

The Identity of the Artist/Art Professor in Higher Education and its Effect on Teaching Practices:  
An Exploratory Case Study

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**Abstract**

The identities of the artist and the art professor are apparently diametrically opposed due to the domains of knowledge to which they belong. It has been a hegemonic, universal belief that teaching implies a function of the transmission of knowledge that is quasi-scientific and rational, and therefore it must exist in the “well-structured” domain, whereas the nature of art as a means of visual communication contributes to the “ill-structured” domain of knowledge. Thus, when making the shift from creating art to teaching art, artists might feel as if they are switching paradigms. This study investigates the pedagogical knowledge of artists as art professors and the implication on identity issues as they strive to be both. This qualitative study uses an exploratory, case study approach. Five higher education art professors in the South East Florida region were interviewed to determine how pedagogical content knowledge is developed from the point of view of artist/professor of art.

**Keywords**

Identity, artists, art professors, pedagogical content knowledge

**Introduction****Statement of the Problem and Rationale for the Study**

The artist has been traditionally educated to be an introverted being, always re-interpreting external information within the boundaries of self-centered experiences and motivations. The process by which this identity is formed stems from and reaches toward a globalization of the cultural self, whereas the art professor’s identity is more extroverted, as the character or persona of the professor resembles that of the performer, always looking for ways to

diversify information to successfully deliver in every class session. The lack of pedagogical preparation for art professors of higher education severs the notion of the unity in these two professions – being a professional artist and an art professor – and this becomes evident in what Efland defines as “cultural communities in their own right, each with distinctive practices” (2004, p.754); each with its own discourse and employing its own metaphors to communicate particular concepts (Parsons, 2004, p. 785). Between the domains of knowledge, art is characterized as employing “concepts that vary in meaning from one application to another” (Short, 1995, p. 104). This study aims to provide a conceptual location of the subjects in terms of their self-perceived truth of who they are as artists and as art professors, providing the researcher with a voice of the other in their context as they reflect upon how they constructed their knowledge and themselves as both, artists and art professors.

### **Research Question**

This research is focused on analyzing data derived from interviews of practicing artists and employed art professors. The main question is: How is pedagogical knowledge built from the perspective of the art professor in higher education? However, upon reviewing the literature on art teaching and artists as professionals, another question emerged: How do art faculty in higher education gain their awareness of their identity as artists/ art professors?

### **Literature Review**

Considering this division of professions, according to Efland, art is then considered an “ill-structured” domain of knowledge rather than a “well-structured” domain, such as math or science, where predictability and consistency are essential components of the transmission of

knowledge (Efland, 2004, p. 756; Short, 1995, p. 104). It has been a hegemonic, universal belief that teaching implies a function of the transmission of knowledge that is quasi-scientific and rational, and therefore it must exist in the “well-structured” domain (Eisner, 1992, p. 306; Kliebard in Pinar, 2002, P. 30). Conversely, the primary goal of the artist is to express an idea (Anderson, 1981, p. 45). Regardless of the subject matter being communicated, symbols and visual metaphors are used to convey ideas and deduct meaning for the artist and the viewer.

The paradigms within the domain of art (traditionalism, modernism, or postmodernism) all share communication as an essential purpose (Danto, 2013; Dewey, 1934, p.106; Eisner, 2002, p. 12). Arthur Danto’s definition of art states that “art is defined by two essential criteria: meaning and embodiment, as well as one additional criterion contributed by the viewer: interpretation.” He has revised his own definitions by saying that “The artwork is a material object, some of whose properties belong to the meaning, and some of which do not. What the viewer must do is interpret the meaning-bearing properties in such a way as to grasp the intended meaning they embody.” He later adds, “I have decided to enrich my earlier definition of art—embodied meaning—with another condition that captures the skill of the artist”. Thanks to Descartes and Plato, Danto defines art as ‘wakeful dreams’ (Danto, 2013). It is then considered that the nature of art as a means of visual communication contributes to the “ill-structured” domain of knowledge. Thus, when making the shift from teaching art, transitioning from the “well- structured” domain into the “ill-structured”, artists might feel as if they are switching domains or paradigms.

Studies on pre-service art teachers show this dichotomy. However, none of these studies have transferred or replicated results on higher education art faculty. It seems as if the process of interpreting intended meaning, as evoked by Danto, in art teaching practices has gained

significance in art professors of higher education as they keep guessing on how to properly teach the art courses they get assigned to. To this regard, lack of pedagogical training in college professors is found in the literature when compared to grade school teachers, who mostly require several hours of pedagogical training - varying per state- to be able to teach any subject in high school, for example. Several peer-reviewed studies have produced evidence that pedagogical training leads to improved student outcomes. In some instances, college professors who participated in at least one year of pedagogical training practiced more student-centered teaching and had a greater sense of self-efficacy than those who did not participate (Postareff et al., 2008). In Arizona, Lawson et al. (2002) found that reformed teaching as a result of participation in a Collaborative for Excellence in Preparation of Teachers (ACEPT), a program focused on providing pedagogical training to college professors who teach major's and non-major's college courses, strongly correlated with improved student achievement on the courses' final exams.

To that effect, assessing the effect of advanced degrees on teaching in higher education seems to be a difficult scholarly endeavor. The attainment of an advanced degree is a prerequisite to be hired as a higher education faculty at most institutions. Since it is often the only requirement to become a higher education faculty member, and since research shows that advanced degrees in a science content area, for example, have no effect on teaching quality at the primary and secondary level, this minimal requirement may be of concern at the college/university level. Postareff et al. (2008) compared the amount of teacher experience (in years) of higher education faculty with approaches to learning (assessed using the Approaches to Teaching Inventory) and found no significant shifts from teacher-centered to student-centered teaching practices based on experience. As Adamson et al. (2003) noted, "Teachers teach as they have been taught" (p. 940).

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

In order to understand the nature of the identity phenomenon in higher education art professors and its effect on teaching, I interviewed five (5) art professors who are also practicing artists. The names of the participants were changed to pseudonyms for the report and throughout this article. The participants work at three higher education institutions in the South East region of Florida, United States. Three of the participants are female and two are male. These participants hold the terminal degree of Masters of Fine Arts (MFA) for their specialization and teach an average of three classes per semester at such institutions they work for.

### **Methods**

Data for the research was collected through a semi-structured interview technique. The interview protocol consisted of fifteen questions related to teaching and professional experience. For this study, a qualitative, exploratory case study methodological approach is fitting for examining the challenges that art professors encounter when trying to unify their identities as artists and art professors. A qualitative methodology also provides a way to investigate higher education art professor experiences as curriculum interpreters and implementers while they maintain a career in the arts. To this effect, the interview protocol addresses question of identity as both, artists and educators. Yin (1994) argues that a single-case design is warranted or appropriate on the basis that the case is revelatory. A revelatory case is one for which there is a belief or assumption that the problems discovered in a particular case are common to other cases

as well.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The professors' very own form of professional understanding is known as the theory of Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) envisioned by Lee Shulman in 1986. Most of the researchers in the field of teacher preparation (Barnett, et. al., 2001; Cochran, et. al., 1993; Loughran, 2004 & Shulman, 1987), have agreed to include PCK as one of the applications in the field. PCK is developed from knowledge of the ways the teacher links classroom content and experiential knowledge, implicit or tacit but acquired through teaching. In other words, PCK is the synthesis of the professors' pedagogical knowledge and expertise in their subject matter. PCK is a key concept to understand and distinguish the content specialist from the pedagogue. Similarly, postmodernism in art education ontologically situates art in the epicenter of constructing meaning and making sense of the visual and cultural experiences around us in a similar way we construct our sense of self, specifically by paying attention to the relationship between knowledge and power (Efland, et.al, 1996, p. 41).

These theoretical frameworks are ideal for the data analysis of this study. They provide a conceptual location of the subjects in terms of their self-perceived truth of who they are as artists and as art professors, providing the researcher with a voice of the other in their context as they reflect upon how they constructed their knowledge and themselves as both, artists and art professors. To this regard, Galbraith explains, "[Art educators] are often perceived as neither artist (by those in art departments) nor educators (by those in faculties of education)" (1995, p.23).

## **Findings and Discussion**

### **Findings**

The results of this investigation lead to explain the construction of pedagogical knowledge of teachers of Visual Arts in higher education, giving a holistic view of the arts in close relationship with the previous artistic experience of these professors. To understand the phenomenon, it was necessary to acknowledge as highly relevant the formation of a dual identity, the artist - teacher, as a producer, processor and transmitter of knowledge. Also, under the assumption that there are serious pedagogical gaps regarding teaching and learning of the arts in higher education, as well as a lack of research on issues related to the training of these professors in the United States, the following themes emerged:

Figure 1



**RQ 1:** How is pedagogical knowledge built from the perspective of the art professor in higher education?

**RQ 2:** How do professors of art in higher education gain awareness of their identity as artists/art professors?

The relationships established between the knowledge of the subject and the practice of teaching. The lack of pedagogical preparation in art professors of higher education was at times substituted by insights on their own art practice, as well as by insights of historic, cultural, and social context

Dual identity, the artist/teacher, as a producer, processor and transmitter of knowledge.

The meanings that art professors have developed about teaching and about artistic learning. Art professors lacked content knowledge that relates to the teaching process.



The names the participants chose to wrap around their professional identities developed over time and were indicators of identity synthesis and professional confidence.

The elicitation of concepts and principles which make up the content of art teaching in higher education

Artists in particular struggle with an identity conflict. According to Efland (2004), art is considered an "ill-structured" domain of knowledge rather than a "well-structured" domain. Thus, when making the shift from teaching art, transitioning from the "well-structured" domain into the "ill-structured", artists might feel like switching paradigms.

Pedagogical Content Knowledge

1- The meanings that art professors have developed about teaching and about artistic learning: Art professors have had to examine -without proper understanding of terminology- their conceptual framework and their epistemological and ontological stances to be able to transfer knowledge and to elicit critical thinking in students. One of the participants described an ideal art professor as "someone with no fear, changing lessons and assignments in order to fit and accommodate every learners' needs."

2- The relationships established between the knowledge of the subject and the practice of

teaching: Many of the participants coincided with the view that they knew how to “do a class assignment properly,” they knew whether the assignment was appropriate for the level of the class but it was essentially impossible to make the students understand why they needed to do certain things in order to “learn how to be an artist.” Somehow the components that take part in being an artist were “non-transferable” or it was almost impossible to theorize about them.

3- The concepts and principles which make up the content of art teaching in higher education: Basically, the participants agreed at unison that curriculum development and curriculum reconceptualization were left out of their range of possible activities within their practice. Art curriculum was prescribed and had little room for improvisation. On the occasions that it did provide with some space for changes at the classroom level, participants wished they had the proper tools to “make something out of it.” Ideally, pedagogical training and immersion in curricular activities related to art and art education were regarded as “priceless,” and “much needed.” Pedagogical content knowledge was drawn from insight on their own practice as artists and from an understanding of their cultural selves in their institutional context.

### Identity

1- Balancing of multiple identities: A balancing of multiple identities developed in some instances as some participants wore many hats, sometimes as “artist/art professor/administrator.” Mishler (2000) and Feldman (1982) tell us that artists in particular struggle with an identity conflict from the nebulous status of their role in society. Artists can be marginalized as frivolous romantics, egotistic modernists, or edgy social critics. However, they can also be worshipped as gallery idols.

2- Self-denomination: Naming is a term used by Lippard (2000) to refer to the art created by artists who do not belong to a particular group or generation. This theme appeared to be a necessary step in balancing and hierarchizing the simultaneous professional identities of artist and art professor. The process of naming themselves was visibly empowering for the majority of the participants. Celina, a graphic designer and art historian, sat up straighter and spoke more assertively as she noted in the interview, "I always sign my name, artist/art educator ... and I always put artist first." The act of "naming" evidently emphasized her dual identity. In short, the descriptors the participants chose to wrap around their professional identities had developed over time and were indicators of identity synthesis and professional confidence.

3- Integrating multiple identities into one: The participants, with the help of a support system that was solely constructed of a personal role model, usually negotiated a management system in which multiple identities are integrated. For example, Brian, who consciously modeled his professional identity after the Renaissance master-apprentice relationship, sometimes succeeded in this strategy. He revealed at one point, "I am both an artist and a teacher of art. They are both who I am and what I do." Professionals in the fields of both, psychology and art education, describe integration of identities as beneficial to the individual (Erikson as cited in Zwirn, 2002; Mishler, 1995; Stankiewicz, 2001).

## **Discussion**

Does experience alone make for a better teacher? This study has revealed that

substitution of pedagogical knowledge for content knowledge and certain insights on content knowledge transfer had occurred among participants. Certainly more research is needed to assess the impact of advanced degrees of higher education faculty on the building of pedagogical knowledge for the betterment of teaching practices. Nonetheless, evidence is lacking that experience on the subject being taught or simply, the highest degree on the content area being taught have any positive impact. More is needed as part of the solution. Art professors still struggle with the identity crisis and part of that crisis seems to come from insecurity as a teaching professional. Conversely, higher education faculty should re-evaluate their teaching methodologies, hold themselves accountable for student learning, and re-dedicate their efforts to improve the profession of teaching (Carey, 2010).

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