

Social Justice Art Education: A framework for activist art pedagogy, (Second Edition)

by *Marit Dewhurst*

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Social Justice Art Education, Second Edition: With a heavier heart and a deeper understanding

Marit Dewhurst's second edition of *Social Justice Art Education: a framework for activist art pedagogy* takes the reader from the enormity of fighting the injustices in the world to the hope and creativity with which young people face this challenge. Dewhurst thoughtfully weaves together pedagogical considerations with examples from her research with young people in an activist art program at a large modern art museum in New York City. Through the book, Dewhurst works to break apart exactly what happens when young people learn to make activist art and how this pedagogy can be translated into a variety of settings with artists and educators who seek a more just world. As Dewhurst discusses the processes involved in Social Justice Art Education (SJAE), connecting, questioning and transforming, she calls forth and weaves through the words and work of activists, activist artists and revolutionary thinkers. The conversation that Dewhurst has through the book with the work of justice movement facilitators, writers, thinkers and activists is a demonstration of the interdependence necessary for this work. Dewhurst names this interdependence as a key ingredient to SJAE and to our survival in the face of injustice.

In this second edition, the need for this book has not only remained but grown. Dewhurst explains, "I return to this book – and the words of the young people it uplifts – with a heavier heart, and also with an even deeper commitment to working in solidarity with artists and educators of all varieties to create more spaces for social justice art education" (p. xii). As the world continues to break into pieces and the divide our political and social environment creates between people grows, the need for SJAE and this conversation around dreaming and creating a different path is ever important. As a tool of oppression is to make the voice of freedom more difficult to hear, the importance of creating spaces for young people to express themselves and fight through their art for the world they want to see is critical. When asked why an artist might make activist art, a young research participant answers, "Because some voices are not heard" (p. 1). This book provides a pedagogy to help student voices project their vision for the world.

In addition to detailing a SJAE pedagogical framework, the book zeroes in on what makes SJAE different from other arts education experiences, situating SJAE in the larger scholarship of social justice education. Calling on the work of William Ayers, Therese M. Quinn and David Stovall, a key aspect discussed throughout the book is the need for SJAE to work to explore the root causes of oppression and seek to dismantle them. The second edition of this book is a reminder that the need to critically examine power, identify



systems of oppression and work to dismantle those systems is a daily practice. We are given not only an account of research, but also a framework for creating a practice of SJAE as a way of teaching and making art with learners. The first chapter instructs educators on where to begin. Titled, “Start Here,” the first chapter outlines the important groundwork one must do before entering into community-based social justice education. Beginning the book with four important principles of SJAE sets an important foundation that this work is not to be entered into lightly. It requires shared power and ongoing collaboration as discussed in principle one. It is about the underlying systems that lead to injustice and not the symptoms as discussed in principle two. It requires praxis and an expansive view of how art can be leveraged for change at every level as discussed in principle three. Finally, SJAE is a pedagogy. It is not about what is made but how the making of art is approached. This discussion in principle four underlines the critical work of community. As Dewhurst describes, “We meet people where they are and begin our art-making there, layering on our power analysis and decisions about the kind of change we’d like to enact” (p. 27). The community and the context in which they live is at the center of SJAE. The relationships built in community then drive the pedagogy and the art.

The second chapter of the book sets the scene for the research that informed the SJAE pedagogy Dewhurst offers. The design of Dewhurst’s research is described in detail and the work of the youth artist activist engaged in the museum-based course in which the research took place is described in detail, bringing SJAE into focus as the young artists’ educational and artistic journey is shared. Chapter three details the curriculum and educational activities observed in the research. Through the lens of connecting, questioning and transforming, the pedagogy of SJAE is brought to life through the experiences of the young people engaged in the class that was studied. Dewhurst offers several forms of connections that the young artists engaged in to, as Dewhurst quotes Friere, “remake the world” (p. 64). Foundational connections are those that link the artist to their own purpose and how they want to shape who they are in the world. The foundational connections drive their art-making, as one young artist articulated, “Through my art, I will be able to make people question what they do” (p. 66). Attentive connections draw links between their work and their own immediate lives and environments. They build observational skills and expand their awareness. Extending connections are those which engage artists in critical analysis and explore causal links for injustice. Questioning, broken down into investigative questions and analytic questions, provide a deeper critical analysis of injustice. Dewhurst describes an exciting pedagogical moment when questioning happened without many words even being spoken as two students constructed visual comparisons to each other’s issues through collaborative art making. The process of transforming moves artist learners from forming an emerging critical consciousness to enacting change. Ideas are transformed into art that challenges not only the viewer but the systems of injustice the artist seeks to change.

This map that Dewhurst has created for the pedagogy of SJAE that engages communities in the work of remaking the world is echoed in the words of Mariame Kaba: “Every vision is also a map” (p. 86). These words that Dewhurst quotes remind the reader that the map of SJAE is there to remake the world. Through this pedagogy, educators have the tools to build a radical imaginary with learners. They can work with the community of learners to create art that makes their visions possible. Chapter four further maps the terrain of SJAE. Dewhurst notes that it can be rocky, outlining constraints and compromises that can lead to more creative methods. Dewhurst acknowledges the complexities of doing work deeply with communities of learners and champions art as a medium for praxis. While SJAE exists in conversation with activist art as inspiration, the need to keep it local is emphasized.

Chapter five, the final chapter of the book provides lenses through which researchers and educators might analyze SJAE. Providing the lenses of context, intention and process, Dewhurst leaves the reader and intellectual analysis of SJAE with ways to more effectively engage in and evaluate SJAE. Through context one can analyze what imprints may be left on the learner and community. An evaluator of SJAE must listen closely to determine whose voices are centered and what levers of power were shifted. By examining intentions, an evaluator can determine whether the voices of the community or learners are centered above that of the educator. They can evaluate the degree to which the project digs into a complex problem or merely offers a simple solution to a symptom. Process provides not only a lens for evaluation but for learning. An educator can assess their process and learn from the process to engage more deeply in SJAE in the future. Did they center collaboration, power-sharing and praxis throughout the process? By looking at the process one might more deeply understand how the artist challenged the systems of injustice they were seeking to change. Dewhurst describes a young artist who sought to change minds about global warming and through the process impacted themselves as well making the decision to reassess his choice of materials to one that was more environmentally friendly. These layers of impact, on the audience but also on the artist, exemplify the complex processes at work in SJAE that Dewhurst challenges the reader to dream up in their own educational practice.

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