

*Real-World Readings in Art Education: Things Your Professor Never Told You.* D. Fehr, K. Fehr, & K. Keifer-Boyd (Eds.). 2002, New York: Falmer. 176 pages.

How do art educators make the study of art relevant within school systems that devalue the place of the arts in learning? The essays included in *Things Your Professors Never Told You, Real World Readings in Art Education* begin to untangle this Gordian knot by providing examples of art in education that breath life into students' learning.

In his introduction to the text, co-editor Dennis E. Fehr asks, "What's missing from all that preening and horn-blowing by the teachers-as-artists and the discipline-based art eddies?" (xiii). By stating the question thusly, Fehr immediately sets the tone for this book. It is not a book that paints a sunny image of students transformed by exposure to great art and self-actualizing through the creation of good work. It is a book that deals with the realities of art teachers' lives and the life of the arts within schools. The essays explore the disillusionment of new teachers dropped into classrooms no one has prepared them to work within. They review success stories of teachers building a practice despite the lack of practical preparation and institutional support. The essays ultimately re-cast the curriculum of art education in the mold of cultural literacy, thus providing students with ways of examining their values and giving them tools for life within the civic realities of 21<sup>st</sup> century North America.

The editors organized the book around four themes that explore the relationship of the arts in education to norms that have become standard practice in many North American schools. Sub-titled "Protesting the Rules," "Breaking the Rules," "Ignoring the Rules," and "Rewriting the Rules" the collection of essays is situated within a liberationist discourse. Essays by Keifer-Boyd, Connors, Dalacruz, Gaudelius, and Duncum develop the "Real-World" context in Part I, "Real World Classroom Voices: Protesting the Rules." Conor's begins her essay, "Each teacher's narrative related here expresses a sense of betrayal by the promises of their training programs [*sic.*] and certification requirements." The ensuing essays review the sources of this betrayal and the need for teachers to re-examine their fundamental pedagogical beliefs and their understanding of the learner. The writers in Part I protest rules about teacher control, the primacy of western ideologies in education, and what is included in Art.

In Part II, "Real World Aesthetics: Breaking the Rules," Fehr, Deniston-Trochta, Morris, and Smith-Shank step outside of the "Great Masters" definition of art to explore alternative visual experiences within and through which students learn. The essays in this section reveal how teachers are enculturated into the orthodoxy of Art through the limited art education they themselves received. The authors open up the vistas of art by examining popular culture and "outsider" art as important carriers of meaning. They remind art educators to "make sure the work of women and artists of colour are valued, exhibited and preserved by our institutions" (Smith-Shank, p. 70). These writers demonstrate how to break the rule of hegemony that has held art educators in its grip for too long.

"Whether the rules are real or imagined, we often fear teaching something that is too political, too sensitive, too impossible" (Fehr, p. 73). Gude, Ewing, Pio, Akins, Wyrick, and Lampela, the authors in Part III, provide passionate and sound argument for "ignoring the rules" so that educators can teach "Real-World Art Lessons." These chapters build an understanding of the culture of most North American art curricula. They tackle the reality of the personal cultures present in North American classrooms and provide models for curricula that honour that diversity. These essays witness concrete instances of art education that can empower both educators and learners.

The final part of *Real-World Readings in Art Education* provides evidence that art educators have changed some of the rules, thereby changing the "Real-World" of the classroom. As Keifer-Boyd describes,

Part IV advocates participatory democracy by underscoring the need for aesthetic-expressive discourse .... The interaction of cognitive approaches with moral-practical and aesthetic-expressive approaches 'encourages social action and moral consciousness' (Blandy, 1987, p. 48).

It is thus that the art educator can affect "Real-World Structural Change" as Part IV's subtitle promises. However, as Weitz and Suggs caution at the close of their chapter, art educators must be prepared to be life-long learners and to be responsive to the changing needs of that real-world. Today's solutions will probably not work in 2010. Art educators must grow and change with their worlds.

As described by *Real-World Readings in Art Education*, the art educator is a freedom fighter and art is the means by which citizens achieve individual and social liberty. Some readers may find this context off-putting. I admit that my first impression of the book was that I was to be regaled by tales of martyred art teachers and entreated to accept art education as the messiah of education. However, as I attended to the

writers' words, I received from this text a realistic picture of the place art education holds in contemporary schooling; it was neither exaggerated nor was art education deified. *Real-World Readings in Art Education* revealed what art educators are doing to make art experiences meaningful and relevant to students, and the unique place that art holds within a student's and a society's development.

Despite my initial misgivings, I wish that I had had such a text available to me as I entered my graduate work. As Ed Check describes in his essay, many art educators embark upon graduate study in order to make some kind of sense of the experiences they have had in the classroom. They have experienced the disconnect between the ideals they held as new graduates and the realities of teaching art. *Real-World Readings in Art Education* can validate the master's student's past experience. It can provide alternative viewpoints and can re-vitalize a waning enthusiasm for one's professional practice. The writers included in the text do provide answers to Fehr's initial question. "How do art educators make the study of art relevant within school systems that devalue the place of the arts in learning?" These writers respond, "With a sense of humour, by relinquishing control, and by providing experiences to students that are localized, situated, and relevant to their lives!"

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