

A studio assignment combines experiences in museum, community, and school settings to help preservice students map the intersections of race, class, and gender—and to create a quilt that tells an important personal story.



Sortings, Cutaways, and Bindings:

Quilt-Making as Arts-Based Practice for Social Justice Teaching

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Like many universities across the country, Towson University—located outside of Baltimore, Maryland—requires future teachers to take only one stand-alone multicultural course. A single introductory course offers very limited assurance that preservice teachers will achieve the familiarity and comfort to transfer what they have learned to the classroom (Van Hook, 2002). Preservice art teachers need multiple opportunities to explore the complex nature of race, class, nation, ability, sexuality, and gender—as situated in the context of art education (Lee, 2013). Teachers need an array of experiences to explore their culturally embedded values and assumptions so they can see how these affect a myriad of daily decisions including the selection of art and other curricular materials, designing of classroom space, and instructional practices (Congdon, Stewart, & White, 2002; Gay 2000). In order to become culturally competent with diverse populations at the interpersonal level, preservice teachers must begin to develop analytic skills to recognize systemic causes and effects of racism, sexism, classism, and so on. Moreover, they will often be required to move back and forth among these skill sets every day. This article describes a studio assignment grounded in social learning theory and intersectionality completed by preservice teachers during their first art education class, enabling students to begin to develop nuanced understandings about categories of difference.

Above: Joan Gaither, 2010, *Distractions and Diversions* (detail). Used with permission from the artist.

Learning comes from varied and multiple engagement in practice and has an improvised character.

Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991) argue that learning is not simply the transmission of decontextualized knowledge from one individual to another; it is also a socially situated process whereby knowledge is co-constructed and embedded within a particular social community. From their study of craft apprenticeships, the authors developed the concept of *legitimate peripheral practice* to describe the characteristic features and organizational structure of social learning in this context. They proposed a social theory of learning that emphasizes the way learners grow toward full participation in a dynamic community of practice. A *community of practice* is defined as a group participating in a shared endeavor, continuously co-constructing the group's identity and work.

Lave and Wenger (1991) make the distinction between a learning curriculum based on the learner's standpoint and one based on the educator's. They posit that the former is a more powerful and meaningful force for the learner. Expertise dwells in the overall organization of the community rather than in an individual. Learning comes from varied and multiple engagement in practice and has an improvised character. Knowledge often circulates quickly and effectively among peers and near-peers. Resources might include broad access to experts, historical artifacts, and technologies; finished products; and more advanced peers.

Motivation, commitment, and intensified effort evolve through increased participation—developing a sense of identity as an expert practitioner. Structured on an apprenticeship model, a cohort of preservice teachers travel through our program formally and intensely for a year and a half, participating—peripherally at first and then more fully—in the practice of art teaching. The preservice teachers experience a variety of museum, community, and school-based settings with their peers and young people, and learn from the technologies, artifacts, and stories about teaching.

Introducing the Studio Assignment

Sorting: Handling and sifting through a variety of evocative materials, resources, and ideas is research for the artistic problem.

We gave the students the following assignment/studio problem, tied to a planned visit to quilt-maker Joan Gaither's studio:

Using a variety of materials and techniques, create a quilt triggered by one of the following two phrases: "beneath the surface" or "layered meaning." You may approach this theme from many perspectives including but not limited to an idea related to your own identity, or you may explore the theme through an historic or social justice lens, or you may combine perspectives. To prepare, work through these five steps:

1. Survey materials related to the exhibition: *A Complex Weave and Identity in Contemporary Art*. Prepare to discuss how gender is shaped by multiple factors and how investigations of identity may lead to artistic statements about larger sociocultural political issues.
2. Research a current event or social problem that demands a response.
3. Read Olivia Gude's (2004) *Postmodern Principles: In Search of a 21st Century Art Education* for eventual connections with Joan Gaither's work.
4. Gather fabric and other materials from your personal collections that you might want to incorporate or share with the group while being especially attentive to memories they invoke.
5. Map your race, class, and gender identity using the prompts and wheels.

Mapping the Intersections of Race, Class, and Gender

Cutaways: Remnants from apparel factories—the negative spaces of intended patterns. Although they seem peripheral, we will bring them to the center, piecing together the discards to make meaning.

Using guiding questions (see Figure 1), preservice teachers filled out three identity wheels (see Figure 2) to chronicle how gender, class, and race have shaped various aspects of their lives.¹ For this introductory

lesson we decided to focus on race, class, and gender to echo the three layers of a quilt; we also gave an option of using a fourth wheel to investigate an identity marker they could choose themselves. Social scientists frequently refer to race, class, gender, ability, and sexual orientation as major status categories used to describe positions in a social structure that are the primary classifications of difference in the United States. These can have a profound effect on individual and societal structures (Rosenblum & Travis, 2008). Status derives its power from all levels of society and affects how we self-identify as well as how others see us. While each of these major statuses has a different history and impact, they share similar processes that have significant effects on individuals and societal structures. For example, people are often categorized as opposites such as Black/White, male/female, or straight/gay—and the non-privileged of the pair frequently becomes stigmatized (Rosenblum & Travis, 2008). Identities or statuses also overlap and are cumulative in their effects; the salience of a status varies in different contexts and over time. The complex and dynamic interaction of identities/statuses in individual lives, social practices, and institutional arrangements is termed *intersectionality*.

To concretize the complexity, fluidity, and interdependence of these categories, wheels were printed on transparency film for eventual layering. Students were asked to describe themselves on the transparencies and then to take careful notice of areas that were densely filled and areas that were empty. After they were complete we asked students to layer the wheels in order of importance in their current lives. The students noticed how difficult the information was to read and that density of text in an area frequently corresponded to a part of life that was shaped by many forces. The relatively empty sections within the wheel were often linked to a privileged status. We discussed how the salience of race, class, or gender might shift over time or in different contexts.

Although the term *intersectionality* is ubiquitous in today's scholarship, there is a question as to whether it is a theory, concept, or strategy for analysis. Applications include intersectionality used to theorize identity, to understand individual experiences, and to analyze social structures. Intersectionality's origins are interdisciplinary, and the theory has since taken hold in multiple disciplines of both the social sciences and humanities.

- Age**
 Because of my _____ aging is hard or easy.
 Because of my _____ I am seen or not seen.
 Because of my _____ do people see me as dangerous?
- Economic and Occupational**
 I consider my vocation to be influenced by my _____ because.
 My income is affected or not affected by my _____.
 Other members of my _____ are available as mentors in my future job.
- Health and Beauty**
 Because of my _____, physical attributes do or do not affect the way I see myself or the way others see me.
 Because of my _____ my health and beauty communities recognize and communicate their shared experiences.
 Because of my _____ how much time, money, and energy do I spend on my appearance?
- Aesthetic**
 I am drawn to certain artwork because of my _____.
 My outward appearance is representative of my _____ identity.
 The kind of material and visual culture I like is influenced by my _____.
- Religious**
 How has _____ played a role in my religious identity?
 Because of my _____ I am treated differently in my religion.
- Family**
 Because of my _____, family is of great significance or not significant to me.
 Because of my _____, I feel that it is important to involve my family or partner's family in my life.
 Because of my _____, I feel compelled, pressured, or not pressured to have children (relationship).
- Geography**
 My _____ has influenced where I choose to live (gated community, an apartment not on the ground floor, suburbs, close to family, etc.)
 How does _____ shape my identity as a rural, urban or suburban person?
- Ethnicity**
 How has _____ intersected with or been influenced by my _____?
 I consider my ethnic identity a heritage that is informed by my _____.
 I don't have much information about my ethnic identity because of my _____.
- Recreation**
 Because of my _____ I spend my spare time doing _____?
 Because of my _____ I belong to a recreational community in the following ways (read the same magazines, wear similar clothing, coaching, driving children to activities etc.)
 Because of my _____ I do or do not take time for recreation.

Figure 1. Mapping my race, class, and gender identities: Guiding questions.

Kathy Davis (2008) argues that the open-endedness and flexibility of intersectionality has contributed to its success.

Intersectionality's appeal to both generalists and specialists is a testament to its accessibility and the possibility for elaboration. Multiple conceptualizations and applications make intersectionality a powerful tool to explore categories of difference embedded in everyday practice in art education at the individual, interpersonal, and institutional levels. This supports preservice art teachers' heterogeneity of experience and potential for growth. An intersectional framework enables participants to learn from the collective experiences of peers, near-peers, and experts—and to change perspective over time. Eileen O'Brien (2001) uses the term *overlapping* to describe the process of linking experiences through shared oppressions. For example, some women may be able to better empathize with the marginalization of people of color by linking it to their experiences of gender oppression (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Warren, 2010). Althier Lazor, Patricia Edwards, and Gwendolyn McMillon (2012) describe a method for developing cultural

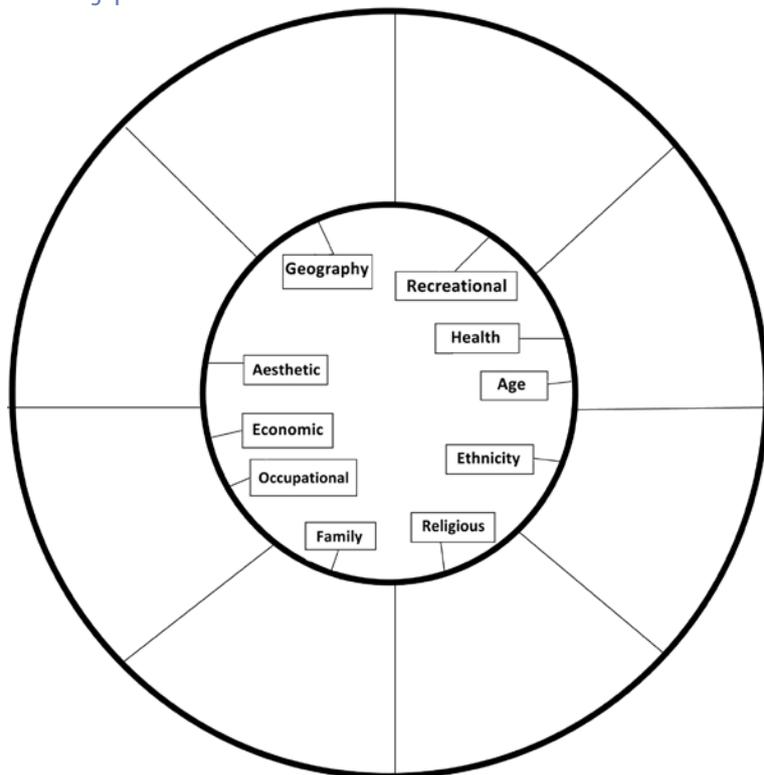


Figure 2. Mapping my race, class, or gender identity: Identity wheel.

understanding that is grounded in the theory of intersectionality. They emphasize that teachers and students may occupy privileged and subordinated positions simultaneously. The authors discuss the necessity for teachers to understand their personal experiences with subordination and privilege to better appreciate their students' culture.

The Studio Experience

Piecing: Adding, joining, and applying patches completes, enlarges, and extends the work.

A visit to fiber artist and educator Joan Gaither's studio outside of Baltimore afforded preservice teachers a hands-on opportunity to view finished and in-progress quilts from Gaither's 44-year career and to interpret multiple and deep connections among them. Gaither's stories of racial prejudice encountered as an African American woman, artist, and teacher; her insights into honoring the cultural knowledge of students; and her advocacy for equitable distribution of arts resources offered profound lessons about diversity as situated in the social practice of art teaching.

In Gaither's studio, preservice teachers had an opportunity to view and in some cases handle completed quilts, works in progress, and historic textiles used for inspiration. Gaither's story quilts weave together personal and universal themes including celebration, identity, protection, racism, and survival. Artistic choices of materials; formal aspects of design; and composition, imagery, themes, and processes are used by Gaither to layer rich details of her intricate visual narratives.

Stories play a major role in decision making and are important for individual and group identity construction. Gaither employed her adept storytelling skills to talk about her thinking processes, politics, influences, spirituality, artwork, life, and teaching experiences. She wove together stories related to her experiences as a Black woman, artist, and teacher that included her personal experiences helping to integrate local schools and businesses during the Civil Rights Movement. Gaither's teaching and artistic practices are indivisible, exemplifying the qualities of an expert practitioner. Gaither refers to her working process as "quilting from the soul." She encouraged the students to "tell the story that only you can tell. Think about how this story will give viewers cause to stop. Visually demand a response" (personal communication, March 11, 2013).

In contrast to the classroom, an artist studio's inherent informality lends itself to social interaction among novices, peers, and expert makers. Throughout the day students had the opportunity to work alongside Gaither as she generously shared her materials and tools opening up time for students to ask questions and share their personal histories as well as to garner insights from the group. Sewing machines, scanners, smart phones, ironing boards, books, bins of fabric, personal photographs, paint, markers, and sewing notions were the artifacts and technologies of our work.

It is useful to exchange information through personal communication while working and also to encourage the community to bind together through story. Stories are packages of situated knowledge often focusing on problems and especially difficult cases. Knowing what stories are appropriate and when to tell them leads to fuller participation. The purpose is not only to learn *from* talk but also to learn *to* talk (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Preservice teachers were also invited to Gaither's home to see the quilts and objects she chooses to use functionally every day and to view her personal art collection; these provided even more insights into her aesthetic decisions. Some students stayed behind to help Joan set up for a community arts project involving elementary students. Additional learning included how she placed works in progress on the table, what supplies she made available, how she displayed visual resources, and how volunteers were recruited and trained for the community work.

Student Work

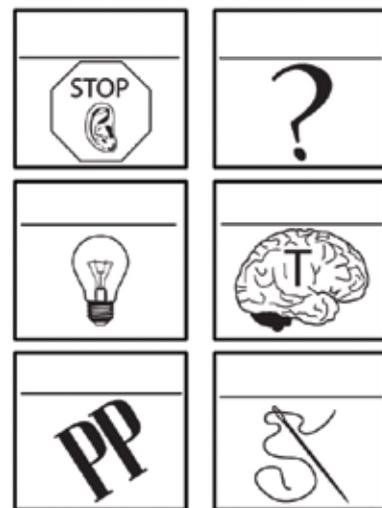
Preservice teachers' artistic responses were varied, reflecting multiple entry points to intersectionality. Some focused on a component of their personal identity shaped by a major status; others responded by linking their identity to larger societal forces, concentrated in a current event. Artworks highlighted in this article are representative of the variety of responses from the students. Themes included education, animal rights, a memorial to a recently deceased grandfather, gender inequality, gay marriage, religious intolerance, class and the economy, the multifaceted nature of identity, and homelessness. The short descriptions included with these images are from artist statements written as part of the assignment.

The Critique

Bindings: Attached over an edge for protection, reinforcement, or ornamentation, the binding often holds all the layers together. Like stories, a good critique binds a community together and reinforces and augments individual and community learning.

Post-it notes were passed out and students were asked to draw a series of symbols representing "stop and listen," "query," "a good idea," "best use of theme," "use of postmodern principles," and "craftsmanship." (Figure 3). Each symbol was drawn under a line placed in the middle of the paper to remind students of the theme, Beneath the Surface.

For the final group critique we hung the quilts on a large wall and used the Post-it notes for conversation starters. Learning how to participate in and then finally lead a critique are steps toward greater expertise in the practice of art education. Stories play an important role in identity development and collective binding of the class community. The improvisational character of critiques encourages members to consider multiple perspectives and have the opportunity to perform different roles.



Images by Alex Garove

Figure 3. Symbols used as conversation starters for quilt project: "stop and listen," "query," "a good idea," "best use of theme," "use of postmodern principles," and "craftsmanship."

Surface

I wanted my quilt to celebrate my grandfather who recently died at the age of 92. I used old shirts and ties that belonged to my grandfather. I chose this arrangement because I wanted to mimic a traditional quilt pattern called grandmother's flower garden. This symbolized the significance of my grandfather's relationship with my grandmother, and how their lives were interwoven with each other's.

—Alex Garove, Class of 2013²

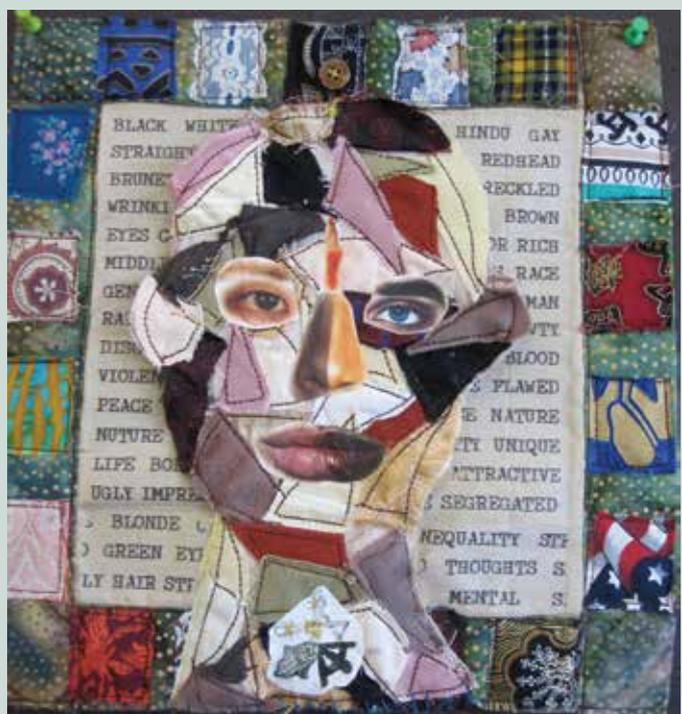
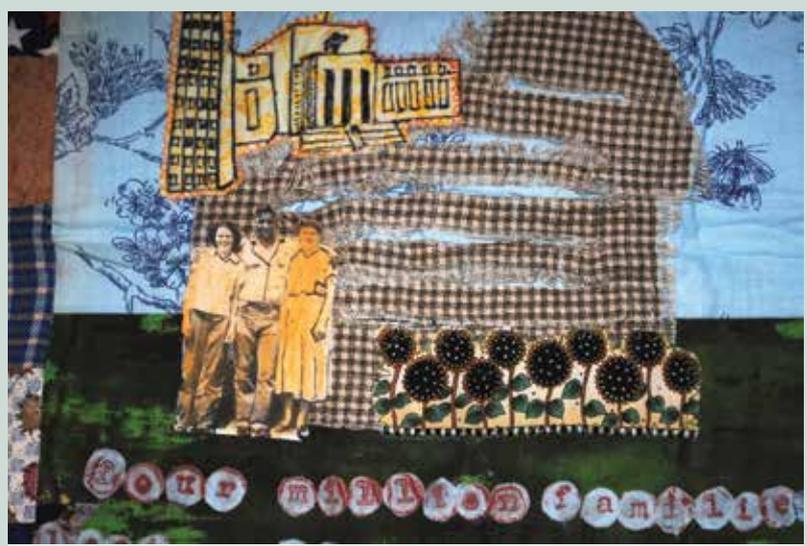


I chose to begin my piece with the words my mother wrote to me in a letter years ago. In her writing she expressed how, in the past, she lived her life "the way society had dictated she should." My mom's words hold the deepest meaning for this piece: however, the general message is to encourage tolerance and acceptance of gay rights and gay marriage. In the end, I wanted to create a piece that held personal meaning, but also spoke to others.

—Tori Wenger, Class of 2013

Employing the low profile gingham fabrics and work shirt along with stars and stripes patterns was an intentional material choice to speak about our nostalgic American dreams of home ownership and financial stability. I carefully frayed the images of a house and pulled it apart to illustrate the economic collapse.

—Dina Weston-Snead, Class of 2013



My quilt square, *Uniquely Human*, addresses the topic of stereotypes based on a person's physical appearance, ethnicity, religious beliefs, and social status. Placed behind the collaged face I created a web of bodily matter, using fabrics of reds, oranges, and pinks, to symbolize the insides of the human body.

—Brittany Keller, Class of 2013

This piece is about my grandfather's struggle with Alzheimer's and my struggle to overcome the grief after his passing. The multiple layers of fabric and pattern represent the complexity of the disease and the things that may be hidden beneath the surface.

—Christine Long, Class of 2014



The hoodie itself is a representation of Trayvon's "suspicious" clothing on the night of his murder, and words associated with Black stereotypes and assumptions are sewn on the outside. Unzipped it reveals personal photographs of Trayvon at different ages. It is easy to disagree with stereotypes while in the comfort of your own home, but putting those beliefs into practice is ultimately what matters.

—Maria Calvin, Class of 2013



Conclusion

Legitimate peripheral practice—the organizational structure of social learning—offers a way of thinking about the relationship of novices, new teachers, and mentors. It can also frame issues of identity, art practice, the cultural role of artifacts, and communities of knowledge that can be useful in preparing art teachers. We argue for the benefits of an intersectional framework informed by social learning theory and embedded in art education teaching. Such a framework helps structure a learning curriculum that begins to prepare our students to work in a diverse society.

Intersectionality's flexibility and various applications provide an apt theoretical structure to explore categories of difference at the individual, interpersonal, and institutional levels as they relate to art education. Intersectionality offers both accessibility and possibility for elaboration supporting heterogeneity of experience and potential for growth in a communal context. It enables preservice teachers to learn from the collective experiences of peers, near-peers, and experts, and to change perspective over time.

I originally intended to focus on race by exploring my experience as a multiracial individual from Trinidad. The way I experience womanness is too entangled with my race to allow for a separate analysis. The major theme of my piece had to shift to how my experience as a *woman* had been influenced by my race.

—Nisa Asqarali



Joan Gaither talking to Nisa Asqarali about her work in progress.

The following semester, students used the existing identity wheels coupled with an expanded investigation into sexuality, ability, and nation to further sort through their values and assumptions related to their work as curriculum developers (see Congdon, Stewart, & White, 2002). They also began their fieldwork in nearby schools, and completed assignments that required more explicit and socially situated analysis. For many students, race became significant as our mostly White, middle class, female students had opportunities to teach in Baltimore city public schools with an almost 90% African American student population. As a result of our introduction to an intersectional framework, they were better able to look at race mediated through factors such as class and gender at an individual, interpersonal, and structural level.

Creating quilts provided a concrete and shared experience to center and consider what we term the *cutaways*, the often-invisible dynamics of power and privilege, in public school culture. Students discovered, collected, designed, joined, and pieced together resources and experiences extending individual and collective learning. Our learning binds the community together by reinforcing commonalities even as we begin to recognize and honor our differences. The quilt assignment brings these pedagogic considerations to the surface, enabling our students to begin to envision their futures as full participants in a community of practice that values artmaking, young people's growth, and social justice.

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AUTHOR NOTE

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ The identity wheel has been modified from Encounter 4: Mapping Gender Identity, *The Dinner Party K-12 Curriculum Project* (Eaton, 2006), which was adapted from "Mapping Identity for Curriculum Work" in *Contemporary Issue in Art Education* (Congdon, Stewart, & White, 2002).
- ² Student comments are excerpts from written artist statements, 2012-2013. Comments and artwork reprinted with permission from the artists.



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