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## “I’m So Offended!”: Curriculum Flashpoints and Critical Arts Education

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### Abstract

Inspired by critical race and feminist perspectives, this paper complicates the conversation on preparing arts educators for diversity and equity. The authors ground their research on the premise that arts educators committed to challenging social inequalities must understand sociocultural influences on art, curriculum, teaching, and learning. The paper reports a qualitative study that investigated how pre-service arts educators make sense of sociocultural differences (i.e., the dynamics of race, class, gender and sexuality). Findings articulate key curriculum flashpoints that emerged when art teacher candidates engaged with sociocultural knowledge. These flashpoints include identity formation, questioning knowledge, and discourses of

offense. The authors argue that these flashpoints present curricular provocations that can assist in developing the critical capacities of art educators. The conclusion explores the implications of these findings for organizing and teaching sociocultural content as foundational knowledge for arts educator preparation.

### **Introduction**

This paper examines how arts educators acquire sociocultural knowledge for teaching. Such knowledge is premised on teaching as a principled commitment to providing all learners with high quality, equitable education in and through the arts. Whether working in schools, museums, community-based or other informal learning environments, educators who are committed to challenging social inequalities need to understand how sociocultural factors influence the production of subjectivities, curriculum spaces, and art worlds. It is this sociocultural understanding that enables arts educators to approach their daily decision-making and teaching practices with critical perceptivity and reflexivity.

Current research demonstrates that social, political and cultural contexts play an important role in arts learning and teaching. For example, race/ethnicity, gender, class, and sexuality mediate how children and youth participate in and understand the arts and cultural production (Addison, 2007; Blaikie, Schönau, & Steers, 2003; Brittin, 2014; Charland, 2010; Gaztambide-Fernández, Saifer & Desai, 2013; McCrary, 1993; Rabkin & Hedberg, 2011; Savoie, 2009; Toren, 2007). At the same time, pre-service art teachers struggle to understand the ways sociocultural factors influence their own artistic development and emerging teacher identities (Ashton, 2001; Kraehe, 2015). According to a survey of in-service art teachers (Milbrandt, 2002), many would like to address inequality, diversity, and other social issues through the art curriculum, but feel they lack the confidence and knowledge to navigate this terrain effectively.

As teacher educators and former school visual art teachers in the United States, we, the authors, frequently witness colleagues and pre-service teacher candidates express an aversion to working in schools that might be described as “diverse,” that is, schools in low-income communities and serving high percentages of students of color (see also Kelly, 2003).<sup>1</sup> Our experiences mirror research showing that students attending schools with high concentrations of racial minorities and/or students from lower socioeconomic strata have significantly less access to certified arts teachers (Kraehe, 2009; Office of the New York City Comptroller, 2014; Parsad & Spiegelman, 2012). Perhaps educator aversion to diversity is not surprising, as

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<sup>1</sup> In a U.S. context, “students of color” refers to racial and ethnic minorities.

professional organizations and policies in arts education have been slow to acknowledge the significance of sociocultural knowledge as a basic competency needed to deliver effective and equitable arts instruction (e.g., NAEA, 2011; see also Koza, 2007; Kraehe, 2010).

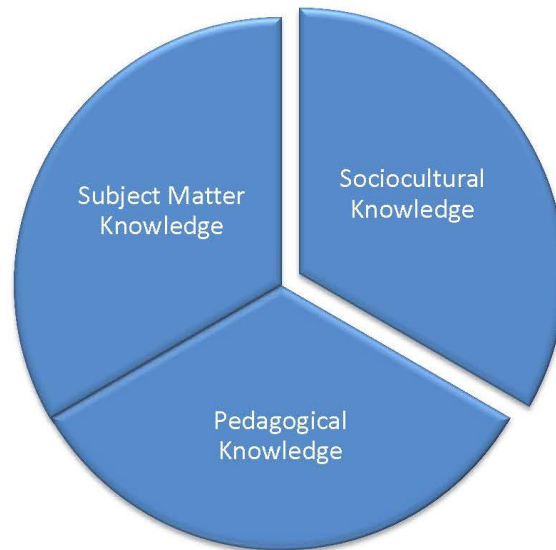
Instead of waiting for policies to materialize (though we hope one day they will), we take the position that it is the role and responsibility of postsecondary arts education to support aspiring and practicing arts educators in perceiving and responding to social and cultural factors. If one accepts this premise, then we are left with a crucial theoretical and practical problem of how to answer this call for action. When looking to the burgeoning literature on cultivating art teachers' sociocultural knowledge, we find that much of it describes curricular ideas and ideals and highlights classroom successes. This celebratory bias, though understandable and admirable, does not adequately reckon with the difficulties teacher educators and their students experience when taking up sociocultural knowledge in arts education.

This paper attempts to complicate the conversation on preparing art teachers for diversity. It describes a qualitative study that investigated the ways in which pre-service art teachers make sense of sociocultural knowledge in the context of elementary and secondary art education methods courses. Drawing from critical curriculum theory and teacher education, we present findings that illuminate potent curriculum flashpoints that emerged when art teacher candidates engaged with sociocultural content. We argue that these flashpoints are provocative curricular spaces that can contribute to the development of critical capacities of arts educators. The conclusion explores the implications of these findings for organizing and teaching sociocultural content as foundational knowledge for arts educator preparation.

### **Critical Educator Preparation in and through the Arts**

Teaching with critical consciousness (Freire, 2004; Leistyna & Woodrum, 1996) requires that art teachers not only understand the subject matter of art and strategies for teaching art (Shulman, 1986, 1987), but they must also grasp how sociocultural contexts mediate curriculum, teaching, and learning (Schwab, 1964), particularly if they are to appreciate the life circumstances of students and the various cultural repertoires students bring to the art classroom (Butler, Lind & McKoy, 2007; Garber, 1995; McFee, 1999). Figure 1 visualizes this three-part structure of teacher knowledge. At a theoretical level, it can be useful to discuss each of the three domains as a discrete form of knowledge; however, in practice it is more accurate to grasp them as interactional elements of a comprehensive system. This means that a quality art teacher education program will support aspiring teachers in understanding how the subject matter they teach and the manner in which they teach it are entangled with and shaped by historically produced inequalities, social and cultural processes, and enduring struggles for justice (Kraehe, 2015). While this sociocultural content may often be regarded as peripheral or elective for arts teacher preparation and is sometimes outsourced to departments and colleges

removed from the arts, critical arts education is not attainable without a deep understanding of sociocultural differences. In the following section, we look to current practices and theoretical issues to understand what is at stake in helping teacher candidates to develop sociocultural knowledge.



*Figure 1.* Core domains of teacher knowledge

Critical arts-based educators employ numerous creative practices to support aspiring teachers in acquiring sociocultural knowledge (see Figure 2). One approach targets the development of students' critical literacies by presenting objects and images found in art, popular culture, and mass-mediated culture as focal points for the analysis of representation, ideology, and power (Cosier, 2011; Knight, 2013; Pauly, 2003). The arts also play a prominent role in aesthetic interventions that instill sociocultural perspectives through doing, making and performance (Belliveau, 2006; Berghoff, Borgmann & Parr, 2005; Brown, 2004; Dillon, 2008; Eisenhauer, 2012; Kraehe & Brown, 2011; Lee, 2012; Maguire & Lenihan, 2010; McDermott, 2002). With these arts-based strategies, students learn to identify social structures of inequality and critique the cultural processes by which these structures are made meaningful and durable. A second approach eclectically layers arts-based teaching methods with more traditional lectures and discussions of academic concepts. In a study conducted across four pre-service teacher education classes, Brown and Kraehe (2010a) found that an eclectic strategy provoked a complex of embodied, intersubjective, and intellectual student engagement with sociocultural content.



*Figure 2.* Pedagogic strategies for critical teacher education in and through the arts.

The third approach emphasizes narrative. Pedagogic uses of narratives take many forms, including such activities as reading poems, memoirs, and fiction; viewing and responding to narratively structured images, exhibitions, plays, films, and documentaries; listening to audio archives and personal testimonies; and telling one's own story (Bell, 2010; Florio-Ruane, 2001). Stories can function as a viewfinder of sorts, helping learners to perceive "the other," and consequently the self, through a different frame.<sup>2</sup>

Immersion experiences, such as community-engaged art projects and service learning, are a fourth approach in which learning moves beyond the walls of the classroom and is contingent upon face-to-face encounters with/in difference. Autobiography and experiential storytelling are frequently coupled with immersion experiences in order to help learners perceive and make sense of sociocultural dimensions of these encounters (Bachar & Ofri, 2009; Briggs, 2012; Shin, 2011; Taylor, 2002). The assumption of this immersion approach is that contact with difference will lead to more informed reflection. Informed reflection, as we understand it, goes beyond Smagorinsky, Cook and Jackson's (2003) description of "rumination couched in an understanding of issues of culture" (p. 1426). To achieve criticality, reflection must also be informed by a recognition that "our social position and the location from which we speak are

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<sup>2</sup> See Callero (2003) for a review of sociological perspectives on the socio-historical construction of identity and the socialization of the self through narrative devices and storytelling strategies.

connected to the way we [know and] choose to represent a culture within structures of domination and subordination” (Desai, 2000, p. 128). In fact, numerous studies suggest that without a critical consciousness, students’ engagements with and in minoritized communities frequently reinforce prior misperceptions of non-dominant cultural practices and further pathologize differences as forms of deviance and deficiency (Brown, 2004; Gomez, 1996; Haberman & Post, 1992; Sleeter, 1995; Terrill & Mark, 2000).

### **Identity, Ignorance, and Teacher Knowledge**

Despite the promise these four pedagogic strategies hold for critical educator preparation, teaching and learning sociocultural content is not as simple as using the “right methods.” Acquiring sociocultural knowledge can be challenging because it entails what cultural theorist Gloria Anzaldúa (2002) calls *conocimiento*, “internal work coupled with the commitment to struggle for social transformation” (p. 574). Teacher education, therefore, must help candidates to “rethink their personal experiences and the knowledge, belief systems and perspectives they hold about the structure and operation of society and schools” (Brown & Kraehe, 2010b, p. 92). For both the aspiring teacher and the teacher educator, this is easier said than done, as teacher preparation is often the first time students encounter these ideas (Milner, 2006, 2010).

Key challenges for critical educator preparation revolve around at least two recurring “problems.” First is identity work, which refers to the ways in which one develops and reinforces a sense of self and personal agency through social participation in cultural contexts. These contexts of social interaction and identification are charged with a politics of indifference. As Florio-Ruane (2001) explains,

Without experiencing culture as a social process in which I participate, it is difficult for me to understand it as part of my inheritance and formation. Moreover, it is difficult, absent of this understanding, for me to awaken to my participation in this process as a teacher and a citizen. (p. 6)

In an arts context, the emphasis on identity may be dismissed as trite. After all, the arts, as they evolved in the U.S., have long relied on modernist notions of individual identity. This includes myths of the artist as a singular, original subject, inner genius as the wellspring of creativity, and artmaking as the quintessential form of self-awareness and expression. Borrowing from cultural studies, we question this depiction of identity whereby the self is imagined as a discrete, stable essence that is “an already accomplished fact” (Hall, 1990, p. 222) merely waiting to be discovered. In place of the self-discovery model of identity, we find it useful to adopt a socio-historical interpretation of self-formation, one in which identities are actively co-produced through ongoing negotiation in an always incomplete process of

identification.

In theorizing the identity work of critical art teacher education, we draw from curricularist William Pinar (2014). Inspired by Roger Simon's concept of historical consciousness, Pinar proposes a praxis of remembering and reconstructing subjectivity in relation to one's social and historical contexts. An historical awareness makes it possible for one to reconfigure the self in dialogue with forgotten histories of violence and oft-ignored structural legacies of social injustice. Remembering, thus, becomes an "ethical and pedagogical practice" of non-indifference that, according to Simon (2004), can

enable an opening into learning, not just in terms of the acquisition of previously unheard of, unknown facts and stories, but as an opening of the present in which identities and identifications, the frames of certitude that ground our understanding of existence, and one's responsibilities to history are displaced and rethought. (p. 186)

The purpose of this praxis is not to commemorate social histories for their own sake. Rather, the purpose is to help arts educators see their roles as content specialists in relation to society and its historical traumas. Remembering amplifies stories that have faded from the collective consciousness and in so doing, enables new narratives with which to reconstruct the self as artist and educator

A second "problem" that challenges critical art teacher education is student resistance to learning sociocultural content. The learning process involves destabilizing long held narratives through which memories and identities have been constructed and made meaningful. Encountering and internalizing such "difficult knowledge" is, according to Britzman (1998) and Pitt and Britzman (2003), a psychologically perilous process for many learners that brings about a sense of dislocation and loss.

Studies indicate that dominant group students in particular exhibit an array of responses to learning difficult knowledge. These range from feelings of guilt, resignation, and paralysis to overt expressions of resentment, avoidance, and refusal (Amos, 2010; Asher, 2007; Brown, 2004; Crowley, 2014; Ellsworth, 1992; Evans-Winters & Hoff, 2011; King, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1996; Solomon, Portfroelli, Daniel & Campbell, 2005). Across the literature in critical teacher education, ignorance or lack of understanding is frequently viewed as the impetus for students' resistance to learning. Garrett and Segall (2013) offer an alternate explanation that challenges the conceptualization of ignorance as a pre-pedagogical state of not knowing. They argue that ignorance is "an active desire to present oneself as not knowing about race [and other forms of difference] and, thus, avoid implicating oneself in such

knowing” (p. 299). Ignorance, thus, becomes an act of resistance that arises in the midst of learning when educators “bring the latent knowledge into focus” (p. 299). This view enables us to move from thinking of ignorance as a passive condition of insufficient knowledge to interpreting it as a motivated strategy of managing the self-implications of what one already knows. This means that ignorance is not a prelude to learning. It is an integral developmental dynamic of knowledge construction.

To understand the part ignorance plays in the construction of art educators’ sociocultural knowledge, we draw from critical race and feminist scholarship. Philosopher Charles Mills’ (2007) describes an epistemology of racial ignorance that can be applied to various encounters with/in difference. He explains that ignorance is a sustained absence of knowledge, an “inverted epistemology” (p. 2), that can be used both intentionally and unconsciously by a dominant group to produce and perpetuate relations of privilege and oppression. In this case, the concept of ignorance goes beyond mere absence of knowledge. Instead, it characterizes a sophisticated social and psychological phenomenon that is operationalized by various groups to maintain the status quo.

In terms of sociocultural difference, we take ignorance to be both an intentional and unconscious practice that perpetuates oppression. According to Mill’s (2007) epistemology of ignorance, the problem is further developed to indicate that those in positions of privilege have a vested interest in maintaining ignorance for the purpose of upholding current social norms and preserving structures of privilege (see also Spelman, 2007). In the case of race, racial ignorance is maintained through the dismissal of racism. The ignorance goes beyond the individual and becomes an institutionalized process when the cultural transmission of ignorance occurs via informal and formal learning environments (Alcoff, 2007). When applied to art education, ignorance takes the form of a pervasive indifference toward social and cultural contexts, where the artist-self is abstracted and divorced from sociocultural factors. The artist, in claiming, “I am just an artist,” is defined by a hegemonic ontology, or the dominant narrative about the being of the artist, whereby the artist-as-individual is presumed to transcend the social and historical. Returning to racial ignorance, the notion of the artist-as-individual equates to a refusal to understand racism, even as such individuals “are able to fully benefit from its racial hierarchies, ontologies, and economies” (Sullivan & Tuana, 2007, p. 2). Therefore, we believe that the notion of artist, art student, or art educator as free of sociocultural categorization is a common instantiation of ignorance that risks propagating oppression based on sociocultural difference.

To summarize, this study is grounded in the ideas that (a) ignoring difference does not eliminate oppression; instead, ignorance serves to manage and protect societal norms, and (b) art educators need to understand the historical underpinnings of sociocultural differences and



how that history influences the present, including their own identities, perceptions, and assumptions.

### **Research Design**

In this qualitative study, we sought to answer the research question, how do pre-service teachers make sense of sociocultural knowledge? The study took place over the course of two semester-long classes for aspiring visual art teachers at a large public university in the U.S. Emily and Sarah, both White middle-class doctoral students, respectively taught methods courses that focused on elementary level and secondary level visual art instruction. Amelia, a middle-class biracial/Black professor, worked with Emily and Sarah as a mentor and research collaborator. All three of us have backgrounds in teaching visual art in K-12 schools and bring an interest in social justice to our research and teaching.

### ***Participants***

The participants in this study were students enrolled in Emily and Sarah's art methods classes. These included 25 undergraduate students and 2 graduate students, all of whom sought state teaching certificates in K-12 visual art education. The majority of the pre-service teachers in these classes were White females, though there were some Black, Latino, and Asian students and a few male students in the classes as well.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Context of the Courses***

Historically, the central focus of the two courses Emily and Sarah taught had been to equip pre-service art teachers with foundational pedagogical knowledge, such as how to develop a curricular unit and how to select appropriate art supplies for one's classroom. Additionally, as part of the requirements for these courses, the pre-service teachers also conducted field observations in elementary and secondary art classrooms as a precursor to student teaching. The pedagogical knowledge from these and other art education courses was intended to work in combination with subject matter knowledge obtained from studio art and art history courses to provide all the tools needed for becoming an art teacher. The acknowledgement of the importance of sociocultural knowledge was limited in this art teacher preparation program. In order to address this gap, we sought to infuse the elementary and secondary methods classes with pedagogy that addressed sociocultural differences and their influence on art, curriculum, teaching, and learning.

We attempted to provoke students to consider the influences of gender, race, class, and

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<sup>3</sup> Racial/ethnic identities of students were assessed both through references students made to themselves and through the researchers' visual determinations.

sexuality on art and teaching through a variety of narrative approaches. Students' narrative responses to these provocations became the primary data for this research. Such responses were expressed in three narrative formats: in-class dialogue, written reflection, and video journaling. During the in-class dialogues, students were invited to discuss course content such as readings, school observations, and guest speakers. The written reflections were structured around assigned readings related to topics such as the sociocultural context of children's artistic development (e.g., Ivashkevich, 2009), the use of enduring ideas in developing art curriculum (e.g., Stewart & Walker, 2005), the influence of postmodernism on art education (e.g., Marshall, 2010), critical response to social inequities (e.g., Eisenhauer, 2008), and the many iterations of multicultural art education (e.g., Chin, 2011). Students also created video journals using Photo Booth on Apple laptops. Video-based reflection is increasingly common in teacher education (Baechera, Kungb, Jewkesc & Rosaliaa, 2013; Kong, 2010; Tripp & Rich, 2012). It shifts the journaling experience away from a written text toward more multimodal expression by providing opportunities for students to utilize their visual and auditory capacities. It also places the physical presence of the student at the center of their narrative musings, revealing their identities and positionalities visually in the process. Through these learning formats, we sought to transform the art methods classes into spaces in which pre-service teachers would be able to explore content specifically around issues of injustice and inequality, and engage in difficult dialogues associated with sociocultural difference.

### ***Data Collection***

As university instructors and researchers, we were aware that unequal power relations between our students/research participants and ourselves were inevitable. Hence, we attempted to reduce any sense of coercion in the research process and maintain ethical relationships with our students/participants by seeking informed consent at the end of the courses. When we explained the research project to the students, all agreed to participate and several were enthusiastic about supporting the study.

Data collection focused on participants' work products from the two classes. No additional tasks were required for participation, and there were no extrinsic rewards or penalties attached to the choice of whether or not to take part in the research. The information gleaned from students' written work, video journaling entries, and our own teaching reflections comprised the data used in this study.

### ***Data Analysis***

We employed constant comparative method to analyze the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). This was an inductive process, as we did not initially know what themes and meanings would

emerge from the data. In reading the data, we remained attuned to the recurring themes in the written work and video journal entries. Additionally, we three met regularly over the duration of the courses. In these sessions, we discussed how the two courses were progressing. We looked at student work samples and discussed how class meetings were going. We reflected on teaching practices, and as it turned out, our conversations were also important in generating some initial impressions of student learning that eventually proved helpful in focusing the data analysis once the course ended.

The goal of subsequent formal analysis was to determine emergent patterns and themes. We watched and transcribed the video journals, read and reread the written narratives, and constructed our own narratives of critical incidents from our teaching (Tripp, 1993). The patterns and themes that emerged through our observations and discussions of the data became the basis of a series of codes that we developed for further interpreting the data. Through the formation of these codes, our analysis also took on a comparative quality in that we utilized the codes to compare data across the different student participants in order to determine the variations and commonalities within student-generated materials. We also compared the work generated by individual students over the course of the semester, taking into account any changes or inconsistencies within individual bodies of work. Our iterative conversations about the data aided our discernment of what themes seemed most salient in the student-generated narratives. In this way, our dialogues enabled us to come to an interpretation that is more impactful and meaningful than we might have generated had we conducted this work as solo researchers. We also used email to invite all participants to comment on the data and results of the study with corrections, elaborations, and questions. This member check confirmed our findings.

### **Findings**

We noticed that the pre-service teachers were indeed wrestling with sociocultural difference. Three distinct themes emerged from the data. They represented curriculum flashpoints, which we define as content around which significant and at times contentious episodes erupt and become spaces of learning. We focus on three curriculum flashpoints—identity formation, questioning knowledge, and the language of offense—that surfaced again and again in students' comments whenever sociocultural differences were directly addressed or implied.

#### ***Identification as the Labeling of Self and Other***

The first aspect of identity that emerged has to do with pre-service teachers' perceptions of socially constructed labels or categories of identity. Multiple students affirmed the desire to cast labels aside. One student stated, "I dislike labels. I do not label myself or others because placing people in categories can cause people to judge. Labels are not fair." Similarly,

another student wrote, “I have tried not to identify people by their race, class, etc...[but it’s] hard for all of us to do.” Both of these white female students seem to be working from the assumption that acknowledging sociocultural difference leads to negative outcomes. Interestingly enough, the former student acknowledged that avoiding the categorization of people is difficult to do. As Koza (2008) argues, “bodies already have been sorted and ordered through a process of differencing” (p. 146) that lends itself to subtle and pervasive discriminations that reinforce inequities. At the same time, oppression is sustained when the significance of sociocultural categories is ignored (Koza, 2008). While the student posited an ideal world where labels do not exist, she simultaneously admitted that there is great difficulty in doing so. The former student concluded her statement by reconsidering her own stance, writing, “Well, shoot, sometimes labels are kind of important. You couldn’t compile a police sketch w/o [without] gender/racial labels.” The student was dabbling with the complexities of identification. As if to say sociocultural differences are not altogether negative, it appears that she was searching for circumstances in which identity categories can be helpful in gaining understanding. Her shift is slight, but her statement captures her own attempt at working through the complexities and contradictions of difference.

### ***Identification as a Negotiated Process***

Across the pre-service teachers’ responses, a common narrative emerged among self-identified racial minorities regarding mis-identification. For instance, in her reflection on her own relationship to sociocultural difference, one female student wrote,

I am half white half Mexican American. On the race bubble sheets I always fill in Hispanic (even though I find that to be problematic) because there is rarely a bi-racial option. I was lucky to grow up in a mostly white affluent part of [City, State], but sometimes it makes me feel like I’m not a “real” Mexican because I grew up so privileged.

She first pointed out a problematic aspect of racial categorizations in that they risk alienating individuals who do not neatly fit into available categories or identify with the meanings that saturate those categories (Hall, 1996). This is often the case for those who identify as multiracial or bicultural (Alsultany, 2002; Piper, 1992). As she discussed the affluent context in which she grew up, her self-narrative revealed another layer of intricacy. In our courses, we did not explicitly discuss the concept of privilege, yet this student was able to detect its presence through personal experience. While she seemed to be grateful for the advantages her social location afforded, she also appeared to lament the loss of authenticity as a so-called real Mexican. It was as though her affluence and White privilege could not co-exist with a Mexican American identity.

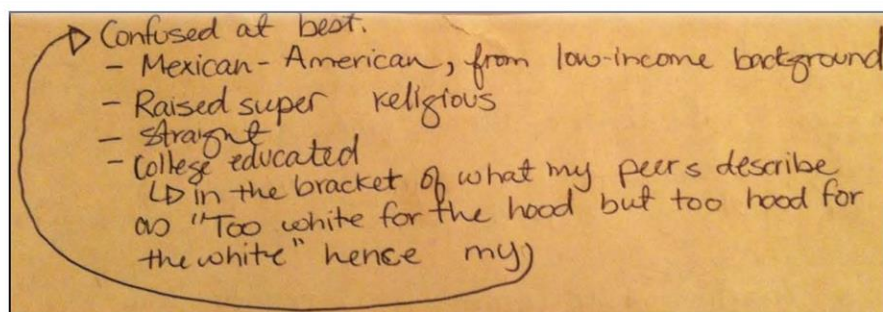


Figure 3. A student reflection on identity formation.

Other pre-service educators also alluded to the pervasiveness of whiteness through their self-narratives. Figure 3 is an excerpt from a student's written reflection that exemplifies the role of others' perceptions in self-identifications. When asked about her relationship to sociocultural difference, she composed a diagrammatic list as part of her written response. She began by recording the various social positions and cultural practices with which she identified, and then contextualized this list by adding information about how others interpreted her identity. Her inclusion of this information in her reflection illustrates that sociocultural difference is not established solely by the individual. Other people influenced the way she interpreted her own identity. She also seemed to indicate that her college education caused her to be viewed by her peers as embodying qualities of whiteness. She did not self-identify in this way, but her self-perception is complicated by others' ascriptions of her.

Another pre-service teacher described a similar scenario regarding others' perceptions of her racial identity. She wrote,

My race is something I think about every day, mostly in relation to how others perceive me, what judgments or stereotypes they form before I even speak. Then after I get to know them I usually am labeled as something that I don't identify with, which always upsets me. I identify as a black woman, but get called white all the time.

Her statement conveys a sense of frustration in others' perceptions of her. She did not indicate what it was that others perceived as "white," as the previous example did. Rather, her writing suggested that she understood there was a collective imagining of what a Black woman was or was not and there was something about how she performed her daily interactions that did not fit the accepted stereotype for this sociocultural categorization, according to the perceptions' of others.

Whiteness was a common imposition in the lives of many students who defied simple categorization and lived their lives in racially complex ways. As one female student wrote, “I am half Caucasian half Mexican female Christian . . . [P]eople can’t tell that I’m half Mexican and often insult Mexicans in front of me. I tell them I am half offended.” This student used humor to illustrate the bind in which she often finds herself. Her comment acknowledged the erasure of minority racial categorization on the basis of interpretation of physical attributes, while also drawing attention to a racial binary (white/of color) that leaves no room for discussions of hybridity.

These students’ reflections suggest that the identities of minoritized pre-service teachers are highly negotiated. Drawing from their personal experiences, they were aware of the powerful role others played in the making and maintenance of social categories used in naming of specific individuals. This collective naming is an exercise of privilege and hegemony, and exemplifies a potential loss of power for these individuals.

### ***Questioning Knowledge for Teaching***

The pre-service teachers in our study also raised questions that problematized the knowledge base associated with teaching art. Questioning this knowledge can be useful and function as a means to identify, engage, and ultimately dismantle ignorance (Freire, 2000/1970). The pre-service teachers put into question their person-historical knowledge, their disciplinary knowledge, and their cultural knowledge in relation to their anticipated roles as art teachers.

#### *Personal-historical Knowledge*

Personal-historical knowledge served as the basis of much of this questioning. In this context, person-historical knowledge is knowledge that is based in previous experience and it is often intertwined with identity, as it frames how students construct a sense of self and belonging. Family, school experiences, religious background, racial and/or ethnic background, and many other factors shape prior knowledge and influence a teacher’s knowledge base. Some of the pre-service teachers in this study used reflective questioning of their prior knowledge to inform the intended content of their future teaching. For instance, in one of her video journal entries, a White female student explained, “Growing up in Memphis, Tennessee, I was raised around a lot of racial tension. I plan on mentioning stereotyping and Othering in my lessons in order to try to counteract this.” Accessing personal-historical knowledge provided a context in which she could consider how, as an art teacher, she might apply her new competencies in order to address conflicts surrounding sociocultural difference.

#### *Disciplinary Knowledge*

The pre-service teachers also utilized their increased consciousness of sociocultural differences in art education to question disciplinary knowledge associated with a formal education in visual art. For example, in her video journal, a White female student reflected on

the push for postmodernist perspectives approaches to the arts. She said, "I worry . . . that I might stray too far from the monolithic Western art historical canon" and in the process fail to live up to societal expectations in her role as an art teacher. By contrast, she also stated, "I might stray too far on purpose to not further . . . the notion of . . . a Western, White male dominated world." She seemed to acknowledge a tension between societal expectations for art teachers and critical and postmodernist incarnations of art and art education.

Following a lecture on technology and the arts by a well-known arts education scholar, another White female student critically questioned a stream within the field that ostensibly challenges the traditional manifestations of art education. She recalled how her thinking unfolded when listening to the guest speaker:

Besides the actual content of [the] lecture and my note taking, my mind wandered to some of the other concepts we have been exploring this semester, like cultural and socioeconomic differences in education. I worry that in some ways this push towards a digital classroom will create more of a divide in these areas. The digital educational world seems to fall under the "dominant culture" of white middle-to-upper class demographics, if not mostly because of the financial factor.

Like the previous example, this student began to examine and question disciplinary knowledge with increased skepticism, acknowledging that expectations for them as art teachers may be at odds with social justice and equity concerns.

### *Cultural Knowledge*

Rooted in prior knowledge and again tied to identity, some of the White pre-service teachers expressed concerns that they may need to expand their own cultural knowledge so as to better serve their students, reflecting on what they deemed to be limited cultural knowledge. For instance, a White male student asked,

While I believe that it is essential we try to help our students explore a variety of cultures through education I'm worried that perhaps my limited cultural knowledge and experiences may steer me toward creating lessons rooted in something I am more familiar with. How can we generate a more socio-culturally aware classroom without letting these tendencies permeate our lesson plans?

Thus, some questioned how to address sociocultural difference within the constraints of the school art educational setting. We found that students had gaps in their sociocultural knowledge. However, they were also interested in addressing these gaps and many tried to apply some of the things that they were learning to their new encounters.

### *Discourses of Offense*

The pre-service teachers used the words “offensive,” “offend,” or “offending” to make sense of tensions surrounding sociocultural difference. Discourses of offense such as these can function as part of an epistemology of ignorance, building barriers against productive change-oriented dialogue, yet they can also open up conversations and provoke action. In the context of this study, there were three ways in which this discourse was mobilized, all highly tied to the sociocultural positioning of the students who engaged them.<sup>4</sup>

#### *“I’m Offended!”*

In order to bring additional voices into our classrooms, we invited two artist-educator guest speakers to speak to our classes. One of our guest speakers, Lauren Cross, discussed her experiences as a Black female artist and owner of an art gallery that focuses on women artists of color. The other guest speaker was KC Jenkins, a White transgender artist/art educator, who discussed childhood experiences with poverty and abuse.<sup>5</sup>

Anxieties surrounding how to address sociocultural difference as an art teacher were at times expressed through discourses of offense. They came to a climax with a difficult dialogue in response to an artwork presented by one of the guest speakers, Lauren Cross (see Figure 4). Sarah took reflective notes about the incident, which began with the words “*I’m offended!*”:

A few days after the presentation, a White female student commented on a particular artwork in which Lauren Cross depicted herself, a Black woman, wearing various blonde wigs. The student claimed that if she were to create an artwork of herself in an Afro wig, then people would call her racist. She also claimed that she could not make artwork about being White and not be called racist. Other students joined in this conversation, with some expressing their discomfort in trying to teach about African American artists or even teach in predominantly African American schools. It was as if the White students who engaged in this conversation wanted to claim marginalization through their discomfort with addressing race in the context of art education.

This declaration of offense, it turned out, was not an anomaly. It served as a catalyst for the

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<sup>4</sup> We draw from Gee’s (2004) definition of Discourse, with a big “D,” as “socially accepted associations among ways of using language, of thinking, valuing, acting, and interacting, in the ‘right’ place and at the ‘right’ times with the ‘right’ objects” (p. 26). The associative property of big “D” discourses mean that they play an important role in social identification of persons and the making of selves. The discourses of offense served an important role in students’ identification processes.

<sup>5</sup> Although we expected KC to talk about experiences as a transgender person, KC chose to focus the presentation on issues of poverty and abuse.



discourses that continued to manifest in the narratives in the days after this initial conversation.

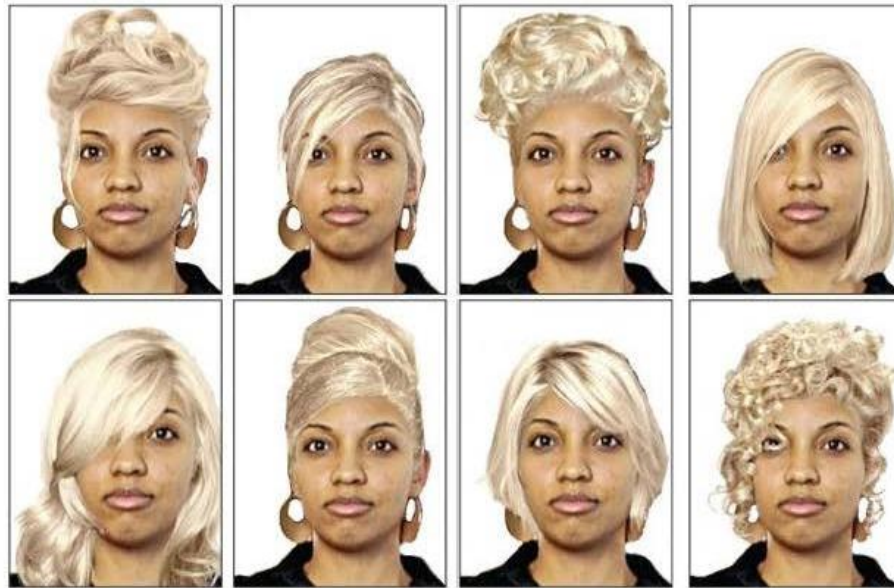


Figure 4. Lauren Cross, *Blonde(d) Out: The Marie Makeover*, 2010-2012. Eight framed prints, 20.3 × 25.4 centimeters each.

#### *I Don't Want to Be Offensive*

Several of the White pre-service teachers expressed fear of being offensive when attempting to confront sociocultural difference within art teaching contexts. One White female student articulated this concern in her video journal:

One of the speakers talked about multiculturalism and that's something that I really struggle with because, being a White girl, I never know what I'm allowed to say or even if that is the question in itself. Is it, should I say something? Should I not? And at the same point, you have to be careful about that and make sure that you're not being *offensive*.

This use of offense discourse was the most commonly expressed within the context of this study. It indicated uncertainty, discomfort, and struggle. Such struggles can be fruitful as new learning is often born out of struggles, although they are rarely linear or "neat" and are often full of contradictions (Anzaldúa, 2002). On the other hand, they are also symptomatic of epistemologies of ignorance, functioning as barriers to change.

### *You Are Being Offensive*

It is not necessarily surprising that pre-service teachers would be worried that their limited cultural knowledge (and their sociocultural positioning, if they are recipients of racial privilege) might lead them towards offending others through attempts at “multicultural” art lessons. A Latino student used the discourse of offense to describe this kind of “offensive” cultural representation from the perspective of students whose culture was misrepresented:

I went to a mostly Mexican school. Most of my peers were of Hispanic origin and . . . of a low socioeconomic level. There were many times when teachers would overgeneralize or stereotype my culture and the culture of my peers. We had several times when we had Cinco de Mayo celebration days as a way to “include” us. However, the teachers thought it was Mexico’s liberation day, when it actually isn’t. We had parties where we had to do certain things and celebrate certain things that my teachers thought were part of Cinco de Mayo and they were completely [unrelated] stereotypical activities and many of my classmates were *offended* . . . but they just accepted it as it is.

This narrative stands in contrast to the others evident in the study, as it uses discourses of offense to represent marginalized voices speaking back to power and acts as a sort of counter-narrative to the dominant group fear-based uses of the discourses of offense. This example demonstrates the importance of teachers developing critical sociocultural frameworks in order to ensure students are not subjected to miseducative art experiences through inaccurate and reductive re-presentations of cultural diversity.

### **Discussion**

In this discussion, we explore how the curriculum flashpoints of identification, questioning knowledge, and offense serve as general signposts indicating potent conceptual meeting places with important implications for reimagining and restructuring teacher preparation. First, the findings of the study showed how students began to see and reflect on their identities and differences as socially and culturally produced. Students wrestled with understanding the relationship between the longstanding systemic inequalities and the localized stories and experiences from which they forged their own uniquely configured sense of personhood. Bringing sociocultural content into the art methods curriculum enabled pre-service teachers to become more conscious of the multitude of mediating forces—both past and present—within which their identities are made and remade from one social context to the next. We think that a critical sociocultural lens is crucial in facilitating the reconstructive process of authoring the self (Pinar, 2014) as “art teacher.” This identity work supports aspiring teachers in understanding themselves and their future students as always engaged in multivalent, dialogic processes of identification. This requires that identities—including disciplinary identities—be

conceptualized as socially and historically situated, context dependent, and potentially contradictory sets of signifying practices and inscriptions (Charland, 2010; Gaztambide-Fernández, Saifer & Desai, 2013; Koza, 2007; Kraehe, 2015), rather than natural or coherent states.

Second, the findings suggest somewhat paradoxically that questioning knowledge is integral to developing a sociocultural knowledge base for teaching. The pre-service teachers' readily interrogated and cast doubt on personal-historical, disciplinary, and cultural knowledge. These efforts are an indication of movement, however tentative it might be, toward recasting taken-for-granted understandings, emotions, and practices as simultaneously mechanisms for sustaining one's own ignorance (Applebaum, 2006; Sullivan & Tuana, 2007). When they no longer accept received knowledge as "truth," it can be understood as a social construction that depends in large part on the knower's positioning within various social arenas and hierarchies (Desai, 2000; Ellsworth, 1992). Given that sociocultural differences exist within all human relations, arts educators in all educational contexts need be able to respond thoughtfully and morally to sociocultural influences on art, curriculum, teaching, and learning. Teacher education is a transitional period. Instead of presenting pre-service teachers with a prescriptive roadmap to follow, the findings suggest that they need opportunities to pose questions and construct problems for which they may not find answers right away (Bolin, 1996; Eisner, 2001). The benefits of questioning knowledge are that educators may grow more skeptical of claims of certainty, more comfortable with ambiguity, and more reflexive about the sources and desires that inform their own ways of knowing.

Perhaps the most unexpected finding was the multiple ways in which participants employed the discourse of offense. There were repeated references to offending others and being offended. The language of offense framed how students make sense of race, class, gender, and sexuality. It suggested students' wariness in making their sociocultural knowledge explicit and available for reorganization. Moreover, it reflected the presence of unequal power relations and the dynamics of power playing out in classroom interactions (Foucault, 1990). That is to say, when the language of offense was deployed, students were not just attempting to communicate their individual ideas. They were participating in "local power games" (Brooks, 2011, p. 57) by positioning themselves and others/Others within hierarchies of status, privilege and power. These structured politics of engagement permeate micro-relations in university classes, as well as larger art worlds and society. Students used offense talk in negotiating their right to name reality and shape the perceptions of the group.

An important lesson for teacher educators is that power is neither equally nor randomly distributed in exchanges between students. Critical pedagogues are generally concerned with constructing comfortable, safe spaces for dialogue. An open forum for civil discourse is often

the goal of efforts to preempt offensive language that might disparage marginalized groups. However, the discourse of offense may also be activated out of ignorance by students who fear and resist psychological encounters with sociocultural differences (Garrett & Segall, 2013; Pitt, 1998). This overuse of “offense” during class discussions about race and racism can flatten racial dialogue. As Leonardo explains, when “anything racist becomes branded as a form of racism without distinctions . . . . analysis of racism is stripped of its radical, objective thrust and differences between its forms are leveled and equated with one another” (p. 240). Claims of “being offended” can be appropriated and used for shutting down conversation when students who subscribe to dominant ideologies are discomforted by the presence of non-dominant group members, the space given to counter-narratives, and an encroaching self-awareness and self-implication in group-based inequities.

### **Conclusion**

Although we hope that their experiences in the augmented art methods classes will have residual effects on the pre-service teachers, this study cannot predict how their developing sociocultural understandings will influence their future decision-making and practice in actual art classrooms. The study supports our assertion that sociocultural knowledge is foundational to making arts education equitable and inclusive. In particular, the three curriculum flashpoints highlighted in our research may serve as important organizational pillars for educator preparation. More research is needed that will identify generative concepts for addressing sociocultural differences within arts contexts. Additionally, longitudinal research is needed in order to address questions of how concepts developed in educator preparation are translated into practice.

From this study, we are able to conclude that the cultivation of a sociocultural knowledge base requires more than a single course or unit of instruction. The classes we studied were just at the start of what should be a larger, longer dialogue that continues to unfold with increasing complexity through subsequent coursework in teacher preparation. Further research is needed that documents various models for delivering comprehensive teacher education in the arts. Comprehensive programs are those that integrate all three domains of teacher knowledge in a balanced manner. It may be that there are only a handful of programs that actually address sociocultural knowledge along with subject matter knowledge and pedagogic knowledge. Yet understanding their organizational structures and inner workings could foster long overdue innovations in teacher candidate assessments, program evaluations, instructional practices, and arts education policy.

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