Shifting the Curriculum:  
Decentralization in the Art Education Experience

“When it is told, it is, to the one to whom it is told, another given fact, not an idea. The communication may stimulate the other person to realize the question for himself and to think out a like idea, or it may smother his intellectual interest and suppress his dawning effort at thought. But what he directly gets cannot be an idea. Only by wrestling with the conditions of the problem at first hand, seeking and finding his own way out, does he think. In such shared activity, the teacher is a learner, and the learner is, without knowing it, a teacher -- and upon the whole, the less consciousness there is, on either side, of either giving or receiving instruction, the better.”


“In a decentralized classroom, the teacher becomes a partner who initiates learning and provides support as needed, but does not inhibit intuitive knowledge and innovative thinking in the process of performing these duties.”

– Christopher Adejumo, Five Ways to Improve the Teaching and Understanding of Art in the Schools, Art Education, 55(5), (2002)

The act of learning is facilitated through an open communication process that encourages one to discover meaning within certain ideas, objects, and experiences. The traditional classroom environment, often consisting of a hierarchical relationship between teacher and student, does not always allow for this kind of open communication to occur. In a decentralized approach to teaching and learning the subject matter is placed at the centre of the process, rather than the teacher or student, while participants are inspired and empowered through the experience. Decentralization in the art classroom consists of a non-linear exchange of ideas between teacher and students, allowing for necessary dialogue and conversation and ultimately leading to innovative exploration of materials and concepts. Students become active learners as opposed to passive participants and teachers learn to strategically listen and watch for teachable moments. This paper examines the decentralized approach to art curriculum from a pedagogical point of view, acknowledging advantages and disadvantages for art teachers, and its contribution to a curriculum that
captures the postmodern aesthetic experience. By referring to art education research and writings of curriculum theorists, I argue for an application of decentralized approaches to teaching art in contemporary learning environments, with particular emphasis on instigating critical thinking within classroom critiques of student artwork. I address the following topics in relation to meaningful understanding of content within art education: the connection between decentralized curriculum and complexity thinking, the noted desire for flexible curricular models in art education including evidence of how decentralized approaches are currently being applied through networked learning, and the significance of equal exchange between teacher and students through dialogue and conversation.

**Decentralization & Complexity Thinking**

In the recently published book *Engaging Minds: Changing Teaching in Complex Times* (2nd ed.) (Davis, Sumara, & Luce-Kapler, 2008), the authors describe how mechanistic understandings of teaching and learning began to change in the 1970s and 1980s with a shift towards a more collaborative approach to learning, coinciding with a broader, transdisciplinary move towards complexity thinking.” Complexity thinking rejects the use of linear, machine-based metaphors and embraces non-linear, organic notions of understanding (p. 76). In this view, learning is not a cause and effect relationship between a teacher and student; the act of learning is one part of a complex system that is dependant on many other parts. The authors describe how the process of teaching and learning is moving away from the concept of one individual passing on established knowledge to another, to the concept of collectives elaborating emerging knowledge. Figure 1 illustrates the difference between the traditional classroom experience with the teacher at the centre
in red (centralized network) and that of a teaching and learning experience that encompasses a complexivist approach (decentralized network).

A decentralized approach to teaching and learning does not necessarily mean that the teacher neglects planning a structure for the art learning experience, rather it requires the teacher to create a structure that allows for certain ideas to trigger other ideas and for knowledge to emerge organically. Since this non-linear process functions similar to the creative process of art-making, it seems appropriate to incorporate this way of working into the curriculum process, either with student group work or individual projects. It is also reflected in the studio classroom critique in which participants each build upon each other’s comments, one response leading to another response and so on. In *Curriculum Development in the Postmodern Era* (2nd ed.), Slattery describes the act of interpretation as something that should emphasize possibility and becoming since human consciousness can never be static (2006, p. 282). Slattery writes about the “hermeneutic circle” and the “proleptic experience” that can occur through postmodern curriculum, repeatedly calling for a holistic model that allows for natural processes and self-reflective perspective. It is this aesthetic experience, originally described by John Dewey, that I feel should be
incorporated into the art classroom through an unhierarchical pedagogical approach, especially in the process of understanding art through critical thinking.

Disadvantages to a decentralized pedagogical approach include a major shift in curriculum planning that requires the teacher to adjust instructional strategies according to individual groups, and that the teacher be willing to feel uncomfortable during an unpredictable teaching and learning experience (Milbrandt, Felts, Richards, & Abghari, 2004). Complexity thinking highlights the importance of neighboring interactions of ideas, but the means to accomplish this must be considered on a case-by-case basis, depending on the topic, the context, and the personalities involved (Davis et al., 2008, p. 199). In other words, decentralized approaches to teaching and learning can be complicated and time-consuming, but they can produce an aesthetic experience that deepens meaningful understanding related to cultural issues.

Teachers sometimes find it difficult to relinquish control in order to allow students a greater sense of agency, however, this can sometimes lead to teachable moments as students are individually engaged with the content. Decentralized instruction preconditions students to access their inner feelings and intuitions in the learning process, often expressing non-linear ideas with less fear of rejection (Adejumo, 2002, p. 8). Some groups of students may be more difficult than others to engage in constructivist (or decentralized) processes but teachers who embrace these methods have found it to be worth the effort (Milbrandt et al., 2004).

With this understanding of the relationship between complexity thinking and decentralized forms of teaching, the power that belonged to the teacher within a behaviorist model of learning can now be thought of as shifting and decentred in social activity.
Flexible Curricular Models for Art Education

Since the beginning of the postmodern era, educators have been calling for curriculum and pedagogy that responds to the challenges of contemporary society. Efland (1995) argued for a curriculum that prepares teachers and students to approach the world of art in all its complexity, replacing earlier curricular models with a more complex and flexible one. He suggested that a spiral lattice type model (Figure 2) might better represent the learning that takes place within art curriculum and that this structure allows for multiple forms of interpretation and implementation and for students to individualize their art educational experiences. Sweeny (2004) proposes a decentralized approach to art curriculum, a more complex version of Efland’s, which expands away from the circular spiral structure into a tree-like network, similar to the decentralized network illustrated in Figure 1.

Sweeny recognizes an inherent connection between the pedagogical philosophies associated with the open classroom movement of the 1960s (an emphasis on learning in small groups and the teacher being less of an authority figure) with networked structures today that exist through the internet (Sweeny, 2008). With the internet becoming more of an accessible tool for interconnectivity and interactivity, some art educators like Sweeny are suggesting that teachers take advantage of the flexibility that is part of the internet and use it to inform pedagogical practices. Art educators are capable of seeing new pedagogical possibilities when working with digital technology in curriculum (Wang, 2002; Wood, 2004). Research has shown that digital technologies, such as social networking websites, are being implemented into art curriculum resulting in better peer-to-peer interaction and creating active learners as opposed to passive participants (Collins et al., 2007).
Conversation & Dialogical Interaction

Decentralized approaches to art education place importance on conversation and dialogue that occurs within a non-linear process of exchange between teacher and students. Influenced by curriculum theorists who have been struggling with reconceptualizing curriculum to meet current social and cultural changes, some art education research has addressed the need to further merge creative production with critical reflection and vice versa. Art educators should conceptualize these processes as being interconnected if they intend to teach in ways appropriate to understanding visual culture (Freedman & Stuhr, 2004). I believe that a non-linear process of an exchange of ideas, based on hermeneutic inquiry, is an important aspect to contemporary art education. Critical theorist Paulo Freire is known for his research of democratic communication within the teacher-student relationship and the role that dialogue plays in forming knowledge, stating that “the object to be known in one place links the two cognitive subjects, leading them to reflect together on the object (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 14). Shor and Freire describe dialogue as a “joint act of knowing and re-knowing the object of study.” In writing about art teachers and curriculum Erickson (2004) referred to a study by Short (1998) which concluded that the understanding of art, and the ability to transfer this understanding from one context to another, should include the critical activities of talking and writing about works of art (Short, p. 62).

Conversation within studio art courses is key to the learning process, there is value in talking to work out interpretations and differences (Kent, 2005). Slattery (2006) quotes David Orr (1992) in stating that “landscape shapes mindscapes” and attests to the significance of the seminar circle in facilitating discourse, as opposed to the rigid arrangement of single desks in rows. In studio art curriculum I relate the seminar circle to
the group critique of student artworks. The decentralized structure of the studio critique, with participants placed in simultaneous view of both the artwork and each other, is very much what Slattery calls for with his vision of curriculum in the postmodern era – a process of hermeneutic interpretation that ultimately leads to self-reflection and critical inquiry. The teacher can in no way predict or plan for the discussion that emerges, thus it is the perfect situation for a decentralized method of discourse and perhaps a teachable moment. The art object in between the participants becomes the centre of attention, allowing for self-reflection by both students and teacher. This decentralized and somewhat circular process of dialogue aligns with Slattery’s view of hermeneutic interpretation as “…each new experience adds to the accumulated meaning of experience for each individual and sets the stage for present and future possibilities…a gestalt or heightened consciousness” (Slattery, 2006, p. 282). I believe this kind of aesthetic experience is something that rarely exists in a centralized approached to teaching and learning.

Ted Aoki defines the “live(d) curriculum” as something in opposition to planned curriculum and explains his concepts by using a visual illustration (Figure 3) of what he terms the “rhizomean curricular landscape” (Aoki, Pinar, & Irwin, 2005, p. 419). He suggests that the rhizomean landscape signifies the multiplicity of curricula that occurs in the learning space and the relationships that happen “between” the forms that represent the teacher and students – the exchanges of communication. In quoting Deleuze and Parnet (1987) he draws attention to the term “multiplicity” not being a noun, since within multiplicity it is not the elements that matter but what is in between them, “…as site of

Figure 3
relations which are not separable from each other” (p. 420). I understand this to mean that the curriculum is about the experience, the process, the relationship between the teacher and students. I believe this to be another decentralized approach to curriculum that disrupts the traditional hierarchical approach to teaching. It seems only fitting that Aoki’s “live(d) curriculum” be embraced by art educators, as it not only leads to self-reflection and critical inquiry but also acknowledges the emotional aspect of the teaching and learning experience.

In conclusion, we are all learners and as art educators we need to be open to engage in the learning process with our students. There needs to be an equality of exchange between all participants in the classroom to allow for a decentralized teaching and learning experience. Conversation can lead to meaningful understanding of art within the classroom and can be used to inform students of social and cultural issues in contemporary society. The teacher can become a facilitator of critical inquiry amongst active participants, encouraging multiple viewpoints through methods of self-reflection.
References


