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Journaling in the secondary photography classroom

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Artists are faced with the major challenge of the near infinite range that art can encompass; even with knowledge and reference to historically relevant artists, much of what guides the artist in their creation is their technical artistry and their aesthetic visual choices (Eisner, 2002). In the art classroom setting, individuality and personal connection become hallmark in the creative process. A student's personal stories, experiences, thoughts, and feelings, while not directly written into a curriculum, become an important element of the final artistic products of their work. One tool familiar to artists in their creative process is the sketchbook: a visual and written journal that helps create a physical context for their final realized artwork. As I began student teaching at a Chicagoland suburban high school, where art classes are fragmented more into specific disciplines, I began considering how this vehicle for idea generation could be useful beyond the scope of drawing-centric classes where this type of activity is a regular part of classwork. Visual artists utilize process as a major vehicle for conveying their concepts; they envision what they want to display, explore their options for creating work, and continuously reflect on their results from the perspective of creator and viewer (Hetland et al., 2013). During a past teaching experience with a seventh-grade visual arts class, I encouraged my students to access their personal narratives through a multi-tiered comics project, incorporating a process through pre-writing, preliminary loose sketching, layout

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design, and reflection on their completed work. Their responses indicated that they loved having a project that incorporated their own stories and had personal meaning, fully embracing the ability to take ownership of the direction of their artwork. However, some students still struggled to connect their finished projects to their own success; their self-reflections did not fully address the amount of work they had accomplished over the course of one unit. This experience prompted my consideration of how implementing this type of process work— with more regular reflection and student-initiated artwork creation— could influence visual artists in high school classrooms. I wanted to explore how a student’s artistic identity could be shaped through a combination of their own choices in expression combined with pre-determined prompts for reflection. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine how process-specific journaling as part of student workflow played a role in the autonomy and self-efficacy of high school photography students. By focusing on process work and providing students with tools not traditionally associated with the photography curriculum such as a sketchbook, the study looked to explore the benefits of further emphasis on expression through artifacts of physical artmaking and personal relevance in a medium that continues to shift toward a predominantly digital presence in art classrooms.

Expanding the Artistic Disciplines and Visual Culture

The present study aimed to expand the parameters that are the basis for defining the curriculum of visual arts courses, almost to the point of dissolution. The study focused on a photography class; a course whose description was initially defined by the lens-based equipment that provides its namesake. The design of the course was modified to include journaling and sketching. This provided opportunities for students to build further connections to the core medium of the course and discover new ways of exploring their concepts for their final photographic work. In a study conducted by Barnes (2009), preservice art teachers were tasked with analyzing fine arts prints through written commentary on sticky notes rather

than verbal discussion. Because of the physical artifacts created in this process, their ideas were able to be organized and categorized visually and further analyzed through group discussion. While the ideas of drawing and writing are certainly not foreign to students, this concrete and visual representation of ideas becomes even more crucial in a space where students are working in a primarily digital realm. The sketchbook was designed to act as a tool available to students both during and outside of class, allowing for their idea formation to be documented and preserved as part of their process at any given time.

This curricular expansion is influenced by the concept of visual culture, which is defined as a rejection of the traditional boundaries of high art and canonized art education. This places further importance on the everyday visual stimuli a student may encounter throughout their lives (Tavin, 2000). For photography students, this means looking beyond photography for their inspiration; students are encouraged to begin considering their surroundings and daily experiences and documenting these ideas in both pre-planning and reflective stages of their process. In this sense, the student's journal becomes a collection of experiences that may have otherwise been left undocumented and perhaps forgotten. This widens the scope of personal narrative in the context of art making. Tavin (2000) additionally makes a nod to postmodernist philosophy and critical theory as a rejection of the established discipline-based arts education (DBAE), defined as a set of standards and disciplines that placed further emphasis on fine arts as an integral part of what would be defined as artistic education, but still regularly ignores the impact of aesthetic experiences such as media and other visual stimuli.

Looking specifically at the classroom, Eisner (2002) suggests that aesthetic and artistic education are not mutually exclusive in a curriculum, and the absence of either inhibits the actual development of the other. Further, he advocates for a diversity of subjects beyond the scope of what is deemed necessary to meet standards. Looking at the context of a photography classroom, I

find that defining disciplines can inhibit diversity in the art making process. This type of curricular restriction within the visual arts reifies its distancing from the core subjects. The addition of a physical journaling element to the photographic process starts to break down these curricular definitions that make a photography class focus solely on cameras and computers as the primary tool for creating artwork. Students are provided with more options for expression within their art-making process, and their aesthetic experiences begin to inform their future artistic choices through the quick visual expressions collected in the journaling process.

The journaling process attempted to provide a positive and constructive introspective experience for students. With the photography classroom as the site for the present study, students are constantly processing new visual stimuli including that which is created by their peers. Providing a physical outlet for students who are traditionally working in digital media helps students organize their experiences visually and in-turn produce more concrete expressions of their ideas.

Student Autonomy, Self-Efficacy, and the Personal Narrative

The addition of new tools to the process of creating art in the photography classroom provided more regular opportunities for students to reflect and explore non-photography-specific media and expand their artistic repertoire. To this point, exploring personal narrative is a reflective act that is directly tied to student autonomy (Ingraham, 2017); for photography students, this expansion allowed for more opportunities to document their thoughts and experiences that are not directly tied to the medium of photography itself. By placing more emphasis on each student's experiences and personal narratives, students could gain confidence in their own artistic identity and self-efficacy. When students are asked to create new artwork for an assignment, their level of autonomy tends to fall in the hands of the instructor. During a study following a group of Australian secondary visual arts students, participants spoke

to the importance of trusting their teacher's judgements while still maintaining some amount of control. However, students struggled with perceiving future actions in their artmaking or pursuing more challenging art analysis (Morris et al., 2017). During this study, this autonomy was felt most when students took on the role of creator, some going so far as to self-identify as "original" based on their aversion to seeking other artists for inspiration. Regardless of whether or not artists are conscious of their own influences, no artwork is created objectively. Through journaling, the present study provided students with a more concrete selection of their influences and inspirations while still maintaining their ownership of ideas.

Self-reflection similarly plays an important role in the development of student self-efficacy. Autry & Walker (2011) tasked pre-service counselors with creating a three-dimensional artistic self-representation followed by a reflection on the creation and presentation of the projects to their classmates. Their findings displayed a growth within a group that ranged in their previous experience with self-reflection; similarly, students in the current study entered this class without any required previous experience in art or photography. To this point, the present study took place in a space where students were expected to work with photography as a primary vehicle for their art; the addition of reflection and drawing to the students' artmaking process was still focused on photography as a final product.

Moving beyond the self as a concept, the human experience has largely been a part of the photographic medium and can act as a jumping off point for students to connect their work to their personal narratives. In a study conducted by Perkowski (2015), students analyzed the way emotions were conveyed through the work of established photographers before attempting to create their own series of work based around the concept of human feeling. This provided a source of inspiration for students to directly connect some of the technical aspects of photography to their own process; however, photography is not the sole influence

for artists working with the medium. Even though photography was the vehicle for creating finished works, the journals acted as an additional space for self-reflection within the artmaking process, placing further importance on the personal narrative for photographers. These changes to the artmaking process sought to expand student artistic autonomy through an expansion of their repertoire for artmaking.

Methods

The current study pulled participants from two sections of an introductory photography course at a Chicagoland area suburban high school. These two classes were comprised of a total of 40 students (23 girls, 17 boys, including 18 freshmen, 16 sophomores, 4 juniors, and 2 seniors). Across these classes, 35 students participated in the full study (20 girls, 15 boys, including 16 freshmen, 14 sophomores, 4 juniors, and 1 senior). I was a student teacher, working with both introductory and advanced photography classes, an introductory foundational art class, and a mixed-level graphic design class. At the beginning of the study, participants had already completed three major assignments in their introductory photography class. Each followed by a group critique where students were encouraged to provide feedback to their fellow students in tandem with instructor provided feedback. Two of these assignments were followed by a written self-reflection asking about their strengths, areas for improvement, and suggestions for the instructor for future assignments. The study was conducted over the course of one full unit following their experiences titled “Constructed Realities” and multiple in-class exercises; these included critiques, photo-walk days where students took photos inside the school, and demonstrations using both cameras and image editing software. In the aforementioned unit, students explored collage through both traditional and digital means. First, students combined found imagery from magazines and printed photos with drawings, cutting and pasting physical media together into traditional collages. Students translated these experiences

into a digital collage utilizing their own photographs as the primary elements of work. The study began on the same day that “Constructed Realities” was introduced to students and concluded after students had turned in their final assignments and completed small group critiques in class for the unit.

Participants were given a pre-assessment survey consisting of two short-answer questions and six statements with a scaled response (rating from 1-5 of strongly disagree to strongly agree). In the short answer section, participants were asked the following questions: “What do you think defines someone as an artist?” and “Would you consider yourself to be an artist? Why or why not?” These were aimed at examining students’ concept of artist identity as both a universal understanding and a self-reflection of their self-efficacy as artists. Participants were additionally asked two more questions: “What inspires the photographs you take? Who or what is the source of your ideas?” These were aimed at looking into students’ autonomy as photographers and whether or not they identified any sources of influence on the work they make. The six statements that followed similarly looked into artist autonomy and self-efficacy, asking participants about their confidence (i.e. I feel confident about my ability to take good photos, I feel confident about my ability to create strong ideas for photographs, I am proud of the work I have made in this class so far) and their autonomy (i.e. I have full control over the direction of the work I make, I am knowledgeable in both taking and editing photographs, the work I make in this class is representative of who I am).

Following this survey, participants were each given a handmade 40-page sketchbook to use these for any purpose they saw fit but were instructed to bring them to class for in-class written reflections throughout the remainder of the semester. Examples of personal sketchbooks featuring a mixture of drawings and written notes were presented to students during class to give some insight into potential use. In addition, participants were informed that sketchbooks would be collected periodically and pages would be scanned. While all students in the class would receive a grade based

on their completion of in-class reflections, only participants in the study would have data collected from their sketchbooks.

At the conclusion of the study, students were given a post-assessment survey, revisiting two of the short answer questions from the pre-assessment survey: “What do you think defines someone as an artist” and “Would you consider yourself to be an artist? Why or why not?.” These questions sought to examine the growth of students’ autonomy and self-efficacy over the course of the study and their overarching definitions of an artist.

Short-answer responses in surveys were analyzed and codes were developed inductively. This resulted in a list of in-vivo codes that focused on artist identity (i.e. creativity, being a creator/maker, thinking outside of the box) (Miles & Huberman, 1994). These codes similarly considered how students approached their own artistic autonomy and whether or not students identified with the definition of artist that they had described, which can be found in Table 1. Once keywords were identified for each code, appearances within written surveys were tallied. Data from scaled responses was counted for frequency of scoring for each option and added together to create an average rating between both class sections and provided an overall picture of students’ initial feelings of autonomy and self-efficacy based only on their prior class experiences. Sketchbooks were analyzed through scanning of written and drawn excerpts, with codes developed inductively based on the assumed purpose of each entry by students. Each entry that received a code was categorized under sketchbook activities (i.e. drawing/sketching, brainstorming, reflecting on strengths). With in-class reflections as the only required entries in students’ journals, drawings, lists, and other free-form writing portrayed the independent thought-process and autonomy of each student. Self-reflections provided insight into student self-efficacy through their choice of positive or constructive feedback for their own work and whether they were able to see their strengths alongside their areas of improvement. These reflections were coded based on content and categorized as sketchbook activities, looking at whether the student made positive

or constructive remarks on their own process and completed work. Further, each reflective entry was coded based on its context; entries coded as technical discussed the tenets of making artwork, either through the use of cameras or image editing software; entries coded as conceptual discussed the ideas and themes behind the artwork that students made.

Table 1
Codes for Surveys and Sketchbooks

Artistic Definitions	Sketchbook Activity	Context
Creativity	Listmaking/Brainstorming	Conceptual
Creator/Maker	Drawing	Technical
Unique/Out of the box	Reflecting on strengths	
Passion	Reflecting on places to improve	
Patient		
Personal Narrative		
Outreach/Sharing		
Perspective		

Results

While the pre-assessment surveys were completed prior to sketchbooks being introduced as an integral part of the course, student concepts of artist identity began to materialize in their written and drawn entries. This included considerations of whether an artist is defined by what they are making or the intention behind their work. As students reached the end of the study, they returned to these early concepts of what an artist is as they re-examined whether or not they identified as an artist. By writing reflections on their artwork and experiences and creating new visual media within their sketchbooks, students expanded on their concepts of artists and subsequently found ways to identify with these definitions.

Table 2
Codes for Surveys - Results

Artistic Definitions – Pre-Assessment	Number of Appearances (Artist Description)	Artistic Definitions – Post-Assessment	Number of Appearances (Artist Description)	Number of Appearances (Self-Description)
Creativity	9	Creativity	13	2
Creator/Maker	16	Creator/Maker	15	7
Unique/Out of the Box	6	Unique/Out of the Box	6	4
Passion	5	Passion	2	1
Patient	2	Personal Narrative	5	6
		Outreach/Sharing	2	2
		Perspective	2	6

Table 3
Results of Scaled Responses

Statement	1 (strongly disagree)	2 (disagree)	3 (neither agree nor disagree)	4 (agree)	5 (strongly agree)	Average response
I feel confident about my ability to take good photos.	0	0	6	20	9	4.06
I feel confident about my ability to create strong ideas for photographs.	0	1	9	17	8	3.94
I have full control over the direction of the work I make.	0	1	6	14	14	4.21
I am knowledgeable in both taking and editing photographs	0	1	8	19	5	3.88
The work that I make in this class is representative of who I am.	0	1	9	13	10	3.97
I am proud of the work I have made in this class so far.	0	1	3	15	14	4.31

Table 4
Codes for Sketchbooks - Results

Sketchbook Activity	Number of appearances	Context	Number of appearances
Listmaking/brainstorming	17	Technical	6
Drawing	31	Conceptual	2
Reflecting on strengths	4		
Reflecting on places to improve	8		

Artists as Creators and Innovators, Purposeful and Inspiring

When asked about their definitions of artists, most participants referenced the idea of being a maker or creator. This was further supported through students' explanations of whether or not they would describe themselves as an artist. One participant noted that they "use their creativity to make things." A different participant explained that they were an artist "only when [they are] creating art;" another participant similarly mentioned that they are "an artist while taking this class, but not outside of class," implying a necessity for constant production or an identity that is directly influenced by intent to create. One participant noted that an artist "shares [their art] with the world," while another mentioned that an artist "creates and inspires." Both allude to the idea that creations should have an effect on other people or serve a purpose. Similarly, several participants alluded to the importance of creativity and innovation as part of the artist's identity; however, what was more telling was the mixed response tied to this assuredness of creativity in regards to self-image as the artist. While some participants believed in creativity as a universal quality, one stating that "everyone is an artist, everyone is capable of telling a story," other participants believed that they did not possess an "artistic eye." One participant tied their perception of an artist back to the idea of the audience, mentioning that they did not "consider

[themselves] making art for other people to view,” returning to the idea that an artist is sharing their creations with the outside world. The post-assessment indicated student responses became more detailed and expanded to include more introspective aspects of the artist identity; students identified the importance of telling their own stories, representing their view of the world, and sharing these ideas with others. This was complemented by students using these same descriptors to self-identify as artists more frequently in the post-assessment. Seven students identified as artists specifically because they created artwork, and some tied this in with their creativity and uniqueness. One student mentioned that they “make pieces of art that are unique to [them]” and “think outside of the box a little when [they] make [their] art/put [their] own twist on things.” Another student mentioned that they “make art constantly” and “try to do things while thinking outside of the box.” Further, the importance of personal relevance and perspective appeared six times each among responses. One student commented that they “consider [themselves] an artist because [they] love telling stories through a picture or drawing;” another student responded that they are an artist because they “[play] with different ways of viewing the world.” Here, both students reflected on the importance of telling a story from their point of view in connection with their artistic autonomy. One student began by identifying their passion for art as the basis for their artist identity, and followed up by noting they make art “to make something that [they] will love and others could possibly also enjoy.” This alluded to the importance of sharing work for this student, but also points to their self-efficacy in artmaking, affirming their pride in the work they wish to share with others.

Inclination for Technical Improvement Over Recognizing Strength

One of the most telling aspects of the scaled responses in the pre-survey was an overwhelming majority of participants claiming control over the direction of their work (28 participants agreed

or strongly agreed with the statement “I have full control over the work I make”) as seen in Table 3. This showcased a strong level of artistic autonomy from a conceptual standpoint. Conversely, when given the opportunity to reflect on their in-process work throughout the “Constructed Realities” unit, students’ written reflections in their sketchbooks primarily focused on areas of improvement in technique with either cameras or the digital editing software provided to them through the classroom. To this point, most self-reflective written passages looked primarily at areas of technical improvement rather than areas of strength. During the study, an in-class critique of a previous unit on film photography was held where students were encouraged to share both positives and areas of improvement. When asked to reflect on the critique, several students only highlighted the areas in which they wished to improve technically. One student pointed to “pay[ing] more attention to [their] photos’ contrast and composition.” Another commented on “taking more pictures so [they] would have more to choose from,” and later added that they “would want to hear more specific ideas on how to improve.” Another student considered “[using] natural light, make [their] image have some symmetry, and...could give it more contrast.” While all of these considerations are valid for growth as an artist, recognizing areas of strength can similarly play a role in their growth and help display self-efficacy as artists.

After reading these responses, students were asked directly to identify a strength in their work in a later self-reflection. From this, a mixture of technical and conceptual responses emerged. One student mentioned that they “really notice and appreciate good art a lot more” and “can now recognize how much work goes into each detail;” this touched on both technical and conceptual aspects, but more importantly, it showed a recognition of how their understanding of course topics and art in general had deepened. Another leaned toward the technical side and mentioned that “although [they] wouldn’t consider [themselves] a pro [they] feel more comfortable using the software.” While this comment still shows a desire to improve, it does highlight an important

recognition of growth. Similarly, another student wrote that “[they] have definitely gotten better but [are] still working hard on getting even better than before” in reference to using image editing software. Students continued to find the work challenging but showed a desire to continue improving.

Participant conceptual development emerged in sketchbooks primarily through brainstorming activities; students created written checklists and quick sketches of ideas to help pre-plan for the primarily digital assignment they were about to complete. These appeared 17 times in student sketchbooks. As seen in Figure 1, one student chose to include clippings from magazines as a collage-style inspiration piece for their “Constructed Realities” final project. What resulted afterward was very little discussion of the positives or areas of improvement for their concepts or ideas. While this awareness of pre-planning as a part of the artistic process was beneficial, the ideas behind the process became second to technique. During the post-assessment survey, students started to discuss the importance of a personal connection to their ideas; one student commented that “[they] try to take pictures that [they] enjoy and like, and [they] show those pictures as representing a part of [themselves].” In this sense, students recognized the overall importance of concept in relation to their self-efficacy, but were not necessarily actively seeking improvement.



Figure 1. Collage from student sketchbook, preliminary work for *Constructed Realities* assignment.

Drawing and Sketching ss Student Choice

Upon scanning the sketchbook pages of participants, drawn or otherwise image-based (i.e. collage) segments were seen the most frequently outside of the required in-class reflections. While some participants connected these visuals to their pre-planning activities, using them as part of their art-making process directly tied to the “Constructed Realities” unit, (Figure 2), others merely chose to create drawings for personal expression. Drawings ranged from quick pencil sketches to colorful and elaborate designs including text (Figure 3). Looking back on how participants defined the importance of creating artwork as part of the artists identity, these independent ventures into creating simple drawn work reveal a more direct association with their own definitions of an artist. By acting as creators or makers, sharing their work with their classmates, and displaying a creative spark, participants aligned their actions with their collective idea of an artist’s identity. To this point, students began to specify drawing as part of their artistic identity. In addition, only reflective writing passages were assigned

to participants and were to be completed in class. In this sense, most of their drawing was not directly linked to reflection or to the “Constructed Realities” unit, but instead linked to development of their self-efficacy as artists. Since participants were given free rein to remove their sketchbooks from the classroom context, any additional drawn work was created voluntarily. This spoke to the participants interest in creating work but also their inclinations to do more than what is asked of them when provided with materials free of restrictions.

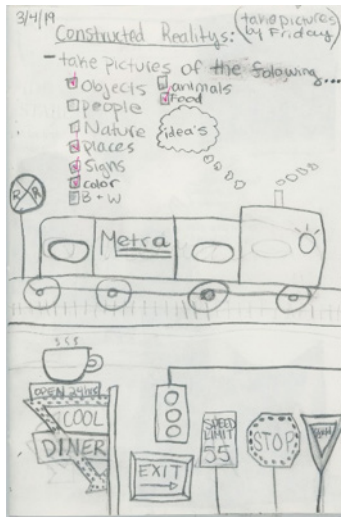


Figure 2. List and pre-planning sketch from student sketchbook for *Constructed Realities* assignment.



Figure 3. Colored pencil sketch from student sketchbook, text and illustration.

Similarly, some participants chose to draw on the covers of their sketchbooks, creating an additional layer of ownership to their sketchbooks. Upon receiving these sketchbooks, participants were informed that they would be allowed to keep them beyond the end of the study and the end of the class. Again, without restriction to its use, participants began to personalize their new materials. While some participants chose to only add their names to the covers, others chose to embellish their names with colorful markers and repeating drawn patterns (Figure 4). What resulted was a collection of unique creations that reflected the visual interests and creative spark of the participants.

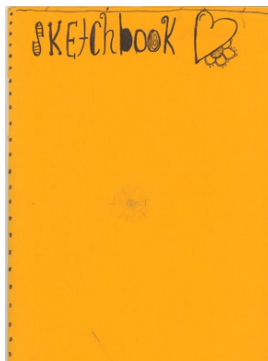


Figure 4. Student sketchbook cover (name removed) with text, pattern, and simple drawings.

Discussion and Future Action

The required written reflections that participants completed created a portrait of student tendencies when they were self-reflecting if not given any outside expectations for the direction of their commentary. Once students were asked to specifically discuss positives, it became clear that they were conscious of their strengths but still strived to constantly improve. Because sketchbooks were checked mid-way through the “Constructed Realities” unit, there was space for intervention during the study where these responses directly influenced instruction; future reflections asked students to specifically consider positives, but some still chose to highlight their desire to continue to improve. This intervention resulted in a display of a stronger self-efficacy from students, and having written documentation of this provided better detail about ways to improve instruction for future lessons. Since students were completing these reflections in journals, their thoughts became intertwined with drawings and other expressions of their creative thinking. This collection of ideas and artistic expressions encompassed visual stimuli that was not restricted to only artistic education (Tavin, 2000).

The context of the photography class implies a place for creative activity, but students did not feel restricted to only accomplishing their creative output through the defining medium of the course. The sketchbook offered a space for expression of their ideas in different media, and the high frequency of students using their sketchbooks for this purpose independently suggested that students actively enjoyed having this additional tool at their disposal. The wide range of subject matter within their drawings revealed a mix of their aesthetic and artistic experiences, something not accessible through solely photographic means (Eisner, 2002).

In this sense, providing students with a tool to create work with may influence their decisions on how they express themselves. This appeared both in the physical artifacts in their sketchbooks, but also in the quality and quantity of their own descriptions of

their artistic autonomy. Students showed more confidence in their artistic identity and their abilities to create work successfully after completing post-assessment surveys. The sketchbooks similarly provided an outlet for further self-reflection from students, showing more of their thought process in direct relation to their photography work.

Since each student was handed a sketchbook and allowed permanent use and ownership of it, there were no real restrictions on what they could add to the pages as long as they participated in any written reflection activities during class. The collection aspect did inform instruction throughout the study, but the quality of this reflection was dependent on the trust built within the classroom community between students and their teacher (Salamanca Gonzalez, 2015). As this trust continued to grow, students became more willing to share more in their reflections and survey responses. While the study only spanned one unit due to time restrictions, students had ample space in their sketchbooks to continue reflecting on new assignments and adding new ideas. Further use of their sketchbooks could provide more insight into their individual growth as artists across different concepts and assignments, and perhaps even bring out more information about how they approach their idea formation in new contexts. To this point, the addition of writing and drawing was welcomed and embraced by students throughout the study and could potentially find a permanent home in the photography classroom.

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