

Conversations with Students, Teachers, Parents, and Administrators about Censorship and Free Expression in High School

Tough Talk

BY RACHEL HALLQUIST

“If the content of a student’s artwork is questioned by the community, will the administration support my goals as an educator? Could I be out of a job next year?” However, there are also legal matters that I considered as well. What about free speech? **Do students not have a right to express their ideas, even if their ideas are unpopular or controversial?**

I often ask my high school drawing students to utilize their personal experiences for content for their artwork. Drawing from their own lives and imaginations often provokes them to become more engaged and invested in artmaking than they might otherwise be in an exclusively formal or technical approach to drawing.

In this expressive environment, difficult and occasionally distressing issues are sometimes present in my students’ artwork. While most of my students’ personal themes are not the sort of issues that would move me to rush to the school psychologist, such as abuse or suicide, topics do emerge that reveal possibly controversial concerns: racism, gender bias, sexual confusion, homophobia, religion, politics, drug exaltation, and sexual activity.

Feeling uncomfortable, I spoke with other art teachers at my school and found that almost all of them have general content restrictions for artwork produced in class including restrictions on nudity, drugs, and violence. Nevertheless, I still felt uneasy; does establishing such boundaries mean students will stop thinking about sex, abusing drugs, being depressed about their achievement, feeling alienated, or any other physical and/or psychological challenges teenagers may face?





Judith Burton (1981) noted, "The ensuing conflict between their sense of past, present, and future selves leaves young people confused about who they are" (p. 60). Adolescent art practices often reflect the conflict of identity development (Burton, 1981; Freedman, 2003). Not surprisingly, artwork can reveal aspects of students' lives, and what is revealed may be distressing (Diket & Mucha, 2002). Common themes in adolescent artwork deal with aggression, power, and relationships (Burton, 1981). After all, an authentic practice of artmaking is utilizing art techniques to portray meaning (London, 1989).

In addition, logic and reasoning during adolescence is not necessarily grounded in concrete examples; teens can enjoy forming and testing hypotheses, finding fault with adult perspectives, and considering multiple viewpoints of the same event, idea, or question (Inhelder & Piaget, 1958). Burton (1981) also wrote, "What is perceived by adults as provocative, anti-social, testing behavior is frequently no more than 'hit or miss' attempts on the part of young people to

seek out adequate means of organizing new and often disparate thoughts" (p. 35). Moreover, artmaking as a means of expression and creative activity could have positive psychological effects on students (Lowenfeld, 1957). Furthermore, art education utilizes high-level, sophisticated thinking, and problem solving (Eisner, 2002).

NAEA Policy on Censorship and Classroom Practice

According to the National Art Education Association (NAEA), "The freedom to create and to experience works of art is essential to our democracy" (NAEA, 1991, para. 1). Teachers should not endorse particular images or ideas but encourage students to think critically about a diverse array of perspectives. Individuals are encouraged to reject or accept any work but individuals may not suppress the expression of any work. Educators should impress upon students the importance of free expression (NAEA, 1991).

Despite the NAEA policy on free expression and although controversial themes may be developmentally fitting, research shows that censorship is prevalent in art classes for a variety of reasons. In a survey of Georgia art teachers, Bruce Bowman (1999) noted that student work that deals with sexual themes, drug imagery, and violence was heavily censored or prohibited by art teachers. Many teachers cited job security and working autonomously as reasons for censoring or avoiding these potentially controversial topics.

However, David Henley (1997) wrote that avoiding controversy might just be a responsible practice, noting there is a difference between an artist's *right* to create artwork and an artist's *privilege* to display that artwork. Audience and community values must be considered as well. "In school settings, the audience is *captive*, unable to freely decide if they can handle such a seductive and confusing work of art" (Henley, 1997, p. 41).

In my art classes I noticed how much administrator and parental support played a part in what artworks I allow students to view, create, and display. When I created an assignment or when I interacted with my students about their artwork I often asked myself, "If the content of a student's artwork is questioned by the community, will the

administration support my goals as an educator? Could I be out of a job next year?" However, there are also legal matters that I considered as well. What about free speech? Do students not have a right to express their ideas, even if their ideas are unpopular or controversial?

In the absence of an official policy at my teaching site, I wanted to understand how teachers, students, administrators, and parents make decisions about the appropriateness of student artwork. What works are considered to be appropriate? What works are inappropriate? How are these decisions made? In what contexts can student works be displayed when they address thorny issues like violence, religion, or sex?

Views on Censorship in One High School Community

In the 2005-2006 school year, I conducted a qualitative study at my teaching site, a California public high school in a suburb east of San Francisco. To understand how decisions were made about appropriateness of student work, I interviewed 38 people within my school's community: 20 of my drawing students (ages 13 to 18), 4 parents of students, all 6 visual arts teachers, the journalism teacher, the creative writing teacher, one teacher who works in both the English and visual arts departments, and all 6 administrators. Participants ranged in age, gender, socio-economic background, religious background, and ethnicity.

Students were interviewed in small focus groups of 2 to 5 students, and all other participants were interviewed individually. I compiled 12 images of student artworks that exhibited themes that could be identified as controversial: violence, sex, politics, drug imagery, religion, and profanity. Prints of these images were used as prompts for participants to respond to during the interviews.

During in-depth interviews, participants were given the 12 prints and asked to sort the images into two piles: one pile for images that would be appropriate for students to produce in class and one pile for images that would be inappropriate for students to produce in class. Participants could form their own categories if they could not respond within the given categories. Participants could also choose to not respond

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Table A: Interview Questions

What is appropriate? What is inappropriate?

- What about the image makes you arrive at the decision that this image is appropriate or inappropriate?
- Why is the topic you have identified inappropriate or appropriate in school?
- What criteria do you consider when you are determining if artwork is appropriate or inappropriate?
- Are there any circumstances you can think of that would cause you to react in a different way? What might those be and why would you react differently?

What can be displayed?

- Would your decisions about appropriate/inappropriate imagery be any different for artwork that would be displayed in school or displayed within the community? If so, why?
- Does the contextual information change your opinion about the appropriateness of the image? Why?

How can art teachers handle controversy?

- How should teachers approach subject matter that could be construed as controversial?
- In what context should students be allowed to express their ideas even if those ideas are unpopular or controversial? In what context should those works be exhibited?
- Do you have any examples of decisions you have had to make about appropriateness in artwork?

to any or all of the works. Participants were then asked questions about their decisions (see Table A).

After sharing their responses to the 12 images, participants were given a contextual statement about the work and asked if this information changed their opinion about the appropriateness of the work.

The Interviews

What is appropriate?

What is inappropriate?

Silencing Softly and "Riding the Fence"

During my interviews, 4 out of 6 visual arts teachers commented that censorship was not an issue in their classroom. Their students did not challenge them with imagery that might cause them to examine its appropriateness or inappropriateness. Each of these art teachers had a few anecdotes, but said that censorship was not a common concern.

However, all of these teachers also said they articulate specific content boundaries regarding what can and cannot be created

and what kinds of imagery and ideas will and will not be accepted. Policies prohibited violence, nudity, and references to drugs and alcohol. One teacher noted, "I give them this talk at the beginning of the year about what they can and cannot produce ... after that it's an unspoken rule" (personal communication, May 19, 2006). She also said that she felt like her name was attached to anything that was produced in class and if problematic content were to emerge from her classroom, she would have to answer to parents, administrators, community members, and even the school board.

One administrator agreed: "You have to be so careful in public schools. It's riding the fence. You can't go too far on either side because you have so many people to answer to: so many people and so many backgrounds" (personal communication, April 5, 2006).

In interpreting appropriateness and forming their guidelines, 5 out of 6 administrators said they would frequently defer to the school dress code, which prohibits clothing with drug and alcohol references

and images of weaponry, and 5 out of 6 art teachers had the same policy for expressive content produced in class. Of all of the students I interviewed, only 2 stated that they had experienced censorship in school. Other students expressed that they understood the school rules and generally complied with them. One 15 year-old boy said, "School has its rules ... Go by the rules, just follow them, it's not that hard" (personal communication, March 6, 2006).

Additionally, all administrators stated that they too had few instances of assessing appropriateness of student work. One administrator hypothesized that these judgments are handled within the classroom. Instances the administration shared in which they did intervene were characterized as dealing with student safety, such as threats made by students that posed a danger to a student's safety or the safety of others.

Relevant to Adolescents

Nevertheless, all participants agreed that the identified topics (violence, sexuality, religion, drug use, and suicide) in the artworks discussed were very relevant in the lives of teenagers. Administrators, students, parents, and teachers agreed that these issues are interesting to teens and that discussing them might promote critical thinking. One administrator felt that controversial topics, because they are so complex in nature, could promote high-order thinking in an authentic way. However, he also noted that students need structure and guidance from a teacher when navigating difficult issues.

Three out of four parents felt that student artwork about these topics could promote positive conversations around difficult subjects, and possibly lead to constructive outcomes regarding tough topics such as drug abuse and suicide. One of these parents shared that she often finds the themes of her daughter's artwork personally frightening, but this artwork has stimulated helpful conversations about the social troubles her daughter faces.

However, 4 out of 6 art teachers stated that while they speculate that controversial issues might be interesting or enlightening for students, they did not feel prepared to tackle these tough topics in their classroom. One art teacher explained her conflicted feelings about the place of controversial issues in schools, "I hate the idea of censoring. I guess what's hard about what is appropriate is they

While having a strict content policy may be harmful, providing no guide-lines may be also damaging: I am responsible for creating and maintaining a safe learning environment for all students.

are kids and they need to go through the growing up process and they need to work their stuff out, but what cliffs do we let them jump off of" (personal communication, March 2, 2006).

Comfortable with Controversy

Three teachers I interviewed, all of them English teachers, stated that they frequently explore such topics as religion, politics, and violence in the classroom. In English classes, these difficult ideas—including violence, suicide, and sexuality—are expressed in many of the books that students read, write about, and discuss in class.¹ Like the administrators, the English teachers agreed that conversations about difficult issues should be structured in developmentally appropriate ways so that they lead to positive outcomes for students.

In addition, all English teachers and administrators cited concern for strict adherence to policies discouraging distressing themes in student work. These participants said that teachers are in a unique position to provide support, report abuse, or challenge unconventional or dangerous perspectives. One English teacher explained:

I think school should be a safe place ... I don't know many other forums where students can express this stuff in the presence of an adult who can enlighten them about things that are unpopular or unacceptable in some arenas. If you don't, you can't foster respect and teach tolerance. All those are things that are so important to our society. Otherwise, why we are teachers? (personal communication, May 17, 2006)

What can be displayed?

Safe Places and Policies

While the welfare of the student-artist was a concern for some, the well being of the student audience was a concern for all students, parents, teachers, and administrators, especially when displaying artwork. Some students and all parents stated that

violent imagery could be frightening to viewers and might not be acceptable to be displayed within the school. When discussing what works could be displayed, all groups expressed deep concern for posting work in a school that appeared to exhibit a directed effort to hurt a group of people.

As noted earlier, cultivating a climate of safety was a major factor in administrator and student perspectives regarding what is acceptable to display. One administrator commented that while he "loathes censorship," within school, one of his primary responsibilities is the safety of all students. All administrators felt that works containing weaponry, drug, or alcohol references would contribute to an unsafe atmosphere at school and should not be displayed.

However, 8 students noted that there was little difference between work produced during class and work that was displayed. These students asserted that student art was "on display" by the very nature of it being produced within a small classroom where "everyone sees what everyone is doing," and because imagery may appear to be quickly visually digested. Two students, one 18-year-old and one 17-year-old, opined that students should be empathetic to the varying needs of other students. They also thought there could be ways for students to privately explore difficult ideas, such as working in a sketchbook or private areas within the classroom. This work could be kept private or shared with the teacher, but not displayed in the class.

One English teacher noted that sharing student writing is a regular and popular aspect of her course, but she insists that students remain sensitive to others. As a result, some students might not be permitted to read their work out loud if the student thinks their writing might unnecessarily upset another student. However, the student can still turn in his or her work and receive feedback from the instructor.

More Information, Please

After discussing their responses to the 12 works of art, I asked the interview participants to read a short contextual statement for each work of art. After reading the statement, the participant was asked if this information changed their mind about the appropriateness of the work.

I wrote the contextual statements for each work to include possible assignments that the work could have been produced in response to. The statements I wrote to accompany each piece were similar to mini-artist statements. For example, one piece I showed was a photograph of two hands passing what appears to be a cigarette or some other kind of controlled substance such as marijuana. The accompanying statement provided the information, "This piece is about peer pressure. Teens often pressure each other into risky behavior, including drugs."

Given some background on the piece, administrators, parents, and teachers shifted judgments on works they had previously considered inappropriate, especially if it was shown that the work was tied to a specific lesson or standard. The exceptions were if an artwork was considered hurtful to a group of students or if the accompanying statement did not explicitly match the image. In addition, all administrators still found violent imagery always unacceptable for display, again citing the need to cultivate a climate of safety.

In the case where the accompanying statement did not appear to match the image, participants noted that more description needed to be provided by artists, specifically why these controversial images were used and not others. Such was the case for one 14-year-old student and the image described above, noting that one hand seemed to be passively accepting the substance. If the piece was really about peer influence, he said there needed to be evidence of some kind of pressure being exerted on one of the participants.

Students, however, did not reach a consensus regarding the contextual information, and at least 3 students felt that more information was just that: more information—and it did not make the work acceptable. Additionally, at least 4 other students worried that student statements might be insincere.

How can art teachers handle controversy?

Working Together

All administrators expressed that they would like to know if teachers are dealing with issues that might incite controversy so that they can help teachers predict problems that may come up, provide assistance in planning fitting approaches for difficult topics, and support the teacher's decisions, if needed.

In addition, another administrator noted that if controversial issues were to be vital to the curriculum, communicating with parents early in the year is key. She also indicated that as a California public school, we must comply with the California Education Code, which states that parental consent is required when topics relating to sex are to be discussed, or when surveys, examinations, or questionnaires about students' or parents' religious beliefs will be part of class.² Topics could be detailed in a course syllabus at the beginning of the semester, discussed with students, and sent home for parents to review. Educational materials should be made available to parents who wish to preview them and teachers could make arrangements to discuss any issues that might arise before the lesson was taught.

Three out of four parents voiced that they would like to know if their student's work caused alarm for a teacher. One parent stated that if a teacher noticed an alarming trend or a shift in her student's style or imagery she would hope that the teacher would provide support to her son by speaking with her son, contacting a parent, or referring him to a confidential resource, such as a school psychologist.

Changes in Practice

I found that other art teachers in my school felt as I did, uncertain and conflicted about how to approach the difficult topics that could emerge in student work. Though I recognized their relevance, I felt uncomfortable and unprepared.

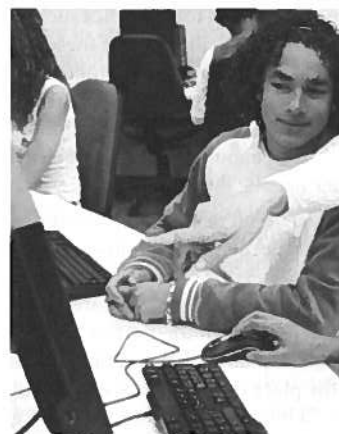
However, I now understand that these topics are normal for teenagers, and ignoring these issues may not resolve them. Furthermore, study participants recognized that these topics are interesting for teens and could promote high-order thinking in a relevant way.

Parents, English teachers, and administrators recognized the unique position teachers are in to help student-artists develop both cognitively and emotionally. In fact, these relevant and edgy topics are a regular part of the English curriculum. Also, English teachers and administrators speculated that strict policies could be a potentially harmful or dangerous practice.

While having a strict content policy may be harmful, providing no guidelines may be also damaging: I am responsible for creating and maintaining a safe learning environment for all students. As an art teacher, I must guide student-artists to recognize that their student audience, within the high school, is diverse and captive. Here I have a unique opportunity to encourage empathy and sensitivity for fellow students in an authentic way, working with students to cultivate considerate ways of creating and displaying meaningful artwork within the school setting. Additionally, I found that the administration at my site was supportive and eager to assist me in this goal.

Through these interviews, I now understand that controversy is a community concern; what is edgy in one community may not be so provocative in another. Therefore, a foundation of cooperation and understanding through dialogue with administrators, parents, students, and faculty can assist art teachers in navigating these potential minefields of controversy.

*Rachel Hallquist teaches art in California.
E-mail: rachelhallquist@mac.com*



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ENDNOTES

¹In English classes, students read books that explore topics such as racism, violence, sexuality, suicide, and religion. Some novels read are *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Things They Carried*, *All Quiet on The Western Front*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Catcher in the Rye*, and even sections of *The Bible*.

²For example, within the consent forms required for students to participate in this research, I wrote, "The artworks may contain imagery relating to the topics of religion, drugs, sex, and violence. If you would like to preview these images, please contact me and I will arrange for you to do so."

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