

Me and My Teddy Bear: Students' Online Production Intersects with Art Learning

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Biography

Dr. Maria Letsiou is a visual artist, educator, and researcher. Currently, she is an adjunct assistant professor of Art Education in the School of Early Childhood Education at Aristotle University in Thessaloniki, Greece. As a Fulbright visiting scholar (in 2015) hosted by Prof. Paul Duncum (UIUC's School of Art and Design, USA), she conducted research on learning through video production. Since 2011, she has participated in several international research projects organized by InSEA. She was a member of the organizational committee of the InSEA seminar in Thessaloniki at the School of Early Childhood Education, Aristotle University, Greece (2018). Her research focuses on youth's unsolicited creative practices on social media, art-based research, socially engaged art education, and studio learning.

Abstract

This article examines issues in contemporary art teaching in relation to the current tensions and contradictions experienced in public life. Young people's participatory creative practices on social media are examined in high school art classes as instances of practice-based learning. A project-driven unit and a school art event are described and discussed within the context of the practice-based learning taking place in the Art High School in Thessaloniki. A mode of video production, inspired by a student's unsolicited video production on an

Instagram account, together with other images and in-class art productions, constituted the studio-learning product and the exhibition items for a school event dedicated to the Declaration of Human Rights Day. The purpose of this study is to open a dialogue about new spaces for participation and creation in art education where in-class art production, a school event, and students' out-of-school creative practices intersect.

Keywords

Video production, social media, studio-based learning, high school, contemporary art, human rights.

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In this article, I wish to consider art teaching and learning as participatory and collective experiences that engage students in art processes that address social contradictions. In an ideal situation, education responds to the questions that are raised in public life (Giroux, 2003). Giroux (2003) expresses the hope that education will provide people with appropriate skills to transform their shared private misery or experience into collective action. The current multidimensional social and financial crisis that is particularly affecting southern European countries makes this process more imperative than ever before. The Greek social context, in which the research to be presented and discussed in this article took place, reflects a constantly changing social stratification that nurtures contradictory behaviors and attitudes in people. I align myself with the assertion of Paulo Freire that a curriculum should consider not only the objects of learning but also the social, political, and cultural conditions within which people live and act (1972, 1998). In the light of the current social circumstances, what kind of educational project might prove to

be an effective response? Does the teaching of art, with its particular tools, matter more than ever, especially those aspects of art that reflect contemporary concerns? Is it possible that a connection between learning art and expressing social concerns might reposition the role of art teaching in the public high school? These questions generated my decision to do the project that I will describe in this article.

I drew on previous research involving art education and the participatory creative practices of youth on social media to examine the potential of students' unsolicited video production in art learning. In particular, I examined a specific mode of video developed by one of my students as legitimate content for high school studio art-learning. I used this video production, together with other activities, in a project-driven unit that aimed to involve students with the issues surrounding Declaration of Human Rights Day. The students were introduced to digital media as a form of artistic expression and also as a process for making meaning in contemporary art practice. The teaching project took place in the context of studio-based learning at a junior high art class at the Art High School of Thessaloniki in 2017. I drew my implication for an art pedagogy that praises the ongoing process of creation and encourages collaboration, participation, and exchange among students. The individual experimentation of each student with the art material becomes a vehicle of inclusive learning that addresses social responsibility in relation to current social concerns.

Out-of-school Online Production and In-class Art Learning

The images of cultural globalization have affected the ways in which children's creative abilities are expressed. As a result, the influence of visual cultural imagery is evidence of both traditional art production and digital products. A new phenomenon has appeared on social media that is called participatory creative practice. In our day, participatory creative activities on the net are steadily attracting more and more teens and school-age children. Consequently, viewing

and creating social media imagery fills a great amount of young people's time daily. They are excited to share those images with other people on the internet and to contribute to the visual imagery of the contemporary global digital world. In this virtual world, young people become both consumers and producers of a participatory culture (Duncum, 2014b; Jenkins, Purushotma, Weigel, Clinton, & Robison, 2009). Young people and students daily produce images, videos, and other digital products, and concurrently, they respond to other people's images. In consequence, young people learn how to handle sophisticated media production techniques in order to communicate their content.

Over the last few years, scholars have discussed digital visual culture as a relevant subject for art education (Black, 2014; Duncum, 2014b, 2015b; Grauer, Castro, & Lin, 2012; Lin & Bruce, 2013; McClure, 2013; Spont, 2010). Art educators propose that out-of-school creative activities and informal learning practices in the new media offer a lens for enhancing the interpretation of the evolving modes of commercial and ideological messaging (Duncum, 2014b; Freire & McCarthy, 2014). Duncum asks how the YouTube video genre, the movie-in-minutes, may be used as a pedagogical tool for students searching for meaning through their images (2014a).

In a previous study I conducted, students' unsolicited video productions were included in the junior high school art classes. This international exchange teaching project, The MobileMovie Project (Katagiri, Letsiou, & Thomas, 2015, 2016), altered the art classroom and changed the school into a public platform for virtual cultural exchange between Greek, Japanese, and German students. As an art teacher, I borrowed and decontextualized the method, normally used on the internet, to engage people in social media as a learning tool. Art teaching expanded to include new media skills, such as video production. Throughout the learning process, students had the opportunity to re-evaluate and re-contextualize the meaning of the video productions that they had created as out-of-school activities. The in-class art learning helped them to either praise or criticize the decisions they had made previously (e.g., the topics chosen, or their

participation in online communities). Thus, the teaching intervention was twofold: first, the students were introduced to video production as an artistic medium, and second, their art learning become a platform for communication and sharing of visual material with Greek, Japanese, and German peers.

Given the popularity of digital media for the production of images, it is reasonable to ask how practice-based learning in the art class might be revised. What benefits might be offered to learning and pedagogy through the addition of digital media and from students' unsolicited creative practice on social media? These questions derive from the prerequisite that art teachers should acknowledge their students' creative abilities, which are expressed in diverse out-of-school contexts. In particular, the youth's digital cultural products indicate digital craftsmanship, purposeful manipulation of meaning-making, and creative ability. Interestingly, many of their practices address cultural and political issues that are symptomatic of young people's lives and concerns. As a result, these practices produce a wealth of material that can be considered in the art learning context.

On considering the learning implications of the unsolicited creative practices on social media that take place during amusement time, assumptions can be drawn about how learning can happen in the art room. Art learning may be advanced by the fact that these activities and art learning share many of the same attributes. Admittedly, the decision to include these unsolicited creative practices into the official art curriculum originates from the visual culture teaching paradigm. In parallel, it embodies the tenets of engaged pedagogy. Engaged pedagogy opens up possibilities for learning that are passionate and interactive (Berry, 2010). The popular culture that is part of the students' life may provide a valuable learning tool, making it possible to fully engage with the students.

Looking at it from the perspective of the contemporary art world, the unsolicited creative practice on social media offers the potential to introduce students to meaning-making processes

in contemporary art. Visual culture with its diverse practices, such as participation in social media, can provide pedagogical tools for a critical examination of contemporary identity as shaped by images (Duncum, 2001; Freedman, 2003; Tavin, 2003). Simultaneously, the teaching of visual culture may address the methods that are used by contemporary artists. For example, certain contemporary artistic productions derive from a constant borrowing and re-using of original media images (Bourriaud, 2002). Similarly, young people copy and reuse cultural products for purposes of amusement. These practices may become powerful vehicles of meaning for studio-based learning in schools because they have the potential to engage students in the learning process. In consequence, learning advances from out-of-school productions to addressing social issues in much the same way that contemporary artists do.

The meaning of the art object is considered as both complex, and yet, simultaneously, simple. For example, both the complexity and simplicity of an artwork are indicated when the meaning is drawn out through a consideration of several of its parameters such as material, form, subject matter, and context. The making, as well as the critique of the artwork, are driven by an interplay of these parameters, which, together, are capable of producing meaning (Barrett, 2011). Thus, an artwork might look like a simple way of creating meaning but, when searching for the conceptual tools that the artist used, a multilayered and unpredictable process requiring the making of numerous choices is revealed. When considering students' out-of-school creative practices, similar qualities may be observed within the artworks. As a result, through teaching that connects with what the students have already investigated during their fun time, art teachers can teach the original qualities of the artwork by analyzing the students' decisions in the context of the art world. Students today handle diverse media, such as video and photography, in relation to the context that forms the purpose of their creation (e.g., participation in social media). These media provide the teaching material that enables the art teacher to address how a creative idea is developed from diverse processes and contexts.

Another issue that arises is the significance of the inclusion of digital media in the studio learning context. Practice-based learning enables the learners to form knowledge through an investigation of images, object creation, and meaning-making. While it enables learners to form a subjective interpretation of the world through images (Sullivan, 2004; Marshall, 2011), educators need to speculate about the possibilities that open up when the new media, as well as the context of the online digital culture, is considered within the studio learning context. As a medium, video or photographic production sustains unique connotations for contemporary life. For example, practices such as video may address issues of daily habits created through people's interaction with the mass media and the visual culture. Consequently, digital media, such as video and photographic production, can constitute practice-based learning that has the potential to address the facts and meaning of daily experience and the online world.

@asproulis14_offical

@asproulis14_offical is the Instagram account of a junior high school student, a boy of 12 years old. It is an account of an imaginary virtual character depicted through a stuffed bear. In Greek, the name *asproulis* means a white little bear. *Asproulis* is the main character who acts in several stories created from digital photographs and videos. The cast of characters are the stuffed toys from the boy's huge collection. The mise-en-scène is the child's living room with the furniture properly placed for the purposes of each play. The stories are typical TV broadcasts of soccer games with advertisements and players' interviews. There is also a soccer team named "Stuffed Animals." The "Stuffed Animals" often play against a well-known soccer team, such as Arsenal (fig. 1). The videos created with the stuffed animals fit into the genre of stop-motion videos. @asproulis14_offical is, therefore, an actualization of an innovative indoor play that is transformed into a thriller because it can interact with a vast number of spectators through the means of social media. Having the stories uploaded on Instagram gives them the



Figure 1:

power of a virtual existence with which followers can interact while following the development of the stories. The decision to use stuffed animals as actors evokes a sense of humor and parody.

The student incorporates sophisticated eye-catching devices that are used in TV broadcasts in order to communicate his intended meaning. Techniques, such as creating surprise, the emotional engagement of the broadcaster through the tone of his voice, the diverse shots and their interspersions with advertisements, are some of the strategies used that indicate the student's prior thoughtful observation and analysis of TV broadcasts. The photographs on *@asproulis14_offical* indicate what the artist was thinking, and his knowledge is indicated through his careful choices regarding lighting, composition, and frame. When considering the meaning of the videos created through the use of stuffed animals as actors at a soccer game, it becomes evident that the student was familiar with the powerful device of parody as an artistic strategy.

In conclusion, *@asproulis14_offical* is a widely innovative and creative activity that indicates a basic knowledge of visual artistic media, such as photography and video, as well as creative strategies. Duncum acknowledges that the vast variety of unsolicited creative practices on digital media, of which *@asproulis14_offical* is an example, indicate both the knowl-

edge learned through social media production, as well as its creative potential (Duncum, 2013, 2015a). Consequently, they provide material for speculation about their potential as content for art education.

The Teaching Process and the School Event

A previous research on inserting media into the art learning context, a particular genre that was developed on social media used (Duncum, 2014a). In this current research project, I decided to use a video mode that was developed by my students because I considered it to be an effective way of fully engaging the participants in the learning process. After careful consideration of the artistic qualities of the *@asproulis14_offical* Instagram account, I designed a unit for the junior high school art class attended by the student who created *@asproulis14_offical*. The project-driven unit took place in the Art High School of Thessaloniki during the fall of 2017. Seventeen eighth grade students participated. The topic of the project was the Declaration of Human Rights Day. The students were to participate in a series of in-class art productions, including video production, and also in a school art event. As a practitioner, one of the purposes of my research was to investigate how digital media can be included in practice-based learning. This decision challenged the mainstream studio production, which focuses on traditional art media. Obviously, the project took place in the practice-based learning environment where students learn how to manipulate art materials and create meaning through their art works.

Creating the video

The *@asproulis14_offical* videos were first screened in the art class: the student described his production process and his motivation for becoming involved in this fun activity. The class then discussed the video and exchanged their impressions about it. A tiny photographic studio was then installed in the art classroom (Fig. 2). Each student brought their own teddy bear



Figure 2:



Figure 3:

or another stuffed animal to the classroom so that the object could be captured on the camera of the student who had filmed *Asproulis*. The actors were readily available as every student had a teddy bear (Fig. 3). The photographer's thoughtful consideration of how to produce a specific result in terms of the amount and direction of light was striking. He explained that he had needed to take several photographs when creating the *@asproulis14_offical* videos. During the photographic session, the other students worked on different parts of the project, and they also had a chance to observe the photographic process and ask questions. In future, a learning session that includes photographic work could be extended to include knowledge about the features of photography as well as how a camera functions. Unfortunately, the timetable for the unit and its scope, which included the planning of a school event to take place during the week of the *Declaration of Human Rights Day*, limited the learning of the technical skills involved in photography. Thus, I decided to limit the learning on how to create a photograph to observing the student who had already developed his method during his own experimentation with his

@asproulis14_offical videos.

One important aspect of the learning process was to record the students' voices as they recited each article of the Declaration of Human Rights. This learning section included a presentation on the history of the Declaration of Human Rights as well as time for the students to discuss the content of each article. Students were informed about how people around the world organize activities in support of justice and to prevent human inequality and suffering. Although the learning about human rights has been developed as a set of teaching practices that aim to enable students to examine their own experience from the perspective of democratic values, this particular project was based on artistic strategies and the role that images can play in prompting the public to ask questions, renegotiate habits, and participate in a dialogue that exposes social tensions. Thus, by pronouncing each article of the Declaration of Human Rights as they recorded their voices, the students experienced an embodied artistic activity.

Other parts of the preparation included editing the video made up of the photographs of the stuffed animals, and then adding the voices of students speaking out the articles of human rights. We simplified the editing process because I wanted all the students to be introduced to the new tool of video editing, even if some had learnt more sophisticated techniques in their out-of-school activities.

Building the monument and the school event

The students were introduced to the ideas and concepts of monuments while considering what a monument dedicated to the declaration of human rights might look like. Students learnt and investigated the different kinds of monuments we interact with every day in towns, such as buildings, statues, and archeological sites. Moreover, they realized that each monument serves several purposes. In this situation, the students needed to decide what kind of monument would be suitable for informing the school community about the Declaration of Human Rights Day. As



Figure 4:



Figure 5:

part of the practice-based learning process, I had introduced my students to the techniques used for creating a relief. The students were inspired by the ancient Greek reliefs and thought that painted depictions of the ancient reliefs might be included in a monument for later installation in the school (fig. 4).

We designed an art intervention that included a screening of the video and the construction of a temporary monument. In addition, a corkboard was placed on an adjacent wall and students were encouraged to attach their own messages in response to human rights' day on this board. The exhibition also included a photograph taken by a child who used to live in a refugee camp in Thessaloniki. This photograph was taken after a big fire took place in the refugee camp in the summer of 2017, and it shows the child's teddy bear inside the destroyed building (fig. 5). I decided to place this photograph in the exhibition venue so that students, or other participants, could extract their own connotations from it. In these ways, the students were engaged in a multimedia installation that included new media work, objects, a photograph, and an interactive

site for individual participation.

The teaching process and the school event offered opportunities for the students to collaborate and to gain experience in creating a collective art work. Furthermore, the interactive stages of the project involved several levels of participation by the school community. For example, the installation of the tiny photographic studio inside the art classroom interrupted the daily classroom routine and operated as a collaborative teaching experience where students carried crucial responsibilities. Further, the post-it messages on the corkboard allowed the students to acknowledge the concerns of their peers. When the art event was staged, the students and other members of the school community could participate in a dialogue about the Declaration of Human Rights Day and about the many misunderstandings that arise but were normally hidden. For example, during the exhibition, students disputed whether the queer community's rights qualified as a legitimate human right. Even though my purpose had been to involve the students in a dialogue about the refugee crisis in order to uncover problematic considerations, other social issues emerged. The socially engaged character of the art event was shown to have the potential to extend and to develop according to the interests and responses of the students.

Implications for Contemporary Art Teaching

I would like to focus on specific issues that arose during the project that indicate its socially engaged character. Art making prompted the pedagogical process, while the teaching that unfolded over time involved human relationships. The project offered different modes for the public and the school community to participate in a memorable experience; it was challenging and a respite from the mundane classroom ecology.

The pedagogical process as an artistic medium

A significant implication can be drawn about the role of object-making in high school art classes. Our era is characterized by the post-studio practice of artists. For instance, museums and galleries offer participatory experiences to the public in which the participants make sense of the work by contributing to the process through various activities (Birchall, 2017). Exploring how this shift could affect the way in which art teaching is performed in schools, Donal O' Donoghue (2015) initiated a discussion about how participatory art challenges the importance of object-making as the primary purpose of teaching art in schools. He interrogates the making of objects by contrasting it with the experience offered by participatory art. He argues that participatory art generates several questions about current art education practice and theory. According to Pablo Helguera (2011), socially engaged art has two interrelated attributes involving performative public actions and the supplementary role of the art object. The art object often stands as an occasion for an event to take place. The public contributes to the physical appearance of the art and, consequently, to its intended meaning. Thus, practice-based learning should include art object creation but not as the only product and concern of learning. In the case of the teaching project, Declaration of Human Rights Day, the several modes of object and image creation, such as taking a video and constructing a monument, supported the concept of the creation of meaning through the many decisions of the creator. Running in parallel, the school event interrupted the normative relationships that occur in school. The topic, *The Declaration of Human Rights Day*, invited the students to create a critical dialogue and to record it. The dialogue involved current social concerns of the Greek community and, in this way, connected public life with learning. An innovative teaching approach made it possible to form new relationships and interrelationships among participants. The participants (both the teacher and students) experienced surprising events and new initiatives. Students were enabled to comprehend the role of the artist as going beyond self-expression to be involved with the

community in catalyzing a solution to a social problem. Usually, when art teaching focuses on individual art creation, students comprehend the artist's role as being isolated from community concerns.

The creation of meaning as foundational to school art production and process

The inclusion of students' everyday aesthetics into the official art curriculum aligns with the visual culture teaching paradigm, the purpose of which is to catalyze learning with critical issues that determine the contemporary life of children and youth (Freedman, 2003). The teaching content here is more inclusive and contains references to the diverse modes of contemporary art creation. For example, as a symbol, a teddy bear represents and fosters empathy. When used as a vehicle of artistic meaning, it can contribute to the construction of relevant meaning as intended by the artist. For example, a recent exhibition of work by Juan Antonio Olivares that took place during the spring of 2018 in the Whitney Museum of American Art, included a video animation with teddy bears, which narrated a story that explored existential issues. The artist described the bears as "an almost universal symbol of empathy" (Panetta, 2018). In our situation, the teddy bears, as representative of the students' aesthetic preferences and out-of-school activities, inspired them to consider the artistic potential of the images.

Conclusion

In this article, I drew on previous research that was conducted for the purposeful inclusion of young people's out-of-school online production into a practice-based art learning context in order to legitimize the use of both the new media and unsolicited video production as learning and teaching tools. The current project involved different modes of student participation that challenged mainstream art teaching practices. I am hoping that the discussion initiated around the teaching project implemented with an eighth-grade art class at the Art High School of Thes-

saloniki will nurture speculation about art teaching in a situation where students contribute to the mode, the aesthetic, and the meaning of an art product. I draw the implication that the pedagogical process should be able to value a meaningful learning experience rather than the sole creation of art objects. In this case, the student's unsolicited video production became a vehicle of meaning.

The *Declaration of Human Rights Day* event made space for an ongoing critique by students about social and political realities in the public sphere. If Freire's argument (1972) is to be considered, the purpose of education is that learners will be able to transform the realities that face them in their everyday lives into actions that embody their critical thinking. If this argument is accepted, education should emphasize processes that enable young people to engage actively in actions that are prompted by common concerns and the public good.

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