

Identity, Image and Meaning Beyond the Classroom: Visual and Performative Communicative Practice in a Visual 21st Century

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Volume 1

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I hereby certify that the work embodied in this Thesis is the result of original research, the greater part of which was completed subsequent to admission to candidature for the degree.

Signed.....Date

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Abstract

Visual Art education, in an increasingly globalized visual world, is gaining significance for its contribution to the intuitive, critical and creative aspects of student learning and meaning-making. This awareness is foregrounded by a realization that tomorrow's world will be increasingly dominated by the triumph of the image, multi-modal practices, technologies and visual culture. In this context, the development of an ethico-aesthetic disposition through visual contemporary communicative capacities might be regarded as essential to modern meaning-making. The research seeks to reveal the impact of studying Visual Art for the adolescent student and its value to them in terms of its contribution to their personal, social and cultural understandings beyond the classroom.

This research represents a qualitative examination of a post-compulsory Visual Art curriculum in New South Wales, Australia that has shifted from a modernist perspective to a conceptual framework informed by contemporary art practices and by a Habermasian theory of communicative knowing. The research presents its findings in the form of, first a meta-analysis of a longitudinal study of the ARTEXPRESS exhibition spanning 15 years of student learning outcomes from the Visual Art curriculum and, second, a case study of 7 students who reflect on the value of the Visual Art learning to them beyond school. The study employs a critical hermeneutic phenomenological methodology, using image and text analysis as data. The methodology bridges traditional educational research methods with Visual Art practices by employing arts-inquiry as a qualitative research method. It uses the montage as a visual communicative platform informed by narrative perspectives to present the results.

In the 21st century, educators, together with the entire world community, are growing in consciousness of the arts as a significant player in developing the attributes and skills that citizens will require in order to be effective participants of tomorrow's rapidly evolving world. The public welfare benefits that accrue from the arts' intrinsic values are increasingly being seen to constitute a central role in generating wider benefits (McCarthy, Ondaatje, Zakaris & Brooks, 2004; National Review of Visual Education, 2006).

Through analysis of ARTEXPRESS student artworks, reflective journals and interviews, the research identified that the skill of visual communicative proficiency links explicitly to the performative act as it emerges from each student's desire and affectivity. In turn, this act is demonstrated to be beyond the knowledge of Visual Art cultural practices, being shaped by critique and power relationships in society. Self-portrait as narrative and subjectivity production were seen by the students as legitimate means of communicating meaning about self and other. The understanding of the logic of the relationships between visual technical activity, embodied material processes and conceptual understandings as contemporary communicative practices was valued by students and parents for its capacity to mediate societal and cultural values, as well as ethical practice and citizenship.

Visual and performative communicative practice links identity, image and meaning. In this study these practices supported self-agency and the creative development of multiple, reflective returns. Visual artmaking is presented as supporting the development of creative possibilities. In turn, an understanding of the endless ways in which imaging and communicating can represent self, truth, reality and existence benefit the individual and society quite beyond the bounds of the traditional classroom.