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AP Studio Art as an Enabling Constraint for Secondary Art Education

Mark A. Graham
Brigham Young University

Advanced Placement (AP) Studio Art is an influential force in secondary art education as is evident in the 31,800 portfolios submitted for review in 2008 (A. Sims-Gunzenhauser, personal communication, August 11, 2008). From the perspectives of a high school educator and AP Reader, I have observed how the constraints of the AP program can be used to generate support for high school art programs and opportunities for large numbers of students to be seriously engaged with art learning. The AP portfolio can function as an “enabling constraint” for secondary art education. An enabling constraint creates structure and coherence by constraining a domain while simultaneously engendering unanticipated, imaginative, and divergent outcomes or responses (Davis, Sumara, & Luce-Kapler, 2008). The AP Studio Art program also shapes student artmaking, primarily through the constraints of the portfolio assessment. The character of these constraints and whether they enable desirable outcomes are worth considering in the context of recurring questions about what constitutes foundational knowledge in studio art.

The AP program can be an effective means to advocate for high school art programs because AP participation is highly valued by parents, school leaders, and colleges (Freedman & Krugman, 2001). Although the degree to which colleges accept AP courses for credit or advanced placement varies, participation in AP courses is viewed favorably by colleges and successful performance in AP courses correlates positively with success in college courses (Dougherty, Mellor, & Jian, 2005; Geiser & Santelices, 2004). The College Board has established educational policies that support high school art teachers, equitable access to its programs, collaboration among college and secondary faculty, and curricula that are analogous with some college foundation courses.

Although certain schools reserve advanced art classes for an elite handful of students, I have observed many other schools that extend the program to a wide and diverse range of students. These schools recruit students who might not otherwise enroll in AP courses by reducing enrollment barriers and preparing students within a broad array of courses prior to their junior or senior years. This is consistent with the College Board’s policy of open access to AP courses (Freedman & Krugman, 2001). While equitable access remains a challenge, initiatives such as College Board start up...
grants designed to give traditionally underrepresented students access to AP courses have successfully involved significantly more students in the program (College Board, 2008). In the schools where I have worked, active recruitment, open enrollment, and expansion of the program to include photography and digital media encouraged many more students to enroll in AP Studio Art. The enormous variety of skill, experience, and content that is evident in the portfolios at the annual AP Reading supports the inference that students with a broad range of art experience are participating in the program.

However, a large-scale assessment such as the AP portfolio runs the risk of breaking down the complex relationships among process, context, and culture into discrete and formalist parts, particularly when the evaluation focuses on the artifacts of student production taken out of context (Boughton, 2004). Springgay (2006) argued that authentic assessment is impossible without considering curriculum, teaching, and assessment as part of an inseparable relational dynamic. Can an evaluation that removes artistic production from the context of its creation properly support the complexities of artistic practice and ways of knowing? The AP portfolio requirements enable the art teacher to develop a curriculum of relatively unstructured tasks that encompass a wide variety of media and conceptual approaches, allowing students freedom in solving each section of the portfolio. The concentration section of the portfolio, in particular, emphasizes individual investigation of ideas and relationships between form and meaning. Nevertheless, the names of the three portfolios—Drawing, 2-D Design, and 3-D Design—emphasize the portfolio’s orientation toward formalist notions of artmaking. The scoring rubrics for the portfolio also accentuate the elements and principles of design. Ultimately, the limitations of the portfolio must be balanced by the mediating influence of the art teacher and the recognition that there are myriad approaches to both artmaking and teaching (Myford & Sims-Gunzenhauser, 2004).

Both the constraints of the assessment and the kinds of art educational experiences it enables may be viewed as problematic in the context of contemporary art practices and visual culture education. AP Studio Art is designed to serve as an analog for college-level foundation courses and uses college curriculum surveys, most recently from 2005, to maintain its connection with college art foundations programs. However, the content of core courses at the college level is being re-conceptualized in light of contemporary art practices. There is tension between the formalist criteria that many college-level art programs and the AP portfolio consider of primary importance and the conceptual, postmodern approaches to content and methods important in other programs. For example, the formalist approach favored by many art programs ignores the complex contexts and transdisciplinary explorations of ideas and media (Tavin, Kushins, & Elniski, 2007). Gude (2004) argued that the elements and principles of design are outmoded and should be replaced by the practices of contemporary artmaking, including appropriation, juxtaposition, re-contextualization, layering, and hybridity. The
AP portfolio constrains artmaking in other ways as well. For example, it emphasizes the evaluation of the artifacts of individual production. Group or collaborative projects cannot be included in the portfolio. The social, relational, and dialogic concerns that are increasingly relevant to contemporary art are difficult to document in a portfolio that focuses on formal aesthetics and individual production of artifacts (Desai & Chalmers, 2007). These ideological challenges to the content of college art foundations and the purposes of secondary art education are important issues for the future of AP Studio Art and suggest the need for continued dialogue among college and secondary educators.

Recurring questions about the purposes and content of art education have created lively discussion about its practice. However, the diversity of approaches that characterize the field need to be balanced by a concern for the survival and health of the means that make it possible for art education to happen within schools (Gee, 2007). The AP program has created significant support for secondary art education by establishing a college-endorsed standard of artistic performance certified by an annual assessment. In spite of the constraints of the AP assessment—including its de-contextualized focus on art production, its emphasis on individualized learning, and promotion of formalist elements and principles of design—it is evident from the range of work produced by AP students that the program does enable a generous flowering of divergent responses that touch on issues of consequence. For example, one teacher had his AP students use clothing as a medium to explore social and gender issues from both postmodern and formalist perspectives in ways that encouraged students to experiment with concepts and materials (D. Barney, personal communication, January 15, 2008). Diversity of artistic and conceptual exploration was also evident in my AP classes where students created work about issues ranging from feminism, censorship, and climate change to fashion, nature, and human bonds. Portfolios submitted for AP evaluation reflect divergent student interests including enormously detailed and imaginative use of traditional drawing media, appropriation from popular visual culture, digital media, or work that deliberately ignores technique for conceptual purposes. Although the remnants of Bauhaus-inspired art fundamentals seem inconsistent with postmodern practices, many college foundation programs continue to emphasize formalist approaches. This suggests there is a need to balance the conceptual, political, ideological, relational, cultural, and critical aspects of artmaking with the acquisition of more traditional skills and vocabularies of art used by some designers, illustrators, fashion photographers, and artists (Dockery & Quinn, 2007). The enabling constraints of AP Studio Art define a provocative and influential position in the ongoing discussions about assessment, foundational knowledge, and the changing character of artmaking.
References


