Socially Engaged Art Education: Practices, Processes, and Possibilities

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Water is a basic human right. Lack of access to water is a social injustice. Six hundred and sixty-three million people—1 in 10—do not have access to safe water and approximately one million people die each year due to water, sanitation, and hygiene-related disease. In 2014, B. Stephen Carpenter, II, chief executive artist of Reservoir Studio, conducted a participatory performance at Edinboro University to draw attention to the global water crisis.

During this performance, art and art education students, faculty, artists, and members of the community made hand-built ceramic water filters to raise awareness of the issue and as a creative response to the crisis. Such socially engaged art activities stretch beyond the production of aesthetically pleasing art objects to foster a dialog that integrates artistic practices, pedagogical processes, and creative possibilities in pursuit of a more equitable world.

Contemporary frameworks of art education, such as community-based art education and public pedagogy have come under increasing scrutiny for not living up to the conceptual roots that shaped their civic role and ethical responsibility (Burdick, Sandlin, & O’Malley; 2014, Uhlig, Lewis, & Carpenter, 2016; Schlemmer, 2017). Similarly, social justice has been taken up in a range of ways (Ayers, Quin, & Stoval, 2009; Dewhurst, 2014; Quinn, Hotchtritt, & Ploof, 2012), which suggests no singular definition is privileged. Following art educator Marit Dewhurst (2014), we define social justice as a process “to convert the status quo—the fractured landscape of institutional discrimination, systematic violence, paralyzing poverty, and silenced oppression—into a more just and equal world” (p. 8). Furthermore, within this process of social justice we distinguish social action as the actual and symbolic means that interrupt conditions of injustice and inequality (Helguera, 2011). The central question that has emerged through our work is both pragmatic and pedagogical: How can creative responses to social injustice provide spaces to interrupt conditions of inequality through the guise of socially engaged art education?
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Creative responses demand active engagement. Artist and art museum educator Pablo Helguera (2011) suggests what characterizes socially engaged artistic practice “is its dependence on social intercourse as a factor of its existence” (p. 2). From a pedagogical perspective, such works are enacted to provoke reflection and to discover something new in the process (Helguera, 2011). Thus, we believe creative responses are especially well suited to encourage critical reflection of and resistance to social injustice. Art educator David Darts (2004) advocates introducing artists into the classroom who actively engage with social justice and human rights issues to open up educative spaces to explore sociocultural, political, and historical complexities. Exposure to these works allows art educators “to challenge disenfranchised conceptions of the social role and political function of art with their students” (Darts, 2004, p. 319). In this light, we encourage teachers to facilitate opportunities for students to participate with socially engaged art that extends beyond the classroom. In keeping with our conceptualization of creative activity and social action, the performances we describe promote art as a catalyst to foster actual and symbolic interactions in pursuit of “an awareness of our own historical existence in the world and our ability to question, and effect change” (Bastos, 2002, p. 72). We offer examples of collaborative creative responses to the global water crisis in pK-16 art education. These examples provide practical evidence of the relationship between creative activity and social justice, and demonstrate socially engaged practices from a pedagogical perspective.

Initiated in 2011, Collaborative Creative Resistance has evolved into a series of public participatory performances by Carpenter and members of Reservoir Studio. Carpenter learned how to create point-of-use ceramic water filters from artists Manny Hernandez and Richard Wukich.

The filters are created with a clay mixture of approximately 50% clay and 50% sawdust. Once bisqued, the standard-size filters are coated with a wash of colloidal silver and affixed to a 5-gallon plastic bucket fitted with a spigot and a lid. The filters have been shown to be effective at rendering inert 99% of waterborne bacteria like e-coli. (Cornelius, Sherow, & Carpenter, 2010, p. 30)

Based on the same technology developed by Dr. Fernando Mazariegos of the Central American Industrial Research Institute (ICAII) (Potters for Peace, 2009), the filters are produced and promoted by nonprofit organizations around the world (Cornelius et al., 2010). These performances seek to render the abstract notion of a global water crisis as a tangible socioenvironmental issue by transferring the studio practices used for filter production into public spaces (Uhlig et al., 2016). This shift of site from classrooms to public spaces affords access to audiences who might otherwise be excluded from these participatory learning experiences.

The Collaborative Creative Resistance performances have taken place in a range of venues, including professional conferences, municipal festivals, and schools. Assistant Professor of Art Education Ross H. Schlemmer organized the full-day event at Edinboro University to demonstrate how social action and creative production can raise awareness of the global water crisis, and as
a way for individuals to enact positive change through practical, arts-based solutions. Carpenter assigned process-oriented tasks to small groups of participants, such as sieving sawdust through a screen to achieve the desired uniform particle size, measuring the proper proportions of dry clay and sawdust, and mixing them with water to produce the clay body for the filters. Participants used a hydraulic ram press similar to those used in filter production facilities, as well as plaster molds made from plastic containers and small foam footballs to create smaller press-molded filters. The performance did not emphasize the filters as art objects. Rather, the objective of the performance was to prompt dialog and discussion, share ideas, and propose solutions.

Conversations during the performance strayed from the demonstration of the skills and techniques required to complete the process, to a pointed discussion about the problem and why the participants were making the filters in the first place. Consequently, the conversations did not end when the filters were shelved to dry. Exchanges continued back into the classroom, throughout social media, at subsequent meetings, and in conversations with individual students.

In fall 2015, a similar workshop was staged when IB-certified art teacher Erika Hitchcock traveled with 22 students, three teachers, and four parents from Green Run Collegiate School in Virginia Beach to Penn State for a four-day visit to learn about the global water crisis and to participate in a hands-on water filter production workshop with members of Reservoir Studio.

In 2014, Carpenter visited Green Run Collegiate to initiate a unit of instruction about the global water crisis and water as a basic human right. The goal of the workshop was to demonstrate how students have the power to make global, national, and local impact through art. For an entire day, the high school art room was transformed into a water filter production center. Students experienced various problem-solving techniques through the lenses of the global water crisis, the power of collaboration, and the lasting impact of creative action. Over the course of four 90-minute sessions, art and design students created more than 150 mini water filters. Similarly, the performance initiated a sustained engagement focused on the students’ ability to create objects and symbols for social change that demonstrated an effective suturing of socially engaged art and participatory pedagogy.

Students researched ideas of sustainability and awareness surrounding the global water crisis and environmental issues of consumable waste. Their research extended beyond traditional methods of reading texts and reviewing visual materials as they expanded their knowledge through creative production. As part of a subsequent 8-week-long investigative unit, a group of 9th-grade students continued to investigate socially engaged artmaking through the work of Vik Muniz and collaborative efforts with the activist group, Students Rebuild. Their unit culminated in exhibitions of their artworks at the Virginia Museum of Contemporary Art and Old Dominion University.

With each artistic endeavor, students carefully consider the potential impact of their work. Extensions of this learning experience continue as several students are developing school-wide participatory opportunities to become more involved in the filter-making process. A group of students developed a workshop for Beach Girls Rock, a city-wide program to empower young
women. This group set up a water crisis educational session to include a filter-making workshop for over 30 girls. These students independently presented the project, discussed the water crisis, and made filters with each participant. For students with little exposure to the impact of artmaking beyond the traditional high school art curriculum, this unit afforded an opportunity to establish personal purpose and to cultivate knowledge of their ability to initiate local and global change.

The socially engaged workshops we describe exemplify possibilities for creating artistic responses as symbolic and actual social actions (Helguera, 2011). Additionally, they demonstrate the pedagogical potential of reimagining art education spaces that extend beyond schools. When pedagogical practices and their social impact are performed in concert with creative production, they become a form of socially engaged art education. Performances such as these afford students spaces to respond to social issues experientially, kinesthetically, and intellectually, and to uphold their rights as learners, creative beings, and concerned citizens of the world.

References