cultural narratives.

Similarly in art education, it is critical that we break down the notion of universal signifiers into the small narratives that operate quite differently from country to country, culture to culture, and person to person. According to Illeris (2002):

One of the most forceful points that have been made within postmodernism is that what modernist thinking has referred to as a
“common culture” and the “human” has most often only amounted to that which conforms to standards set by and for white, middle-class men from the Western world—and that the values that have been deemed to be “universal” can themselves be said to be the result of cultural and historical constructions. (p. 47)

The Handmaiden’s role in art education is to bring forth critical awareness of relationships between cultures, ideas, knowledge systems, absences, artifacts, and especially our lives. In a world as fast-paced, multi-layered, and inevitably interconnected as we live in now, it is probable that the concept of isolation from societal impact no longer exists for the majority of people and governments. There is instead, connectedness and juxtaposition of seemingly disparate ideologies. For example, the Chinese Military Museum in western Beijing has remnants of a U.S. spy plane that the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) shot down, exhibition text on the evils of capitalism and how the Chinese fought to rid foreign control of industry and capital, and old army “uniforms” made of tattered grass tied together to show how miserable and how hard the PLA fought for communism. A large McDonald’s® next to the military museum is a popular stop for Chinese tourists after learning about the evils of capitalism in the museum’s 5000 years of Chinese military history. “The appearance of homogeneity [such as McDonald’s] is the most salient, and ultimately the most deceptive, feature of globalization” (Watson, 2004, p. 169). Anthropologists are finding that in the 21st century the proliferation of visual culture does not equate with homogeneity in that there are vast differences in the “internal meanings that people assign to cultural innovations” (Watson, 2004, p. 167). What this means for educators is first to recognize that globalization is not a homogenizing force, especially not in predictable ways, and that the study of visual culture involves the study of contextualized and localized meanings that are indeed diverse perspectives in an interconnected world. For example, the film Titanic was highly popular among Chinese middle-agers in the late 1990s for different reasons than the master narrative of a love story Hollywood style. Anthropologists inform us:

Improbable as it might seem to Western observers, the story of lost love on a sinking cruise ship hit a responsive chord among Cultural Revolution veterans. Their enthusiastic, highly emotional response had almost nothing to do with the cultural system that framed the film. Titanic served as a socially acceptable vehicle for the public expression of regret by a generation of aging revolutionaries who had devoted their lives to building a form of socialism that had long since disappeared. (Watson, 2004, p. 153)

Fortunately, many art historians and art critics (Berger, 1972; Brown, 1997; Chadwick, 2002; Gómez-Quintero & Bustillo, 2002; Koloski-Ostrow & Lyons, 1997; LaDuke, 1992; Smith, 1995) no longer refer to
universal signifiers, but instead concentrate on the social use of art, values expressed in art, and some even focus on diverse “ways of seeing” and interdisciplinary connections. In these ways, art education serves honorably as a Handmaiden to understand societies from inquiry that seeks local and contextual understandings, values, and purposes of art.

Unmasking Patriarchy

The Handmaid’s Tale also served as a catalyst for thinking about art education as a Handmaiden within a patriarchy. One student wrote, “another metaphorical idea was represented by the powerful Commander … a man so powerful he could never be seen as impotent [or] infertile” (January 17, 2004). The students discussed potency, infertility, and how birth control pills are not covered by their health insurance while Viagra is covered. One concluded, “I think we are still living in a man’s world” (January 20, 2004).

The Handmaid’s Tale, like Parker and Pollock’s (1981) book Old Mistresses, brings attention to the absence of terms that include both genders. “Masterworks” have been privileged since art left the realm of the trades in the Renaissance, and it was unthinkable to attribute master works to women. Still, women have been practicing artists throughout history. Curiously, some “old mistresses” had their artwork attributed to a male artist by diligent researchers who could not conceive of a woman master. Fortunately, in recent times, some of these mistakes have been uncovered. One example of retribution is the work of Constance Blondel Charpentier (1767-1849) and her Portrait of a Young Woman, now titled Mademoiselle Charlotte du Val d’Oges (Parker & Pollock, 1981). This work was originally thought to be by the Neo-classical master Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825). What was formerly a “perfect piece” by David was considered to have “certain weaknesses” when it became a Charpentier (Parker & Pollock, 1981, pp. 106-107). Can Handmaidens make masterworks? In the film, the Handmaids’ work is to provide a baby to a couple, who raise the child’s status by their socio-economic and political status. Handmaidens in the film find that the only means to change the system is to work within the system. Similarly, in order to be taken seriously as an artist, women artists sometimes changed their names to androgynous ones, or used their brothers’ names. For example, Lee Krasner (1908-1984) tried to avoid female stereotypes by looking like and painting like a man. She was so successful that she received a backhanded compliment from her teacher, Hans Hoffman, when he said, “This is so good you would not know it was painted by a woman” (Wagner, 1996, p. 425). Historically, when art is known to be by a woman, the work has diminished in popularity, monetary value, and aesthetic worth (The Guerrilla Girls, 1998; Parker & Pollock, 1981). Similarly, when art education is gendered female as a Handmaiden, the intent has been to signal its lowered status. The absurdity of devaluing art as a Handmaiden
to social studies is to support a patriarchy in which women to succeed must deny their identity like Lee Krasner and other women have done to be valued.

Learning from The Republic of Gilead, the serfdom in *The Handmaid's Tale*, we examined how perks to art workers circumvent resistance to the power structures that designate which artworks are most valuable. The Handmaid states, "No power structure can institute total serfdom (unless they kill off most of the people) without giving a few perks (Atwood, 1998, p. 319). Serfdoms are systems of slavery. The elite and powerful orchestrate the values, beliefs, and the practices of their serfs, but only because the serfs believe that they benefit. One student noted:

It seems to me that the definition of purity in the movie had changed to mean those who followed along without complaint with the newly established social order. ... The slut was the one who refused to cooperate with the fertility rituals, who sought to escape from the constraints of their roles. (January 20, 2004)

Perks keep the power structure of cultural art capital stable. In the artworld, certain works of art share the fate of the Handmaid. They are prized objects that are useful for generating and maintaining status. Recognition as an artist in the 21st century still depends to a large degree on lineage from a study with notable artists, working within certain discourses, and exhibiting in respected venues. Education, each step of the way, is intended to build such a lineage, historically privileging the status quo, and teaching the values that maintain the art serfdom. Counter to such hegemonic practices, art education as a Handmaiden exposes the political, economic, and social systems that control cultural capital. Once the systems are revealed as benefiting a few, such systems of privilege are no longer desired systems for those educators who believe in justice, equality, and the right to a quality education for all.

**Handmaidens Art Education Political Creativity**

In *The Handmaid's Tale* the regular naming of commercial and food products is a regulatory practice and "thus familiar and reassuring" (Atwood, p. 308). Similarly, advertising in magazines, on billboards, on television, and in cyberspace promote the desire to own, taste, and wear. The content of contemporary postmodern, post-communist cultures is commodified and political. Art, from a feminist integrative perspective, is political. While there is no "correct" position about issues raised by art and cultural artifacts, no artwork or artifact can escape positing a political position, including abstract art (Guilbaut, 1983). Feminist contemporary inquiry into art involves contextual explorations and thoughtful, reflective, and ethical considerations of power and privileging of ideas and people. A society that does not participate on a daily basis in creating and critiquing images has accepted being controlled by those who do create and critique images. Corporations use images to sell, governments use...
images to promote nationalism, swaying people to wave flags "patriotically." Habermas (1996) argues that without "aesthetic-expressive" discourse there is tyranny of democracy. Art, addressed from the interdisciplinary social responsible strategies of the Handmaiden, are not controlled objects, but rather, out-of-control signifiers in that the meaning and value of the art is regarded as specific to a time and place. From this perspective, no one owns or controls the object's meaning or significance, but everyone can contribute to its meaning and purpose.

Students in our classes in discussing the film The Handmaid's Tale, noted that when creativity is absent so is hope. Without creativity, there is no vision (January 20-21, 2004). One student asked, "Is creation a shared process between the creator and the audience?" (January 18, 2004). We believe that creativity is a generative activity that results from gathering multiple perspectives, finding connections, and critically evaluating diverse information. Creativity involves the use of metaphors and analogies to imagine, create meaning, and make connections. It involves reflective thinking, exposing the worldviews in which specific beliefs are situated, engaging in critical dialogue, and transcending assumptions. To develop curriculum that incorporates creative and critical practices, a pedagogical shift is needed that views knowledge as interdisciplinary and dynamic rather than as complete, definite, and fixed. Art as a Handmaiden rejuvenates creativity in education by encouraging discourse and feeding intellectual hunger. The Handmaid knows that genius and/or creativity, if they exist at all, are rare and would not exist in a vacuum, but only within the contexts of cross-fertilization and a community of strong and supportive partners (Csikszentmihaly, 1996).

The Handmaid's Suggestions for Art Education Significance in Today's World

Freedman (1994) asks, "What better subject than art for addressing social and cultural issues in school?" (p. 134). Ten years later, in an online class, discussion between students in both our courses consider the reality and consequences to art education with the separation of disciplines in educational institutions:

In watching the movie [The Handmaid's Tale] ... I was also struck by how our current educational system truly does assign each school subject its own colored uniform and role in society. Each group (subject) is not really supposed to mix. Each group (subject) is supposed to do their own job and not interact with other groups (subjects) unless it is officially sanctioned. Sometimes other subjects do want to use the arts. However, if the arts do not seem to be fertile ground for other subjects to plant their seed, the fate of the arts is often put in jeopardy! In fact, our entire educational system could even be compared to the Handmaiden. ... For, just like the Handmaid who could not conceive with a sterile master, the school...
that fails to educate all children in the same way to the same level of mastery—even though they do not receive funding [to do so]—will be sent to "the colonies." (January 19, 2004)

Another in the course reflects on the film’s meaning in relationship to his K-12 art education experience:

I completely agree that art is taught to be valued for its superficial qualities at those [K-12] grades. I remember being taught by many of my teachers that good art was something that was painted to look like it’s a photograph and completely leaving out any discussion of its content. The ideas didn’t matter to those teachers, only the surface beauty and its ability to decorate. (January 20, 2004)

Similarly, another student states: “As I was growing up I came to the conclusion that I was NOT an artist because I didn’t feel confident in my ability to realistically reproduce a landscape or photograph” (January 20, 2004). Another adds to the online discussion, “I am reminded of observations I did in kindergarten classrooms where students were graded on their ability to color in the lines” (January 20, 2004). We turn to the metaphorical Handmaiden for suggestions on how to change art education by working within the system so that future children do not experience art education as a rigid, standardized discipline.

Preservice Interdisciplinary Teaching Partnerships and Collaborative Planning

Teacher education programs need to address how to change the traditional approach to separation of disciplines and avoid creating additive modules of art or diverse cultures or other areas of human experience. If additive, it is unlikely that preservice teachers once employed as elementary school teachers will be able to include the additive curriculum due to limited time and pressure to teach to the tests in which student scores impact school funding. Changes in educational institutional infrastructures are needed, along with a national commitment to create evaluations integrated in the fabric of pre-K to higher education. Every teacher and high school graduate should be able to pass proficiency assessments of their knowledge of diverse ideologies, people, places, and times; have strategies for building self-esteem that is not at the expense of others’ liberty and justice; and can demonstrate that they can work with others respectfully and productively. Such knowledge requires the study of the varied meanings conveyed through the signs and symbols of spoken, written, visual, and kinesthetic languages of the world’s people. This is an interdisciplinary enterprise that art education can foster.

While there are good resources¹ to help elementary teachers develop as art educators, no one can learn to teach art in one college semester art class. Unfortunately, the curricula in degree programs that certify elementary school teachers typically require or recommend a single art course.

To educate elementary school teachers about art, the certification degree program should partner pre-service K-12 art educators with the elementary school generalists and discipline specific teachers to develop curricula and teach together in several interwoven courses. Elementary pre-service teachers need to learn how to critique art lessons to avoid trivializing or misrepresenting people and ideas. Often trivialization is inadvertent, either by absence or by stereotypical inclusion. Both absence and simplification are likely due to limits of time with the division of time per subject. Division of disciplines promotes mis-education. Art education as a Handmaiden promotes an interdisciplinary approach to education, which can be modeled and practiced in education and art education teacher certification programs.

Research, Discussion, and Content Searches

Research is vital to art practice and to art education. Research is the Handmaiden to art as a companion in communication, challenging assumptions, and memorializing events. Art that is devoid of content, thereby devoid of research, is not meaningful. There are various ways to conduct research such as site visits, interviews, observations, sketching, reflective journaling, library research, and reading; and there are many ways to facilitate content searches. The purpose is to search for specific content relevant to one’s life contextualized within historical precedents and contemporary issues.

Content-based and Multivocal Critiques

The Handmaid suggests a feminist pedagogical approach to artmaking and art critique. This involves subverting hierarchical power systems, questioning what is situated as authority (e.g., art, institutions, laws, values, identity), destabilizing clear-cut assumptions of culture and identity, creating counter-hegemonic representations that are double or triple coded, and envisioning emancipation (Harding & Narayan, 1998; Minh-ha, 1989; Nagy-Zekmi, 2003; Spivak, 1990; Szeman, 2003). The Handmaid encourages a multivocal art criticism approach, which is based on applying diverse sets of questions that derive from critical theories in anthropology, sociology, feminism, art, and ecology. Each set of questions provides a lens to interpret an artwork. The combination of different theoretical stances toward art provides a range that provokes critical inquiry at its best (Keifer-Boyd, 1997, 2005). A Handmaiden pedagogical approach to making art would include what internationally renowned artist, Judy Chicago, refers to as content-based critiques. Key components of a content-based critique to assist the student to form a clear vision in the artwork involves discussion of the following:

1. What is your goal with this piece?
2. Start by telling me what you want to express.
3. Let’s talk about ways you could do this.
4. How will the viewer understand it? (Keifer-Boyd, 2004)
Summary and Conclusion

Handmaiden Art provides an interdisciplinary education relevant to students' lives and contemporary times. She seeks to open a chink in the serfdom walls that have promoted discipline isolation in hopes the institutional barriers to collaborations will crumble. We encourage art educators to consider speculative fiction, such as Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, to engage in discussion with others about the social and political trajectories of the times in relation to education, and to envision art education as a way to understand and shape a socially responsible future. Atwood's novels stir the imagination and provoke discussion about contemporary issues. In all her novels she situates art and education in the fabric of social discourses. For example in *Oryx and Crake* (2003), Atwood provides a view of the future that includes contemporary curricula such as "Webgame Dynamics" (p. 188), and a speculative plight of new media artist Eduardo Kac's *Green Rabbit* (p. 95). She discusses the nature of art as an "amplification" (p. 168) of desire and thought, and as "symbolic thinking" (p. 361) feared by those who wish to control people. Such speculative fiction, based in the realities of current times, helps us to recognize issues of the day and imagine art as a Handmaiden to a socially responsive and responsible future.

References


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