

“Everyone Needs an Art Education:”

Developing Leadership Through Positive Attitudes Toward Art Methods Courses

A student in one of our art methods courses for elementary majors told us, “Everyone needs an art education to be a well-rounded adult. Art motivates and helps children be creative and express themselves.” As two instructors of these art methods courses, we sometimes are challenged about teaching art methods to generalist elementary majors, as some students are skeptical about the need for these courses. This student’s comments lead us to reconsider how we teach and how students respond to these methods courses. In particular, we thought it would be important to consider strategies to help students who hold positive views to become empowered as future leaders, advocates, and role models for change in our classrooms and beyond.

Research about K-6 generalists, elementary, preservice majors in teacher education programs often emphasizes students¹ who are resistant to art methods courses, although Galbraith (1991) and Gibson (2003) found some elementary majors held positive views about art methods courses. In addition, instructors who are frustrated by students who respond negatively to these methods courses often seek advice about how to have their students adopt positive attitudes (Galbraith, 1995). In a previous study we conducted with another researcher (Lackey, Manifold, & Zimmerman, 2007), some elementary majors were found to be unresponsive, yet others held positive views about art methods classes. This previous study suggested that developing leadership among those who hold positive views might be a means of nurturing constructive responses from those who do not.

In this article, we report results of a study we conducted using focus-group student discussions and focused interviews with instructors of art methods courses for elementary majors at universities in five sites around the United States. We determined that The Empowerment/Leadership for Art Education (Leadership Model) developed by Thurber and Zimmerman (1997, 2002) would be appropriate to develop strategies for implementing positive change to counter the resistance that students and instructors sometimes demonstrate toward these courses. This Leadership Model² is constructed on a feminist framework that has been successfully used in a variety of contexts that support building reflection and empowerment through interactions among groups of people working toward common goals. We created an interview protocol that focused on beliefs, attitudes, perceptions, experiences, and circumstances of students and instructors in respect to these

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courses. The Leadership Model provided categories for analyzing our data. The study was guided by the following questions.

1. How do instructors and elementary majors describe their positive and negative experiences about participating in art methods courses?
2. How do student and instructor responses to focus group and focus interviews align with stages of the Leadership Model?
3. What are implications of this study for enacting positive practices in art methods courses for preservice elementary majors in similar contexts?

What Elementary Education Majors Think About Art Methods Courses

At the conclusion of the spring semester 2005, we (along with a colleague) individually interviewed instructors and groups of students at our university who were randomly selected from seven sections of an art education methods course. We used focus interviews and focus group discussions because they provide a large amount of interaction in a short period of time (Morgan, 1997). The goal was not to learn about individual biographies, percentages of opinions, or classroom settings; rather, the focus was on identifying the overall sense of group attitudes relative to ideas being discussed (Greenbaum, 1998; Kruger & Casey, 2009).³ Using a common syllabus, we had each taught at least one section of this course. We followed the same interview protocol when we interviewed a focus group composed of students whom we did not teach (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). Each of the seven focus groups included 8 to 10 students, and interviews lasted about one hour. The students, who were upper-level undergraduates in a cohort group, were required to enroll in an art methods course in their final semester prior to student teaching.

In order to determine whether our findings were unique to our situation, we contrasted our outcomes through cross-site analyses of data with sites at four universities

in the south central, southeast, southwest, and midwest regions of the United States. These institutions were made up of three public, research-oriented universities and one smaller university, all with established art education programs. In these four locations, we conducted hour-long interviews with each of four instructors, and held three focus groups composed of eight preservice students in each group.³ We used a common interview protocol, based on the one used at our own institution, in which participants responded to questions about instructors' and students' attitudes about the importance of art methods courses; students' views of an ideal art methods instructor; instructor opinions about students' attitudes and abilities; and relationships among students, peers, and their instructors.

Students who participated in the focus groups were predominantly young adults (average 22 years of age), white, and female. The instructors, except for one, were women, and all were seasoned art instructors who had been teaching elementary art methods courses for 8 years on average, and art in public schools for 12 years on average. We used content-analysis methodologies (Neuendorf, 2002) for analyzing data. Categories of the Leadership Model supplied conceptual themes for content organization.

Building Leadership

Based on a decade of research about leadership in art education, Thurber and Zimmerman (1997, 2002) created An Empowerment/Leadership Model for Art Education to develop in-service teachers' personal, collaborative, and public voices (Figure 1). The model provides a structural outline for encouraging teachers to be reflective practitioners (Chen, 2009; Schon, 1987) through an environment built upon cooperation, collaboration, equity, and support among all members of a community of teachers (hooks, 2000; Noddings, 2003). The first segment of the model is *personal voice/reflective practice* (solo voice). Elementary education students and their instructors experience this phase of personal voice and empowerment when they feel

validated and valued for their personal and professional experiences as reflective, self-directed practitioners. Without developing a strong personal voice, it would be difficult to enter the next stages of the model where empowerment and collaboration are necessary for enacting change.

The second phase is a process of creating a *collaborative voice/collaborative practice* (voices in a chorus). This occurs as instructors and students pool their knowledge about pedagogy; are empowered by validation of their shared experiences; and communicate positive, shared visions about art methods courses to those who may be resistant to these classes.

Finally, a *public voice* (voice as a change agent) becomes possible when empowered students and instructors take leadership roles in moving affirmative attitudes about art methods courses into public arenas. Whether individually or collectively, these empowered students and instructors can seek to empower others to have positive attitudes toward art methods courses through social action.

This Leadership Model suggests a guide for steering elementary-education majors away from stereotypic, pessimistic views about art's place in K-6 curricula toward more-affirmative opinions. The model is appropriate for guiding instructors and their students to move from self-empowered voices to collaborative voices, and eventually to becoming positive agents for change. Transition from private voice to collaborative requires purposeful and positive instructor intervention. Furthermore, instructors and students need guidance to recast negative ideas about the role of art in the generalist classroom.

In this article, we present a sampling of instructor and student comments collected during the course of this study that align with categories of the Leadership Model. Finally, we present outcomes that might be expected from application of the model to empowering positive leadership among instructors and students in art methods courses in similar settings.

Development of Voice in Inservice Education

Personal Self

Solo Voice

Outcomes:

- self-knowledge as reflective practitioner
- validation of own experience
- autonomy
- personal empowerment

Professional Self

Voices in Chorus

Outcomes:

- collaboration experiences as active learners and increased knowledge of content and pedagogy
- validation of shared experiences
- communication of a shared vision
- professional empowerment

Outcomes:

- political change through ethical, moral, and social action
- validation of leadership through public forums
- critical inquiry
- leadership for empowering others

Social Action Self

Public Voice as Agent of Change



above

Figure 1. The Thurber and Zimmerman Empowerment Leadership Model for Art Education/Development of Voice in Art Education.

left

Figure 2. Two art methods instructors engaged in a conversation about how to empower their students to take a positive attitude toward art methods courses.



Personal Voice and Personal Practice

Personal voices and personal practice may be generated when students first enter an art methods class. Instructors could expand upon understanding art methods as a pleasurable experience as a bridge for students to embrace art as a valuable component of an elementary education program. Although many of the responses we received in our interviews and focus group dialogues could be construed as negative about the value of art methods courses, they may be viewed from another perspective; these responses may suggest possibilities for meeting students' expectations and, at the same time, encouraging positive attitudes (Figure 2).

Student Expectations About Art Methods Courses

Some students reported they began their courses with negative preconceptions, reflected in comments such as, "An art methods course is worthless." "With standardized testing, why should we have to teach an hour art lesson?" Many students, especially those who were in their last year of teacher preparation, commented that they entered the art methods classes with strongly held convictions about the lack of importance of art methods courses in their teacher preparation. For example one student commented, "Next to math, reading, science, and social studies, teaching art is at the bottom of totem pole."

Students' expectations about taking an art methods class were based mainly on the premise that praxis, not theory, would be the focus of the course. Many expected non-unit, one-hour lesson plans that they easily could use in their future teaching. One student made clear her preconceived notions about the purpose of an art methods course: "We should learn to write fun and easy art lessons that do not take long to do." Very few students mentioned the value of discussing art from visual culture contexts could be "important."

Some students thought that, if they had to teach art, they envisioned its usefulness only as a means for integrating it with other subjects and/or as a therapeutic activity. Some typical comments were, "Art may be important for emergent readers" and "Art is mainly therapeutic and it is important for kids to be creative." Others reported entering the courses with a positive outlook such as, "I'm open to all possibilities... that will benefit my future [elementary] students."

Through our interviews, we also found that exiting exams, student teaching, and graduation preoccupied the attention of students who were seniors. They objected to art methods courses being required during their final semesters before student teaching. In the words of one student, "The art methods course should be taken earlier than my senior year... I feel like now I need to focus on graduating."

Instructor Perceptions of Student Attitudes and Abilities

One instructor had a predetermined view of her students. Her critical view of their cognitive abilities precluded any notion that they had capability for extensive art-learning experiences. She explained, "Elementary education majors are at the concrete, sequential learning stage and they can't understand about the importance of process as well as products and do not see possibilities of teaching art in an in-depth way."

Several instructors, however, had less-pessimistic views of their students' abilities. They felt their students became open to art methods classes by first being offered "fun, short lessons" to address their expectations, and then moved to adopt more-positive attitudes that evidenced in-depth art learning. Following this practice, one instructor was able to meet her long-term goal of "focusing on art vocabulary, composition and design, and

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understanding that art is based on ideas.” Her students ultimately came away from her art methods courses with lessons that could be applied in their future teaching environments as theme-based units of instruction. One of her students expressed this positive response: “My future students can look at a piece of artwork and then write about it, use it in a thematic unit, or just appreciate it” (Figure 3).

Who Should Teach Art Methods Courses?

Students in this study expressed deeply entrenched views about who should teach art methods courses. A few students preferred someone who had experience as an elementary generalist teacher and used art in his or her classroom. One of these students explained, “An instructor does not need to be an art specialist ... an ideal instructor should have experience as an elementary educator and know the real world of elementary teaching.” For most students, however, instructors who have experience teaching art as specialists at the elementary level were perceived as the best instructors for a K-6 art methods courses because these instructors understand age-appropriate pedagogy, and also have experiences with artmaking.

Some students noted that in their field experiences in K-6 classrooms art was never integrated into the curriculum. One student explained, “I didn’t get to see any teachers doing art activities or examples of integrating art into the curriculum.” A few students seemed inflexible about needing to teach art in their future elementary classrooms. One explained, “Only if there is not an art specialist should we need [to] teach art, otherwise we should not have to integrate art into our curriculum.”

Collaborative Voice and Collaborative Practice

Collaborative voice and collaborative practice are effective means for developing leadership through interaction of instructors and students who hold affirmative views of art methods classes. These students have the potential to become leaders who can advocate for art education among their peers. One instructor advised that collaboration is not easy to achieve in some groups of students: “There were times when students don’t like to negotiate with their peers. We need to teach about negotiation; you don’t always get your way.” In addition, having to be with the same group of students for methods courses in all subjects (as was the policy in some programs) was seen by a few students as restrictive. One said, “This grouping can be limiting and if there is trouble with people inside the group, then you are stuck with them all that semester.”

A Community of Learners

Some instructors used the collaborative nature of group artmaking to positive ends, and designed art projects that supported collaboration. As one explained, “I begin the course with a group artmaking project that focuses on the students in a community who care about each other and support and encourage each other’s artwork.” In these instances, planned group experiences helped students develop empathetic feelings for one another, and for art methods courses in general.

A vast majority of students valued relationships in the “comfort zone” with other students where they could all be together, supporting each other by holding the same points of view. Many positive student comments about



far left
Figure 3. Students creating and discussing artwork in a small group.

left
Figure 4. Students collaborating on a group art project.



Figure 5. An instructor modeling a positive attitude toward art education.



Figure 6. A student with a positive attitude toward the place of art in elementary classrooms can positively impact others in his or her art methods class.

collaboration, as achieved through planned group activities, reveal how students can be led to explore their own artmaking while also sharing these positive experiences with one another. Some comments were: “I am not comfortable with my art. But I am comfortable sharing my ideas and expressing myself with my peers.” “We are like a family bubble... I like having this type of environment because it makes you comfortable making art.” “When we do group work we actually listen to our classmates and we learn from each other” (Figure 4).

Some students had very constructive attitudes toward the place of art methods in elementary classrooms. These students sometimes became leaders, and contributed to a positive environment for art teaching through a community of instructors and students. Some of these students had art backgrounds, and were comfortable supporting their peers’ efforts in artmaking and incorporating art in elementary curricula. One student volunteered, “I would be willing to help others integrate art with academics and I would do this because I have a strong art background.” Once a community of learners is constructed, instructors and students alike can set the stage for future advocacy.

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Public Voice and Public Practices

Students who could become peer leaders had yet to reach a stage in their careers where they would be likely to use their public voices to make contributions to advocacy for art methods courses—except at a local level, and especially in their own art methods classes. Later in their careers, it is hoped that they might become leaders in their future educational settings. A majority of instructors were open to guiding students to develop positive attitudes toward art methods courses. These instructors were able to model leadership and become empowered public advocates for art methods’ rightful place in K-6 classrooms.

Strategies for Positive Change

As a result of student focus-group dialogues, interviews with instructors, and our own teaching of art methods courses for elementary preservice majors, we offer some strategies to enact positive change. These suggestions can be generalized to sites that are similar to those in our study, but they may also be useful to those who teach art methods in other settings as well. A number of strategies for positive change resulted from analysis of the data. These strategies can help instructors of art methods courses develop agendas for guiding students who hold positive views to become empowered as future leaders, advocates, and role models for change.

It would be difficult to deny the importance of selecting instructors of art methods courses who have art-specialist backgrounds and/or elementary-level art teaching experiences, and who demonstrate integrating art with academics in real-life teaching situations. Because many generalist classroom teachers do not include art in their curricula, it is important to invite those who do to serve as role models in art methods classes to demonstrate how to include art in K-6 classroom practice.

We strongly suggest that art methods courses be introduced earlier rather than later, so that positive attitudes about art and art teaching can permeate throughout students' entire preservice experiences. Once they become comfortable with a few basic artmaking projects early in a semester, they can be introduced to the value art as a specific and valued subject matter. If students' own perceptions are initially recognized and valued, they eventually can develop a positive view about art methods courses and understand how teaching art has value in K-6 generalist, elementary, preservice programs (Figure 5).

Instructors and students who hold optimistic views about art methods classes can act as change agents, transforming negative opinions to positive visions (Figure 5). Establishing a caring, collaborative community of support can aid students in experiencing art methods courses positively. Such a community also presents an opportune time for those students who have potential leadership skills to be prepared to take initiative and empower their peers (some of whom may be reluctant in their support for art methods courses) to move in a positive direction.

When instructors plan ways for students to work cooperatively and collaboratively, those students who propose constructive means for improving art methods courses can turn into supporters for convincing those who respond negatively to change their attitudes (Figure 6). These instructors and student peer leaders then can become change agents by refocusing students who view art methods courses as "worthless," "not important," and at the "bottom of totem" to ones who hold a different perspective, as one student said: "I think it is really, really important to bring art into the elementary classroom."

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AUTHORS' NOTE

This study was funded by a grant from the National Art Education Foundation. Authors are listed alphabetically and both contributed equally to this article.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ In this article, the term *student* will refer to elementary generalist preservice teachers enrolled in K-6 art methods courses.
- ² The Empowerment/ Leadership Model is complex, and is presented here in a concise form (Thurber & Zimmerman, 1997). For a more detailed description of the model, see Thurber and Zimmerman (2002).
- ³ In focus groups and focus interviews, it is necessary to identify factors of central importance in order to understand how participants view a topic and distinguish a limited number of important ideas, expressions, and common preferences that illuminate a study (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Focus groups tend not to yield numerical, quantifiable, or generalizable data across sites outside of the inquiry being conducted. Content analysis is generally used as a methodology for analyzing and interpreting focus interview and group data (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007).

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