

# Learning With and Because of Each Other: A High School Art Portfolio Class as a Community of Practice

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## Recommended Citation

Frederick, Gregory Robert, "Learning With and Because of Each Other: A High School Art Portfolio Class as a Community of Practice" (2010). *Dissertations (2009 -)*. Paper 37.  
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LEARNING WITH AND BECAUSE OF EACH OTHER: A HIGH SCHOOL ART  
PORTFOLIO CLASS AS A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

by

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A Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School,  
Marquette University,  
in Partial fulfillment of the Requirements for  
the Degree of Doctor of  
Philosophy

Milwaukee, Wisconsin

May 2010

ABSTRACT  
LEARNING WITH AND BECAUSE OF EACH OTHER: A HIGH SCHOOL ART  
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This educational criticism of a senior high school art portfolio class asks: *In what ways does the community of practice developed within a successful studio art program at a high school contribute to an understanding of its success?*

Interviews, documents, photographs, and classroom observations gathered over one year inform this qualitative study. Participants include three Portfolio co-teachers, twenty Portfolio students, and two younger art students. Analysis focuses on the interplay of structure and participation that shapes learning among the participants, both as a group and individually. Five themes emerge as valuable ways of understanding the community of practice: team teaching, students working in the hallways, the class as a community or family, students serving as teachers and mentors for each other, and the relative freedom of choice students have to work in ways that resonate with who they are, who they are becoming, and what engages their attention.

Findings suggest: mutual engagement in the joint enterprise of creating and evaluating the bodies of artwork produced within a capstone portfolio class sustains and renews a vibrant community of practice; newcomers and old timers have open and easy access to each other; quasi-studio spaces along the hallways contribute to the ease with which students serve as teachers and mentors for each other; discussion, deliberation, and consensus building contribute to a cognitive culture that provides models of what adult artists do; teachers serve as art experts, counselors, and brokers between the portfolio class's community of practice and other communities of practice to which they and their students belong or hope to belong; and teachers develop simultaneously caring and demanding relationships with students.

A high school studio art program grounded in expressionism and focused on voice need not have to choose between self-expression and demanding aesthetic standards, or among practices proposed within the constraints of any of the models of art education to have surfaced over the last several decades. Instead, elements of multiple vantage points emerge through the interplay of structure and participation to sustain a community of practice that supports students as they try to give visual form to their particular voices.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Gregory R. Frederick, B.A., M.A.

Relatively late in my career, my friend and former colleague, Michele Korb, told me I just had to take a graduate course, *Using Technology for Instruction and Assessment*, taught by Dr. Heidi Schweizer. Not only did Michele's prediction that I would love the course come true, the experience made me decide that although I was a relatively old dog, mastering this new trick of doctoral studies might be fun. Perhaps *fun* is not the best word to describe the oftentimes challenging, occasionally exhilarating, and always time-hungry journey that began more than a decade ago with that first jump back into the pool of graduate studies. In addition to my debt of gratitude to Michele and to Heidi—who has fostered this project and helped me grow since the beginning—I owe so much to other extraordinary teachers in Marquette University's College of Education as well as to my mentors at St. Norbert College.

Dr. Robert Lowe has helped me become a better thinker and writer. His confidence in and patience with me has made me more confident in myself. I cannot thank him enough for his encouragement and support. Dr. Bill Pink helped me understand that qualitative methodology could reveal so much worth knowing. His enthusiasm for my dissertation topic energized me when I most needed to believe that what I had to say was worth saying. Dr. Sean Courtney taught me to understand situated cognition and gave me the freedom to pursue the idea that eventually led to my epiphany about the relationship between the theory of a community of practice and the success of the art program at the high school at the heart of this study. Dr. Robert H. Boyer and his wife, Barb, have been mentors for me since my days as an undergraduate at St. Norbert

College. It was Bob who first believed in my abilities as a scholar. It was Bob and Barb, together, who have modeled for me how to raise a family.

My colleagues in the Educational Opportunity Program supported my graduate studies in countless ways. Their good humor, encouragement, and generosity always makes me feel at home at work, and I am so grateful to all of them for keeping my spirits up no matter the circumstance. Sande Robinson, Marion Fraleigh, T Ullrich, Nate Ziarek, Greg Nelson, Judy Koerner, and Jane Hanley all contributed to the success of this dissertation immeasurably as did so many others in EOP and in the larger Marquette and Milwaukee community. Rose Trupiano is the world's best librarian. Ralph Weber and Diane Paszkiewicz contributed the resources of *Gass, Weber, Mullins LLC* during the initial stages of the transcription process. Of course, the art department at the high school I call CCHS made the whole project possible. Pat, Cathy, Anne, Mark, Craig, Keith, Talia, and Jill, it is to you and your students I owe the most thanks.

I also want to thank my family. My dad and mom, Robert P. and Jean M. Frederick, met at Marquette after the end of WW II. Their spirit lives in me, and I trust they know how proud I am to be able to add another MU degree to the family legacy. My brothers and sisters, John, Sue, Cathy, Mary, and Patrick, and my mother-in-law, Lois Sieren, thank you for your love and support. To my wife, Pat, daughter, Kelly, son, Chris, and son-in-law, Sean, you have taught me so much about the ways that artists experience the world. Without you there is no world for me. Finally, I dedicate this dissertation to my grandchildren—Luke, Lizzie, and Will Mizer—who keep on teaching me how much fun it is to learn with and because of each other.

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## CHAPTER 1: SETTING THE STAGE

*It was a teacher workday at the end of a long school year. Grades were due. Supplies needed to be stored, bulletin boards dismantled, and floors swept. Throughout the building, detritus of the past year littered desks and floors and row upon row of open lockers. On the building's sixth floor, however, dozens of students crowded around two of their art teachers, listening to directions about how they would spend the next several days getting a head start on the artwork they would create for the advanced placement portfolio class they had elected to take during their senior year. Most had paid \$300 to take this class that met from 9am to 5pm during the first week of their summer vacation. Teachers waived the tuition for a handful of others who claimed financial hardship.*

*I sat at a teacher desk behind the cluster of aspiring artists and their teachers, readying myself, too, for the year ahead. Would I be up to the task of understanding how this particular group of students and their teachers functioned? Would I be able to represent what I learned to others in a coherent, useful, and credible way?*

For many years I had taken pride in the work of my wife, Pat, and her colleagues with their art portfolio students at Central Catholic High School (CCHS), Wisconsin's largest Catholic school. Year after year, CCHS art students earned national awards, admission to America's best art colleges, and, in recent times, more than three million dollars in scholarship offers annually. As chair of the English department at CCHS when the art portfolio class was first proposed as an honors class to the curriculum committee, I remember distinctly the difficulty that Pat (then and now, head of the art department at CCHS) had in convincing the rest of the curriculum committee to allow the art department to offer an honors level class that would carry a weighted grade of five points

instead of four for students who earned an “A”. The head of the math department was the last holdout. She capitulated, finally, after rationalizing that enrollment in this class would amount to no more than a handful of students each year.

From those beginnings in the mid-1980’s, the senior art portfolio class has grown from seven students taught by one teacher in its first year to forty-five students taught by three co-teachers in the 2004-05 school year, the year I collected data for this study. Since 1977 when Pat joined the CCHS art department as a part-time ceramics teacher, the art teaching staff increased from two full-time teachers and one part-time teacher to four full-time and four part-time teachers. Total enrollment in the school decreased dramatically during this same period as it did for Catholic high schools throughout the region,<sup>1</sup> but enrollment in CCHS art classes dramatically increased despite the school’s having no fine arts graduation requirement. The forty-five seniors who took the portfolio class in 2004-05 represented more than 13% of the senior class in this urban, comprehensive, Catholic high school. In that same year, 476 of the school’s 1341 students elected to take one or more classes in the visual arts.

In a qualitative study of a high school art program in the Appalachian Mountain region of North Carolina, Barone (1983) realized that one of the things the art teacher most responsible for the school’s success had done was to make it well known for his students’ performance in national scholarship competitions. CCHS’s art program became famous in the same way. Art students there have earned top scholarship awards through their participation in the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards and the Arts Recognition and

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<sup>1</sup> Enrollment at CCHS was 1834 students in 1977-78 and 1341 students in 2004-05. Data gathered by the National Center for Education Statistics and the National Catholic Education Association show that this decline is consistent with Catholic High School enrollment trends in the Midwest.

Talent Search (ARTS) program sponsored by the National Foundation for Advancement in the Arts (NFAA), two annual, national competitions intended to identify and reward students for the quality of their art work (Wolf, 2001; Artistic success, 2005; Art as social experience, 2008). The CCHS portfolio teachers have earned a number of regional and national awards, too, from Scholastic, the NFAA, the state art education association, the local archdiocese, and the United States commission on presidential scholars. Several times, they have shared Scholastic's Gold Apple teacher award for submitting the most outstanding group of entries in a given year.

The success of CCHS students in these national competitions drew attention from the admissions departments of art colleges across the country. Over the years, many art colleges have invited the CCHS portfolio teachers to visit their campuses for several days to provide them with a first-hand look at the school in order to better advise CCHS students about their art programs and the college admission process. (In the first years of these visits, I accompanied Pat on three such trips.) In recent years, art colleges have also sent representatives to CCHS in late October or early November, during the week just prior to the Saturday when the local college of art and design hosts "National Portfolio Day," a collaborative, national recruiting effort among the association of art colleges and universities in the United States and Canada.<sup>2</sup>

Hundreds of high school art students from all over the region attend the portfolio day event to have their bodies of work reviewed by admissions representatives who

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<sup>2</sup> The National Portfolio Day Association (NPDA) was created in 1978, solely for the organization and planning of National Portfolio Days. The Association consists of representatives from regionally accredited colleges and universities, which are members of the National Association of Schools of Art and Design. The NPDA is the only organization of its kind, and its membership represents the highest standard of visual arts education available in the United States and Canada. See: <http://portfolioday.net/>

advise them about how best to proceed as they prepare portfolios for admission and scholarship consideration. The lines are long, especially to meet with representatives from the better-known art colleges. At CCHS, however, because of the number and quality of the applicants the portfolio class produces each year, the admissions representatives work with the CCHS art teachers to schedule short presentations at the school followed by individual reviews of the work of interested students. In the year of my study, nineteen art colleges sent one or more representatives to CCHS during two school days prior to the national portfolio review day to interact with students in this way.<sup>3</sup> In recent years, CCHS has had to turn down requests by some colleges to send a representative because there simply is not time to schedule all the colleges interested in making a presentation within the two days that the school allows for such visits.

### **Rationale for this Study**

A persistent problem for the field of art education has been how to justify art as a subject worthy of a place on the curriculum (Efland, 1990, 2002; Eisner, 2002a; Freedman, 1994, 2000; Freedman & Stuhr, 2004; Hetland, Winner, Veenema & Sheridan, 2007; Siegesmund, 1998; Wolf, 2004; Zessoules, Wolf & Gardner, 1988). Over the years, the field has established various traditions and advocated for various models for art education to address this problem (Anderson, 2005; Clark, Day & Greer, 1987; Efland, 1988, 1998 & 2002; Eisner, 2002a; Freedman, 2003b; Gardner, 1989; Greer, 1984; Hetland et al., 2007; Siegesmund, 1998; Wolf, 1988; Zessoules et al., 1988).

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<sup>3</sup> Admissions representatives do visit other area high school art departments prior to national portfolio day, and when they travel to other regions of the country they similarly visit high schools known for the quality of their programs and significant numbers of potential applicants.

There is general agreement in the research literature, even among those advocating for the efficacy of a particular approach that contemporary high school art teachers tend to develop practices that, consciously or not, combine elements of these traditions and models, based on their individual backgrounds, values, and interests (Burton, 2004; Dorn, 2004; Eisner, 2002a, Siegesmund, 1998). Efland (1998) points out that one reason art teachers have relative autonomy over what and how to teach is art's reputation as a soft or non-core subject, helpful in developing students' affective capacities but not cognitive ones. Burton (2004) concludes from a review of the literature on the practice of teaching art in K-12 classrooms that:

There remains considerable dispute about the subject matter teachers are expected to teach; whether the subject matter is derived from studio practice or from constitutive disciplines; whether it is confined to the traditions of fine arts or extended to embrace a more all-encompassing visual culture; whether it derives from the formal study of elements or from the life experiences of young people; or whether it is an intermingling of all vantage points and, if so, what are the interconnecting threads? (p. 572)

In this context of art teachers' general freedom to shape their programs as they see fit and the lack of consensus in the literature about what constitutes best practices, it makes sense to take a close look at schools where the visual arts have flourished. Schon (1983) suggests that best practices in many fields develop on the job as experience and intuition shape the decisions good professionals make. Teachers construct and reconstruct their teaching practices over time, developing repertoires of theories, practices, knowledge, and values that emerge from on-going classroom life. What eventually develops as teachers and students work together within a particular school's program is an identifiable community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) that sustains and renews itself in established but continually negotiated ways as new members

join the group. At CCHS, the community of practice that has developed over time produces award winning art and scholarship-worthy students year after year.

Understanding successful practices at one school and the ways they contribute to a sustainable community of practice should inform the debate about the value of art as a worthy subject, influence the development of successful practices at other schools, and, perhaps, identify the “interconnecting threads” among the various traditions and models of art education that, at least in their instantiation at CCHS, seem to constitute good practice.<sup>4</sup> The growth and subsequent widespread recognition of the CCHS senior art portfolio class suggest that teachers there have developed an art program worthy of such study. Increased enrollment, faculty, number of national awards and scholarship offers, and attention from art colleges nationwide certainly provide evidence of the outward success of the CCHS art program. The school’s promotional literature notes the subsequent success of many of its graduates in careers in fine art, design, filmmaking, fashion, advertising, and education.

However, these outcomes do not help one understand the CCHS program from an insider’s perspective, allow one to see the results of the particular choices that its teachers have made in developing a successful program, or help explain why, year in and year out, the portfolio teachers and each new group of students who join them maintain the record

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<sup>4</sup>Efland (1990) identifies three historical streams of influence on art education: the expressive, the reconstructive, and the scientific. Siegesmund (1998), in his explication of these influences, worries that the field is left with no unifying vision to guide practice. Others maintain a positive view on this multiplicity of influences: “Clearly all of us would like to have the best possible arts education: that goal is most likely to be realized if there are several competing models and critical discussions of each of them” (Zessoules et al., 1988). Also see Wolf (2004) for an analysis of the ways expressive, reconstructive, scientific, and other influences have shaped the evolution of art education curriculum.



of success the CCHS program has enjoyed. Therefore, an investigation of the community of practice among the CCHS art teachers and their students, a practice that represents a particular set of values and choices from the historical traditions and models of art education, may benefit other art educators as they develop practices influenced by these same traditions and models. Indeed, I hope all educators may benefit from this investigation of the ways a particular group of students and teachers learn with and because of each other in the community of practice that they co-create. To that end, the following question has guided my research:

*In what ways does the community of practice developed within a successful studio art program at a high school contribute to an understanding of its success?*

### **Literature Review**

The visual art program at CCHS has drawn attention from previous educational researchers. The Alliance for Young Artists and Writers commissioned Wolf (2001) to study videotapes of one beginning and one advanced class from a number of schools across the country, CCHS among them, with long-standing records of success in the annual Scholastic Art and Writing Awards competition. Wolf concludes that a number of invisible rules shape practices in these successful art and creative writing programs:

- Nothing is too small.
- No shrugging allowed.
- Fact is smaller than fiction.
- Done does not equal finished.
- It's "among" not "within." (p. 6)

She illustrates these rules with short vignettes from selected classrooms, among them several from CCHS art classrooms, to advance the thesis that artistry is not inborn but

learned. Attending to the slightest technical details, encouraging each other to engage, to persist, and to work beyond initial satisfactions, teachers and students in these classrooms develop habitual ways of working together that help explain perennial success.

The research question that guides this dissertation asks a question similar to Wolf's but explores in much greater depth and detail the community of practice that develops within one successful high school art program. Wolf does not explore student-to-student interactions, limited as she is by data gathered from just two classes from each research site and challenged to make generalizations across two distinct disciplines. Nor does she attempt to investigate the influence of older students on younger ones as they develop along an arc of participation (Wenger, 1998) from novice to master. Still, Wolf contributes valuable insights about the relationship between attending to details as seemingly insignificant as how to rinse a paintbrush between successive strokes and a "life-long habit of attention to each not-at-all small thing" (p. 9).

Since I did not observe any of the beginning classes at CCHS, the vignettes Wolf includes from one such class provide valuable corroboration of the interview data I gathered from seniors about their experiences in the Art Fundamentals class that most of them took as freshmen. That Wolf's observations resonate with my own also serves as one source of referential adequacy (Eisner, 1998b), the quality of an educational criticism that enables a reader "to locate in its subject matter the qualities the critic addresses and the meanings he or she ascribes to them" (p. 114).<sup>5</sup> Though our work differs in scope and intent, Wolf and I understand teaching and learning practices made familiar to us by the

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<sup>5</sup> In the methodology section, I will elaborate more on educational criticism as a qualitative method of inquiry since I believe it represents the best way of constructing meaning from the data I have collected for this study.

CCHS teachers and students. Our mutual goal is to lead readers to conclusions about these practices that, without our respective interpretations, they may miss.

Sharon Morrissey Jones Johnson (2001) shares this same purpose. In her case study of the narrative process in 55 of one CCHS portfolio student's self-initiated works of art created over a three-year span, Jones Johnson concludes that the work reveals an overarching narrative of the student's quest for self-identity. Jones Johnson's observations of this student's work in the CCHS portfolio program resonate with my own observations about the community of practice in which this student developed and which continues to produce scores of other successful art students. However, the theoretical lenses from which we view the data we collected from CCHS differ greatly. Jones Johnson focuses on the elements of the narrative process, as defined by Bruner (1990), evident in the thematic content of individual works of art. In her analysis of character, action, setting, conflict, resolution, sequence, canonical violation, and point of view across seven distinct bodies of work comprising 55 total art pieces, Jones Johnson argues that, taken as a whole:

The sequence of psychological events that construct the plot of the overarching narrative include: (a) wanting a new identity of self (Sketchbook One), (b) rejecting social and cultural canons shaping his adolescent identity (Sketchbook Two), (c) revealing betrayals of family and friends (Sketchbook Three), (d) documenting alienation from his life (Photography Series), (e) finding heroic guides (Dream Catcher), and (f) confronting self and recovering self (Painting Series). (p. 266)

My own theoretical framework differs from Jones Johnson's both in its purpose and level of analysis. Whereas she zooms in on an individual student's own journey as revealed in his body of work, I intend to pull the lens back a bit to focus on the features of the community of practice in which students like the one Jones Johnson studies flourish.

Still, her explication of the overarching narrative of one student's successful quest for identity provides another source of referential adequacy for my own interpretations of the emphasis the CCHS community of practice places on students' freedom to discover and use their own voices through their art.

Although CCHS does not provide the site for his research, Barone (1983, 2001) does attempt to identify ways of accounting for the success of a different high school's art program. Eisner (2002b) regards Barone's (1983) initial study of the Swain County High School art program as a model piece of educational criticism. In 2001 Barone revisited Swain County and many of the subjects of his original research. The result is a book-length case study on the lasting influence that these students and their teacher have had on each other. At the heart of each work is Barone's high praise for the charismatic, hard-working, and caring teacher responsible for the Swain County art program's success. The original research, commissioned by the Rockefeller Brothers Foundation which was interested in learning more about the art program that had produced the award-winning work of a high school student from Appalachia, argues that the value the art instructor places on expressive qualities of art-making transcend the officially sanctioned value the state funding agency places on vocational training in regional arts and crafts.

In following through on this idea in his case study almost twenty years later, Barone (2001) introduces two competing interpretations of a remarkable teacher's enduring influence on his students and on one high school's art program. The first interpretation celebrates an:

individual teacher struggling alone against formidable and debilitating societal and institutional forces. A teacher who successfully transmits enduring messages

about autonomy, character, and living life with a disposition toward bold, judicious acts of self-re-creation. (p. 6)

Barone's second interpretation provides a negative counterbalance, offering a portrait of a teacher who, in his preference for allying with his county's art community more than with colleagues in other disciplines at the school and in "choosing to focus directly on his students' private aesthetic awareness," this very same heroic art teacher "denies a view of education as primarily a political act" (p. 6), and thus limits his lasting influence on his students by allowing them as well as himself to remain unaware of the larger societal and cultural forces which depend on the tacit, normative influences of schooling practices to replicate existing social inequities.

In both the early and later research, Barone attempts to reconcile seemingly antithetical notions about the purposes of schooling. In the original essay he concludes that the pragmatic approach to an arts curriculum intended to lead to vocations in the craft industry can co-exist with an aesthetic approach intended to develop students' abilities to express feelings and to find personal meaning in the making of beautiful objects. Almost twenty years later, he leaves it to his readers to decide which of his interpretations, if either, is the more legitimate view of a charismatic teacher's influence on some of his favorite students. While Barone believes some "degree of heroic dispositional transfer had occurred" (p. 143) between teacher and selected students, he also recognizes the power of other "cultural scripts" (p. 143) that compel students away from the arts and toward more pragmatic adult pursuits.

Barone contributes valuable insights on ways art students struggle with competing values of pragmatism and idealism after leaving a successful high school art program, but in choosing to focus on the enduring outcomes of teaching, Barone reveals more about

interpersonal relationships among selected students and a charismatic teacher than he does about what other factors may account for one high school art program's success.

Two successful high school art programs in the Boston area serve as research sites for Hetland, Winner, Veenema, and Sheridan (2007). However, instead of investigating ways to account for success in their analysis of data gathered over a year of videotaping classes and interviewing teachers, Hetland and her colleagues presume that the schools' art programs are successful. Five common traits support their rationale: the schools' identification as art specialty schools, a faculty comprised of practicing artists, selective admissions policies based on portfolio reviews, the amount of instructional time—more than ten hours weekly—devoted to art, and small class sizes. By classifying the cognitive outcomes possible when circumstances for teaching and learning are optimal, Hetland et al. (2007) believe they are better able to determine the value of a visual arts education on its own merits. They reject as unsubstantiated, popular claims about art instruction as a means of improving test scores or of transferring creative and observational abilities to “more important” disciplines like math and science (Eisner, 2002a).

Hetland and her colleagues identify eight studio habits of mind they believe to be “central to artistic thinking and behavior” (p. 1). These habits include:

- develop craft
- engage and persist
- envision
- express
- observe
- reflect
- stretch and explore
- understand art world (p. 6).

Hetland et al. (2007) also refer to these habits as “dispositions” and credit the work of David Perkins and his colleagues for this usage (Perkins, Jay, & Tishman, 1993;

Tishman, Perkins, & Jay, 1995, as cited in Hetland et al., 2007). At least four of these dispositions—develop craft, engage and persist, observe, and stretch and explore—echo Wolf’s (2001) rules for successful studio art programs, and Barone (1983, 2001) emphasizes a fifth—express—in his assessment of the qualities that contribute to the success of Swain County High School’s art program. Indeed, my own analysis of the CCHS art program suggests instance upon instance of CCHS teachers and students developing or using all eight of the dispositions. These similar results not only provide another source of referential adequacy for my own observations of the CCHS program, but they also suggest a growing consensus about the dispositional outcomes of good art instruction. Siegesmund (2000), for instance, describes the process of “reasoned perception” in his observations of good high school art teachers in southern California who develop similar patterns of cognitive engagement as they work with their students.

Hetland et al. (2007) and Siegesmund (2000), however, focus their analysis on data gathered during observations of teachers and students at work on particular assignments in particular media. Neither looks at a particular student’s development over time, as Jones Johnson (2001) does, and none of the above investigates ways that successful art programs sustain themselves over time. Nor do they explore student-to-student interactions. Rather, they presume that quality programs result because of bountiful resources or charismatic teachers and instructional strategies that engage students’ aesthetic sensibilities or habits of mind as they work on assignments given to them by their teachers.

All of these qualities do make a difference, of course, but it is a mistake to overlook the value that can come from an analysis of ways that students and teachers

learn with and because of each other, both formally, on assigned tasks and teacher-led critique but also informally, as students and teachers develop and sustain a particular community of practice together. Hetland et al. (2007) overlook a great opportunity to analyze the informal learning among the teachers and students in their study because one of their research sites is a residential art specialty school where students participate in “open studio” over the weekends when classes are not in session. If Hetland or any of her colleagues ever step into these open studios, however, their readers do not hear about it. Instead, they focus their analysis on data gathered during teacher-led activities more typical of the studio art classroom: lecture-demonstration, students-at-work, and critique. They attend to elements of spatial arrangements and class management strategies that enhance easy movement among the three studio structures above, but even during the students-at-work stage it is the interactions between teacher and student that draws their attention.

The literature I have reviewed thus far makes significant contributions to the discussion about the value of art education within the high school curriculum. Charismatic teachers, instructional strategies that develop artful habits of mind, and giving students the freedom to express and discover their personal identities through their art all play significant roles in the successful high school programs noted in this body of work. However, one of Wolf’s rules for successful art and writing classrooms seems to beg for more explication: “It’s *among* not *within*.” The supporting vignette Wolf provides—of a student driving home to retrieve a portrait to bring back to class to illustrate (triumphantly) his belief in the superiority of drawing in the classical style—gives just a taste of life in one vibrant high school art program’s community of practice.



## Community of Practice

A definition seems necessary if we are to understand ways the community of practice that has developed among CCHS art teachers and students contributes to an understanding of the success its art program continues to enjoy. Wenger (1998) defines a community of practice as one that includes joint enterprise, mutual engagement, and shared repertoire. Members who share these three affinities develop ways of talking about meaning, practice, community, and identity that embody the knowledge shared and valued among the group and replicated as new members join the group. Wenger (1998) assumes that our existence as social beings is central to the way we learn, that knowledge “is a matter of competence with respect to valued enterprises,” that knowing concerns our “pursuit of such enterprises,” and that “meaning—our ability to experience the world and our engagement with it as meaningful—is ultimately what learning is to produce” (p. 4).

Lave and Wenger (1991) coined the term “community of practice” in their investigation of the ways such groups as midwives, tailors, quartermasters, butchers, and nondrinking alcoholics develop from novices to full participants within their respective communities of practice through a process they describe as “legitimate peripheral participation” (p. 35-37). Novices pick up the practices of established members of a community in both explicit and implicit ways until “knowing what” becomes inseparable from “knowing how” (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989). Learning becomes not an “internal construct” but an action that expresses the merging of internal and external realities.

Lave and Wenger (1991), however, are skeptical of most school learning. They assert, for instance, that high school physics students’ practices have more to do with

replicating the culture of high school than with imitating the practice of real physicists (p. 99). Wenger (1998) explains that from a community of practice viewpoint, “If school practices become self-contained then they cease to point to anywhere beyond themselves. School learning means learning school” (p. 267). In a similar vein, Brown and Duguid (1993) believe that most classrooms “tend to be too secure. The actual practices under study can often neither be stolen or constructively discussed,” especially when contrasted with the adult workplace which provides more “inherently authentic practice” from which learners can “steal their knowledge from the rich resource made up of other, more experienced workers and ongoing, socially shared practice” (p. 14). Efland (1976), in his famous analysis of the school art style, describes how school culture merely replicates itself within an art program when “there is little resemblance or relation between what professional artists do and what children are asked to do” (p. 39).

In many respects, Efland’s analysis of the school art style makes clear the practices that emerged as the typical community of practice among K-12 art education by the mid-1960’s. Efland’s analysis is consistent with Tyack and Cuban’s (1995) conclusions about the hegemony of common practices that become reified over time into a kind of grammar that constrains our imaginations regarding what is possible when it comes to accepted ways of teaching and learning in schools. Anderson (1998) describes the constraints of the school art style this way:

First, to be free of cognitive strain, it is primarily studio activity framed as manual skill. Skills such as mastering elements and principles of design and manipulation of media become the focus, rather than framing art instruction as creative, cognitive, conceptual activity in which students develop skills and techniques to solve art and life-centered issues. School art requires that students use media that are resilient, not requiring too much skill or dexterity, yet resulting in visually appealing products that have identifiable differences so they appear to be

humanistic expression, while in reality coming safely under the umbrella of institutional control and decorum. (Anderson, 1998, p. 14)

Limited by the constraints of time, assignment, and materials, art students and teachers developed a community of practice that served to “vivify school life and break up the routine, . . . [using art as a kind of] therapy, minimizing the cost of institutional repression” (Efland, 1976, p. 41).

While the culture and context of high school certainly influence both what and how students learn, it does not necessarily follow that a high school art program cannot develop a community of practice that has at least as much to do with replicating the authentic practices of artists as it does with replicating the culture of high school. Wenger (1998) understands that developing such a community of practice within a school setting will be challenging, but he believes it is possible:

If we believe that information stored in explicit ways is only a small part of knowing, and that knowing involves primarily active participation in social communities, then the traditional format [of schooling] does not look so productive. What does look promising are inventive ways of providing access to resources that enhance [students’] participation, of opening their horizons so that they can put themselves on learning trajectories they can identify with, and of involving them in actions, discussions, and reflections that make a difference to the communities that they value. (p. 10)

Eisner (2002a) believes that a community of practice analysis is significant for the field of art education. Regardless of the ideologies that frame any particular art program, he believes that at least four forces affect what students learn in the arts:

the constraints and affordances provided by the materials with which students work; . . . the prompts cues and scaffolding that the teacher provides to enable the student to succeed; . . . [the] classroom norms, the kind of thinking and behavior that is encouraged and discouraged in the setting; and . . . an ambiance we can refer to as the classroom milieu. (p. 71)

In the best of circumstances, Eisner (2002a) believes that:

these interacting forces create a cognitive culture that has as much to do with developing dispositions as with developing aesthetic and analytic abilities. It is a culture that, at its best, models what adults do in those realms. What the milieu teaches is seldom on the list of aims for the arts, yet what the milieu teaches can be of prime importance in helping students learn what it feels like to function as a budding artist, to be really engaged in one's work, not for extrinsic reasons but for intrinsic ones. (p. 74-75)

What Eisner describes as “what the milieu teaches” compares with what Lave (1991) describes as what participation in a community of practice teaches: “Learning . . . is a process of becoming a member of a sustained community of practice. Developing an identity as a member of a community and becoming knowledgeable skillful are part of the same process” (p. 65). Eisner (2002a) explains how communities of practice can develop within art classrooms this way:

If teaching is conceptualized in terms of the conditions that influence learning in classrooms, it can include not only what teachers do to influence what students learn, but with what students do to influence one another. How the classroom can be organized as a community of practice with its own norms and procedures so that these norms and procedures positively influence those who inhabit that community, namely students, is an important and often neglected consideration in the study of teaching. The situation teaches, as Dewey pointed out, and professional teachers can and do have a hand in shaping the design of that situation. Thus, the consequences of forms of social organization in arts classrooms are no trivial subject matter for research on teaching. (p. 216)

The three most prevalent models for art education to have emerged since Efland's critique of the school art style, Discipline Based Art Education or DBAE, Arts Propel, and Visual Culture Arts Education or VCAE,<sup>6</sup> all recommend practices that, over time,

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<sup>6</sup> DBAE (Greer, 1984; Clark, Day & Greer, 1987), Arts Propel (Zessoules et al., 1988) and VCAE (Freedman, 1994, 2003a, 2003b; Duncum (2002), Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005) all share an emphasis on the cognitive outcomes of art education but differ in their reconstructive aims and the value each places on expressive outcomes. While there is no set curriculum for DBAE, Arts Propel, or VCAE classroom practices, studio art is just one of four separate disciplines within the DBAE framework, the others being art criticism, aesthetics, and art history. The intent of DBAE was to place art on the same footing as other academic disciplines “by means of a formal, continuous, sequential,

could shape sustainable communities of practice within any high school art program. However, as Burton (2004) has suggested, no consensus on a best model exists, leaving art educators free to mix and match among the traditions and recommended practices that suit their own circumstances and interests. The significance is not that a community of practice develops from the choices art educators make. Everyone belongs to multiple communities of practice as each of us goes through life (Wenger 1998). Instead, the significance lies in the kinds and quality of knowledge and practices that are preserved and how they are passed on within any particular community of practice. In this dissertation I investigate ways the community of practice developed and sustained among

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written curriculum across grade levels” (Greer, 1984, p. 212). The work of Hetland and her colleagues (2007), already reviewed, describes the studio practices and the cognitive outcomes one should expect in an Arts Propel classroom. Students engage in “domain activities” intended to lead them through three stages: production, perception, and reflection (Zessoules et al., 1988). Assessment procedures call for students to keep “processfolios” of their work to document their process over time, reflect on their performance and improvement, and determine a focus for their next efforts. A major difference between DBAE and Arts Propel is the relative status of art history content. In DBAE art history represents an independent body of knowledge to be studied and valued for its own sake. In Arts Propel, art history content is integrated within the context of the student’s own art work as offering points of comparison in setting standards for achievement. Both models focus on cognitive engagement, but Arts Propel is more firmly rooted in the principles of constructivist learning theory (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1985; Bruner, 1990). *Visual Culture* replaces *art* as the preferred name of the discipline within VCAE (Freedman & Stuhr, 2004). Advocates like Gude (2004) offer a new and improved set of descriptors for ways of making art (*appropriation, juxtaposition, hybridity, recontextualization, and gazing*, to name a few) as replacements for the traditional elements and principles of design that “were never the universal and timeless descriptors they were claimed to be” (p. 7). Art making in this context often becomes polemical, a visual advocacy for a wide variety of social, personal, and cultural concerns, and its forms may include non-traditional media such as installation, performance, video, and computer art. Advocates believe that VCAE broadens students’ understanding of what can count as art and how art can be made. Thus, images and experiences gained through popular culture and/or students’ personal interests have as much claim to legitimacy as the traditional processes and products of the art studio (Freedman, 2000, 2003a; Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005).

CCHS art teachers and students contributes to an understanding of the success of the CCHS studio art program.

## **Methodology**

*In the realm of art, critics follow artists. That is, critics do not provide the specifications artists are to fulfill; their relationship to artists is not one of architect to builder. Rather, critics are commentators, interpreters, evaluators, and, at their best, educators.* (Eisner, 1998b, p. 121)

Educational criticism (Eisner, 1998b) provided the best model of qualitative inquiry with which to structure this dissertation for three reasons. First, it represents the qualitative methodology most closely associated with art and K-12 art curriculum. Eisner, trained as a painter and renowned as an expert in both art education and K-12 curriculum, recommends that educational criticism try to make sense of schools and communities “through language that is not tied to formalism or to theories that abstract the vivid particulars. [Its purpose is] to tell a story that has the ring of truth without compromising figurative or interpretive language” (Eisner, 1998b, p. 3). Artistry in the attempt to make meaning from data adds to the power of the research:

One must be able to use language to reveal what, paradoxically, words can never say. This means that voice must be heard in the text, alliteration allowed, and cadences encouraged. Relevant allusions should be employed, and metaphor that adumbrates by suggestion used. (p. 3)

Secondly, educational criticism addresses claims to reliability in ways similar to other qualitative methodologies while also placing “a high premium on the idiosyncratic, on the exploitation of the researcher’s unique strengths, rather than on standardization and uniformity” (Eisner, 1998b, p. 169). Through the quality of *connoisseurship*: “the means through which we come to know the complexities, nuances, and subtleties of aspects of the world in which we have a special interest” (Eisner, 1998b, p. 68), the educational

critic brings both his own voice and sensibilities to bear on his subject. Finally, educational criticism directs the critic's attention to five major dimensions of schooling: the intentional, the structural, the curricular, the pedagogical, and the evaluative. Together, these dimensions comprise what Eisner (1998a) has called the ecology of schooling, an apt metaphor for a study that identifies ways a community of practice contributes to one high school art program's success.

That I have a special interest in and knowledge of education and the CCHS art program there can be no doubt. I have known my wife since we were both 17 and fellow students at CCHS. Pat began her teaching career at CCHS in 1977, the year after I began teaching there. Our two children were our students during the years I taught English at CCHS. Both of them as well as many of their friends who took art classes at CCHS were also students of Pat's and mine and have gone on to graduate from art colleges and are pursuing art-related careers. My daughter is a public high school art teacher, children's book author and illustrator, and my son is a New York-based, graphic designer and photographer. For more than thirty years, I have known the CCHS art program and its teachers and students very, very well. This personal experience enhanced my understanding of the history of the CCHS art program and the context in which its students and teachers have developed a community of practice. However, I was also very aware that my unique strengths might also suggest liabilities, especially in terms of addressing concerns about researcher bias.

### **Researcher Bias and Claims of Reliability**

Educational criticism (Eisner, 1998b) recognizes researcher subjectivity as unavoidable. Selectivity in perception and presentation is inherent to the qualitative

process. Indeed, “bias occurs because of omission as well as commission, and since there is no form of representation that includes everything, *in this particular sense*, all forms of representation are biased” (Eisner, 1998b, p. 239 – 240, italics in original). That being said, the educational critic has a responsibility to “breed credibility” (Eisner, 1998b, p. 110) among his readers as well as to be aware of how his prior knowledge and beliefs may “impede fresh perception” (Eisner, 1998b, p. 67). I have taken particular care in the ways I address educational criticism’s claims to reliability through *consensual validation*, *referential adequacy*, and *structural corroboration* to minimize the effects of bias in gathering, analyzing, and presenting my data (Eisner, 1998b).

### **Consensual Validation**

*Consensual validation is, at base, agreement among competent others that the description, interpretation, evaluation, and thematics of an educational situation are right.* (Eisner, 1998b, p. 112)

For consensual validation, I have depended on my advisors and on the teacher participants. The willingness of Dr. William Pink and Dr. Heidi Schweizer to become very familiar with my data in its raw state and to offer advice and critique on how best to make meaning from it grounded my thinking throughout the dissertation process. Also, Dr. Robert Lowe’s careful and critical reading of my work over the course of my doctoral studies helped me become a better writer and thinker. He invariably made sure that both general and informed readers would understand and trust the process and product of my research. The three portfolio co-teachers, too, were and continue to be sources of inspiration and corroboration. I value most that my analysis resonates with them as true and that it has enabled them to understand aspects of their own practice that they did not previously understand as well or see as clearly.



## **Referential Adequacy**

*The major function of educational criticism, like all criticism, is the expansion of perception and the enlargement of understanding. Critics speak so that others can see and comprehend; criticism is an educational venture. (Eisner, 1998b, p. 113)*

For referential adequacy, I have provided sufficient “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) of the CCHS portfolio teachers and students as they work together so that readers will understand the qualities of the CCHS program I address and the meanings I ascribe to them (Eisner, 1998b, p. 114). The difference between thick and thin description is context. Without the contextual cultural knowledge of what it means when someone winks at you, Geertz (1973) explains, no meaning accompanies what one could construe as merely a physical tic. Anyone familiar with Wolf’s or Jones Johnson’s research on aspects of the CCHS art program will recognize that all three of us know about studio art classrooms in general and the CCHS studio art classroom in particular. We understand the context in which quality art education can take place. While our research addresses different aspects of the CCHS program in different ways and for different purposes, we share the common purpose of trying to make meaning that might go unnoticed were it not for our respective analyses. Indeed, one of Wolf’s hidden rules for successful art and writing classrooms pointed the way toward my investigation of community of practice theory as a way of trying to understand the CCHS art program. Art educators familiar with DBAE, Arts Propel, and VCAE will also recognize how the CCHS portfolio class positions itself among the competing ideologies and contemporary models of art education.

## **Structural Corroboration**

*Structural corroboration in educational criticism, as in law, requires the mustering of evidence.* (Eisner, 1998b, p. 111)

Similar to the concept of triangulation (Denzin, 1978), structural corroboration provides the means of claiming validity through constructing a preponderance of evidence from multiple data sources (Eisner, 1998b). The job of the educational critic is to look for “recurrent behaviors or actions, those theme-like features of a situation that inspire confidence that the events interpreted and appraised are not aberrant or exceptional, but rather characteristic of the situation” (Eisner, 1998b, p. 110). To accomplish this purpose, I gathered data over the course of one year through direct observation, multiple interviews and focus groups with students and teachers, digital images of students’ artwork and of students and teachers at work, at rest, and at play, and from written student and teacher documents. In the table below and the sections that follow, I note the sources of my data and describe in more detail how I went about selecting participants, gathering data, and analyzing it in ways that minimized researcher bias.

**Table 1: Sources of Data**

	June 2004	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan 2005	Feb	Mar	April	May	June 2005	Ongoing
Observation	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Field Notes	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Photographs	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Student Artist Statements				X	X				X	X		
Teacher/Course Documents	X	X			X					X		
Audio Journal	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Student Focus Groups				X			X			X		
Teacher Focus Groups				X			X				X	
Student Interviews		X		X	X		X	X	X	X		
Audio Recorded Critiques		X					X	X				
Audio Recorded Segments of Live Class	X			X	X	X	X	X	X	X		
Audio Recorded Teacher Presentation to Parents			X			X						

All told, I took 1349 photographs of the class and the students' artwork and recorded 5.75 hours of student focus group discussions, 3 hours of teacher focus group discussions, 32.4 hours of individual interviews, 2.5 hours of segments of live class, 2.2 hours of teachers speaking at parent meetings, and 10.25 hours of class critiques in which one student presented his or her body of current work to the teachers and fifteen or more classmates. I visited the class at least twice a week throughout the entire school year and attended all but one of the Wednesday evening studio nights at which art students, teachers, and members of a parent support group worked on a variety of tasks related to

the production of art work for individual classes, senior portfolios, college scholarship consideration, or entry into national competitions for high school artists.<sup>7</sup> I attended public exhibitions of student artwork at the school, my university's art museum, the city's public art museum, and at the local children's hospital to which portfolio students were asked to donate work to decorate its newest building. I attended the "national portfolio day" at the local college of art and design where high school art students from across the region had their portfolios reviewed by admissions representatives from thirty-six art colleges and universities from across the United States.

I also had access to documents the teachers prepared for the class and the school's curriculum guide, as well as to student self-assessments and to multiple drafts of the students' own artist statements written and revised at various points and for various occasions throughout the year. During the last week of school, students read their final artist statements aloud to the whole class as an introduction to presenting a slide show of

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<sup>7</sup> Studio night is a voluntary "open studio" held almost every Wednesday evening during the school year. Any CCHS art student is welcome to work on the sixth floor, the location of the school's music, art, and drama departments. Decades earlier, most of the school's fifth and the entire sixth floor had served as the convent where nuns of the Order of St. Francis who taught at CCHS lived. The time between the end of the regular school day on Wednesday and the beginning of studio night at 6:00 pm served as a convenient block of time to schedule student focus groups and most interviews. I would usually choose one of the small music practice rooms that lined the longest of the sixth floor corridors (and which used to serve as individual bedrooms for the nuns) as a private and comfortable setting for the individual interviews. For the first two sets of student focus groups, I was able to secure the art history classroom in the Social Studies department on the school's fourth floor. For the last one, we crowded into one of the practice rooms and sat on the floor. The first teacher focus group took place at one of the teacher's homes; the second, at my home. The last one took place in the sixth floor "shooting room," a windowless but large interior room in one of the art classrooms where finished work was photographed for reproduction as slides.

their portfolio along with a personal commentary about one new work, a loosely-defined self-portrait that no one was to have seen previously.

### **Selecting Participants**

Since I knew students would know me as the husband of one of their portfolio teachers and that I was a former English teacher at the school, I took extra care in developing methods that would encourage all participants in the study to discuss their participation candidly and as fully as possible without fear that what they said or felt would be judged as right or wrong, good or bad. In addition to the three portfolio teachers, I selected nineteen of the forty-five students to participate in focus groups. (A twentieth had to withdraw prior to the first focus group due to time conflicts.) For these groups, I asked teachers to recommend students who were likely to be well informed and articulate and who comprised variety in terms of gender, backgrounds, and interests. Eventually, I arranged to interview three other students, too, as I developed awareness of who would contribute to my fuller understanding of the portfolio class.<sup>8</sup> However, I began by trying to find a variety of voices that, together, contributed to ways of understanding the art program's record of success. Of course, I also looked for anything that seemed problematical or that might interfere with the pursuit of success.

### **Data Gathering Strategies: Focus Groups**

Logistically, it made sense to divide the nineteen students into two groups, each of which would participate in three focus groups throughout the school year. Pat, Cathy,

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<sup>8</sup> Appendix A lists the student participants and provides brief background information on each of them. All student names are pseudonyms. Teachers names are used with their permission.

and Anne also participated in three separate teacher focus groups, timed to follow each of the three student focus group meetings in November, February, and May of the senior portfolio year. For both focus groups and individual interviews, I used digital photographs I had taken during my observations to stimulate conversation among the participants.

This tactic had several advantages. The photographs not only provided data all by themselves but served as excellent stimuli for generating additional data from all the participants with minimal intrusion from me (Collier, J. 1967; Collier & Collier, 1986; Schwartz, 1989; Stokrocki, 1985 & 1991). For the first focus groups for both the students and teachers, I selected 240 slides to show to each group from my laptop computer. The students and I gathered in an empty classroom after the school day had ended but prior to the beginning of that night's studio night. I met a few days later with the teachers at Cathy's house. At each session, I also handed out contact sheets that arranged the photographs into 10 pages of 6 rows each with 4 images per row. I labeled the resulting grid of images by row, 1 through 60, and by column A, B, C, and D to allow for easy identification of each slide as focus group members referenced the images that brought particular ideas and experiences to mind. I selected the 240 images to represent what I believed to be the widest range of people, places, and things that I had observed between the start of the school year and the date of the first focus group meeting, November 17, 2004.

The first focus groups included two stages. During the first, and briefer, stage, I showed the slide show in its entirety without interruption. Upon its conclusion I asked for general responses to having seen all 240 slides, telling each group that I was interested in

their help in answering the question: “How does this class function in terms of participation, learning, and identity?” For the second stage, I passed out a set of the contact sheets to each participant. As we proceeded to discuss each page, I asked participants to pick out images or parts of images that they could comment on in one of three ways:

- How an image or a part of one depicts something or reminds them of something that everyone should know about the way portfolio class works.
- How an image or a part of one depicts something or reminds each of them about something that only he or she as an individual might understand about the way the portfolio class works. (“What is your secret knowledge about the way this class works?”)
- Is there anything about the way the portfolio class functions in terms of participation, learning, and identity that is not captured in one of the photographs or in our discussion so far?

By asking participants both what the photographs revealed and did not reveal (collectively and individually), I was able to uncover native perspectives unlikely to have been generated by questioning alone (Collier, J. 1967; Collier & Collier, 1986; Schwartz, 1989; Stokrocki, 1985 & 1991). As Paulo Freire (1970) used photographs to elicit native perspectives from the illiterate peasants with whom he worked, I used photographs to elicit data I otherwise would have overlooked.

Examples of this data abound. One student elaborated on how a painting in the background of one of the photos reminded her of the graduate from the previous senior portfolio class who had painted it, how he had little or no ability to draw when he entered high school, and how he now was at a prestigious East coast art college on scholarship. This memory reminded her both of her own college aspirations and of her belief that the

art fundamentals class at CCHS should be a required course. I asked her more about these thoughts in a subsequent individual interview.

This strategy for using photographs to solicit data characterized my methodology for all of the focus groups (as well as for the second round of individual interviews). The set of photographs I showed prior to the second focus group included 187 images of the slides the 19 focus group students had submitted to the annual Scholastic Art & Writing Awards scholarship competition. I again showed all the slides first without interruption and asked an open-ended question upon the slide show's conclusion: "What did seeing that body of work make you feel, think about, or reflect upon?"

During the second stage, I asked students to talk about their Scholastic slides with the group with this question as a guide: "What do your Scholastic slides reveal about what you have learned or tried to learn, and who or what has influenced that learning?" For the second teacher focus group I asked the same open-ended question in stage one but substituted this question for stage two: "What is worth pointing out about each student and/or his or her Scholastic slides in terms of helping me understand how the portfolio class functions in terms of participation, learning, and identity?" The third and final round of focus groups mirrored the procedure for the first one, except that I selected 295 new slides taken between November 17 and May 5, the date of the last focus group meeting.

### **Data Gathering Strategies: Routine**

Throughout the entire year, my routine became one of observing, note taking, reflecting, taking and reviewing photographs, and listening over and over again to each



round of recorded data. All the digital audio recordings were easy to organize and replay on both my computer and my iPod. My repeated listening informed my decisions about transcription. All nine focus group sessions (six with students, three with teachers), forty-four of the individual interviews, and two class critiques were transcribed in their entirety by professional transcribers. During and after each of the times I observed the class, I took field notes, and I would frequently record personal reflections on the same day or evening to further document my impressions as they surfaced.

### **Data Gathering Strategies: Selecting Students to Interview**

My ongoing analysis of one round of data guided the questions I developed as well as the students I selected to interview for subsequent rounds of data collection. With variety of perspectives and backgrounds in mind as well as on how articulate students had been during the focus groups, I selected twelve of the nineteen students from the focus groups to take part in a series of semi-structured interviews throughout the school year. One reason for this winnowing was simply logistical. I did not have time to schedule multiple interviews with all nineteen focus group students. None of the seven eliminated from the individual interview process had revealed any information during the focus groups to contradict or extend in a significant way anything that other focus group participants' had said. I was confident that my winnowing process would not cause me to overlook a way of understanding the portfolio class's community of practice.

I tried to represent variety and to minimize bias by selecting students from each of the following categories that had become apparent to me: students who fully intended to enroll in an art college, those who planned to enroll in an art college or a university where they would major in art, those who planned to enroll in a university where they would

major in an art-related discipline, and those who liked art but had no intention of pursuing an art major or art-related career. While the course is primarily intended for students from the first three groups, any senior with some previous course work in art and a self-identified interest in meeting the requirement to produce a minimum of 24 “portfolio worthy” works of art over the course of the school year is accepted into the class. (That number matches the number of works required of any student who elects to submit his or her portfolio for advanced placement review.)

The table below shows the breakdown of the original twelve students I selected for multiple interviews.

**Table 2: Students Selected for Multiple Interviews**

<b>Student</b>	<b>Definitely Art College</b>	<b>Maybe Art College, Maybe University with Art (or other) Major</b>	<b>University with major in art related or other field</b>	<b>University, but with plans to major in a field not related to art</b>
Juan	X			
Eva	X			
Angela	X			
Amira	X			
Will	X			
Neely		X		
Paulo		X		
Steve		X (Art or English)		
Todd			X (Architecture)	
Daphne			X (Design)	
Ellie				X (undecided, anything related to Peace Corps aspirations)
Zoe				X (business or veterinary science)

When it became apparent that I needed to schedule additional interviews with other students to get a more complete understanding of the way the portfolio class functioned, I made arrangements to do just that. Early in the process of my recursive

analysis of data from both the focus groups and the individual interviews, I realized that the influence of students from previous portfolio classes was emerging as a significant theme. I began to wonder not only about the influence that these former portfolio students had on the members of the 2004-2005 portfolio group but about what influence this current portfolio class and its individual members may be having on younger art students at the school. The more I learned the more my perspective evolved on what it all meant (Peshkin, 1985). What exactly was the nature of the knowledge and practices that were being transmitted from old-timers to newcomers, and how was this knowledge passed along?

To help find answers to these questions I added two younger students—Martin, a junior, and Woody, a freshman—to the students I interviewed. I selected these two students because several of the portfolio students I interviewed mentioned them as younger students on whom they believed they had some influence. When Woody revealed that among the many portfolio students who influenced him one, Yale, stood out as having the most influence, I arranged to interview him as well. (Yale already was among the focus group students but not among the ones I had initially selected for the series of individual interviews.) The only other student I interviewed who was not a member of either focus group was Gary, a portfolio student whose particularly challenging critique I observed and who resisted his teachers' and classmates' advice for how his artwork might improve. I knew that I could learn much from a portfolio student like Gary whose experience seemed to vary from the norm. Indeed, Eisner (1998b) and other qualitative researchers stress the importance of attending to data that seems to

disconfirm or contradict one's own interpretations (Green, 2000; Patton, 2002; Rossman and Rallis, 2003).

### **Data Gathering Strategies: Semi-Structured Interviews**

For the first round of individual interviews with the twelve students I had selected from the focus groups, I merely hoped to get to know each student, to find out what had sparked an interest in art in the first place, to learn more about the process that had led to electing to take the senior art portfolio class, and to understand what role, if any, art might play in the student's future. In the second round of personal interviews, I asked students to elaborate on any of the comments they had made previously (in the first interview or in either of the focus groups) that seemed particularly significant to me. Ellie, for instance, a student who liked art but had no intention of majoring in art in college or pursuing an art-related career, had said, "Portfolio class changes the way you think!" and I wanted to explore what she meant by that. I told students, too, that I would ask them about a number of topics before we were finished, but I withheld naming them until we had exhausted meaningful conversation about each topic in succession. The topics were:

- critiques
- the current drafts of their artist statements
- relationships with younger art students and/or students from previous portfolio classes
- plans for upcoming voluntary art shows and the mandatory Fine Arts Day exhibition
- the acronym *curve ball*

I concluded the second interview in two stages: first, by asking students to review and comment on any of the slides I had taken of the class in which they appeared (Ellie appeared in 39 slides, for instance), and second, to respond to what I called the “spill the beans” question—to confide in me anything they knew about portfolio class that they presumed I may not know and/or would never find out unless they told me. This strategy for the second interview gave structure to our discussion but also allowed for students to take the conversation in directions I could not have anticipated.

The third round of individual interviews pursued follow-up questions from previous interviews and focus groups and asked students to reflect on some of the big events that marked the final month of the class: Fine Arts Day and the formal receptions accompanying it, the Haggerty Museum show, the Children’s Hospital reception for CCHS art students who had donated work to decorate its newest building, and, most importantly, the final presentations in which students had to read their final artist statements aloud to the whole class to introduce a slide show of their complete portfolio and the unveiling of their final self-portrait. I also tried to bring closure to the year we spent together in two ways. First, I introduced another visual aid, an architect’s rendering of the sixth floor, as a way of soliciting comments about the space in which the portfolio class took place, the people who occupied the “geography of the sixth floor,” and any meanings students attached to particular spaces. Finally, I asked students for their advice on what to make sure anyone who read my dissertation would need to understand about the CCHS portfolio class.

### **Data Gathering Strategies: Spontaneous Interviews**

In addition to the three rounds of planned interviews, I did conduct spontaneous interviews on several occasions that seemed opportune moments to capture voices during what, to me at least, seemed a significant activity. After the first day the college reviewers met with portfolio students, I handed my recorder to several students and asked them to tell me about how the day had gone for them. After the first round of critiques, I asked three students to step into one of the practice rooms for a quick debriefing about what had just taken place. When a former CCHS art teacher came to a studio night to visit his former colleagues, I recorded part of his conversation with one of the twelve students I had selected to participate in the individual interviews. When another of these students began to cry during a peer critique of her work, I pulled her aside the next day for a short interview to try to explain to me what had prompted the tears and how the teachers and any of her classmates had followed through with her. During our last formal interview we revisited that experience after weeks had passed and given each of us a fresh perspective on that trying experience.

In gathering this data I have learned more than I will probably ever be able to say. In the process of writing this dissertation, the job of choosing a focus and developing a coherent story from this abundance of raw material became my most important one. In the following explanation of the strategies I used to analyze and code the data, I hope to assure readers that my description, interpretation, evaluation, and thematic analysis of the CCHS senior art portfolio class are reliable. I hope, too, that readers will find the story that results filled with meaning beyond my telling.

## Data Analysis and Coding Strategies

While Eisner does not recommend a specific coding procedure to follow in an educational criticism, researchers who do educational criticism engage in processes consistent with the constant comparison methodology first described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and refined by many others (Goetz, J. P., & LeCompte, M. D., 1981; Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G., 1985; Janesick, V. J., 1994; Dey, I. 1999). The process becomes one of tracking key issues, recurrent events, or activities in the data that become categories on which to focus. Over the course of my work on this dissertation, two strategies proved particularly helpful as I worked with data to develop categories and identify emergent themes. One was to merge all the transcripts into a single document and to search the document for recurrences of words and phrases that had begun to ring in my head: *freedom, community, sixth floor, identity, voice, each other, my wall, my statement, my slides, studio night, influences, Fine Arts Day, the Haggerty show, levels, mark-making/claiming one's marks, search, honesty/being truthful, thinking, document/documentation/sketch book, risk, art history, break through, care/caring about, portfolio teachers/other art teachers/other teachers at the school, (periods of) not working/being stuck, Scholastic, ARTS, college reps/college reviewers/art college, deadlines, the parents, money/scholarship, future, curve ball, meaning, critique/critique note cards, reputation, other schools*. I used a feature of Microsoft Word to insert comments and compose tentative interpretations in the right-hand column adjacent to the appearance of these words and other phrases in the transcript that seemed significant because of their frequent use or that stood out as particularly illustrative of ways that teachers and students participate with each other in the class.

A second strategy was the ongoing use of the audio journal I have kept since beginning my research. I have listened to my recorded data so often I can almost recite along with the speakers as they respond to me and to each other. I have re-listened to my own reflections repeatedly, too, as a way of refining ideas as they took shape over time. The inserted annotations to the merged transcript and the audio journal informed each other as I reflected on ways to distill the categories into the major themes I will present in the following chapters. My practice was to record new journal entries when ideas occurred to me as I re-listened to any of the previously recorded data. This recursive process helped me develop insights about how pieces of data related to each other and to any of the components of community of practice theory (Brown, Collins, and Duguid, 1989; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger 1998). It has been a messy and intuitive process, working from bits of data outward to theory and from theory inward to bits of data. The inserted annotations to the printed transcript and the recursive dialogue I had with myself in the audio journal both contributed to my ability to make meaningful connections across multiple sources of data to aspects of community of practice theory, especially as articulated by Wenger (1998).

### **Emergent Themes**

During the first session with one of the two student focus groups, one of the students said, “Well, we all learn with and because of each other.” That comment has turned into the most significant of all the themes I present. It led to the connections I have been able to make between the data and the theory of community of practice, particularly the four components Wenger identifies as necessary to “characterize social participation as a process of learning and knowing” (Wenger, 1998, p. 5). These components have



contributed to my decision about how best to structure the thematic presentation of my data in the chapters to follow. Chapter two presents themes related to *community* and *practice*, concepts that Wenger defines this way:

- *Community*: a way of talking about the social configurations in which our enterprises are defined as worth pursuing and our participation is recognizable as competence.
- *Practice*: a way of talking about the shared historical and social resources, frameworks, and perspectives that can sustain mutual engagement in action. (Wenger, 1998, p. 5)

Chapter three presents themes related to *meaning* and *identity*, concepts that Wenger defines this way:

- *Meaning*: a way of talking about our (changing) ability—individually and collectively—to experience our life and the world as meaningful.
- *Identity*: a way of talking about how learning changes who we are and creates personal histories of becoming in the context of our communities. (Wenger, 1998, p. 5)

A final chapter discusses ways my study may have meaning beyond an increased understanding of the success of one high school's studio program in the visual arts, including implications for art education and future research.

## CHAPTER 2: COMMUNITY AND PRACTICE

*The world as we shape it, and our experience as the world shapes it, are like the mountain and the river. They shape each other but have their own shape. They are reflections of each other but they have their own existence, in their own realms. They fit around each other, but they remain distinct from each other. They cannot be transformed into each other, yet they transform each other. The river only carves and the mountain only guides, yet in their interaction, the carving becomes the guiding and the guiding becomes the carving. (Wenger, 1998, p. 71)*

This chapter describes both the mountain and the river of the CCHS senior art portfolio class as a community of practice. The metaphor describes the interplay between the relatively fixed structural elements and concepts of the portfolio class and the ways members of this community participate with each other to shape and be shaped by the constraints and affordances those elements and concepts provide. “Interplay” suggests “players,” and, of course, the primary players in the CCHS community of practice are the portfolio teachers and their students. Since players require a stage on which to play, it seems appropriate to begin with a description of the setting where most of the action unfolds. Description of the structural elements and concepts that shape students’ and teachers’ separate and mutual participation will follow, beginning with the overall structure of the course and the course description. My interpretations and explanations of the ways students and teachers interact with each other will be interspersed throughout the chapter, organized around four themes that best demonstrate ways the community of practice developed within the portfolio class contribute to an understanding of the CCHS art program’s success:

1. The value of team teaching: Three portfolio teachers, plus
2. The value of students working in the hallways
3. The value of the portfolio class as a family or community, and
4. The value of students serving as teachers and mentors for each other.

A fifth theme: the value of giving students relative freedom to work in ways that resonate with who they are, who they are becoming, and what engages their attention, focuses my analysis in Chapter 3.

### **The Setting**

The CCHS art department shares space with the music and drama departments on the school's sixth (and top) floor. The original use of the space—as a convent for the nuns who taught at the school—accounts for the sixth floor's unusual layout. Classrooms, band and orchestra rooms, practice rooms, teacher offices, storage spaces, two lavatories, a kiln room, a dark room, a small computer lab, and a dance/drama studio run along either side of a twisting corridor that makes eight, ninety-degree turns from one end to the other. When the portfolio class outgrew the capacity of any of the four art classrooms, the art teachers arranged to sheathe the sixth floor hallway walls with homasote, a structural fiberboard, to expand the space where students could work.

The majority of the 45 seniors in the art portfolio class (all but those whose focus is sculpture, ceramics, photography, or media art) stake claim to space along one of the short or long segments of hallway outside the music and art classrooms as his or her “wall.” The twice weekly, two-hour classes scheduled at the end of the school day literally take place in the hallways and in three of the four of the art classrooms.<sup>9</sup> This unusual addition to the physical space where the class takes place represents a significant way the structural element of setting has been shaped by the river of participation over time. More students required both more space and more teachers. As will become evident

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<sup>9</sup> An architect's rendering of the sixth floor is included as Appendix B. A photography class is the only other art class in session during the two meetings of the portfolio class.

in the sections devoted to each theme, that portfolio students work with a team of teachers and in the sixth floor hallways influences ways everyone participates with each other and, in turn, contributes to the success of the CCHS art program.

Portfolio students make use of the sixth floor hallways and classrooms for independent work during free periods (“mods”) throughout the school day. All art students use the art classrooms as “resource rooms” for independent work when regularly scheduled classes are not being held. It sometimes becomes difficult to distinguish between when classrooms are being used as resource rooms for independent study and when they are being used for regularly scheduled class meetings. No one closes doors, and teachers and students—especially portfolio students—walk freely among the hallways and classrooms with only the slightest regard to whether an official class is in session or not.

More time for independent work comes on most Wednesday nights, when art teachers open the 6<sup>th</sup> floor between 6:00 and 10:00pm, sometimes later, especially as deadlines for national contests, college applications, Fine Arts Day, and the Haggerty Museum art performance and installation show loom. All art students, art teachers, and members of the parent support group are invited to work on the sixth floor on these “studio nights.” This additional meeting time outside of the regular school day also represents a structural element shaped by both the need to find more time to work with more students and the teachers’ desire to include the participation of interested parents in the community of practice. Parents’ participation, if only peripheral, nevertheless

contributes a very important way of assisting in the preparation of student artwork for contests, scholarship applications, and art shows.<sup>10</sup>

The sixth floor hallway space is always reserved for the portfolio students. Their walls serve as quasi-studios where the students pin canvas or paper on which to work. They also add a variety of personal markings: from graffiti-like messages and impromptu drawings to pictures cut out from magazine or sketchbook pages. One portfolio student has lined the upper border of her wall with a string of Barbie dolls. Another has invoked pirate jargon in a scrawled poster that, later in the year, would become part of the design for art club t-shirts and buttons and which would serve as an informal motto for the senior portfolio class of 2005: “WE PUT THE *ARRRR* BACK IN ART!”

### **The Context of AP Portfolio: Its Overall Structure and the Course Description**

Before my observations of any of the portfolio classes, I had presumed the class would include a mix of all three of the activities that Hetland et al. (2007) describe as typical of the studio art classroom: lecture-demonstration, students-at-work, and critique.

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<sup>10</sup> The parents group has its own community of practice and ways of sustaining itself over time as parents of graduating seniors leave the group and new parents join. On a studio night in early fall, officers of the parents group host a reception for new CCHS parents interested in learning more about how they can become involved in supporting the art program. Pat, Cathy, and Anne address the group at this meeting, explaining how indispensable the work of the parents group is to sustaining the success CCHS students have had in securing substantial college scholarships. Every year, the parents group prepares mats for more than 1,000 pieces of student art for exhibition from the portfolio class alone. Each spring, they sponsor a “Parents Choice” art exhibition at a local gallery to showcase their favorite work by underclassmen. They bring food to every studio night—which everyone enjoys—and they share stories with each other about the experiences of their own children as well as the experiences of other students they know who have gone through the program. The art teachers host an appreciation banquet for the parents near the end of every school year. It is not unusual for parents to stay in the group or to revisit occasionally long after their own children have graduated.

While the class does indeed include all of these activities, its emphasis on individualization distinguishes it from studio classrooms that proceed in lock-step fashion from one assignment or class project to the next, with all students attempting to solve the same kinds of problems at the same time. Students and teachers alike value the freedom students have to choose their media and subject matter. The constraints on this relative freedom of choice come in the form of teachers' expectations that students will work toward meeting a variety of deadlines over the course of the year.

Deadlines during the first semester include: the first round of formal critiques in September and October; the Art Recognition and Talent Search (ARTS) competition in October; the National Portfolio Day reviews in November; and the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards in December. Deadlines during the second semester include: the second round of formal critiques in February and March; college admission and scholarship applications from January through early March; art exhibitions at CCHS for Fine Arts Day and at the Haggerty Museum for the art performance and installation show in April; and one for the final artist statement and slide presentations in May.

These deadlines influence the ways students and teachers participate with each other throughout the year. Some deadlines are hard and fast, but many are negotiable, including the decision of some students not to meet a particular deadline at all. One reason that teachers started offering a pre-Portfolio summer class in June was to help as many students as possible meet the ARTS deadline in October, but the teachers understand that, so early in the school year, not every student will complete the number of quality, finished pieces the ARTS competition requires. Many students choose not to participate in the Haggerty Museum exhibition, but teachers expect all students to meet

deadlines for the Scholastic competition, the National Portfolio Day reviews, and the Fine Arts Day exhibition.

When it comes to meeting deadlines for the formal critiques, however, teachers and students seem to be constantly renegotiating the sequence in which students will present their work and how much new work they will present. One student, Ellie, even renegotiates the minimum number of pieces due for the final portfolio presentations when she gets the teachers' approval to devote her time to a huge and complicated installation piece for the Haggerty Museum show, an endeavor which she realizes may leave her a few pieces short of the expected 24.<sup>11</sup> While the teachers do express impatience and frustration with students whom they believe have made poor use of their time, they also understand—even for these students—that many such individual adjustments are part of the way the class is intended to work. Pat believes that the consistent application of the same rules for everyone can actually do more harm than good. During the first teacher focus group, she explains:

One of the things you hear in school a lot is, "We have to be consistent. Everything has to be consistent." And I would say that if I have a least favorite word . . . [it] would be *consistent*. Because I think consistency can kill every individual thing you've got going.<sup>12</sup>

Given this emphasis on individualization, and the wide range of students' interests, technical skills, and conceptual abilities, I came to think of the portfolio class

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<sup>11</sup> A description of the role Ellie's peers play in critiquing her work on this installation will be included later in this chapter. An analysis of the reasons that inform Ellie's decision will be included in Chapter 3.

<sup>12</sup> I have inserted ellipses and/or bracketed text to improve readability and clarity of transcribed text and to minimize any effect on the meaning of quoted passages due to excessive verbal fillers like 'and' "um," "ah," "like," "you know," and other tangential asides. I have left several of these fillers to capture the flavor of passages as they were spoken.

not as a class in the usual sense but as a program, and the classroom not as a “room” at all but as a string of inter-related neighborhoods where students and teachers collaborated in a variety of ways. The description of AP Portfolio from the CCHS curriculum guide suggests that the class is, indeed, a year-long program intended to guide students to apply and refine skills they had acquired previously to develop a body of work representative of who they are and how they will use the tools of art to communicate that:

AP Portfolio is an honors course. At this point you will have an arsenal of skills. It is time for you to choose a focus of your own, an idea to explore in depth. This is the year that you tell us what you want to work on, the year for you to pull all of your skills together. Your work is individually contracted, and the teachers become facilitators. The emphasis is on completing a body of work from your own voice. You can choose any medium to work in, at any time. You will continue to refine technical skills, as we give emphasis to new conceptual skills. You will complete an individualized body of work that will give you the mobility to apply to any college or art school that requires a portfolio (including the University of Wisconsin). This body of work can be used to enhance your application to college even if you are majoring in another subject area. Attendance at MIAD’s [the Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design’s] Portfolio Day and college presentation days is mandatory.  
*Prerequisite: See preferred sequence above and consent of the instructor.*<sup>13</sup>

The informal language of the course description, its emphasis on the value of the course to the college application process, regardless of the student’s intended major, and its emphasis on conceptual skills and each student’s developing a body of work true to his or her voice shape the way that the written curriculum plays out in practice. The teaching and learning activities that result from the course description will become clear in my presentation of four themes that organize the rest of this chapter. While all four themes reveal ways the portfolio class’s community of practice contributes to an understanding

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<sup>13</sup> Information about the recommended four-year sequence of classes is included as Appendix C.



of the success the CCHS art program has enjoyed, the first theme—the value of team teaching—provides the overarching structure from which all of the other themes flow.

### **Theme 1: The Value of Team Teaching: Three Portfolio Teachers, Plus**

As the portfolio class grew in size, the number of teachers assigned to teach it grew, too. Pat, 55, and Cathy, 46, have been team-teaching the course since 1992. Anne, 33, began co-teaching the portfolio class in 2002. In the year of this study, Pat was beginning her 27<sup>th</sup> year at CCHS, Cathy her 15<sup>th</sup>, and Anne her 9<sup>th</sup>. Pat has an MFA in painting and a modest record of exhibitions of her large, abstract oil paintings. Cathy earned her national board certification as an art teacher. Before becoming a teacher, she had worked as a graphic designer, creating labels for the wine industry. Anne majored in ceramics in college and is a free-lance graphic designer. All three women are good friends as well as colleagues. They share the joys and sorrows of their personal and professional lives with each other. The friendship and mutual trust among these three women influence their practice as teachers. Cathy was Pat's student teacher when she went back to school to get her initial certification, and Anne was a former student of Pat's in the years before CCHS even had a portfolio class.

Both Pat and Cathy teach full time. Anne is part-time, working 3 of every 5 school days. Along with missing school due to a parental leave during the first couple of weeks of the fall semester, Anne's part-time status accounts for at least part of the reason students mention her name far less often than they do Pat's and Cathy's in talking about their portfolio teachers. Also, students are somewhat more likely to have had previous classes with Pat or Cathy than with Anne. Regardless of how well or how little the teachers know the students from their previous and varied experiences with them, all

three routinely share their individual assessments of what they believe to be each student's particular set of strengths and areas that need improvement.

The portfolio teachers frequently consult with the other four CCHS art teachers—Keith, Craig, Jill, and Mark, and the department's art assistant, Talia—on ways of helping portfolio students make progress. Mark, for instance, whose son, Kurt, is a member of the portfolio class, demonstrates a variety of skills on studio nights that the teachers, together, have decided would prove beneficial. One night he gathers interested students together to demonstrate how he stretches his own large canvases; on another, he shows how he prepares the ground of his canvases with rabbit skin glue. Another time—at one teacher's request—he conducts an informal workshop on color theory. When a New York gallery invites Mark to bring some of his smaller paintings to them for consideration for inclusion in an upcoming show, Mark brings in several canvases on a studio night and asks teachers and students to help him decide which ones to take with him to show the gallery owners.

The casual and voluntary activities of studio night contribute to the feeling that every member of the CCHS art department is engaged in the joint enterprise of helping each other become better artists. During the two school days when art college representatives visit CCHS to make short presentations and to review students' bodies of work throughout the sixth floor hallways, the college reps become quasi-teachers, too. Long after the college representatives return to their respective campuses, the CCHS art teachers continue to engage students in conversations about ideas the college reps emphasized in their individual critiques of students' work. Throughout the college admissions process, Pat, Cathy, and Anne develop an active phone and email

correspondence with many of the college representatives.<sup>14</sup> These conversations help shape ways the teachers interact with students and their parents about how to guide the next stages of development of students' artwork as well as their eventual decisions about where to attend college.

Everyone involved values being able to work on both of these processes within a team-teaching context. Angela appreciates the way the teachers confer with each other about each student's college plans in order to give her and her classmates individualized advice on the college selection process. She notes how she and her classmates received different written advice from their teachers about which colleges they should be sure to see during the college representatives' visits to CCHS and at the National Portfolio Day at the Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design on the following Saturday:

the art teachers . . . take into account each and every one of us as individuals, and they told us what schools they thought would be good for us and from that we got to decide which schools we really wanted to go to [at Portfolio Day] and which ones we didn't want to go to so much. . . . It shows how hard . . . and how much they're willing work for us . . . 'cause no one got the exact same paper and no one ranked [the colleges] in the exact same order . . . [They] know we are all individuals and we all are seeking different things from college.

Angela's classmate, Ellie, illustrates the value she finds in having both a team of teachers to guide the development of her work and 44 other classmates with whom she can share the experience:

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<sup>14</sup> Over the years, the teachers have become very familiar with the campuses, programs, and personnel at more than 20 art colleges and universities with strong programs in the visual arts. Most of their first-hand knowledge comes as the result of their participation as guests in "teacher weekends" sponsored by the colleges. At a few other institutions, however, they have arranged their own campus visits. This personal knowledge of art college campuses, programs, and personnel contributes to the ways portfolio teachers are able to serve as brokers between the CCHS community of practice and other communities of practice to which students hope to belong.

I was thinking about that—[the decision to have one large section and a team of teachers for Portfolio]—the other day, actually, because . . . me and Daphne were talking about . . . [what] some people had heard back from Scholastic about their portfolios and stuff, and just how subjective the whole [judging art] thing is. . . . That’s how I feel. . . . If you had one teacher, it would sway you so much because it’s nice to have [all three of] them. . . . One [might] say, “Oh I love this part,” and the other one is like, “No, I don’t like that at all.” Then you can decide because it’s true to yourself. I just think that would be horrible to split them up because they are all so different and they all have different inputs. I think Anne is better in design; I think she knows more about that. They all have their parts, and I think it’s really helpful . . . [that during] the critiques all have different things to say. . . . Plus, I think that would be bad splitting up the classes because I think you would bond then with those 15 people . . . instead of having the whole group.

Todd, who intends to become an architect, jokes that he uses the divergent opinions of all the art teachers to his advantage as he considers how best to develop his work:

All of us have experienced this, so this is something that we all, you know, can relate to. . . . The teachers just, they almost double team you, you know, in a good way. . . . When you have a question, . . . Pat, Anne, Cathy, Mark, they’ll all just come and . . . try to help you figure out this problem of yours. It might not even be a problem, but they’re just open to so much. . . . What’s cool is how they work off each other and you, I mean I’ve gone and asked Pat, you know, for a comment, and then not telling her . . . I would go ask Cathy about the same question . . . to see . . . how they answer . . . the questions differently, and then, you know, I’ll bring them in together and let them argue about it or something. . . . It’s fun and it’s just a great experience that all of us have definitely had.

The team-teaching context influences ways that all teachers in the CCHS art department interact with each other as well as with students. As Angela pointed out, the 45 students represent a wide variety of individual needs. Although the CCHS curriculum guide recommends a four-year sequence of specific art courses and electives as the best preparation for Portfolio, any senior who has taken the year-long Art Fundamentals course, one or more other art classes, and who has demonstrated interest in preparing a body of at least 24 individual pieces of “portfolio worthy” art can be admitted to the

class. This self-selection process is unusual for an honors level class at CCHS.<sup>15</sup> The art department's non-competitive admissions policy results in a more heterogeneous group of students than is typical for the school's Advanced Placement courses. A recurring phrase in the data from student interviews is, "We're all at different levels." The phrase is usually followed by some kind of apology for suggesting that the speaker thinks of herself as superior to others among her classmates, but the fact remains that students do have different levels of preparation, technical skills, and interest in art.

### **Who Needs the Mark-making Lecture/Demonstration?**

On the very first day of the week-long summer class which most portfolio students took in June after the end of their junior year, I witnessed a memorable lecture/demonstration that I came to think of as typical of how the open and fluid structure of team-teaching shapes the ways that students and teachers interact.<sup>16</sup> Pat acknowledges the different levels of skill and experience within the group by asking students who had never taken the Advanced Drawing and Painting class to identify themselves. About a dozen or so of the 40 students present raise their hands. Pat tells them to remain in the room with her after the general announcements are finished so that

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<sup>15</sup> For instance, the policy I inherited (and regret not changing) when I served as chair of the CCHS English department and as teacher of its senior AP Honors English class restricted enrollment to the "best" 50 English students in the school as determined by a consensus of English department members.

<sup>16</sup> While most portfolio students take the summer class prior to the official start of the portfolio class in the fall, a few also took the summer class after their freshman and/or sophomore years. Others never take it. Zoe, for instance, due to her decision to add Portfolio to her schedule after school had started, did not take the summer class, and a few other students elect not to take it for a variety of reasons. As with many aspects of the portfolio class—concurrent enrollment in Art History, for instance—enrollment in the summer class is strongly encouraged, but not required. Because Anne was due to deliver her second child, she did not teach the summer class in June of 2004.

she can work with them on an exercise she believes is essential for portfolio students to have experienced. As other students leave the room—either to claim their walls and begin working or to consult with Cathy about ways of discovering a unifying purpose or idea as the basis for the body of work they hope to complete in Portfolio—I overhear one student say, “They’re going to try to get a whole semester of Advanced Drawing in one day? Good luck!”

While I am certain that student’s incredulity was well founded, Pat seems up to the task. She begins the lesson by giving each student a sheet of white paper and a stick of charcoal and asking them to quickly make two or three marks on the page. When the students finish, Pat tells them that she bets she can describe the kinds of marks most of them have made without even looking at them. She takes a piece of chalk now, and on the board she illustrates the kinds of generic marks she believes most students will have made: a squiggle, a lightning bolt, a scribble, a “W,” a slash, a loop, or a line. “Boring and predictable,” she tells them. “Artists try to avoid the generic and the predictable. They try to make marks that are fresh, never seen before by human eyes.”

That’s tricky business, she tells them. It calls for original thinking, risk taking, and creativity. Even the most famous of realist painters make fresh marks. She grabs a reproduction of Andrew Wyeth’s famous painting, *Christina’s World*, to demonstrate what she means. She asks students not to look at the woman lying on the hillside or the house in the distance but to look closely at any of the four corners of the painting. “What do you see there?” she asks. “Do you see any of these generic marks? No. What you see are ‘ghosts and layers’ of original marks that no one had ever made before and no one has

made since. Wyeth owned his marks. They are his and his alone. Your job as artists is to make fresh marks and claim them as your own. How are you going to do that?"

As she is talking, as if on cue, another art teacher, Craig, who had been busy cleaning out desks in another part of the room, walks across the length of the classroom, carrying a dustpan. He pauses mid-stride and interrupts Pat's lecture to give an example of what she means. He names a local artist and teacher at the Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design. "Do you know what he does?" he asks the students. He takes his shop broom and drags it across the top of his drawings, and then he starts to draw again on top of that."

Pat adds an example of her own that Craig's example brings to mind. "Grace Hartigan," (a relatively famous painter with whom Pat studied in graduate school) "used to take her canvas into the shower with her!" Craig continues walking through the room and Pat turns the lesson back to the students, "Now let's see what you can do."

The student nearest me begins to cover his elbow in charcoal and then to drag his bent and blackened arm across the page. Another student makes a charcoal sandwich out of two sheets of paper with bits of his charcoal stick in the middle and rubs the pages together between his hands. Lesson learned. At a break in the action, I hear one boy telling a girl, "You know what I want to do? I want to get a bunch of those tiny packets of mustard and line them up under the door but on top of my paper. Then I want to jump on the packs of mustard." The girl is not very impressed. "Wouldn't that stink?" she asks.

"Yeah," the boy concedes, "but it would be cool."

These are the students, remember, who are relatively underprepared for Portfolio. The weeklong summer class is Pat and Cathy's attempt to bring everybody up to speed.

Spontaneous moments of collaboration like Craig and Pat's interchange are not uncommon. During one class period, for instance, Anne responds to a question from Todd by leaving him for a few minutes to interrupt Pat's work across the room with another student. When she returns to Todd she shows him a quick drawing Pat made on a scrap of paper to illustrate a layering technique with colored pencils to add the depth and richness of color Todd had been trying to incorporate into his drawing. Anne describes the interchange as fairly typical of the way teachers make use of each other's particular skill sets in their work with students. Sometimes, however, the ways teachers interrupt each other are not such perfect complements to the lesson at hand. The portfolio teachers laugh about another colleague's habit of interrupting them mid-sentence in the middle of an Art Fundamentals class, for instance.

### **Going with the Flow**

The following lengthy excerpt from the transcript of their first focus group illustrates ways that Anne, Cathy, and Pat describe their team teaching situation to each other. They had just seen the 240 slides depicting a wide range of people, persons, and things from the first few months of class, and I had asked them to talk to me about what the slides did and did not show about the way the portfolio class worked.<sup>17</sup> The free-

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<sup>17</sup> The 240 slides depict scenes from September through November and were shown in chronological order, beginning with an early studio night and ending with the National Art Portfolio Day held at the Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design. The images include: students working alone; students socializing and/or working with several other students (either on individual pieces of art, in both formal and spontaneous critique, looking at each other's slides, or cleaning the art rooms and hanging each other's work in the hallways in preparation for the individual reviews of the college admissions representatives); students working with one teacher; students working with two or more teachers; students presenting their body of work to teachers and students in formal critique; students watching art college representatives' slide presentations; individual



flowing nature of this conversation—without any additional prodding or interruptions from me—characterizes the relationship among this close-knit teaching team. They clearly embrace their roles as co-facilitators of their students’ learning. Although hectic and at times chaotic, the situation they have set up for themselves—teaching more like members of an improvisational dance troupe than as cogs in a “well-oiled machine”—contributes to the pride they take in their work and their students’ growth as artists:

Cathy: Well, I was thinking when I was watching it that it always looks amazing . . . when you sequence parts out, and . . . you look at it in that sequence. . . . It looks really amazing. It looks like, “Wow, what an amazing place!” When you’re in it (laughter) it doesn’t feel, it doesn’t have that same sense, . . . just having that time collapsed in the sequence like that really changes, you know, kind of how you start to see what happens. I guess, kind of like a good movie would.

Ann: I would agree that . . . it’s really cool to just see it as just an observer, like someone floating overhead, kind of just looking at parts of what’s going on, because I think . . . being in it is sort of just like . . . jumping out and landing on the wheel and just spinning, and going with the flow, you know, and not really stopping to, it’s strange because . . . seeing it that way, I’ve never seen it that way before. Because you just, you are just in it, and you’re just moving and you’re just doing. And, um, and certainly

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students consulting with individual college admissions representatives both at CCHS and at MIAD; teachers consulting with one student or with small groups of students; members of the parents support group working together to prepare students’ work for presentation (cutting mat board, mounting work within mat board, and covering finished pieces with protective acetate); individual pieces of artwork in progress; announcement posters in the sixth floor hallway; and various features of the sixth floor space: the portfolio students’ individually decorated flat file drawers, the computer lab, the ceramics room, the shooting room, the magazine/clipping shelves; the art resource book cabinets, the chalkboard in room 610, the portfolio teachers’ cluttered desks pushed together in that same room, the walls of the figure drawing room filled with examples of student work from Art Fundamentals and Figure Drawing that the teachers had put on display for “freshmen parents night,” an overflowing garbage can, and a student desk on top of which are jars of paint, a pair of headphones, and a CD player. Students, parents, college representatives, and teachers are depicted in a variety of postures: standing, kneeling, leaning on tables, and sitting in chairs or, with the exception of the parents, sitting on the floor. Several pets—a puppy, a rabbit, and a duck—appear in some of the images taken on various studio nights.

it's cool, and you notice cool moments, and all these things, but I think looking at the images, it's sort of like, "Wow, you know, how did that happen?" . . .

Pat: Or, THEY talk to each other? (laughter) Or look, . . . "What's he doing down there?" (laughter) Oh my goodness, they are looking at each other's work! It's like, "That's good." Yeah, you realize things are going on when you're not doing them all. It's like, that's nice. . . .

Cathy: I love the hallway, frankly, . . . because I think that there is an energy to the entire floor because of, maybe because of that condensed space. . . . Having the work out in the hall is having the kids, kids having to bump up against each other, . . . it gives that, I mean there is sharing that goes on because you have to walk past that work. If that work were in a room, you might never walk past it. So, I think that it provides opportunities in its own way that it wouldn't otherwise, if we had, I guess, you know, quote unquote "better space."

Anne: I also think it probably gives the kids some kind of sense of freedom, in that everywhere else in the building, to be in the hall you have to have a pass and people, you know, if you're out in the hall they're wondering why you are out there, and um, you are supposed to be on your way somewhere, . . . but up there the kids have their own little carved out piece of space and it's theirs, and, you know, it's their wall, and they've got their own. I mean it's tiny, but it's theirs. . . . I think there is an element of trust and responsibility that . . . if they are stepping up and being responsible, and it just, you know, I think that fact that they have that responsibility—that we're giving it to them and that we trust them—and that it's basically an environment of trust.

Cathy: In contrast to the rest of the school. Because that's the first thing that kids say, is that, "This is so cool up here, it's not like the rest of the school."

Pat: I mean, I go to Glasser's "Fun, freedom, power, and belonging," and it's absolutely what they have.<sup>18</sup> It . . . [may seem like] chaos, I think, if you were trying to teach because you are trying to do 15 things at once, but, I think that's why it's worth it.

Cathy: I think there's something to that. . . . We do multi-task in the sense that . . . we really are acting as facilitators. I mean, across the board. . . . even when you [are] quote unquote "teaching your classes" . . . kids feel free to

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<sup>18</sup> Pat refers to William Glasser's (1998) *Choice Theory* that argues that peak learning experiences satisfy basic human needs for survival, love and belonging, power, freedom and fun.

come in the middle of whatever you are doing and ask you something. . . .  
(laughter). There are no boundaries. . . .

Pat: Anyone feels free to drop in any time, which is fine, I mean you get used to it and you adapt to it, but . . . yeah, all the rules that are playing out in the other floors CAN'T play here because every time you take . . . those rules too seriously, you give something up. . . .

Anne: All those things contribute to a real sense of family, kind of, you know, where it's like we're in and out of each other's faces and . . . the interrupting, you know, . . . [another art teacher will come in during] the Fundamentals Class . . . (laughter by all) . . . [and say,] "Look at this camera, look how this works!"

Pat: (laughter) . . . [and there are] 27 kids that you are supposed to be taking care of right now (laughter by all) and it was in the middle of a sentence (laughter by all)

Anne: . . . but it was kind of cool, you know, because that's what's real, you know; it's cool.

Cathy: I think so, and I think, too, . . . whatever impetus we have, whatever moment comes along, like, if one of us has a great idea and it HAS to come out right then, then it doesn't matter what everybody else is doing; (laughter) we'll just go there.

Pat: (laughter) like losing things like, I mean, you never know where half the supplies are because they could be (laughter) in somebody else's room; they could be in the shooting room; they could be anywhere. So hunting for books becomes a real choice moment for everybody. Who had it last and where did it go?

Cathy: But there's a lot of trust in that, I mean, I think that . . . everybody trusts [that] everybody is doing what they are supposed to be doing to further what the kids need. You know, so there is always the focus that the kids are the most important thing and that we're there to make it work for them.

Pat: And if we're not, they fill in for each other.

Cathy: I think that's the other situation that is critical . . . We're only us, and we can only do so much. And they do fill in for each other, and they really start to take that role on, and they really start to teach each other stuff, and they take responsibility for it, too. Now, that is what I am seeing. . . .

Anne: I think it's also about where you put your focus. I mean, it's almost like being at home with little kids. It's like, well, yes, you know the house is chaos because, you know, we're doing something else right now that counts first. You know, so it's not the focus on keeping everything in order and . . . this . . . well-oiled machine that way. It's more the focus is the kids and the work and what's happening. So everything else just flies by the seat of its pants, which seems to be OK.

Pat: I think as a teacher it's hard to feel like you are covering all your bases because you know all this other stuff is going on around you. And so you always feel like you can, well, but I missed that kid, or I should go in to that kid, or I should have said this, or we didn't do this, or we didn't have time to meet for this, and so, there has to be a comfortableness for that unsettled feeling for that.

Cathy: There is, because you know that you missed stuff. I mean you can see it in the kid's work. You know what's missing because somehow you might have thought you had taught them that, or they would have caught it somewhere, but it didn't happen. We have to be OK with, "Ooo, we have to teach that to them right now." You know, now that we're noticing that somehow they missed it. So, I mean it's not perfect. . . . I think what you don't see is that . . . in the time that you see kids working in the hall, there's also classes going on, there's also different levels of work going on. . . . We're taking like longer months of time with students so it's not just . . . [the slide show] makes it look like we are . . . "Oooo, ooo, ooo" (laughter) like we are going to dance around and suddenly . . . [everyone knows] what to do. (laughter) . . . I think it's more complicated than that. And I think there's more, it's just the collapsed time thing. In real time, the hallways aren't always full, you know, there's more snippets going on, and um . . .

Pat : There's stuff you want to cover or you think you want to cover. And you have to let a lot of that go. And I think there are times when, you know, you just wish you could just gather them altogether and just teach and lecture and talk and, you know, "Now you get it." and you really have to be OK with saying, "Oh well," you know, because they have their own agenda, and their agenda isn't always the same as yours. . . . I kind of imagine a lot of teachers in the school [not] being able to teach like that and how absolutely uncomfortable it would be for them.

This lively interchange demonstrates how much the teachers value the malleability inherent in the structure of team-teaching itself. In the attempt to meet everyone's needs, the teachers "multitask" and "facilitate" as best they can, believing that

“trying to do 15 things at once” contributes significantly to the worth of their joint enterprise. The teachers respond to the structure’s constraints—the futility of trying to cover everything they would like to teach, the unsettled feeling of not having spent enough time with all of the students who need them, the frequent interruptions, and the relative chaos of searching for misplaced curricular materials—with trust in each other and the process of “going with the flow.”

When Cathy remarks: “There are no boundaries,” she may as well be describing a synthesis between the relatively fixed, but malleable structure team teaching provides and the constantly changing ways students and teachers work within that structure. The structure defines while participation shapes the portfolio class’s community of practice; one guides while the other carves “until the carving becomes the guiding and the guiding becomes the carving” (Wenger, 1998, p. 71). Within this dynamic context and for a variety of reasons—from valuing multiple points of view on decisions about creating art and choosing a college to enjoying the sense of belonging to and bonding with the whole group of students who have elected to join the community of practice—students like Ellie, Angela, and Todd concur that the structure of team teaching contributes to the success of the portfolio class. Students also agree that the setting of the class contributes to its success.

## **Theme 2: The Value of Working in the Hallways**

Like their teachers, the students believe the physical space in which team teaching takes place adds energy to the sixth floor and encourages mutual sharing among all art students. Among the 240 individual images viewed in their first student focus group, ones

that suggest the value that results from students working in the hallways draw many favorable comments. This exchange between Amira and Kurt is representative:

Amira: I like D-5 because it's . . . one of Juan's pieces in the very beginning. I think one of the coolest parts about the whole CCHS thing is that you get to watch everyone's work develop. And just having it up on the wall constantly, like . . . if you really love something that somebody is doing or if you don't like it, you can go up to the person and just talk about their work, and what you could say could completely change whatever they are working on. And that's just such a huge influence that we all have on each other, just by like passing by. . . . We're always up on the sixth floor, you know, . . . I mean, it's mandatory we have to be up there pretty much, but I mean a lot of kids choose to be up there all the time. And I think that says a lot to the program, just how, you know, we all feel comfortable being up there and just, you know, lying around on the floor even though we look lazy, but we might be thinking about stuff. Where else? You can't do that, on like, in an English resource room or anything like that, they'll tell you, "Get up!" But not here. Which is really, you know, I really appreciate that. . . .

Kurt: . . . All the slides showing . . . our spaces, like our wall, it's like it's your own studio, . . . that's your space; you get to do what you want with that space. But also it's . . . open for everyone to see into it, it's like, you just walk around and see everyone's, like, what they're doing, what they are working on, and it's cool that you can have both those aspects into it. . . . You can just be alone, chilling, working on your work, or you could have everyone, like talking to you, telling you what you need, and either way it's open for the public or just for yourself.

The simultaneous public and personal space that working in the hallways affords is more critical to fostering ways that students influence each other's learning than is the hallway space, *per se*.

What seems important to sustaining the community of practice is the open and easy access that students have to seeing each other's work as it develops over time and being able to engage each other in conversations about that work at every stage of the process. Amira believes the layout of the sixth floor facilitates students' borrowing from each other without even realizing it, citing ways Eva's "splashy" technique shows up

transformed in her own and a number of other students' paintings. She says, "All those little things . . . you pick up after seeing somebody's work . . . or seeing them working, . . . you kind of adapt it and change it to be your own." Paulo concurs. He admires, for instance, a painting of Neal's that uses spray paint as a medium and turntables and phonograph records as subject matter in ways both similar and different to the ways he had used both in his own work. Neal's painting uses both for comic effect, depicting Albert Einstein as a DJ, "scratching" records hip-hop style in a piece he calls *E = MC Hammered*. Paulo had used spray paint and depicted turntables and phonograph records for more serious purposes in politically charged paintings that share the intention of praising hip-hop culture or protesting a social injustice.

Paulo makes a distinction between "stealing" and "copying" from the images that surround him on the sixth floor. Stealing is a virtue in his mind because the artist who steals an idea or image transforms it into something original—as Amira did with Eva's splashes and Neal did with Paulo's hip-hop imagery. However, when Paulo sees an image he created reproduced by Juan in one of his paintings, he takes exception and draws Juan's attention to the transgression with a gesture familiar to both of them, "calling out a bite." Paulo explains:

When you bite someone you go like this . . . (He slaps one forearm quickly on top of the other.) . . . because, I mean, that's not your move; you didn't think about that you know? . . . [Juan] has a graffiti mentality because he changed it. He knew he was biting. He didn't make it his own. He did the same exact thing I did. If he really wanted to steal it, he would have stole my image of something, he would have stole it and did something different with it. And that's stealing, not copying.

Paulo admits having made a similar mistake and subsequent correction in a painting of his own. When he realized that his depiction of a pregnant African woman he intended to call "The Birth of Hip Hop Music" bore too striking a resemblance to "one of Juan's fat

pieces,” he tells me: “I knew I was biting . . . and I had to change it. And that’s the day that you saw me going crazy on the huge canvas.”

Working so closely to each other in the hallways lends itself to these kinds of interactions. Students do seem to develop a general sense of trust in each other—especially among the small groups of classmates whose walls are in close proximity. During our final interview Amira describes the intimate nature of much of the sharing among portfolio students as “a sixth floor thing:”

Amira: I’ve talked to kids now who I wouldn’t have talked to before, and we talk . . . about . . . personal . . . stuff, and . . . with critiques and things, like if something is really personal . . . you have to be able to explain part of it . . . at least so . . . the person, the viewer kind of understands what’s going on. . . . I think this class has really taught me how to kind of let go of certain facts and just tell people and it’s not as big of a deal as . . . I think, or maybe the small stuff that I do withhold is a big deal and I need to tell people. . . . I haven’t learned completely, but I’m getting a much better feel of what I should tell and what I shouldn’t. And when the time’s right to do that.

Greg: What are the influences that brought you to that point? To that . . . realization about . . . how much am I gonna share, how much am I gonna withhold? When is the time right? . . .

Amira: When people tell stuff about themselves that . . . I’d label as very gutsy . . . I get [the] impression that . . . that had a huge impact on the audience and, you know, it was legitimate. . . . I admire that a lot. And I admire a lot of kids up here who just, you know, will tell . . . about events that are painful to them like Neely with her dad, you know, with his arm chairs only showing up from her older work. . . . I think that’s really powerful . . . that she’s finally worked through that, and with Annie with the dog bite issue . . . it’s really just kind of like group therapy almost. You know, like we’re all here and we’re all stressed out sometimes and we’ll all just freak out together. And it’s good. And you know there’s times when we’re just like totally not honest with each other, and then there’s times when we’re so honest like you can’t address it again, like that moment’s passed. Like you can’t talk about it again . . . if you’re not up here. Like . . . [you’re not going to] talk about it in English class, like no, you don’t bring that stuff up—that’s a Sixth Floor thing.



Greg: So the difference between the Sixth Floor thing and the English class is what?

Amira: I think with, well English. You know, it's school, it could be . . . any class. But the Sixth Floor thing is just it—you can be totally honest. Or you could totally lie to everyone. You know? Either way or [to] any degree. . . In regular classes—if you're talking about yourself in a theology class or English class or any class like that—you're gonna withhold information because you know that not everyone in the class has something in common with you. You know up here we all are drawn to art in some way. So there's like one common thing, but when you're not up here, then there's just too many variables, and it's just too risky to really . . . be open. [That's] just . . . the way that society works, like you don't, you don't tell people stuff like that. I mean it's much . . . looser now than like the 30's or something, where you had family secrets and you never told anybody and then it would come out and . . . be like a huge like town, you know, thing, but now it's not as much of a problem, but people still do that with each other. . . . You don't tell people what you're really thinking. You don't tell people what's really going on at home or at work or . . . how you really feel about a person. And up here, I mean you don't completely do that all the time either but it's much more open in the sense that sometimes it does happen.

Having the common bond of art and of working and relaxing together in the hallways contributes to the ways student influence and trust each other. From the gesture of “calling out a bite” to the sharing of an intimate detail—“a sixth floor thing”—that informs one's work, the ways students learn with and because of each other are shaped by the physical space in which they work.

In the year of this study, CCHS was in the midst of a capital campaign to raise funds to build a field house and, subsequently, to relocate the drama and music departments into space left vacant by the move of the athletic department into a new facility. The third stage of the renovation includes tentative plans to remodel the entire sixth floor to accommodate the space and technology needs of the visual arts department. There is no telling, of course, what a change of space might mean for the community of practice that the portfolio teachers have developed with their students and colleagues in

the department's current configuration. At the very least, Cathy's concern about unintended consequences of someday having "quote, unquote better space" should cause architects and curriculum planners to consider ways that the current hallway space contributes to the success that the CCHS art program has enjoyed.

The most significant of these ways is the open and easy access the hallway space provides to beginning and advanced art students alike to see and interact with portfolio students and teachers at work. As Cathy has already pointed out, "There is sharing that goes on because you have to walk past that work. If that work were in a room, you might never walk past it." Indeed, the access that students of all ages have to each other sustains the community of practice over time. As novices travel through the hallways they participate—at least in peripheral ways—in the CCHS portfolio class's community of practice, a community in which, as Amira points out, "If you really love something that somebody is doing or if you don't like it, you can go up to the person and just talk about their work, and what you could say could completely change whatever they are working on. And that's just such a huge influence that we all have on each other, just by like passing by."

It is to this sense of community that the next section turns, a theme that seems to flow naturally from the first two themes. For it is in the context of the structure of team teaching and of students and teachers working together in the sixth floor hallways that community—what Anne describes as "a real sense of family"—takes its shape.

### Theme 3: The Value of the Portfolio Class as a Family or Community

Like their teachers, several students in each of the first focus groups also use the metaphor of family and refer to the portfolio class as a community. This interchange among Nadine, Angela, Kurt, and Yale is representative:

Nadine: The thing I got from the slideshow was really how much community is put into this whole, the whole class. . . . The individuals, . . . the individual work, everything has to do with everyone else because . . . it affects everybody. . . . I think that surprised me a lot, watching this slideshow because, you know, I'm actually going to miss it a lot. I didn't realize that until I was watching it and it was kind of, . . . these problems maybe I had with people before kind of went away because we all have this thing in common, this thread that ties us all together.

Angela: I kind of got the sense of community, like you could see the home, you can see how comfortable everyone is even if we're just sitting around lounging out and not doing art and you can see people helping each other and coming to each other and critiquing each other and . . . explaining to one another, . . . trying to influence one another and that's really great.

Kurt: Yeah, . . . everyone . . . talks to each other about the work, like they don't just say, "Oh, it's looking good." . . . Everyone pretty much helps each other out saying what they like about it, what they don't like about it and it's pretty cool how, like we have that community, like, that everyone can talk to each other about it pretty openly.

Yale: I think another big thing, too, is the teachers. Because you notice they were in like almost all of the slides. . . . They just . . . play such a big part and everything, just helping us. . . . It's really something special we have here and that not many other places have the teachers like we do here that they can go around and help us and just really critique us and let us know their honest opinions and help us out. . . .

Nadine: . . . I think what I've discovered through this class . . . is that portfolio is a lot more than just the art because I think today I was kind of feeling, like maybe I didn't want to go to art college, but it's so much more than even just the art. And while it doesn't seem like that—well, you have to do these deadlines—it's community. I mean it's such a sense of community and that's such a valuable thing to learn before you go to college because that's something that's going to be viable in all our lives, and I'm really grateful for taking this class and I'm really grateful that they offer it because I think I've gotten such a sense of community that you're going to

have at workplaces, that you're going to need to have at certain places and I think that that's what it's completely meant to me is while the art is amazing and I love doing it but the sense of community is more important to me.

To be sure, there are times during the year when the stress of managing conflicts among obligations to the portfolio class, other classes, and non-academic activities strains the generally amicable relationships among students and teachers. Amira describes the way the students interact with each other during these stressful times, first by explaining how she sometimes edits her comments before delivering too critical a comment to one of her classmates during formal critique:

Amira: . . . I don't want to be overly harsh . . . because we're always so stressed out, and it's like if you say the wrong thing, anybody could burst into tears. You don't want to make people cry. Because, you know, half of us are like . . . freaking out when we're up here anyway. It's . . . so much drama. It's almost funny. . . .

Greg: So much drama, it's almost funny?

Amira: It's almost funny. Until like you realize—Wait, it's not funny. Like if I didn't go here and I just like saw and I knew all the stuff that was going on you'd be like, "Ha, ha. It's so funny." But, it's not funny when you're up here.

Greg: OK. I need to hear more about that—all the drama. . . . Tell me about the drama.

Amira: . . . so like when, when Pat or Cathy doesn't like the work and you've been working at it for hours, and you haven't been sleeping and—like I know this happens all the time with a whole bunch of people—and then you're just like, "I don't know what to do!" And then there's always like some sort of tears and you . . . just like stomp . . . away, and stuff like that, or like if we have arguments with each other, and it's like, "Oh, don't go on the other end of the hallway, because he's not talking to you. Or she's not talking to that person, and then you don't want to get in between things, and . . .

Greg: Well, you know in the . . . focus groups last week, . . . maybe that's because there were all 10 of you there, . . . if you would listen to that it

sounded like one big happy family, and now what you're saying says, "Well, not so happy? Or?"

Amira: It's, well, it's all pretty good like most of the time, 'cause this doesn't happen very often. I don't know . . . if I just tend to focus on negative aspects of things. But, I mean I'm not gonna say that we're happy all the time, and that we get along all the time, and stuff like that because that, that's not the truth. Like I think overall we get along pretty well, like considering all the stress we're under and how, you know, we're not completely familiar with each other. And just how intimate the art is, because you're, you know, it's stuff that you're really close to and . . . going out and telling people . . . why you did this piece, that can be really hard. And so you're just kind of like sticking out [on] a limb and hoping that they're not gonna, I don't know, . . . they're not going to just completely hate the idea or be really cruel about any critiques that they have. So it's kind of, it's really gutsy kind of things. So I mean considering . . . all the stuff that you would almost expect would make us like really, you know, mean and argu[menta]tive and, just, . . . I don't know, bitchy all the time, we're pretty good. So, I think that's why . . . the big group thing went, you know, how. . . we're all just like [a family]—yeah, because . . . if you just focus on . . . [the] positive, we have more positives than negatives by far.

So, while not always one big happy family—as not even families ever are—the portfolio students seem to understand that their growth as artists owes much to how they can support each other within their community and how they can teach each other in a variety of ways. Amira drives home this point during a focus group discussion about the value she finds in the practice of all students writing note cards to each other at the end of each session of a classmate's formal critique:

I love the concept of note cards. . . . I keep them by me so whenever I'm working and I just feel like, oh I'm sick of working, I'll just look through them, and, you know, there's a lot of good ideas in there. And a lot of positive feedback. So when I feel like, oh . . . I'm just making crap, you know, I can get back into . . . a good focus and just start working again. Because, you know, there's a lot of, well community and just how people, like you could be having a crappy day, there's people who you can talk to on the sixth floor, like, anyone basically will listen to you. And it's just really special.

Outside of school, too, the special, family-like bond that portfolio students share manifests itself in a number of ways. After he is finished reading the note cards his classmates gave him after his critique, Juan purposely leaves them at a local diner where a number of portfolio students socialize, believing someone will find them and bring them back. Angela describes a time when a group of girls from Portfolio were together and started to ask each other which of the boys from the class they would kiss. She laughs as she describes how they rejected candidates as they went over the list, repeating the phrase, “No, he’s like a brother to me!” until it became a chorus. At social occasions, too, Paulo believes he and his portfolio classmates “Share energies, you know?” describing “how cool” it was to arrive at a party and feel delighted to find so many of his portfolio classmates in attendance: “I think we shared vibes.” He believes that the shared vibrations he senses among his classmates influence the ways they motivate each other as artists: “I think that’s what really makes us work, like our energies, you know?” Amira reports a similar sense of kinship with her portfolio classmates—even the ones she does not know particularly well—when she encounters them among the hundreds of art students from all over the region in attendance at the National Portfolio Day:

There’s a lot of other kids there and there’s the college reps and it’s in an unfamiliar building, and it was all kind of like, “Oh my God. Why am I here?” And then you see someone you know and you just feel so much better because . . . even if . . . my wall is not near any of those guys’ . . . we’re still from the same school; we still know each other’s art and we’re able to just kind of like relax and calm each other down, you know, before review and not get all stressed out because . . . [of] the strong sense of community that we have.

Students also talk about community in terms of the pride they take in belonging to a program well known among the art colleges and whose graduates have a record of

success in art-related careers. A freshman, Woody, tells me that he wants to live up to this reputation. At his public middle school, he explains:

I was in track, and our track team was . . . like really good, so everybody ran really good, but when I got to CCHS, it's not really known as that great, and . . . my times were a lot slower so . . . it's the same kind of thing really. . . . If your art department's known as really crappy, you're not really gonna get that inspired to like work hard in it.

Steve, who says that taking Portfolio “changed my life, like literally,” expresses similar pride in belonging to the CCHS art community. His familiarity with the success of many CCHS alumni in their subsequent art careers helps Steve imagine the legacy he will contribute to when he graduates:

CCHS is this great art school. It's just a great school in general, and if you have this mass of like 40 artists coming through here every year . . . and . . . such great artists have been here . . . it adds up, you know? . . . I kinda imagine this like stream of . . . water and it's like passing through CCHS and it's bringing people in—it's moving real fast—bringing people in and then just pushing people out, and it's always great when they go out. So it's just kinda fun to think about it like in five years even. . . . Just . . . imagine what's gonna change. Like what the kids in this class are gonna do that's gonna like affect . . . what's going on. . . . [The graduates pictured in the promotional booklet] . . . they looked like the kind of people that would be doing that.<sup>19</sup> Like Greg L. . . . he looked like a fashion designer; he looked happy, he looked really happy in what he was doing and it's like, “Oh, he's from CCHS,” and it's like he was probably here, he probably walked through this hall and stuff, and it's kinda cool . . . it's cool to have that connection.

Martin, a junior who credits Juan as having a strong influence on his own development as an artist, already feels excited by the prospect of helping lead the next group of portfolio students to connect with each other and, perhaps, even the larger art world. He imagines

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<sup>19</sup> The promotional booklet Steve refers to is one produced as part of the CCHS capital campaign. The booklet includes reproductions of the high school artwork of 21 former CCHS Portfolio graduates, short biographies of alumni currently working in a variety of art-related careers, quotations from these and other alumni, and a listing of the colleges and graduate programs where CCHS alumni have earned full scholarships and fellowships.

that the community that he and his classmates form could resemble communities of artists who have come together before to influence ways of creating art.

I just really want to motivate people and . . . get really interested . . . [and] just come together . . . like [the senior class is now.] . . . They're so close right now and everybody talks and just really comes together. And I think it's really important to art to have a community surrounding you and to have . . . a support system with people to critique you . . . that's what I really want for all of us on the 6<sup>th</sup> Floor . . . [the] juniors, especially, to really come together. 'Cause I think of a whole community of art . . . that's like a lot . . . I don't wanna say big revolutions but . . . like the big changes in art all happen from . . . gatherings and people influencing each other. . . . That's how so many different genres of art emerge; it's from different influences. I think that's so important in art and literature and any kind of fine arts.

While Martin's aspirations to influence "big changes in art" seem idealistic, his determination to help build a community among his peers similar to the one he admires in the current senior class seems very realistic. His belief in the power of a community of artists to influence each other in positive ways will help sustain the portfolio class's community of practice and, in turn, the CCHS art program's record of success.<sup>20</sup>

The attributes evident in this analysis of the class as a family or community contribute to an understanding of that success. Portfolio students feel a sense of kinship with each other and with all CCHS students who have taken or will take the portfolio class. They have high expectations for each other. They feel proud to belong to a successful art program. They value their classmates as sources of comfort, critique, and inspiration. Despite occasional arguments and frustrations, they believe they are part of something special, feeling, as Nadine says, in "this thread that ties us all together . . . a

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<sup>20</sup> In the following school year, Martin chooses as his wall the same corner of the sixth floor where Juan worked. Like Juan, he becomes a co-president of the CCHS art club, and, in the national Arts Recognition and Talent Search contest, he is selected as one of 20 finalists in the visual arts, doing Juan—who received an honorable mention—one better. Each, however, receives substantial merit scholarships and both choose to attend the same prestigious, East coast art college.



sense of community” that provides “such a valuable thing to learn before you go to college because that’s something that’s going to be viable in all our lives.”

This sense of community among portfolio students and their teachers emerges from the common purpose that the course description provides and is shaped by the flexible structure of team teaching and the interactions that take place along the string of inter-related neighborhoods in the hallways and classrooms of the sixth floor. The boundaries that separate the three themes identified thus far, while relatively fixed, are also—like the boundary between the mountain and the river—malleable and amenable to some overlap. Indeed, some examples already presented could also serve to illustrate the value of the fourth theme that concludes this chapter and follows below. The themes do depend on each other, each one flowing from the context and structure the others provide. The next section focuses on the ways students serve as each other’s teachers and mentors, a theme about which Pat (in my discussion of the value of team teaching) has already observed, “You realize things are going on when you’re not doing them all. It’s like, that’s nice!”

#### **Theme 4: The Value of Students Serving as Each Other’s Teachers and Mentors**

The first time I noticed Daphne was during the summer class at the end of her junior year. She had claimed space in the middle of the longest stretch of sixth floor hallway and was busy at work on a painting of her mother. Pat was at the far end of the same hallway, more than 40 feet away. Daphne raised her hand in a futile attempt to draw Pat’s attention. Amira happened to walk by just then, and soon she and Daphne were looking at Daphne’s painting, discussing what I presumed was the issue on which Daphne had hoped to consult with Pat. A minute or two after Amira left Daphne, heading

toward her own wall, Pat—never having seen Daphne’s raised hand—approached Daphne’s wall. I expected that, now that she had the chance, Daphne would consult with Pat, too. Instead, she just kept working on her painting, and Pat walked further up the hallway until some other student asked for her attention.

Months later during my first interview with Daphne she says she does not remember the specific incident but believes it is a fairly typical one:

All the art teachers are great, but it’s good to get other people’s perspectives as well. . . . If my religion teacher could answer my question about art and I could feel, “Okay, that makes sense to me.” I’m gonna take her advice. . . . It’s like okay, okay I see your perspective. . . . I’m gonna go with that.

The teachers believe such “snippets” go on all the time, that their portfolio students routinely “fill in” for each other and “really start to teach each other stuff and . . . take responsibility for it, too.” Many instances of such peer teaching substantiate their belief. That Amira’s advice proved a worthy substitute for Pat’s in the incident I have just described would probably not surprise them. What may surprise them, however, is the variety of contexts in which this and other kinds of peer teaching and learning take place.

In the analysis that follows, I describe four contexts in which students serve as teachers and mentors for each other, with examples from within the portfolio group and across age groups and time. The value this theme contributes the CCHS art program’s success will become evident in a number of respects, perhaps most importantly with the understanding that one way the community of practice sustains itself over time owes much to the fact that portfolio students serve as teachers and mentors to younger students just as previous portfolio students served as theirs.

My description of the ways portfolio students serve as each other’s teachers and mentors will be presented in four contexts:

1. Teaching and mentoring each other within the portfolio class itself;
2. Teaching and mentoring each other as they experience the CCHS art program over the years of their mutual participation in it;
3. Teaching and mentoring younger art students coming through the ranks, and
4. Being taught and mentored by previous portfolio students while they were coming through the ranks themselves.

### **Context 1: Serving as Teachers and Mentors for Each Other Within the Portfolio Class Itself**

Amira's consultation with Daphne serves as an example of the most obvious and typical way students consult with and teach each other during the year of the portfolio class itself: informal, spontaneous critique. These moments of critique, too numerous to recount, occur most frequently within interstitial groups of portfolio students that are shaped by longstanding friendships, the neighborhoods on the sixth floor within which students most often choose to work, or other affinities students discover over their senior year. Ellie, Daphne, and Amira, for instance, who did not know each other very well before taking Portfolio, became almost constant companions during Ellie's decision-making process for her Haggerty installation piece.

The three girls routinely huddled together on the floor near Ellie's and Daphne's walls as Ellie shared preliminary sketches with them and solicited their advice on the materials, scale, and design she considered using for a piece about a protest she had attended at the School of the Americas. The art teachers as well as the Art History class had made all three girls aware of a variety of artists and art movements, and, following Ellie's lead, the girls discussed Ellie's plans within the context of three artists' work. Their familiarity with Cristo and Jeanne Claude's most recent collaboration, "The Gates,"

an installation of 7,500 saffron-draped gates along 23 miles of pedestrian paths in New York's Central Park, helped the girls decide that the scale of Ellie's work had to be big enough to give viewers the opportunity to walk through it in order to experience the meaning Ellie hoped to convey.

Another influence resulted from Ellie's viewing a video about the large-scale installations of artist and naturalist, Andy Goldsworthy, during a resource mod in the sixth floor computer lab. Already an environmentalist, Ellie decided she wanted to incorporate natural materials in her installation in ways that evoked Goldsworthy's work. Daphne and Amira helped Ellie weigh the pros and cons of this idea. They approved of her ultimate decision to fashion crosses out of branches and brightly colored thread and to weave them along a corridor of cyclone fencing that Ellie would build to enclose the simulated protest site. The girls agreed that these simple crosses were more fitting tributes to the ordinary citizens killed by Latin American soldiers trained at the School of the Americas than the conventional white crosses had been at the actual protest. Besides, they figured, white crosses would still be visible in the photograph of the protest that Ellie planned to enlarge to poster-size and hang at the closed end of the long corridor, just above a makeshift shrine where viewers would pick up postcards Ellie created to explain the reasons for the protest. The trick would come in mastering Photoshop well enough to eliminate images of the fencing visible in the original photograph from Ellie's finished poster. Attending to that detail would help simulate the experience Ellie had at the original protest.

At one point during the time these brainstorming sessions about her Haggerty installation were taking place, Ellie confided to me that she worried that, "Everyone is

getting really sick of me talking about it.” However, Amira’s comments to me about their impromptu critiques indicate that she and Daphne were more than willing to play the role of friendly critics:

Right now . . . what [Ellie’s] doing, it’s so, like, “Wow!” It’s going to be interactive, and there’s so many components behind it and, you know, it’s hard to get all the details so we’re just talking [about] . . . what’s going to be the most successful, and we just bounce ideas off each other. I mean she has the ultimate say, but . . . it’s a good process for . . . us. . . . People are definitely going to be willing to help her. I’m really excited about it.

Amira recognizes that the process of weighing decisions about “what’s going to be the most successful” for Ellie’s work also benefits her: “It’s a good process for . . . us.”

Evaluating each other’s possible choices during spontaneous, informal critique teaches both artist and critic to consider the overall purpose of a work of art and how best to arrange “all the details” to complement the whole.

A second way students serve as each other’s teachers and mentors within the portfolio class surfaced during my analysis of the value of students working in the hallways with Amira’s observation about how students almost subconsciously transform elements of each other’s styles into their own work. Paulo discussed the dangers of such mimicry in his observation about how he and Juan call out each other’s “bites” when the borrowing is too close to the original. Because this kind of imitation represents such a powerful way students teach each other—sometimes without even realizing the source of the influence—another illustration of how it works seems useful. Here, Paulo describes Juan’s influence on his own style and the efforts he went through to make it his own:

I always . . . look at people’s work, . . . not really trying to criticize it but just enjoy it, and I’ve seen . . . elements of some people’s work that I’ve taken, and elements that other people have taken from me. Like I remember when I was first starting, I saw Juan [as] a really good artist, like “All right, he’s a pretty good artist.” You know, he has other color schemes, . . . and maybe I can use some of

that. And [from] that I found my own style. [By] taking from him, I totally grew off [in a different direction] and [my style] is opposite now. It's parallel but opposite. So it totally grew from his, but it's something different now. I think it's something more advanced. . . . And I've often seen people take from me. . . . I've seen kids like dabble with spray paint because my . . . work is . . . graffiti influenced. And . . . maybe that helped out some kid who . . . is from the suburbs and has no knowledge of what graffiti culture is, you know? . . . Graffiti art. . . . is an art form in itself that no one really knows about, and if that's educating someone else, you know, I feel that I shouldn't be jealous if somebody is taking from me. . . . I kind of congratulate . . . him for . . . learning from what I've done.

Whether or not Paulo has transformed elements of Juan's style into "something more advanced" is, of course, not the point. The point is that Paulo recognized he could learn from the example of a talented peer and that others have tried to learn from him. He believes that these stages of imitation—even the "cliché" of copying "your favorite artist"—represent important steps an artist "grows out of" in the process of becoming "your own person, your own artist . . . [in order to] really know what you're doing with your art."

A third way students influence each other's learning is in playing the role of peacemaker for classmates who become angry at each other. Like much of the spontaneous, peer critique, this work of mending relationships goes on without the teachers' involvement or knowledge. Angela, for instance, intercedes with Zoe on the day after a formal critique during which the way Juan asked a question about Zoe's preference for depicting animals instead of people had offended her and caused her to cry. The critique ended shortly after that, and later that same day, at studio night, Pat spends a long time with Zoe—who had cried a few times before during portfolio class for reasons that have more to do with her personal life than with her art. Unbeknownst to Pat, however, Angela and Juan, who are very good friends, had decided that Angela should

try to explain to Zoe that Juan did not mean to hurt her feelings and that the two of them really like some of Zoe's new work.

Angela also tells me that she told Zoe she understood that Juan's manner at critique could come across as so arrogant sometimes, but really, that his heart was in the right place. A couple of days later, when I first have the chance to debrief with Zoe about the incident and Angela's intervention, she is not ready to let go of the resentment she feels toward Juan, and we move on to discuss other matters. However, during our final interview two months later, I find the opportunity to raise the issue again. I had listened several times to the audiotape of the critique during which Zoe starts to cry after Juan's comment, but I could not understand why Zoe would take offense at an idea that, actually, another student had raised first. Juan followed with observations that seemed very thoughtful to me—and certainly not at all intended to be hurtful. Zoe still did not quite see it that same way, but her perspective on the incident had evolved:

[Juan] does care and so I'm not gonna hold it against him. . . . I don't really want [to] . . . treat it as I did before, as . . . this big huge monumental thing that . . . would totally kill me. . . . If anything it's made me a better person because now I've accepted him, and forgiving him . . . is helping me change. . . . [I've learned] it's more or less the way I dealt with things instead of the way he dealt with them, if that makes sense.

Yes, it does. Whether or not Zoe would have reconciled the matter in a similar way had Angela not taken on the role of peacemaker is anybody's guess. However, it is worth noting that the main point Angela had tried to impress upon her—that Juan does care about her—is an idea that Zoe ultimately believes.

While it may have been better and braver for Juan and Zoe to reach accord without Angela's intercession—something that neither one of them was interested in doing—Angela's efforts to mediate a conflict between her peers demonstrates a way

students attend to each other's feelings. This kind of peer counseling, of course, has very little to do with ways portfolio students teach technical or conceptual skills to each other or mentor each other's development as artists. However, such interventions serve to maintain the sense of community and, at least in a small way, sustain an atmosphere of collegiality that promotes portfolio students' learning with and because of each other.

That learning, of course, does not begin with their enrollment in the portfolio class. As early as freshman year, some art students develop relationships that include helping each other learn what it means to be a portfolio student. This complex set of skills and knowledge includes learning how to critique each other's work, certainly, and, sometimes, learning how to forgive each other in order to get on with the work at hand. However, becoming a portfolio student also means learning how to model for each other ways of behaving as and thinking about what it means to be an artist, to adapt the disposition of an artist as one's own. Much of the evidence for this transformation of personal identity will be presented in the next chapter. However, because the peer teaching and learning that takes place among small groups of portfolio students over the years of their mutual participation in the CCHS art program represents another context in which students serve as each other's teachers and mentors, some description of the ways it takes place and the learning that results is worth including here.

### **Context 2: Serving as Teachers and Mentors for Each Other as Portfolio Students Experience the CCHS Art Program Over the Years of Their Mutual Participation in it**

Juan believes that one reason he considers himself, Eva, and Will among the top students in the portfolio class is traceable to the friendship they formed as sophomores interested in learning all they could about art:



. . . Since we're human, and it happens everywhere, we do . . . clump ourselves with different groups, and [that] sometimes is the defining factor in whether or not you're gonna like grow more during the whole year. . . . I don't want to say that this happens every year, well obviously the whole clumpy thing happens every year, but I don't know if the spaces are always the same. But . . . I know that where my wall is and Will's wall and . . . Eva's is . . . we did form this like relationship early on. It was sophomore year, and . . . I brought them to a studio night once and they really liked it so . . . we developed this relationship. . . . We were always like pushing each other in different ways . . . of thinking, different ways of doing the mark making, so and nobody else was doing this. We were sophomores so it was . . . extremely early on, and we were already like thinking about mark making and what we were trying to say and . . . how we wanted to explore the page and all these things. So, that was something huge. And then we went into junior year and so we were still that little group in a way, and other people would join, but then they would leave, like . . . Rob W. sort of came and left, and . . . —art is something extremely important—and I, like we'd have phone conversations and we'd just like chat about art work, chat about how we didn't understand a lot of things, how we didn't know what postmodernism was, so it was just sort of like finding information to help us, and this is what we did like literally every night around 11:00 pm.

Angela is another important member of this longstanding, peer-teaching and mentoring group Juan describes. I suspect he leaves her name out of the quotation above for a couple of reasons. First, unlike the students Juan mentions, Angela is not a painter, preferring drawing, photography, and mixed media pieces instead. Secondly, Juan does not consider Angela's body of work as up to the same level of quality as his, Eva's, or Will's, an opinion that he has no trouble sharing with her. However, he does like Angela's work and keeps encouraging her to do more—something he has done ever since freshman year when the two of them developed their friendship.

Angela recognizes that Juan has always led the way in their relationship, and she would probably admit that she has learned much more from him than he has from her about what it means to be an artist. She describes their mentoring relationship this way:

He's my best friend . . . [who has been] like a little teacher for me because he isn't so naïve . . . when it comes to certain things like I am. . . . He's the one that . . . keeps me on task . . . I don't want to say like my mom but . . . he kind of is; he's

like my . . . partner in crime, my companion. . . . I know he's not the same level I am . . . he was like my prize, my friend that, you know, may be smarter, this friend that made me think more about things. . . . I think a lot of people have those, . . . but he is like a role model to me even though he's [just six] months older than I am, [but] I think where he's at, he's more than 6 months ahead of me.

Since their freshman year when Angela noted Juan's passion for art was changing him, she wanted to learn from his example:

[Juan] started dressing differently, and that is what attracted me. I was like, "Whoah! Hey! I could dress differently." . . . I don't have to wear these stuffy clothes. I don't have to wear these name brand clothes. . . . I realized that "artsy" people, quote unquote, . . . find the simplest things beautiful. . . . They find the things that everyone else thinks are ugly and the things that everyone else thinks are trash—they find them amazing. And I wanted to be part of that.

While a change in fashion marks a superficial way of being an artist, the ability to find beauty in the simplest things or to transform the simplest things into something beautiful does not. As they became better and better friends, Juan and Angela find a number of ways of influencing each other's thinking about beauty and the artist's job of creating it and raising questions about what it means to call something beautiful.

Exchanging sketchbooks with each other, visiting gallery openings, and engaging in telephone and face-to-face conversations about art and artists represent some of these ways. In one sketchbook entry, for instance, Angela answered Juan's persistent question—"Why do you do art?"—with a description of the way she rearranges grocery items in aesthetically pleasing patterns on the conveyor belt as she waits to check out. When they attend gallery openings together, the two influence each other's opinions about both art and the artist. At the opening of a Mexican artist who had studied with Frida Kahlo, for instance, Juan has a hard time reconciling his admiration for the paintings with what he interprets as the artist's slightly patronizing smile, one that makes him conclude: "We're not respected here." This judgment leads to conversations with

Angela in person and over the phone. Angela is more willing to look past issues of personality to the positive role model this artist provides, so different from the negative ones she believes too many of her other Hispanic friends have followed.

She tells me again how much she credits Juan for leading her to art and to artists like Frida Kahlo and her student:

[In] this Hispanic group that I was hanging out with all the time [freshman year] it's not very cool to carry around art. It's not very cool to dedicate your time to anything but your friends. Really . . . it's cool to get in fights with your parents; it's cool to rebel against your family; it's cool to . . . do things I wasn't really interested in doing. So art was there for me and art . . . was what I needed. . . . Juan kind of stirred the water. . . . We weren't really good friends [at first], but we were friends, you know, . . . and I was like, "Well he's so happy this way, and I want to be that way. I want to be happy" . . . [so] I turned to art.

By the time they are seniors in Portfolio, the two friends routinely share their thoughts and feelings with each other, especially when it comes to art. Angela describes their almost constant communication this way:

That's what we do when we're outside of school. We talk about school. You know we talk about Portfolio more like all the time, basically. 'Cause that's where we live. This is our home. So, this is what we know. So this is what we're gonna talk about. We're gonna talk about art, we're gonna talk about specific people, we're gonna talk about where they're headed, and you know we've talked about Zoe, and we've talked about how she is going somewhere, and we're glad to see that her work is headed in a positive direction.

This pattern of communication, of course, has influenced the directions they take with their own art.

Their common Hispanic heritage—Juan is Mexican and Angela is Puerto Rican—contributed to their initial enthusiasm for Frida Kahlo and their attendance at her former student's exhibition. However, they also find inspiration in Kahlo's artistic concern with her own body, a concern that influences the development of their own aesthetic sensibilities over time. After years of sketchbook exchanges, phone calls, and

conversations about art, Juan's and Angela's very different bodies of work for their senior portfolios share two themes in common with much of Kahlo's work: finding beauty in human forms where others may not, and transforming one's own painful experiences into sources of inspiration to create art.<sup>21</sup>

In Juan's case, one source that informs his painting is the loneliness and insecurity he felt during middle school:

I would sit at the end of the table and just eat, and that's when like I was really, really . . . overweight, and . . . I would . . . [imagine] people from my class like saying things, and the whole body image stuff started coming and I would be sitting there and I would be eating and, like always, being afraid to go for seconds because I didn't want to appear hungry, and so that's when everything started, and it's projecting itself right now in my paintings.

These feelings of insecurity project themselves in Juan's work in complex ways. His large, brightly colored canvases depict exaggerated human forms, self-portraits, "fat" cows, tortoises, and/or birds in surrealistic landscapes or interiors.

The middle ground of one of his largest canvases, set in what appears to be a classroom, depicts two nude and faceless figures, one male, the other female, both in profile, facing toward the right-hand side of the canvas. The obese male sits on what appears to be a classroom chair with his head bowed, shoulders slouched, and right arm resting on his belly and disappearing between his legs. The lithe female figure seems to emerge from the male figure's right shin in a pose like a ballerina's, her arched back turned away from the seated figure and her right arm reaching above and beyond her back-tilted head. In the lower right-hand corner of the foreground, Juan depicts himself

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<sup>21</sup> Kahlo suffered polio as a child and a terrible bus accident as a teenager. These experiences informed her paintings. Her husband, the Mexican muralist, Diego Rivera, said of Kahlo: "Frida is the only example in the history of art of an artist who tore open her chest and heart to reveal the biological truth of her feelings."

from the shoulders up, wearing a loose-fitting, hooded sweatshirt with a t-shirt underneath. He sits with his back to the two nude figures. He gazes up and slightly to his left, off the front plane of the canvas, with a wide-eyed and bewildered expression on his face as if lost in thought. Across the background of the painting, a multi-colored and richly textured wall runs the length of the canvas and provides the space on which Juan depicts a large, classroom whiteboard. Among the text that Juan includes on it, amid graffiti-like marks, overlapping patches of bright colors, and drawings of small glass jars suspended by threads that dangle from the top of the wall, is the barely legible phrase: “I need a hug.”

Angela, who, like Juan, also struggles with “the whole body image stuff,” has no trouble identifying emotional pain similar to the kind Juan feels as a source of inspiration to create art. However, she did need more support from Juan than he did from her to risk creating emotionally honest art that would measure up to the quality of work expected from portfolio students. She confides to me that “[Even as] . . . I became a sophomore . . . [and] . . . a junior I was terrified of portfolio class, and I was afraid that I would not be able to keep up.”

With Juan’s encouragement, of course, she not only has become a portfolio student but follows Juan’s example of transforming her own painful experience into objects of art, telling me that her relationship with Juan and her experience in Portfolio “has really gotten . . . me up to the point where I have to get the guts to do what I have to do and what I know is true.” Having mustered up this courage, she approaches the major work of her second semester in Portfolio with this question and the experience that prompted it in mind:

The question that I'm still really unsure about . . . is "What is beautiful?" [I'm] . . . playing around with this idea of me being beautiful and kind of showing the rest of the world that just because I look different . . . does not mean that I am not beautiful, . . . and at the same time, it's me trying to figure out if I really do believe that myself because . . . I still have it in the back of my head. . . . I can still hear the voices of those people . . . who don't believe it.

Two kinds of work emerge from Angela's decision to transform her doubts about her own beauty into art. The first is a series of self-portraits of her partially nude figure—some photographs and two drawings. The second is intended as a costume for a performance piece for the Haggerty Museum show for which she spends a couple of months teaching herself how to use a sewing machine to fashion fabric from pages she's torn from a bible to make a dress.

By turning herself into an unlikely Madonna, she hopes to combine the two themes to have emerged as most important to her body of work: conceptions of female beauty and doubts about her religious faith. Ultimately, she decides she does not want to wear the Madonna dress for the performance art piece at the Haggerty show. Instead, she decides to build an altar around it. She fashions a rosary out of dozens of apples and drapes it over a genuflector she acquired (I hope through legitimate means) from somewhere. As one might imagine, the idea for the project causes quite a controversy among some outside the CCHS art department. In her relationship with Juan, however, she has learned to defend her choices, in this case well enough to impress her parish priest who spends a long time talking with her when he visits the Fine Arts Day exhibition and sees the Madonna dress displayed on a mannequin as well as the photographs and drawings in the series of self-portraits. He would tell Pat later how impressed he was with Angela: "She's really on a spiritual quest, isn't she?"

While I was not privy to Angela's conversation with her priest, I know from my own conversations with Angela how articulate and passionate she has learned to be when it comes to discussing and defending her own work. For instance, of her nude figure drawings she says:

I was drawing myself in my room, alone, nude, and it was really late at night, and I was hoping my Mom would not come in. I was hoping to God, you know, this God that I don't even know if I believe in, this God that I only turn to when I need something. I was praying that my Mom would not come in my room like she usually does . . . but at the same time . . . when I was drawing I was so happy, and I was so accepting of myself, and it was just the best, . . . I wouldn't trade it for the world, even if my Mom had walked in. It was two in the morning . . . but it felt right and needed to be done. . . . I just I think it's really important . . . when you can have times like those and you can realize things about yourself, and about the world around you, and be self-aware.

Her comments about the Madonna dress are just as insightful, especially when it comes to reflecting on the set of experiences and feelings at the source of her idea for the project. She has this to say, for instance, about those whose comments about her appearance caused her to doubt her own beauty:

If it wasn't for them, I wouldn't be where I am right now. And I wouldn't be questioning beauty right now, and I wouldn't be the person that I am right now because I think that everything we do and every person we encounter and every minute of our lives changes us and . . . could change us . . . drastically. . . . So I know my art has changed, like [I have] as a person. . . . Art is really our truth—and the former truth was really questioning my faith and now it's really trying to find beauty.

There is no telling, of course, how much Angela's growth as a person or an artist is due to the peer teaching and mentoring relationship that she and Juan nurtured from their freshman year on. Their having "clumped" together over the years of their mutual participation in the CCHS art program may not be the "defining factor" in their growth as artists, but it certainly is an important one. Relationships like the one she develops with Juan and the one Juan describes among Eva, Will, himself, and others allow students to

model for each other ways of behaving as and thinking about what it means to be an artist, to adapt the disposition of an artist as one's own.

Over time, these behaviors both shape and sustain the community of practice among students as they help teach each other what it means to become a portfolio student. While this section has described ways students of the same cohort serve as teachers and mentors for each other as they move through their high school years together, the following section will provide evidence of ways older art students serve as teachers and mentors for younger students. As will become increasingly clear, the success the CCHS art program has and continues to enjoy owes much to its relatively open and flexible structures that provide opportunities for students of all ages to work together during and after the regular school day.

### **Context 3: Serving as Teachers and Mentors for Younger Art Students Coming Through the Ranks**

Resource mods and studio nights are two structural components that facilitate ways students are able to serve as teachers and mentors for each other across age groups and time. These periods outside of regular class time create an atmosphere that promotes spontaneous and casual interactions among students of all ages. At one studio night, for instance, a junior approaches Amira to ask her to show him how she is able to work back into the black ink she has started to use in her mixed media drawings depicting her memories of life in Malaysia. Even though Amira has heard from her teachers that they have noticed “a lot of Amira imitators” among the underclassmen and, as a result, feels a little wary of divulging her secrets, she engages in a brief and pleasant exchange of information with the student about her technique. During a resource mod, some freshmen



in Neely's "little buddy" group ask Neely to demonstrate a blending technique for them.<sup>22</sup> When they tell her that she is even better than Cathy (their Art Fundamentals teacher), she is obviously pleased but delivers a good-natured reprimand to them, telling them how good all of their teachers are.

Woody, the freshman introduced in the previous section who intends to measure up to the high standards of the CCHS art program, has gained a reputation among the portfolio students for being particularly eager to talk with them about how they are making their work. Paulo tells me that he regards Woody as a little brother. Amira laughs and says that she knows already that Woody will be a portfolio student one day. Woody understands that the current portfolio students provide him with a built-in group of mentors from whom he can learn both technical and conceptual skills, and he actively pursues ways he can benefit from their experience. He explains that he is primarily drawn to portfolio students whose way of working is similar to ways he likes to work on his own, outside of class assignments. In this segment of our interview, he describes how he engages their help:

Woody: Well, . . . sometimes I'll compliment them, and say . . . that [their work] is really cool, . . . and then I'll just like maybe, I'll stop for a second . . . just look at it [to see] if I really like it. . . . [If I do] I'll . . . take in my head that that was a really good idea, and that maybe I should like try something like that. . . . [For instance,] like Yale's—he did a stencil out of his face, and like before [learning how Yale worked] I was just drawing with stencils and then cutting them, but he actually went on the computer and then turned the contrast up so it would look . . . more like photo and like real. So, that's what got me . . . [to] start doing that. And I probably would have never known about that but from him. . . .

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<sup>22</sup> CCHS students have to take four years of theology classes, and Neely has elected to take "Big Buddy," a course available to seniors who have demonstrated leadership qualities and who are willing to serve as mentors to a small group of freshmen.

Greg: . . . And it had something to do with . . . computers? Tell me more about that.

Woody: Well you take a picture, and then you go on . . . *Photoshop* and you turn it to black and white, and then you turn the contrast up, so it's just like black and white; there's no grays. And then when you print it out, you just cut the black part out and it can make like a really cool . . . stencil. I could actually bring like something in [to show you] . . .

Woody had completed two stenciled portraits, one of himself and one of his mother, using the technique that Yale had described to him. In addition to finding value in the information Yale passes along about technique, Woody appreciates the welcoming atmosphere he finds on the sixth floor and the direct, honest critique that Yale and other seniors provide as they interact with him during resource mods and on studio nights:

Well, . . . they're really—they're just nice, and if they like your stuff they'll say so and that feels really good to have a senior say that. They like your stuff as a freshman. . . . And they also will say they don't like it if they don't. And I like that a lot, too, because I don't like it when people are always just like, 'Oh that's good.' Even if they don't really mean it. . . . [Yale, for instance,] . . . he's really like straightforward like if he doesn't like something he'll just [say], "That sucks." . . . [but] if he does [like something] . . . that just makes . . . what he says—if he says something's good—it just makes it that much better because then you know that it's genuine. And that's really hard to find, you know?

Older students also serve as role models who introduce students to more abstract, conceptual thinking about elements of art that transcend mere technique. In Woody's case, for instance, discussions he has with Amira suggest to him a way that he will grow as an artist beyond the development of techniques and skills, as this excerpt from our interview illustrates:

Woody: Well, first actually I didn't really like [Amira's work], but . . . after I . . . saw it more, I realized that it really was pretty beautiful and it was good work. . . . Just 'cause like, I don't know . . . at first [I] didn't like it 'cause . . . I thought . . . her style was too, . . . you know, like "pretty" kind of? But then it—I like how . . . through her art she kind of talked—it was more than just pretty—it was like she actually, like, it was like herself. There's a lot of her childhood in [her art] that you can see after looking at it . . .

Greg: And . . . how do you know there's a lot of her childhood in it?

Woody: Um, through like the pictures of . . . her . . . as a girl like in some of it and, . . . I don't know. She told me like what it kind of meant and stuff. . . . She . . . really feels like a lot of people judge her just as like, "Oh, she's Asian." . . . They don't really . . . think of her as anything but just . . . Asian. And she's really . . . Malaysian . . . and . . . that really affects a lot of her art. . . . She did a painting of . . . her grandfather in one of her pieces, . . . and my favorite one is probably the one where there's . . . a little girl swinging on the slide and stuff. . . . I just really like that she put that in. It makes it . . . really interesting. 'Cause like you don't notice it at first, and then it's like there and it's—she really did a good job putting that in.

Greg: OK. Now you said that Yale's work inspired you, there's something [in it] that you might . . . like to try, a technique. Is . . . Amira's work something that you . . . think you've learned from?

Woody: Not really.

Greg: No?

Woody: No. 'Cause it's like, I don't know, it's really like it's so much, it's like so complicated that it's . . . past . . . what I can really like take in and . . . try to do.

Greg: . . . And you mean that in a good way?

Woody: Yeah. I mean, well Yale's is like, the design stuff is a lot easier since it's . . . a little bit more just like a skill . . . like trying to silk screen . . . that's [just] a skill, but then what you do with it you know, that's the art part.

Greg: Uh huh. . . . So . . . you've had this . . . change of heart about Amira's work, first not liking it, [and then] when she told you a little bit more about the work and what it meant, you began to see it in a different way . . . and [to] like it more. . . . You . . . describe her work as complicated and—I'm not sure if I understand this correctly—beyond what . . . you can do right now? . . . Why 'beyond' what you can do right now?

Woody: Well, like I still really don't know . . . how to . . . paint since nobody's really taught me so . . . trying to do something like that would just be crazy. . . .

Greg: OK. So . . . from Amira you didn't really learn as much technique because you're not a painter yet, but you learned other stuff from her or not?

Woody: Yeah, I learned . . . how it really like makes a piece more meaningful if you put some of yourself into it instead of it just being . . . something that looks good.

Greg: And you imagine that that's what you'll be doing?

Woody: Yeah, I think so.

Making a piece more meaningful by putting some of yourself into it roughly translates to what the teachers mean in the course description when they say. "The emphasis is on completing a body of work from your own voice." Woody understands that Amira's work does just that: "It was more than just pretty—it was like she actually, like, it was like herself." Although Woody is already hard at work developing the arsenal of skills he will use as an artist, Amira has taught him that "the art part" is how to use those skills to create personal meanings that transcend a work's aesthetic qualities.

Juan believes that he and most of his portfolio classmates have learned that same lesson. He takes pride in how many of the underclassmen look up to him and seek him out for advice. He likes it that one sophomore calls him his mentor and that, Martin, the junior who hopes to emerge as a leader in Portfolio next year, includes quotations from him in his sketchbook. Once, several underclassmen ask if they can apply gesso on his next painting. He obliges and playfully barks orders to them as they use their bare hands to undercoat his raw canvas. Juan believes he has a responsibility to help these students understand what it means to be an artist:

Juan: . . . People approach me sometimes. Just because I paint such big paintings . . . they just start talking to me. . . . One person that I actually became friends with was Martin M. He has such a drive for art . . . and it's that drive that makes me want to like . . . spend my time and not actually

waste it with somebody. . . . He's a great guy and . . . he's always learning from stuff that I'm randomly saying, and he's always asking me questions about something I'm doing and he always wants me to . . . express my ideas and help him . . . grow mentally, and it's people like that that I really enjoy. And there's Ryan M. who, oh I don't enjoy that much, just because he does not have any confidence in his work, but I try to help him out. . . . He's also always asking questions and trying to get a little better. And there's Lori J. who is gonna be a phenomenal artist next year. . . .

Greg: Now all the ones that you've mentioned, are they all juniors?

Juan: MM mm.

Greg: Are there any sophomores? . . .

Juan: Sophomores? Ah, Richard. Richard, I forget his last name. He's in my TAC [homeroom].<sup>23</sup> He skipped . . . Fundamentals. . . . He is phenomenal already. . . . He calls me his mentor.

Greg: He does?

Juan: Yeah. . . . He just sort of . . . likes what I'm doing, and he's always trying to paint like me and do stuff like me, and I try to tell him that you know, one day he's going to like develop this thing and it's gonna be HIS thing. Um, so he's a sophomore. And there's Alex. He's in my TAC as well; I forget his last name. . . . He has a real hard time with art, and . . . he never comes to class and he never does his painting homework, . . . but . . . he's so interested in it that I feel like it's good that I still talk to him about it. And ah, I'm sure there's a few others, I just can't think of them right now.

Greg: Any freshmen?

Juan: Um, there's Woody.

Greg: Tell me about Woody.

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<sup>23</sup> At CCHS homerooms are called TACs, an acronym for "Teacher Advisor Contact." TAC Teachers meet daily with their TAC, a group of twenty or more students comprised of smaller cohorts of freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors. When a class of seniors graduates, each TAC room will welcome a new group of freshmen into its community at the beginning of the next school year. This structural element of the CCHS advising program complements the structures of the CCHS art program. In both cases, the open, frequent, and easy access that upperclassmen have with underclassmen facilitates communication among different age levels.

Juan: Well . . . I haven't . . . developed a good relationship with him, but he also . . . is very interested in art. And I was real surprised 'cause he's like 14 and he's sure involved in a lot of things. So, I like that. . . . He just—goes outside, like [to] parts of the hallway, and he'll just see me doing something and he wants to know what I'm doing and why I'm doing it . . . and I think that's a really good start for him since he's just a freshman.

Greg: How do you know that his name is Woody? Did he introduce himself?

Juan: Oh yeah. . . . It was during a studio night actually. 'Cause we had a meeting, yeah, that's how I met a lot of them. . . . We had a little meeting with the freshmen and asked them what they wanted to see in Art Club. And I remember that I met him there. That was the first night . . . of studio night when we had a party and it was a lot of fun.

Greg: . . . So then those kids felt . . . permission to approach you?

Juan: Yeah.

Greg: 'Cause you're an officer of the Art Club? Is that right?

Juan: Mmm mm. But I don't think they see me as like the Art Club president. . . . I think they just see me as an artist, painting.

Greg: In all these relationships— . . . one student is calling you a mentor— . . . what do you see yourself teaching them?

Juan: Um, not so much like techniques and how to mix this color with that color, 'cause I think that's something not important, it's something that they'll learn, it's like technique stuff. . . . What I try to do is just sort of . . . expand their thinking and go more conceptual with their ideas instead of just . . . doing projects for a class, or [I try to get them to] question . . . more things. And I [try] to explain this to them, and I know it's a little early for a lot of them. 'Cause I know you have to be ready for this. Or it takes time, like [it did for] me. . . . I just see that a lot of them just do projects and that bothers me so much just because I think that they're not getting anywhere with those. And I was really happy [to see] that Richard actually . . . he does the Advanced Drawing homework and Painting homework, but he also does stuff on the side. Martin M. as well. . . . He's actually writing about me in his sketchbook and he quotes me like every page. It's really funny. And ah, he actually took a Figure Drawing class and a Painting class [outside of his regular classes here], and now he's doing a face, um, structure painting class type thing and . . . it's that sort of thing that I sort of want them to learn from me.

Greg: Are . . . the teachers aware that this kind of stuff is going on or are they oblivious to that?

Juan: . . . I would say that they're not too sure about that.

Greg: So . . . when does it happen? Where does it happen? How does it happen?

Juan: Well, . . . studio nights are a big thing. Because it, all of us find ourselves doing art. And . . . that's the time that . . . Talia [the art department assistant who, among other duties, monitors the hallways] is not around so everybody can sort of walk everywhere. And so people find time—they talk to me. But also during the week, . . . specially mods 1 and 2. . . . Talia is in her office doing something, so they sneak out to my wall, and they just sit with me. And they just start talking to me. And that's where all the talking begins and ends.

Greg: And so in mods 1 and 2, these kids are actually risking getting yelled at?

Juan: Yeah. (laughs)

Greg: Because they're supposed to be somewhere else, they're supposed to be in a resource room or a class . . .

Juan: A resource.

Greg: A resource. OK. But instead of staying in the resource room, . . . they go out in the hall . . .

Juan: Specially Martin M., who's always there, during his Photo class actually.

Greg: . . . it's during his Photo class that he's out [with you]?

Juan: Well, not always, but sometimes.

Greg: Ah.

Juan: Um, but yeah, that's when it happens.

Juan is not the only portfolio student who talks about taking on the role of a mentor for younger students. Some even see this role as one they inherited from the portfolio students that had influenced them. As Will says:

I know a big reason I took this class was . . . seeing the upper classmen work when we were younger, . . . for me more sophomore and junior year. . . . I know I

bothered some of them a lot so, whenever people are bothering me I always try to be nice and help them out because I was them and hopefully then they will grow up OK and be bothered by other kids. And those kids will be bothered by other kids and the cycle will just go on.

Based on the evidence presented in this section, it seems as if the cycle will, indeed, go on as long as Will and his classmates keep doing their part to serve as teachers and mentors to younger students. From his own experience, Will seems to understand that one way the CCHS community of practice sustains itself over time stems from the fact that portfolio students serve as teachers and mentors to younger students just as previous portfolio students served as theirs. The next section presents evidence to complete the loop, describing ways that members of the current class of portfolio students learned and continue to learn from the influence of previous portfolio students.

#### **Context 4: Being Taught and Mentored by Previous Portfolio Students as Current Portfolio Students Were Coming Through the Ranks**

In Todd's case, the quality of CCHS students' artwork began to shape his own aspirations as early as grade school when he began to take notice of the artwork his older sister had begun to bring home from school. He was impressed enough as a seventh grader to decide that he would take art classes in high school, too. By the time Todd was a sophomore at CCHS, his sister was in Portfolio, he had already completed Art Fundamentals, and he would complete both Figure Drawing and Design that year. Todd recalls a number of ways former portfolio students influenced him:

Todd: . . . I was always impressed, not only impressed but almost idolizing them. I remember certain students that I'd walk by and always look at their work because you knew that there was gonna be something new there, something different there and it was always worthwhile to stop and look at it. Yeah, I couldn't name the kid's name but I just remember the same corner every time I walked past it [I'd tell myself] "Wait – make sure you look because it's not gonna be there next year and you'll be



impressed by it.” More or less you’re gonna learn from it and understand what this program has to offer.

Greg: You’re going to learn from it how?

Todd: You’ll be seeing what it takes to get to that. Not seeing what it takes. You see that and you wanna learn what it takes to get to that. You wanna learn how he got to it. When you’re looking at a piece, for instance, I remember Juan Carlos was one of the kids whose stuff I was always amazed by and he happened to be near my sister’s wall so when I went by as a sophomore I’d always stop and say hi to my sister, look at his stuff, and . . . wonder . . . “How, why, how did you get there?” You know? And I wanted to learn how to get there, too.

Greg: And did you – you’ve talked about the teachers but did you have that conversation with Juan Carlos, or is it just something that you tried to . . .

Todd: It was expected – I kind of expected it. Almost taking it for granted. I knew if I stayed in this program I was gonna get there. It’s almost like that. I mean, I knew, I know my sister didn’t talk to these kids, she didn’t even know these kids. She was the first one in my family to be in this program and I just kinda expected it. As much as taking it for granted as it is, but I knew I was gonna come around and I knew it was gonna happen so I just . . .

Greg: So you had faith then?

Todd: Exactly.

Greg: If I keep taking classes and do what they tell you to do. The stuff that you admired would be stuff . . .

Todd: One day that I’d make.

Greg: Okay, and is that true? I mean, look at your stuff now – are you thinking “Oh my gosh, I can do this?”

Todd: Yeah. I look back at my freshman work and it hurts to look at sometimes. I’m like why were you doing that! But then you remember, well, I had to do that to learn from it, as cliché as that sounds, to learn from my mistakes to get to where I am now, but you have to start somewhere and they pull it off in that you can start freshman year and get to where we are now, Portfolio.

From their first decision to take an art class at CCHS to their enrollment in the senior art portfolio class, Todd and his 44 fellow seniors have traveled from peripheral to full participation in the art portfolio class's community of practice. As a seventh grader, Todd began this journey, at first inspired by his older sister's work but as years passed learning from the work of other portfolio students, keeping the faith that he would someday have the skills he admired. His classmate, Eva, believes that she, Todd, and the rest of their classmates have developed progressively over time, "learning with and because of each other" at every stage.

She and Will agree that the portfolio students who have preceded them play a significant role in what they both have learned and continue to learn, telling me that it is one of the things they talk about all the time:

Will: We're kind of freaks about that. . . . 'Cause you know . . . they're not here anymore. . . . To the school, to the system, they are effectively dead.  
But—

Eva: Not in our minds . . .

Will: In our hearts, in our minds, we, we love them and need them and hate them, I suppose, sometimes.

As a sophomore, Will showed up at the Fine Arts night reception early to read all the artist statements of the seniors in that year's portfolio class. He says that the description one girl had written about her father's hands has forever changed the way he looks at hands. He and Neely continue to argue about which of their respective favorites from the previous year's portfolio students had the best work. Eva and Amira both admire Woody's courage to engage them in conversation about their work and wish they would have spent more time talking with previous portfolio students about their work when they had the chance. However, Eva reveals that she still learns from the work they have left

behind, measuring her own progress as a painter by the critical skills she is able to apply when viewing works she once admired. She changes her mind about the quality of a large portrait that hangs in the CCHS lobby when she realizes that the portfolio student who made it used paint “just from the tube!” This realization confirms Eva’s belief in the quality of her own work, knowing that she has developed a more sophisticated palette of blended colors in her own large self-portraits.

Just as studio nights provide time and space for current portfolio students to teach younger ones, they also provide occasions for returning portfolio students to interact with and teach current ones, primarily through showing their post-high school work and relating what college or, in some cases, life as an artist is really like. During college vacations many previous portfolio students visit the sixth floor to say hello to their friends and teachers and to show off slides or real examples of their current work. The student whom Neely most admired from the previous portfolio class comes back on a studio night to show off the large scale drawings she completed in her foundations class at the Rhode Island School of Design, for instance. Seeing that work and talking with the student on studio night contributes to Neely’s decision to attend RISD, too. Another former portfolio student who was in his second year on full scholarship at a prestigious art college in California comes back on a studio night to show slides of his current photography portfolio. As students crowd around his laptop, Pat and Cathy make arrangements with him to come back sometime as a visiting artist—as they have done over the years with many other portfolio students who have gone onto graduate school or interesting art-related careers.

On one occasion, the mother of a former portfolio student visits on studio night to show off the portfolio and website of her daughter who has her own line of haute couture and recently created the dress that a famous pop star, Christine Aguilera, wore to the Grammy music awards ceremony. Seeing the sleek and beautiful dresses on this former portfolio student's website prompts Juan, Amira and Angela to ask Pat if they can see slides of the student's high school portfolio. After seeing her high school work, they agree that their own work is "definitely better" than the student's was when she was at CCHS. Amira reports feeling a little bad at first but then having an epiphany about what this student's progression since high school could mean for her own aspirations:

She's doing really phenomenal stuff now so, that was like—"Wow!"—if you really work hard we can get a whole lot better and then, it's just really weird thinking about how much better we could get.

This unplanned lesson in the value of persistence, of course, was not on the agenda for that particular studio night.

On another studio night, a former CCHS art teacher and a CCHS alumnus himself drops in. He had left his teaching post to pursue an MFA at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, the college that Steve has decided he will attend in the fall. The former teacher and Steve spend a long time talking about a wide range of topics about life in Boston and at the school. The teacher observes that the most difficult problem for Steve, "since it looks like your work will translate to large," will be finding adequate studio space, especially during his first two years. He tells him, "If you're assertive, you can find a way to make it work," citing how he had to claim space in a hallway, even as a graduate student, in a way similar to the way Steve must be used to by now, given what

he knows from first-hand experience about the ways CCHS portfolio students lay claim to walls on the sixth floor.

When the discussion turns to Steve's "top two influences"—Jean Michel Basquiat and Cy Twombly—the teacher agrees that "those are good influences," but he cautions Steve that there will be people at Boston who will try to talk him out of his style because it is too derivative of Basquiat's. He advises him to "stick to his guns," however, that what will matter, ultimately, is how well he is able to defend his choices. "Your work is really good," he says, and offers to help show him the ropes once he arrives in Boston.

The open and flexible structure of studio night builds in the opportunity for students and teachers alike to respond to teaching and learning opportunities as they present themselves. Anyone who happens to stop in—from recent graduates, to parents of graduates who have gone on to successful art-related careers, to former teachers pursuing graduate study at schools current students will attend—knows that on studio night there will be interesting work to see, good food to eat, and the opportunity to learn with and because of each other.

## **Conclusion of Chapter 2: "We Can Just Like Multiply It"**

This chapter has tried to describe ways that a number of the relatively fixed structural elements of Portfolio shape and are shaped by the ways students and teachers interact with each other. These elements: the self-selection admission policy; the course description; team-teaching; the pre-Portfolio summer class; exchanging note cards after formal critique; the open and easy access that art students of all ages have to each other working in the hallways, in resource rooms, and on studio nights; the focus on preparing a body of work and meeting deadlines for art contests, shows, and presentation to college

admissions representatives—come to life in a vibrant community of practice only through the participation of students and teachers in the joint enterprise of helping each learn how to become better artists with and because of each other. The four contexts in which students serve as teachers and mentors to each other fit easily within these structures, never changing them entirely, but shaping them to suit the most pressing need of the moment—be it mastering a particular technique, bouncing ideas off each other to decide on the most successful next steps for any given work, or modeling for each other ways of thinking and behaving as an artist.

The four themes presented in this chapter—team teaching, working in the hallways, the sense of belonging to a community or family, and the four contexts in which students serve as each other’s teachers and mentors—reveal ways the community of practice developed within the CCHS art program contributes to an understanding of its success. As is true of much of this chapter, however, a student conveys this idea much more memorably. When I ask Amira a final question about what the readers of this dissertation need to understand about the way Portfolio works, she says:

This . . . program just . . . takes that . . . little decision [of students] to . . . take [Portfolio], and then it just makes . . . the student . . . just really think differently and just look at things differently, and it takes kids from like all different kinds of backgrounds—kids who can’t pay for . . . application fees and there’s kids who could pay for like everybody’s application fees . . . plus have money for college and all that other stuff. And it just takes them all, and . . . it almost doesn’t matter how much skill you . . . have coming into [the CCHS program]. It just matters how much you’re gonna take from it. . . . There are kids who are very talented but . . . I don’t think that they’ve taken everything they could have out of this class. And then there’s kids who . . . couldn’t draw Freshman year at all, and now they’re just like . . . one of our prime seniors and I think that’s just like so amazing. . . . I don’t know if that happens at other schools. . . . I know that [at] other schools, you go in art because you’re dedicated to it and you really want to do that. . . . You get a lot of kids who know that they want to do art and they know that they want to learn about it. And [here] it just feels like you get kids who, you know, there’s kids who do, and there’s kids who aren’t sure. And then

. . . Pat and Cathy and Anne are just here to . . . kind of like guide you through that process so when you figure out that you really do want to . . . learn everything that you can about art or when you don't, they'll be there to just, you know, give you hints . . . help you figure everything out. Like with Edie's statement, how . . . [she said that even though] she grew a lot in . . . [Portfolio] [she] decided [art is] not for her . . . I don't think a lot of people in . . . other schools if they're a senior in an art class like a Portfolio comparison . . . I don't think a lot of kids would have done that. Because you're there because that's what you want to do; you want to do art. And here there's more of a decision and there's more, you know, lots, lots more choices, and I think that people really need to know that. And they need to know that . . . we don't all come from . . . similar backgrounds or have a lot of experience with art beforehand or anything like that. But, you know with this program you've got all the books and you've got the teachers and we get the [college] reps to come, and I think it just takes whatever potential that the kids have and we can just like multiply it. . . . I don't know what else to really say.

An important word choice in Amira's summation of what the readers of this dissertation need to know about how the CCHS portfolio class works comes in the last line: "WE can just like multiply it." Amira's multiplier, "WE," includes parents, teachers, college admissions representatives, and students—across age groups and time—all working together to sustain their collective community of practice. Without the river of their mutual participation to carve the mountain of flexible structures that guide them to "lots, lots more choices," their community of practice would cease to exist.

This chapter has elaborated on the first key word in Wolf's (2001) invisible rules that shape successful art programs: "It's *among* not *within*." The next chapter on meaning and identity modifies Wolf's observation and will demonstrate that, at least as far as the CCHS art program is concerned, Wolf's rule should read: "It's among *AND* within."

### CHAPTER 3: MEANING AND IDENTITY: RELATIVE FREEDOM OF CHOICE AND THE SEARCH FOR VOICE

*Education, in its deepest sense and at whatever age it takes place, concerns the opening of identities—exploring new ways of being that lie beyond our current state.* (Wenger, 1998, p. 263)

In Chapter 2, some of the ways students begin to explore new ways of being and to find personal meaning on their journeys to becoming full participants in the portfolio class's community of practice have already surfaced, especially in the ways students serve as teachers and mentors for each other over time. Indeed, evidence that supports the second chapter's focus on ways the interplay of structure and participation shapes learning among the whole group of participants overlaps somewhat with evidence that supports the theme presented in this chapter. Angela, for instance, begins emulating Juan as early as her freshman year after concluding she "wanted to be happy," too. In turning to art she began on a path that would shape her ideas about beauty and religion and provide her with a means of clarifying those ideas for herself and communicating them to others. Martin, too, sees in Juan a role model and hopes that he can follow in his footsteps and emerge as a leader of the portfolio class in his senior year. As a freshman, Woody has already learned from Amira that "the art part" of the technical skills that he is beginning to master will include discovering ways of including personal meaning in the art pieces he creates.

What distinguishes this chapter from the previous one is its shift from a focus on the interplay of structure and participation that shapes learning *among* the whole group of participants to a focus on ways giving students relative freedom of choice facilitates learning *within* selected individual members of the group. As students make choices



within the relative freedom the class provides them to work in ways that resonate with who they are, who they are becoming, and what engages their attention, they have the opportunity to explore emerging identities and to find personal meaning.

That students value the freedom they have to make choices about the kinds of art they create, there can be no doubt. The word “freedom” echoes through the transcripts like a mantra. However, the freedom students have to make choices is a relative one. Teachers provide a rubric that describes criteria on which they will evaluate student participation and progress, for instance, and they routinely advise students on choices they might consider as they develop their portfolios. Indeed, teachers as well as national contest judges and college admissions gatekeepers expect that students will know and apply the principles and elements of design in the artwork they create. These frames of reference for creating and evaluating works of art certainly influence the choices students make. However, teachers’ expectation that students will try to produce work “from their voice” provides the frame of reference that best demonstrates how giving students relative freedom to develop a body of work that resonates with who they are, who they are becoming, and what engages their attention shapes the CCHS art portfolio class’s community of practice and contributes to our understanding of its success.

The chapter will begin, then, with a description of how teachers and students use the term voice in ways that resonate with Wenger’s (1998) conceptions of meaning and identity. In the cases that follow, my emphasis will be on how the search for voice contributes to ways four very different students find personal meaning and explore emerging identities in Wenger’s sense of the terms. As will become increasingly clear, the diverse voices of these four students provide the best way of demonstrating

circumstances that both facilitate and limit the success portfolio students experience as they work within the context of the theme presented here.

**Theme 5: The Value of the Relative Freedom Students Have to Work in Ways That Resonate With Who They Are, Who They Are Becoming, and What Engages Their Attention**

**Voice**

The freedom from specific assignments in Portfolio comes with accompanying responsibilities for students beyond producing a given number of works by a series of deadlines. Teachers also expect students to be able to articulate why their choices matter—personally, aesthetically, and as a vehicle of communication for a larger audience. Questioning who they are, what engages their attention, and why they are doing what they do influences the art students create, the ways they think, talk, and write about their choices, and their decisions about the role they imagine art will play in the rest of their lives. Teachers and students, alike, talk about this process as a “search for voice.” The course description, as noted in Chapter 2, mentions this particular challenge as the central emphasis of the portfolio class, and teachers believe it an important enough concern to try to help parents understand what they mean when they talk about *voice*.

On two studio nights during the school year, the portfolio teachers address parents of CCHS art students about the nature of the school’s art program, emphasizing that it intends to develop students’ facility with art as a language and that it is in the portfolio class where students develop a body of work that represents each student’s unique voice. In early October, at the invitation of the officers of the parents’ support group, the teachers speak to parents new to the school who have indicated an interest in the art

program. In late January, the teachers host an information session for parents of art students who are considering registering for Portfolio in the following school year. On both these occasions, the teachers show slides of the work of previous portfolio students to illustrate ways that distinct voices emerge over time. As Pat relays the stories of the students whose slides she presents, she describes the transformation that she, Cathy, and Anne witness when students “land on their voice.” To the parents of next year’s Portfolio students, Pat explains the transformation this way:

We’ll often have parents of juniors panicking, saying, “Oh, oh, ooh, they only have three or four pieces, they’ll never be able to do it.” I am telling you it is getting them into that portfolio class, it’s that senior year, because when they find their voice, they don’t want to stop working. But finding their voice takes us a good three years, if not three and a half. Landing on what they really need to speak to, where their heart is, what they have to talk about, um, we go in and out of false starts all the time and once they find it, it becomes a part of their life and everything they do.

Regardless of the degree of success students experience in “landing on their voice” and its becoming “a part of their life and everything they do,” the teachers believe that the search for voice contributes significantly to the way portfolio class works. Cathy explains:

When we talk about voice . . . that’s such a huge thing. . . . I think you can go through your whole life and never . . . really grapple with that. And I think for our kids . . . really having time to sift . . . and then have a vehicle through which you start to define your voice, figure out who you are, and why you’re doing what you do, it’s not . . . it’s such not a small thing. . . . If they haven’t had this experience . . . how else are they getting to that in their lives? Or do they? You know, does it happen anywhere else in the educational process? . . . Maybe some kids find it on their own independently, you know, by chance, . . . but not by structure, . . . and I do think that we’re structured for that and answering those questions . . . or at least asking them . . . at least getting them on that path, to know that it’s bigger than . . . a hoop or a class or anything like that.

Pat’s conception of voice as landing on what you really need to speak to, where your heart is, and what you have to talk about complements Cathy’s conception of

defining voice as a means of figuring out who you are and why you are doing what you do. Together, Pat and Cathy's construction of *voice* resonates with Wenger's conception of two of the features of a community of practice: 1) *meaning*, as "a way of talking about our (changing) ability . . . to experience our life and the world as meaningful" and 2) *identity*, as "a way of talking about how learning changes who we are and creates personal histories of becoming in the context of our communities" (p. 5).

Students, too, seem to understand the search for voice in this sense, as a vehicle for discovering personal meaning and for learning more about who they are and who they are becoming within the context of the portfolio class's community of practice. Juan describes the process this way:

I'm sort of still finding myself and my own voice. I'm trying to figure out my crazy head . . . , literally, and it's helping. . . . I'm kind of understanding myself a little better because I don't think I can actually communicate something to the world until I understand myself. So right now I'm just painting for myself. I'm creating my own little show and critiquing it and then I'll see where I go. . . . I've been . . . playing around with different styles and defining my style, defining what I like to do and staying away from trying to be somebody, for example, trying to paint like Dali, trying to paint like Frida Kahlo, . . . trying to paint like somebody else. It's more of like me trying to paint like Juan and that's been going well. I feel like my pieces are changing in that sense, that they do have a new feel to them; they're no longer like the painting that resembles Dali. It's the painting that resembles Juan now. So that's been really good. And I think that's going to change my art completely.

Juan is not alone in characterizing the search for voice as a way of understanding himself better and for finding a unique way of representing that understanding visually. Ellie, for instance, calls this process one of "finding a truth in yourself." She explains:

The portfolio class and art . . . are trying to get you to realize more about yourself and about the world. . . . That's the main goal of portfolio, to really find yourself in your artwork and express yourself in your artwork. . . . It's not just, "Oh, you paint an object . . . and try to make it real." It's trying to . . . find a truth in yourself. . . . You hear other people in the class like have these breakthroughs and . . . you want, like you strive for that. Like you don't want something that's

superficial, especially after hearing people's statements about . . . truth. . . . You know what I mean? Like if you're sitting there and if your art's not true and like it's just for the class, . . . I don't really know what that'd feel like.

Daphne, too, emphasizes how challenging it is to try to use the tools of art to “find a truth in yourself.” In an interview, she explains:

Art is asking me to look . . . for answers within. It's asking you to figure out yourself. . . . I mean what's more complicated than that—trying to figure out who you are and what do you have to say. . . . You're trying to make a statement about yourself that you really don't know yet. There's so many of my pieces that I can't even – I can't . . . put it into words. . . . So art is constantly – this class is constantly pushing me to find more things about myself that I didn't know. Sometimes at night I make lists of ideas for pieces. I kind of just reflect on what I could do next. . . . I don't think there's a bigger [challenge]. It pushes you in such a way to . . . I don't know, it's always like a reach for perfection.

Students like Juan, Ellie, Daphne, and many others respond enthusiastically to the challenge to discover more about themselves through their art as they make choices within the relative freedom the class provides. When this “reach for perfection” results in the students' “landing on their voice,” it can be transformational. In the final draft of his artist statement, for instance, Steve asserts that discovering his voice changed his art as well as his conception of the role art will play in the rest of his life:

Near the beginning of my high school art classes, I wasn't happy. Things were always dictated by the teachers, the piece you made, its focus; but I found out later, the real reason was I just hadn't found my voice. Now, I love starting and working on and completing a piece. I can do whatever I want; I can make mistakes on the paper that end up being my favorite part of the piece, or someone else's! I loved finding what I'm good at, and discovering other people that do what I do. Now that I've found it, I'm ready to find more. I still love painting and drawing, and am, by no means, done with it. But I want to look at other media . . . [to] see what else is out there that could make my work even better.

Like Steve, many students not only relish the freedom to “do whatever I want,” they also attach a negative connotation to what they call “project art” or art made solely to satisfy a class assignment. Steve describes his breakthrough as a result of discovering a

way of “turning what I like into what I do.” He attributes his ambition to become a famous artist to the portfolio class, an experience, he says, that “changed my life.” The long road he traveled to land on his voice, however, supports Pat’s claim that the search for voice can include false steps along the way even after having mastered the basic skills that class assignments and “project art” are intended to impart. During the October meeting with parents, Pat indicates that Steve’s experience is a very familiar one:

What happens when a student lands on their voice, when they really find out exactly why they have ever gotten into this to begin with, it’s not torture anymore. Because sometimes in the first three years, it’s like, “Uhh, now I have to do this.” Or, “Now they want me to draw.” Or, “Now I have to do this.” Yeah, well [they’re] still in the project stage. [They’re] still making projects. Until they hit their voice. It’s, you know, we’re yanking and pulling to get all this stuff polished, [but] when they land on what they really have to say, they’re non-stop. It’s like we can’t stop ‘em.

The beginning classes in which teachers give assignments, “yanking and pulling to get all this stuff polished” serve an important purpose, however. Students do value having taken Art Fundamentals, for instance. It is in this class that students first become acquainted with the elements and principles of design and the mnemonic acronym, *Curveball*, for: *contrast, unity, rhythm (or repetition), variety, emphasis, balance*, and the provision to consider *all* of these principles when judging the aesthetic qualities of their compositions. However, students distinguish between the skills they learned in Art Fundamentals and “real” art classes (as Paulo describes them) that allow them freedom to apply those skills in ways that speak to their own interests, in their own voice. Eva describes the relationship between the skill building of Art Fundamentals and the freedom to discover and use one’s voice in Portfolio with an analogy to math, explaining what others need to understand about the whole enterprise of the CCHS art program this way:

. . . It is about yourself and it's about presenting yourself to other people and learning to communicate . . . concretely. . . It's about problem solving and . . . keeping at something. It's a continuous process; it's not like one class where you have a paper. . . It's more like math class where you build up on more things and you can apply it to the rest of your life. . . There is really a community and the teachers take a lot of time out to . . . spend with us. . . You . . . take everything you learned from freshmen year. You can't be in Portfolio without having taken [Art Fundamentals] because you have to learn the basics, you know, you need to know how to add before you start doing, you know, . . . your calculus. . . You keep building off what you have so you can't help but learn from it. And the old stuff becomes easier. . . It just becomes part of the process and . . . art becomes a part of your life whether, you know, it's not like math where if you don't use it again it won't matter. . . It's still like a realization about yourself and art. So, you carry that along with you.

The teachers' commitment to the process of helping students build on what they have in order to learn from it and carry that learning along with them influences every role they play within the CCHS art program's community of practice. As circumstances warrant, the teachers assume the roles of art expert, personal and career counselor, and broker between the portfolio class's community of practice and other communities of practice to which the students belong or hope to belong. In these interactions, teachers and students engage in a process of negotiating meaning about a range of topics both artistic and personal. Their mutual engagement in the search for voice becomes an opportunity for students to search for identity, for a way of becoming a "kind of person" within communities they value, a process Wenger (1998) describes as, "a trajectory in time that incorporates both past and future meaning into the present" (p. 163).

This trajectory differs from student to student, of course, depending on their initial interest in art, its role in their lives prior to their enrollment at CCHS, and the role they imagine it will play in the rest of their lives. Students come to the art program at CCHS with a wide range of prior experience and interest in art. Some choose the school expressly because of the reputation of its visual arts program; others have no idea that art

will play a major role in their high school careers. By the time students elect to take Portfolio, however, their mutual engagement in preparing bodies of work intended to qualify them for entry into America's top art colleges helps define who they are, regardless of whether or not post-secondary plans include actual enrollment in an art college.

Students respond to the challenge to use the tools of art to create a body of work that resonates with who they are, who they are becoming, and what engages their attention in a variety of ways. While other frames of reference for creating and evaluating art also guide the choices students make, their search for voice is at the heart of the enterprise. Pat explains that teachers try to help students discover their voices by encouraging them to “Pay attention to what you pay attention to” and asking them, “What are your questions?” These conversations take place over years of teachers and students working together, not just once they are in the portfolio class.

Students are also encouraged to keep sketchbooks and to make interest inventories—lists of 100 things that engage their attention, influence them, or about which they have questions. When a former CCHS student sends Pat the interest list she submitted as part of her MFA thesis exhibition, Pat shares it with the class as an example of how paying attention to one's influences and questions becomes a life-long habit for artists. Some students tease Pat about her name appearing as number 44 on the MFA student's list of 101 things.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> The MFA student sub-divides her influences into seven categories: *text* (1 through 20), *art* (21 through 41), *people* (42 through 51), *places* (52 through 62), *films* (63 through 67), *objects* (68 through 89), and *miscellaneous* (90 through 101). It is an eclectic list, ranging from the profound to the mundane. Books on psychoanalysis and digital



Amira believes the freedom students have to develop their portfolios without specific assignments to guide them helps students discover their voices because, “They have to re-examine themselves and, you know, question like why am I thinking this way and why am I using only these mediums; why don’t I do other things?” Pat says teachers try to facilitate this introspective process by paying attention to the body of work that emerges from each student over the years, not just in the portfolio class. She explains:

We never look at one piece alone. We are always looking at a collective group of work, . . . groups of pieces so that we can really see how they’re thinking. It’s about thinking, and that emerges in patterns. . . . Even in regular classes not even in just portfolio . . . we are looking at every piece as it emerges to see if we can find patterns in the way they think. If we can find patterns in the way they think we can help them do a better job of looking at how they pay attention.

The four cases that follow not only represent diverse bodies of artwork but a variety of ways that students think about their choices as their teachers and classmates try to help them “do a better job of looking at how they pay attention.” In selecting these four, I had to leave untold equally compelling stories of ways other students searched for voice. I chose Steve, Ellie, Eva, and Gary based on the variety of their post secondary plans: Steve begins Portfolio undecided between art college and a university and between majoring in art or English; Ellie knows she wants to attend a liberal arts college and to major in a field other than art that will best prepare her for the Peace Corps; Eva has known she wants to attend an art college since she began high school; and Gary plans either to attend a two-year college to study animation or to join the police academy. Gary also represents an anomaly among the portfolio students in that his search for voice proves relatively unsuccessful. The four cases, then, represent a cross section of stories

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electronics appear alongside a cookbook and *Some Knitting Tips from Grandma*. Places include the Banff Centre for the Arts and the “space between clouds.”

that describe a variety of ways portfolio teachers and students work together to “pay attention to what [students] are paying attention to” as they search for voice and make choices within the context of the relative freedom the class provides.

### **Steve: Back to Astro Boy by Way of Basquiat**

In Steve’s case, for instance, the teachers saw similarities between Steve’s drawings and the paintings of the artist, Jean Michel Basquiat. Near the end of Steve’s junior year, Cathy and Pat separately encouraged Steve to look at Basquiat’s work and to see a recently released film about Basquiat’s life. Steve admits to setting aside both suggestions until school started again in the fall when Pat, Cathy, and Anne all began to emphasize, again, that the quality of his work from Advanced Drawing and Painting his junior year was far superior to his ceramic work.

When I ask Steve if he believes he had been pushed into choosing drawing and painting for the focus of his portfolio work, he says:

Some little bit, like I feel like my hand’s been held, like I just crossed the street or something. Like I wanted to and I just needed that kick over, I just needed someone to guide me over and, you know, I guess I did. . . . I found out I had a talent and actually liked it. . . . I was willing to cross and they helped me.

The teachers’ discussions with Steve, in their roles as art experts and counselors, certainly change the direction he would have chosen for himself without their intervention. However, the more Steve learns about Basquiat, the more he recognizes that the teachers had, in fact, picked up on patterns in the way he works that resonate with both Basquiat’s style and content. After studying a book on Basquiat that he purchased during a portfolio class field trip to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, Steve explains the affinity he feels for Basquiat’s work this way:

I like his figures; he does people very abstractly. . . . He'll oftentimes leave them blank like really they just let the background fill in the color, whatever, you know, instead of just outline it. There's just a lot of little things in his painting; he'll draw like airplanes and just little people, little birds or whatever that just make up, just take up the space or whatever, and he does a lot of—I don't put this in my paintings—but I like the fact that . . . when he was still doing paintings he was real kind of against the sort of snobby art scene or whatever and so he would always like write, he would always draw in his pieces . . . little quotes from dollar bills or whatever . . . saying this piece is like money or whatever, you know, it's transacting and traded and stuff. And . . . my new work, I guess I can call it, has a lot of that same, you know, just paint it, just paint it in the back, you know, with different colors and then just draw an outline of a person and then . . . just do lots of little things that have meaning to me.

Over time, Steve comes to call those little things that have meaning to him

“images of opportunity,” explaining that while he may sometimes start with a predetermined idea—one about his grandmother, for instance—he refuses to work to a predetermined end. Instead, as he says in his artist statement:

The reason I work is because of the people around me. The brush strokes, the colors, the forms and figures and images I use all come from the way I feel about the people in the same room as myself. It's very much a process of opportunity; I use images of opportunity, of the feelings of those around me. I include things I see and hear because those things matter to the people around me.

When I ask for an example, he tells me about working on a recent painting and overhearing “someone talk about TV or a TV show, so I drew a TV, you know, . . . it's just images of opportunity.”

Similar to Juan's having found the painters Dali and Kahlo for inspiration, Steve, with the help of his teachers, locates Basquiat as an artist whose way of working resonates with his own interests. Instead of the art teachers assigning projects to the whole class to learn from the style of a particular artist or genre, as happens in many

studio art classrooms,<sup>25</sup> the practice at CCHS privileges the search for the student's voice first. Along the way, teachers try to help students find artists whose approach to creating art may prove helpful in the process of discovering a way of working that resonates with who they are, who they are becoming, and what engages their attention.

True to Pat's description of what happens to students once they land on their voice, Steve seems to work non-stop after what he and other students describe as his breakthrough piece, one he admits is too dependent on Basquiat's style but that marked an important transition for him. He explains his thinking process for that first piece this way:

[I decided] why don't I just try and closely, why don't I just try and rip off Basquiat and see where I go. And you know I tried and it was perfect, I loved it, like I loved ripping off Basquiat! . . . I don't want to continue to do that, but it was just a definite change in my work. . . . like I see more of a resemblance between my current work and Basquiat than my old work and Basquiat, you know, there's just this point in here where I don't know who else thinks this [way].

Even after Steve breaks his right wrist in a skateboarding accident and has to wear a cast for more than six weeks, he learns to use his left hand and produces drawings and paintings in a prolific outburst that surpasses even Juan's. After his arm heals, Steve tells me he considers his left hand a new tool he has learned to use when he wants to produce a raw image.

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<sup>25</sup> The 2007-2008 school-year art calendar published by *Scholastic, Inc.*, for instance, outlines six, one or two month projects, all of which include seven elements: major artist or school, period/culture, contemporary connections, design element/principle, medium/technique, studio workshop, and interdisciplinary connections (Scholastic Art, September 2007). One can imagine a teacher building an entire year's curriculum around these units that proceed from the study of a model artist, period, or culture to students' imitation of it in their own work.

During our last interview, I ask Steve if he is learning anything as a result of finding his voice through this change in the way he draws and paints. His long answer reveals much about how the relative freedom to work in ways that resonate with who he is, who he is becoming, and what engages his attention has contributed to the way he talks about his ability to experience life as meaningful and how the portfolio class has shaped his identity. He believes that he is:

learning something about myself and the kind of things I like; maybe the kind of things – a new way to turn what I like into what I do. . . . There was no . . . moment or anything, it just . . . I took a step and was like this is what, this is what . . . I feel like I should have been doing this all along. What was I thinking with that other stuff, you know?

The learning in this class has been interesting in that I've . . . learned on my own. In addition to learning that my ceramics wasn't quite up to caliber but my painting was, I learned the technical skills, like what materials blend well together. . . . I've been working with the same 7-8 materials throughout the whole year, and I've learned charcoal doesn't write well on paint sticks, so if I'm looking to get a darker line in a white paint-sticked area I go at it with my paint . . . add more paint. . . . I remember working on that green piece – there's a green piece with a big white face on the right and some yellow, like a yellow box and . . . I remember the yellow just . . . being freshly painted and being fairly thick and just going over it with some sepia and, you know, just the way it didn't really brighten the brown, but it just kinda carved the yellow – the paint out, and I learned that and . . . I really like that. So little things that I know if someone would have sat me down and just been like, you know, here's what this stuff does, here's how it mixes together, I would have just totally blown it off. . . . There would have been nothing there for me, so, you know, the learning has been mostly technical, but then . . . like I said, I've developed my statement about . . . where all the pieces are coming from, you know, I learned how to appreciate art. Along with Portfolio I had to take art history and that was really fun. I'm looking forward to freshman year of art history class, maybe concentrating on a certain area of art history. . . . In terms of identity I guess, you know how, who I am and Portfolio, it's made me more relaxed. It's made me more open. I find that I'm really different when I just come out of a portfolio class I'm really . . . casual. . . . Maybe in Pre-calc at the beginning of the day or Physics when I come up with a dumb answer or ask a question that the answer was right in my notes, I might be a little more self-conscious, but [not] in Portfolio . . .

Before Portfolio I was planning on going to be an English teacher, wanted to come back here and teach English. . . . [But in] Portfolio [I] got really into the painting, got really into the drawing and completely switched around and, you

know, for once I was actually like paying attention or was interested in what all those colleges had to say. . . . I remember last year, junior year, . . . by the time the third college was up I was just like what do I need this for? . . . I can really remember myself saying that . . . and then coming in now I'm going to an art college and so Portfolio has changed my life. . . . I'm glad it has, you know, I'm really looking forward to going to Boston, getting into art. I heard stories, shaky ground, as an artist going to art school, getting a BFA, . . . what can you do with it, you know? Then I've also heard Pat's stories; there's a lot more out there than you think. There's a lot more out there than people think for a BFA, so, you know, [I am] excited and anxious to see what's happening.

From learning technical skills and developing an appreciation for art history to becoming more relaxed and open and excited about his decision to attend an art college and pursue a BFA and an art-related career, Steve's experience in Portfolio demonstrates how he has become a particular kind of person within a community he values. No matter what the future holds for him, Steve's having become a full participant in the CCHS portfolio class's community of practice will influence the trajectory of the rest of his life and the meaning he makes of it.

As Steve reflects on his transformation, he recognizes this new self he has grown into and the future self he imagines he will become in Boston are both connected to the elementary school student he used to be who risked getting into trouble by spending class time writing and illustrating comic books to show off to his classmates. He is excited to show me some examples of his "Astro Boy" series that he had thought were long lost until discovering them recently in a box his mother had hidden away in the attic. When I point out that many of the figures in his new paintings have heads very similar to Astro Boy's head, he is surprised at first, but sees the similarity and says:

Yeah, there is a pretty connecting line. You can see the—just to take the top of his head—he's got the two points and then the curve in the center. That's been in my [new] pieces for a while. I mean, you can go back and take a look at that, but I

know definitely you'll find those like the top of his head and just a piece or something. So, I forgot about that, . . . so that's been there. Yeah, wow!

Not only does Steve find elements of his fourth grade style showing up in his senior portfolio paintings, but he also describes being influenced by his elementary school classmates in much the same way as his statement describes the influence of the people who surround him now. He recalls sitting at a table:

at sort of a bay window in my 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> grade classroom and just drawing, and I really liked drawing and I got in trouble for it a lot because I was supposed to be doing other stuff and I remember . . . well, in 4<sup>th</sup> through 6<sup>th</sup> grade and a little bit on to 7<sup>th</sup>, I drew comics and they were just homemade comics. . . . It was almost always during school, because you have friends around and you can bounce ideas off of them.

At his wall in the sixth floor hallway at CCHS where he adds images of opportunity to the drawings and paintings he creates for his senior portfolio, Steve, having found his voice, continues to find inspiration from the classmates who surround him. Whether it is drawing a TV in the moment after he overhears a bit of conversation or spontaneously incorporating a piece of a friend's final self-portrait onto his own, Steve has used the relative freedom the portfolio class provides to find a way of working that not only represents who he is and who he is becoming but one that incorporates both past and future meaning into the present.

Steve's willingness to trust the advice of his teachers that his drawings and paintings would lead to both better art and a surer route to discovering his voice proved a critical turning point in his senior year. Both he and his teachers knew that there was no guarantee that the suggestion to learn more about Basquiat would help Steve discover a way of turning what he liked into what he would do as an artist. The suggestion could

have been one of the “false starts” that Pat describes as fairly common as students and teachers collaborate on how best to search for each student’s unique voice.

### **Ellie: 50 Facts that Should Change the World**

In Ellie’s case, for instance, she believes she discovered her voice after making somewhat of a false start by focusing on self-portraits in a multi-media collage style that reflected her life-long interest in arts and crafts. In the pre-Portfolio summer class, Ellie elected to focus on self-portraits for her portfolio because she had completed several of them in previous art courses and could not think of any other idea on which to unify the pieces she would need for the concentration section of her Advanced Placement portfolio.<sup>26</sup> The choice seemed a perfect fit in that it continued in a direction she had been heading since elementary school. Ellie explains:

When I was growing up . . . my mom had a day care at our house and so . . . she was always like doing crafts and stuff like that, . . . and I was in Girl Scouts and she was my Girl Scout Troup leader and so I'd always be doing crafts and things like that. . . . So then once I got into school, I'd always just loved art class because it's the same concept you know like [the] same creativity and so . . . my stuff

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<sup>26</sup> Students who elect to submit *2-D Design* portfolios to the College Board Advanced Placement Program for consideration for college credit must submit 24 images of their work: 12 that represent a breadth of mastery in a “variety of works demonstrating understanding of the principles of design” and 12 that represent a *concentration*—defined as “a body of work unified by an underlying idea that has visual coherence” (AP Studio Art Scoring Guidelines, 2004). Of these 24 images, 5 must be designated for “quality” judging, and the actual work—all under 18 x 24 inches, including the mat—must be sent to the College Board. In 2005 the 24 images had to be slides. Currently, students can upload digital images of their work to the College Board website. Advanced Placement policies at both universities and art colleges vary widely, and most institutions of either variety award only elective credit when they do honor AP scores, preferring to make their own assessments about whether or not to place incoming students in second year art courses. These constraints on CCHS portfolio students’ freedom of choice have more influence on students like Ellie who plan on enrolling in a university and are interested in earning three elective credits. Since very few of the CCHS portfolio students are interested in earning such credits, Pat reports that only a handful of students each year pay the fee to have their portfolios evaluated by the College Board.



would be . . . decent, like it wouldn't be extraordinary but . . . I liked doing it and it look[ed] good for my age, I guess. . . . I don't know how to explain it, but . . . ever since then . . . I just always loved it in class . . . and I'd always . . . make Christmas presents and stuff for people, like that's just really how I started getting into it, and then I came to CCHS and . . . I knew the program was really good so I just wanted to continue in it.

The portraits that Ellie produces during the first semester are of high quality. A large collage in which she translates a photograph of herself and a friend into a vivid portrait, using what seems like thousands of bits of multi-colored paper, even takes a silver medal at the regional Scholastic show. However, even before the award is conferred in January, Ellie has lost her enthusiasm for creating multi-media portraits, despite some very cleverly conceived pieces. One that includes buttons to carry the field of color off the bottom of the page and another that uses a bright blue zipper in a similar way are particularly striking, for instance.

A number of circumstances combine to influence Ellie to try to discover her voice in a completely new way of working and with content that holds more meaning for her. First, as she has already noted above, she believes many of her classmates have made breakthroughs with their art and she wants to experience one, too. She believes she can do this if she begins to work on expressing ideas in her art that matter more to her than crafting a series of self-portraits. She admits that some of her portraits do have meaning for her but that the prospect of doing more of them just to satisfy an AP requirement would seem like doing “fake art” now. Secondly, on the same field trip to Chicago when Steve purchased the Basquiat book, Ellie buys a booklet called, *50 Facts That Should Change the World*. These facts describing social inequities resonate with Ellie’s values and her aspirations to make the world a better place by one day joining the Peace Corps.

She decides to try to find a way of making her art speak to these core values. She tells me:

I just feel like, I hate to say . . . a calling or something because I don't even think I believe in God right now. I don't know. I was talking to my friends from work the other day about this. I just have this crazy . . . I just know I'll need fulfillment in my life. I know that I can't do a normal job, I guess . . . like just to keep the world running, you know, and so, it just kind of boggles my mind how everyone doesn't have that because you see so much stuff going on in the world and there's so many people that just kind of like pass by it. I just don't understand. I just think it's human to care.

Finally, she engages in conversations with her peers and her teachers about her desire to take her art in this new direction. Chapter 2 detailed how helpful Ellie finds her conversations with Amira and Daphne during this transition, especially after she has decided on the subject matter for her Haggerty installation piece. However, Ellie does not come up with that idea instantly, and the role her teachers play in guiding her thinking, as it was for Steve, is critical.

The following excerpt from a conversation between Pat and Cathy during our second teacher focus group illustrates the way they try to help each other understand how best to facilitate Ellie's search for voice. Both teachers want to encourage Ellie to think about a variety of ways her new work could unite her commitment to social justice with her art, but they are uncertain about how to proceed:

Pat: We were talking about surface and fibers . . . and what could you do if you had to make the CCHS community aware of something? You know, . . . what if there was some artwork, graphic, or fiber that went on backpacks? You know, where every kid was gonna see it. I mean what if you weren't working on paper any more? What if you could make your work more actively engaged in sending out a message? What would that look like? . . . I think we should . . . try to make that happen for her . . .

Cathy: I can SO see her work going off into sort of an activist-art direction. Where maybe she's gonna grapple with . . . social/political issues. Maybe that's what her work needs to be about.

Pat: Well, then I think we need to push her a little harder for that and a little faster. Give her some ideas. She doesn't know what that looks like.

Cathy: Well, she does to some degree. I mean we do that with Art History and they see quite a bit of it. I think . . . she wants to go there with this next piece that she's trying to do. I don't think that the image that she has for that is strong enough. But . . . we were talking about it the other day, trying to get her to do something more conceptual or performance or . . .

Pat: Yeah, I just don't know. . . . I think we have to narrow it a little more. I don't know if she's able to just think up the whole thing. I think it's too big for her.

Cathy: That's a pretty big conceptual jump to move from making this kind of work to . . .

Pat: Right. . . . She's not a performer either.

Cathy: No, she's not . . . but then it might be okay, . . . there's a middle ground here. . . . You know it doesn't have to be [performance] and it doesn't even have to be big installation. It might be, um, because when I look at her work I do think of it as, you know, you could look at it as more design-oriented also. You know in terms of how she is working with space and color. . . . So now, she takes on an issue regarding the [political] images that she is using and trying to put those toward making some kind of a statement. Maybe she just needs to do that in 2-D first. Instead of making it, you know . . .

Pat: Well, it reminds me of [a former student] who . . . [was] big in Campus Ministry. And we just kept saying, "Well, Allison, you are just such a natural artist. You are an artist, and you have to develop that first if you really are going to have something to give back. Otherwise it all becomes about, you know, "Let's just serve Thanksgiving dinner to the poor." You know, I mean you have bigger things, and more important things you can evolve and be helpful with that other people don't, in ways you can serve a cause by first strengthening your own understanding of who you are. . . . I think that's the part that Ellie doesn't understand. She still sees this as very separate from and self-indulgent in a way, and um, I don't know that we are particularly good at turning that around for her. . . . There's still a separation for her. . . . She still doesn't realize that [art] . . . can integrate in—I mean it's not separate from her other thinking. And we haven't found a way to help her make the integration, and I think that's what the semester should be about. . . . How do we get that voice that is so . . . frustrated with the world and is trying to do good things to the world, how do we make . . . this work in the service of that because I would like to think before she leaves at least that she doesn't put one aside and do the

other but [sees] that they're integrated. Whether it be graphic design or whether or not she could, you know, could she really change somebody's view? Just at Fine Arts Day or at the Haggerty? I mean, is there something she could do project-wise that would make people understand an issue that's important to her?

This conversation provides an excellent example of how the search for each student's unique voice is at the heart of the portfolio class. The teachers' belief that art can serve as a vehicle for "strengthening your own understanding of who you are" is borne out by Ellie's affirmation that the "main goal of portfolio [is] to really find yourself in your artwork and express yourself in your artwork. . . . It's not just, 'Oh, you paint an object . . . and try to make it real.' It's trying to . . . find a truth in yourself." Chapter 2, of course, describes in some detail the School of the Americas installation project that is the first result of Ellie's breakthrough to find a truth in herself by integrating art with "that voice that is so . . . frustrated with the world and is trying to do good things to the world." As Ellie explores this new way of being an artist, she makes connections between her work and the installations of the artists Christo and Jean Claude and Andy Goldsworthy. In doing so, Ellie confirms Cathy's belief that Ellie's experience in Art History will help her understand a meaningful context for her own social-activist art.

At the formal critique where Ellie presents her idea and preliminary drawings for the installation, Ellie entertains many questions and suggestions from her classmates and teachers about the installation project. She remains very much in charge of the degree to which she will consider the feedback she receives during critique, rejecting ideas about incorporating video or sound into the piece, for instance, but solving the problem of providing viewers with sufficient background information by designing a postcard and placards in English and Spanish that provide information about the School of the

Americas and the reasons for the protest. On a blue square on one side of the postcard, Ellie includes a quotation from Fr. Roy Bourgeois, an American priest and founder of the human rights organization SOA Watch: *They tell us they're teaching democracy. We say, "How do you teach democracy through the barrel of a gun?"* Ellie finds a way, too, of incorporating her love for arts and crafts into her new social-activist work when she makes the decision to fashion crosses out of branches wrapped in brightly colored thread to represent the citizens killed by soldiers trained at the School of the Americas.

Ellie's one regret about her breakthrough is that she wishes she had discovered this new voice sooner. She tells me she wishes that Portfolio were a two-year course instead of just one so she would have more time to produce work in the same social-activist style. As it is, after the Haggerty installation, Ellie has time only to devote to the final self-portrait assignment that she must unveil when she presents slides of her portfolio and reads her final artist statement aloud to the whole class during the last round of formal critiques. She tells me that she did not want to return to her old way of working for this assignment, describing her previous self-portraits and hopes for the last one this way:

They're just art, you know, and I enjoy doing [them] but [they don't] have that meaning that I wanted, and this [final] one like . . . I was trying to think of something that I could do that would show . . . how I've progressed and . . . what I want to do in life and how I can incorporate that with art more.

This statement indicates that Ellie seems to understand what Pat hoped she would—that her thinking about how to make the world a better place and her thinking about art need not be separate but could be integrated. When I ask Ellie what her experience in Portfolio would have been like had she not discovered her voice, she replies:

I think I probably would have enjoyed the class as much, but I wouldn't have learned very much from it. Like it just would have been painting and collaging and . . . I just wouldn't have learned more about myself and about other people as much. . . . Something can look pleasing, but if it doesn't really mean anything . . . it's not helping the artist [and] it kind of lessens the value of the art.

The work that she produces for her final self-portrait represents perfectly the person and the artist that Ellie has become as a result of her participation in the CCHS portfolio class's community of practice. She explores her emerging identity as a social-activist artist and communicates the meaning she has created in doing so by presenting a series of photographs she took to illustrate more than a dozen of the 50 facts that should change the world. Each photograph includes text describing a particular injustice or inequity, but after the last photograph in the series, Ellie adds the tag-line, "Do Something!"

Ellie's thinking process for this final piece illustrates her awareness of the importance of visual choices she makes on the work's meaning and the emotional response she hopes to elicit from an audience. She rejects her first idea of putting one fact each in a series of handcrafted purses, for instance, when she realizes that finding a slip of paper with a fact that should change the world and the invocation to do something about it would reach only one person at a time. She did like the surprise element of that plan, however, as well as the way the handcrafted bags would evoke the meaning that working on arts and crafts still holds for her. She decides next on the series of photographs. At first she plans to include the tag-line, "Do something!" in each photograph. She thinks better of it, however, believing that the tag-line will have more impact on her audience if it comes as a surprise at the end after the viewer has become accustomed to the visual litany of one fact after another.

The overwhelming praise Ellie receives from her teachers and classmates when she unveils this self-portrait delights her. When the art teachers select it as one of the pieces they will purchase to display in the CCHS lobby, Ellie is thrilled. She tells me during our last interview:

I think it's so amazing that it's gonna be in the school 'cause that's exactly what I want, like I didn't want to . . . take it home and just put it in a pile because I want people to, . . . like everyone to have to read them and make people aware. . . .

My whole concept is that you need to . . . understand people and understand people's situations. . . . I think . . . if people . . . actually knew what was going on in the world, they would help. Like who's not gonna help someone . . . who is in pain, you know? Like it's pretty rare that they wouldn't. So I don't know, . . . I just found . . . a good way to . . . make people aware of what I want them to be, I guess. Instead of words. 'Cause I'm horrible with them.

Ellie may underestimate her facility with words, but she definitely has learned to use the tools of art to communicate an idea visually. She plans to enroll in a public university in a neighboring state in the fall and is undecided on what her major will be, knowing only that whatever field she chooses she intends it to be one that will prepare her for work in the Peace Corps after she graduates. When I ask her if she imagines art will play any role in the future she imagines for herself, she says:

I think it definitely could, especially after my last two pieces. . . . I feel like I could do a lot more stuff like that . . . even . . . [though] I do want to . . . directly help. . . . I don't want it . . . just to be the art and just stay in the United States and continue on living. And just do that. . . . I think it's important to kind of get out of the United States and to see what other people live like. But I think that . . . the art could definitely play a part in that eventually.

Whatever the future holds for Ellie, she, too, has made excellent use of the relative freedom the portfolio class provides to work in ways that resonate with who she is, who she is becoming, and what engages her attention. While her first semester work proved worthy of an award from the Scholastic judges, Ellie felt disconnected from the meaning of much of it. Once she discovers her voice, however, she is able to explore an emerging

identity as a social-activist and artist, an identity in which she finds personal meaning in the present—as a member of the portfolio class’s community of practice—and hopes to find in the future—as a member of the Peace Corps.

Ellie’s initial instinct to create a body of work focused on self-portraits as the surest route to her voice did help her produce artwork of high quality. However, her choice may have been influenced too much by the judging criteria of the national contests and the Advanced Placement program and her own success at creating self-portraits in previous art classes. I suggest this because Ellie tells me that at semester break the teachers told everyone that this was the time for them to catch their breath and to change things up if they felt they needed to, now that the deadlines for both ARTS (mid-October) and Scholastic (early January) had passed. It is not that students are not encouraged to work from their voice for those competitions; they are. However, students like Ellie who do not really start to work independently from class assignments until the beginning of the pre-Portfolio summer class may feel too much pressure to assemble a cohesive portfolio based on work they have already completed, especially for the very early ARTS deadline which requires 10 technically proficient and original pieces. Ellie tells me that she welcomed the teachers’ invitation to change things up

because . . . especially after . . . ARTS and Scholastic when you had to have like your theme down. And I think that is kind of frustrating, that idea, because I . . . remember in the summer class I brought in all my art and they kind of come around and say like, “Oh, I think you should do this” as your focus or theme or whatever. And . . . basically all I had was self-portraits because in almost every class you take here . . . you have to do self-portraits, you know. So, um, it’s just kind of hard to tell . . . because I don’t think I got much out of doing self-portraits as . . . my focus.

The contests and AP all require a cohesive body of work that not only demonstrates technical proficiency and originality but a “personal aesthetic” (ARTS) or



“personal vision” (Scholastic), or “underlying idea that has visual coherence” (AP). The shorthand for these criteria among CCHS students is “focus” or “theme,” although teachers much prefer “focus” and try to dissuade students from using “theme.” Pat explains that she believes the connotation of “theme” makes it too easy for students to choose a subject or topic arbitrarily without giving enough consideration to “the idea at the heart of the investigation.” Since the ARTS deadline is not even two full months into the school year and since students may include art they have created in earlier years among the 10 required pieces, Ellie’s choice to go with self-portraits as a focus is pragmatic but not, as she would learn, the core idea that would help her find her voice.

Whether or not Ellie could have explored an emerging identity as a social-activist artist earlier in the year is anybody’s guess, of course. Teachers do show the same slides of previous students’ portfolios to the summer class that they show to the parent groups, and they talk about voice in the same ways. It just took Ellie the relative false start of focusing on self-portraits in an arts and crafts style before discovering that that body of work was not the most significant vehicle through which she could start to define her voice or help her figure out more about the person she is becoming.

While meeting the October deadline for ARTS is not a requirement, Ellie is similar to many portfolio students in that she aspires to the highest level of achievement. With that characteristic in mind, it may be a good idea for teachers to consider that one reason students “go in and out of false starts all the time” is the pressure they feel to choose a focus or theme arbitrarily because of the rush to be ready for an October deadline. At the same time, choosing an idea that turns out to be a false start on the journey to discovering one’s voice is not necessarily a bad thing. The teachers do, after

all, use the semester break as an established checkpoint to invite students who believe they have not yet landed “where their heart is” or found “what they really need to speak to” a chance to get a fresh start. Besides, pursuing what turns out to be a false start on the journey to discovering one’s voice at least gives one the chance to explore an emerging identity. For Ellie, the experience of being the girl who makes collaged self-portraits during the first semester of Portfolio actually helps her decide to keep looking for a more meaningful way of being an artist.

### **Eva: Self-knowledge Through Self-portraits**

In Eva’s case, her early decision to focus on self-portraits as the vehicle that would help her explore an emerging identity and discover personal meaning proves to be exactly the right choice. Eva is clearly a student who has made good use of her time inside of class and out to create work and to be self-reflective about her choices. You may recall that Juan identifies Eva as among the students with whom he would talk about art on the phone “like literally every night around 11:00 pm” beginning in their sophomore year. So, unlike either Steve or Ellie who start Portfolio uncertain about their post-secondary plans, Eva, who says that when she was a little girl her mother thought she would be an artist or an architect one day, knows she wants to attend an art college long before enrolling in Portfolio. She believes that having the freedom to work in ways that resonate with who she is and what engages her attention has not only helped prepare her for art college but has helped in a personal struggle with her own identity:

Allowing us . . . to pick our own subject and to determine how we’re gonna do things . . . helps us develop. It just increases our understanding of art because we understand other art better. . . . We make our own rules earlier . . . and we experiment more. We are developing how to let go, which is I think necessary to go further.

Choosing self-portraits as the vehicle to learn more about who she is and who she is becoming was an easy choice, given Eva's introspective nature. She explains:

. . . My work is usually self-portraits because what I think about is myself . . . because I'm always back to who I am, you know? I keep trying to perfect myself. . . . I want to understand . . . myself and my role with other people and . . . how just the brain works because . . . if I understand myself better, I can understand others better. . . .

I'm understanding . . . there are things that are really important to us and there are things that drive us and there are things we struggle over because we get hung up on like little things that don't really, if you take it out of context, wouldn't necessarily be a big deal. . . . I wanted other people to identify with how I was feeling.

Eva finds a variety of ways in a variety of media for creating self-portraits to investigate her feelings and to help others identify with them. Over the course of the year, she creates a drawing and painting portfolio, a photography portfolio, and an impressive body of work in ceramics that includes a life-like statue of herself that stands about four feet tall. While her media and style change dramatically over the course of the year, the idea at the center of Eva's investigation remains constant:

. . . A lot of it is my sexuality because I'm attracted to women, and I really struggle with that and though, like I'm attracted to both sexes . . . I felt guilty about that for a really long time. . . . I . . . felt like it was wrong and I guess that was also like why my subject matter's about myself and . . . the female body and just the relationship with that and how can I like something that I am. So it was just kind of like, "Is it me I like?" . . . It was just like a weird process of thinking, and I had anger over it until slowly . . . the anger kind of just dissipated into like sadness over it and, um, . . . that's kind of the process that we go through, you know. We are angry about things. We lash out in anger because we don't know how to deal with it otherwise. . . . You want to blame situations or people, but it's really ourselves that we're . . . blaming. . . . My subject matter . . . sort of resolved part of that and so now I'm just exploring my confidence. . . . I'm even doing it as the process of my work, like I'm trying to be more confident in making bigger steps . . . In my self-portraits I'm even portraying how . . . the looks I'm making or the positioning is even saying that. . . . Because before . . . like I was depressed, and I'm not sure if it was because of my struggle with identity, but like a lot of things [in my work], especially ceramics, I'd draw like little people and

there'd be like huddles, you know, . . . because I was holding everything in and so now . . . I have more confidence and understanding and it's . . . coming out more.

Eva believes the freedom to choose different media and to experiment with her painting style actually helped in this exploration of her sexual identity. She credits the freedom of the CCHS program with helping her find her voice earlier than she might have had she attended a different high school. Eva bases this belief on stories she has heard about other high school art programs from classmates who have attended summer programs sponsored by various art colleges. She explains:

[Will] went to Maryland over the summer and you know [he says the students from other high schools around the country] all seemed to be really focused on like rendering things and doing things accurately, and I think that most places do really center in on that before you really learn anything like how to expand your learning. You start with the basics; . . . we do that, but we just we don't like overdo it, and it's not like you have to do it this way. Where just like the painting class and the drawing classes . . . [give] . . . your basic assignment, you know, use it how you like it. It allows us to kinda speak to ourselves better and so we develop a voice earlier than just drawing itself because I think that you can't necessarily just tell a person . . . how they're supposed to do something. . . . CCHS . . . allows for us to experiment and to take that foundation further.

As Eva struggles with a whole range of emotions regarding her sexual identity, the freedom she feels to experiment and to develop her foundational skills beyond mere realistic rendering influences the progress of her painting style. Two paintings in particular illustrate the correspondence between Eva's choice of style and the way she feels about who she is and who she is becoming. One painting, completed early in the first semester, conveys the guilt, self-blame, and sadness Eva describes above. The other, completed near the end of the first semester, reflects the exploration of her confidence in who she is and who she is becoming.

In the first painting Eva depicts the interior of a bathroom and a shadowy hallway just outside it. The focal point of the scene is the figure of Eva herself, standing in a

bath tub, nude, with her head bowed under a shower. A shadow covers her downcast face; her shoulders are slouched, and her left arm hangs straight down her side. The bathtub runs parallel to and against the back wall of the room. A tall, rectangular mirror hangs on the wall above the right end of the tub. The bottom half of the mirror shows the reflection of the head and shoulders of a blonde woman in  $\frac{3}{4}$  profile, her right shoulder turned slightly away from Eva's left one. She is wearing a white and violet colored blouse. Her hair covers her left eye, but her right eye seems to gaze off the front plane of the picture and directly at the viewer. In the hallway outside the bathroom, barely perceptible in the shadows, a man in full profile appears to be knocking on the door to the bathroom. He has a stern look on his face, but he, too, seems to be gazing off the front plane of the painting and toward the viewer. While I did not have the opportunity to talk with Eva about the specifics of the narrative she intended to convey in this small painting, that its mood is melancholy there can be no doubt. Its style, except for the small scale, shows the influence of the painter, Lucian Freud, on Eva's representational method. She tells me that the book on Freud is one from the CCHS collection that she has studied closely.

Eva's growth as a person and as an artist is evident in the style and content of the second painting, one Eva describes to me as her "breakthrough" piece. She had taken the advice Pat had given her during her first critique to work on larger canvases, but she was having some difficulty trying to develop a looser style. When she spotted several jars of paint that Juan had left on the floor next to his most recent painting, she took them and proceeded to pour the mixed paint all over her canvas. She explains the feeling of empowerment of her breakthrough this way:

My pieces were small and tiny and I was so frustrated so I needed to go bigger and that's when I started spilling. . . . It was just like I wanted to get my hands in

it and I was . . . frustrated and . . . was just using the paint to get that out whatever way and so . . . it was just kind of reconquering it and just feeling that I had power over the piece.

The power Eva exerts over her painting reflects not only a change in style—from small, tight, and formal to large, loose, and increasingly abstract—but a change in the way she feels about herself—from angry, sad, and depressed to increasingly confident. The self-portrait that results from this breakthrough to what Amira describes in Chapter 2 as “Eva’s splashy style” exemplifies what Eva meant above when she said:

I’m trying to be more confident in making bigger steps. . . . In my self-portraits I’m even portraying how . . . the looks I’m making or the positioning is even saying that.

The breakthrough self-portrait shows Eva from the waist up, wearing an empire-waist, spaghetti-strap dress of many shades of rust, burgundy, and gold. She faces the front of the canvas. Her head leans to the right and slightly forward, and she gazes down toward the bottom left edge of the canvas as if lost in thought. She uses extreme contrast between the lights and darks of her face so that her features almost seem outlined. Her body is positioned to the right-hand side of the canvas so that the viewer cannot see her left arm at all. Her right arm disappears into a swirl of rusts and browns and gold. The exposed skin above the bust line of her dress as well as parts of the dress itself are almost transparent, revealing vein-like layers of dripped rusts, reds and burgundy underneath. Eva’s expression is neither happy nor angry, but more self-reflective and resolute, with a tinge of sadness or regret. The newfound confidence she reports feeling as a result of this breakthrough piece is evident more in the change in painting style than the expression on Eva’s face. Unlike the observation she made about her earlier ceramic work, Eva is certainly not holding anything in. The colors are bold; the brush strokes and streaks of

color convey energy absent from the more somber and calculated look of the bathroom painting. Of this progress, Eva says:

I am really pleased because I feel like I'm being successful. . . . There is a process of how your own art develops. . . . People take on different steps at different times, but . . . I really think as an artist you have to solve your own issues before you can really deal with other ones. . . . My art did help me through a lot and so I'm like stepping up . . . just [as] a person [confident in] who I am but also . . . with that confidence, I'm taking more steps, like I'm having confidence in my mark making and taking more chances.

While the relative quality of each portrait is open to interpretation, the important consideration is that each piece results not from an assignment given to the whole class but from the expectation that students will use the freedom the class provides to find ways of using the tools of art as a “means of figuring out who you are and why you are doing what you do.” At the very least, the images represent two points along Eva’s trajectory of making meaning and exploring an emerging identity for herself within the portfolio class’s community of practice. In some respects, Eva’s “taking chances” with the spilling technique reflects her attempt to recapture a time when she felt happier, when painting with attention to “mark making” and “ghosts and layers” first excited her. As she works out in the hallway at her wall now, just outside room 610 where Pat teaches classes that Eva once took, she enjoys overhearing some of the key phrases that had so much influence on her own development as an artist. Eva recalls the way the drawing and painting classes junior year played an important part in shaping the artist she has become:

[Pat] brings out [books] like the Jim Dine and . . . Jasper Johns—she always brings out [books] and talks about the layering. . . . Beginning of junior year—she was so adamant about using . . . medium. You know, just, “Build up the layers. Build up the layers; . . . draw and erase.” You know, she’d speak about the ghosts. So, I remember that. And there’s one piece she’d always show . . . that an art student had done . . . I don’t even know when. But it had . . . the different layers and how it was like purple in the background, did the face and all this other stuff. She had that out for all like last year. . . .[Ghosts and layers are] . . . almost kind

of like not the basis of our art, but it's definitely . . . something you can recognize in CCHS work. With that influence on it and the mark making because . . . it's going past . . . realism. You know, it's going to more like self-expression. And you know I think Drawing was one of . . . the most important classes. And . . . I had Painting . . . that same semester, too. . . . We had so many Portfolio kids in that class like for the next year, so I'm just remembering . . .—that was the first time . . . like we were so excited about art. And you know, we were all like playing in the paint. . . . I wish we kind of could get that . . . first initial excitement again, but it does influence . . . how we get . . . here. We obviously take it in our own way.

For students like Eva, Ellie, Steve, and many others, the relative freedom to take their art their own way facilitates their growth as artists as they respond to the challenge to work from their voice. Without the relative freedom for students to follow their own paths, the whole character of the CCHS community of practice would change dramatically. Amira, for instance, believes that the sixth floor would lose at least “half the energy we have up here” if Portfolio were organized around solving conceptual problems assigned by the teachers instead of around each student's search for voice. Extending students this freedom, however, has limitations as well as advantages.

### **Gary: A Composition in Black and White**

In Gary's case, for instance, the teachers' attempts to guide his search for voice prove relatively unsuccessful. As I noted in Chapter 1, Gary was not an original member of the group of portfolio students I selected for this study. Only after witnessing a group critique in February during which teachers expressed their longstanding concern that Gary still was not using color in any of the pencil drawings for his portfolio did I decide to do a follow-up interview with him. Whereas Steve was willing to listen to the advice his teachers gave him about how best to improve the quality of his portfolio, Gary is not. The resulting stalemate tests the limits of the relative freedom that teachers extend to



students. At the very least, this impasse leaves all parties feeling frustrated. The teachers do not want to let go of their informed opinion about the steps necessary for Gary's artwork to improve, and Gary does not want to surrender any of his freedom to choose to work in the way that he clearly enjoys the most. Anyone who witnessed Gary's first group critique in October could certainly not have predicted that more than five months later, at the group critique near the end of February, that the teachers' estimation of the quality of Gary's work would change so dramatically.

At the October critique, the teachers praised Gary for having made a breakthrough in a new series of pencil drawings depicting dragon-like creatures snaking up from toilets. They judged Gary's cartoon-like illustrations as "original," confident in both line quality and composition, and—particularly in the rendering of "believable" creatures—"very real" and "fully developed." The teachers did recommend that this black and white work would eventually need to incorporate color and to develop in some other technical aspects. However, the overwhelming response to Gary's work from teachers and students was positive. At one point Pat suggested that Gary's new drawings were already "near college level work."

However, Pat did question whether or not Gary's focus was "toilets," as he had stated at the beginning of the critique, wondering if the humorous response he intended to provoke in his audience could be served just as well if he expanded the focus of his investigation to include "bathrooms," or "private interiors." Cathy was so impressed with the confident line quality of Gary's creatures that she suggested he might focus on developing these characters into a narrative independent of any particular setting. Anne praised the line quality of several of the pieces Gary presented, but she noted that

sometimes he could use more contrast, especially since he was using just a graphite pencil. She recommended he try to get more “black, blacks” to improve the contrast, depth of field, and focal point in all his pieces, instead of settling for dark grays as he had in some of the new drawings. However, Anne also asked Gary if he envisioned proceeding from pencil drawings to paintings because she agreed with Pat and Cathy that eventually this kind of work would need color.

Gary rejected the suggestion to switch from drawing to painting, saying that he “sucks” at painting. However, he offered that he could imagine incorporating colored pencil into his work as he developed it for his portfolio. Pat—who had taught a painting class to Gary in his junior year—tried to encourage him:

You know, you really don't suck with paint, just for the record. You are a pretty good painter. But let's get the color in any we can at this point and then ultimately break through . . . your self-image as sucking with painting. I think before with paint you were struggling with what to paint and how. Now you know what you want to paint and how we can go at it specifically with this.

Pat and Cathy addressed the group at the end the October critique, summing up the major points they expected Gary to consider as he developed his portfolio work. Pat stressed that: “We gotta work on color development, but this is a major breakthrough.” Cathy agreed but suggested it would be okay to, “Keep developing these for awhile; then we'll move into color, but let's get a few of these done with the black and white composition nailed. Then color.” Pat recited a list of technical problems for Gary to address: “So, depth of field, high contrast, a little better shading, starting to use color, and play with the rest.” She concluded by asking the group to recognize the progress that the new series of drawings represented by pointing to two earlier pieces that Gary also included in the work assembled on the classroom wall for the October critique:

I think you guys can understand that this color piece that is there is really kind of where [Gary's] been at or just copying things. That [older work] breaks to what's happening down here [in the new series] as a major shift already, so . . . he's gonna have it!

More than five months later at the group critique when Gary presents work that is supposed to represent the progress he has made since the October critique, he clearly does not “have it” in the way Pat had enthusiastically predicted. Instead of developing the characters from his October drawings in any of the ways the teachers suggested, Gary has changed his subject matter to large-scale pencil drawings of crime scenes and reverted to copying compositions he admires from magazine photographs. He bravely defends his choice not to use color by making an analogy to sports, explaining that asking him to use color is like asking star NFL quarterback, Tom Brady, to switch from football to baseball.

The protocol for the February critique includes the rule that the teachers must wait to respond until the students finish telling Gary what they think of his new work. Some praise the crime scene drawings (there are just two of them) as evidence of a more serious side of Gary showing up in his work, “so different from your cartoon stuff.” Everyone who speaks, however, encourages Gary to start using color. After Eva tells Gary to consider that he might just be “copping out because you don't want to do it,” Gary defends his choice to stick with pencil drawings this way:

Yeah, that's one thing, and also everybody else is using color. It's like if I want to try and be a little different . . . if I just use color it's going to match what you guys are doing.

Nobody buys that. Two students point to the improvement in their own work now that they have started using paint sticks or pastels instead of just charcoal. Eva tries to encourage Gary by telling him that his work could be “amazing” and really “pop out” if he started to use color. Juan says that he likes Gary's drawings but that he is “playing it

way too safe” as if he is taking “baby steps, and maybe that’s good for you right now, but this is the high school experience and you should go a little faster and experiment.”

The teachers follow this same train of thought when it is their turn to respond.

Cathy takes issue with Gary’s sports analogy, pointing out that a quarterback has to have command over a whole set of football skills to play the game. She explains to Gary that:

You need certain skill sets as an artist as well, and one of those skill sets is color and dealing with color and having the ability to use it because you can choose to use it and have the confidence and skills to employ it when you want to. And you don’t right now, and you’re resisting it. And your audience—although you get the kid coming by, like, “Oh man, that’s awesome!” stuff, which is great and it feels good—but these guys know; I mean it was interesting to see that their input to you was like, “Yeah, this is really beautiful, but, boy, we know that you have the potential to do so much more.” And it’s time. It’s time for you to not predictably know what you can do. And I think Juan hit it on the head. You are comfortable, and . . . every time I walk by you shudder because you are like, “Oh no! Here she comes again.” And . . . you know, one of these days . . . It’s hard for me not to just come by and wipe color right across it and make you have to respond to it.

Pat says that she will be right behind Cathy doing the same thing and that it is not okay for Gary to stay in the comfort zone of working in just pencil. She continues:

If your goal is to polish your realistic skills, go ahead, keep doing it. Do it with pencil, but that doesn’t mean that you have to isolate it from color. And . . . also, . . . if you’ve seen the picture you have taken this [drawing] from, it’s almost identical. I mean what’s different [from] this picture other than the face? You put your face in the mirror, but this is a copy of a photograph. . . . This is not a clever composition that is your own. It’s another artist’s composition. So . . . that’s very frustrating to me. And we’ve said this to you many, many, many times. You need to break through. We need to find out what you are capable of. You need to take some risks and some chances. I like the riot [drawing]. I think you’ve got a composition there that starts to feel a little bit like you’re . . . getting fresh, but the figures also border on tight, and I think you’ve got to play in order to keep things loose. . . . The best realists know how to make a mark and know how to keep it loose.

Both Cathy and Pat end the critique by trying to empathize with and encourage Gary. Cathy says, “I know you’re trying to talk about your own identity, as is everybody, and that’s what we want for you, too. But we want you to come out of this feeling like

you've conquered something, and the best thing to do is to conquer the things you are least confident with . . . and then you'll feel so much better. I mean it will be a good thing." Pat concurs:

Really, we'd rather see you screw it up for a while. . . . It's time for you to risk, to fail, to fall flat on your face because it's the only way you are going to grow. And you know what? We are still going to be there for you. We are still going to support you. And it's one of the things you have to trust about the community here and all of us. . . . I mean you are really walking out on that diving board, and it looks like cement down there, . . . and you're not ready to jump. But . . . let doing it badly for a while be your safety net. Screw around with some color; let's find out what can happen. I don't think you would even be capable of doing it badly.

Despite the collective urgings of his teachers and classmates, Gary has no plans to use color any time soon. The day after the fairly rough critique, I ask Gary about his friend and classmate who described the improvement in her own work since the teachers had "forced her" to start using paint sticks instead of just charcoal. Gary says:

I'm as stubborn as they come, so I'm a whole lot harder to take down than she is. It's just that you gotta ease them into color. If you force them to do it—they know that they're right—give it time, cause sooner or later I'm probably going to find out that I have to start using color. But it's something we've got to learn on our own. We just, you know, maybe we should just use color, you know, tell us that a couple times, but if you just . . . [tell me] . . . "Stop, . . . you're going to use color right now!" that's not going to help because if you're just given something right away, it's not going to help you out. It's just feeling like an assignment now instead of being able to be free and learn what you're going to do with it.

When I remind Gary that with just a little more than two months left in his senior year time is running out if he ever intends to use color in his portfolio drawings, he tells me: "The more I look at that big riot piece that I'm doing, I figure, okay, this is, you know, a massive main event; . . . it's going to be too big to not do without color, so I'm sure it will come into that piece."

However, Gary never finishes the piece. At the end of the year when he presents his portfolio, artist statement, and loosely-defined self-portrait to his classmates and teachers, Gary shows just 15 slides instead of the expected minimum of 24, and several of these are self-portraits he completed as a sophomore in his figure drawing class. He does pass out a couple of photographs of other drawings he had done at home as well as photographs of each of the four unfinished panels of the large-scale riot drawing. Amid the penciled in outline of a cityscape in which Gary depicts riot police, fire fighters, citizens, camera crews, a police dog, and assorted thugs in a frenzied moment of action is Gary's one indication that color might indeed find a way into the drawing if he ever finishes it. Between a fire truck and a lamppost toward the background of the riot scene, a lone bright blue newspaper box stands. However, Gary does not mention this bit of blue when he addresses the group at the final critique. He merely passes the photographs around before reading his artist statement and presenting his self-portrait.

The self-portrait is a cantaloupe which Gary had sliced in half, hollowed out, and filled with several rotting key limes before reconnecting the two halves with pins so that from the outside the melon appears to have "a very nice exterior, great to look at and strong and everything like that." However, as Gary takes the pins out to reveal to his teachers and classmates the rotting limes inside, he explains that they represent "everything that's been ticking me off for the past couple of months." As he picks up the first lime and raises it to show the group he says, "This one is: (falsetto voice) 'Gary, use color!'"

Everyone laughs.

Cathy, laughing too, asks, "Still?"

Gary shrugs and says, “Yeah.”

Gary’s artist statement wanders from topic to topic, revealing as much or more about his interest in NASCAR racing, popular movies, and cracking jokes with his co-workers at his part-time job at Walgreens as it does about any personal meaning he has found through his art. However, these sections and others from his statement do reveal insights into who Gary is and who is he becoming that could be very useful to the teachers’ efforts to help Gary discover his voice.

Consider his rationale for his cartoon-like drawings, for instance:

The reason I draw toilets . . . [is] . . . to make people laugh; it is just something I like to do. It doesn’t matter if I am doing a power point presentation for a class and get a laugh from the audience from the funny music bits I included or if it is a skit for a class and I am improvising the whole thing right there, it needs to get me a laugh for me to feel it was good or complete.

Gary very well may have benefitted from a discussion with his teachers about how to integrate his need to make people laugh with his art in the same way Ellie benefits from the discussions she has with Pat, Cathy, Daphne, and Amira about how to integrate her need to make the world a better place with her art. While Gary’s artwork never becomes as original, complete, or technically accomplished as the teachers had hoped it would become, it still can serve as a vehicle for Gary to explore emerging identities. In his toilet drawings, for instance, Gary explores the identity of the class clown, the kind of person who will do almost anything for a laugh. However, instead of exploring humor as the idea at the center of Gary’s investigation, everyone gets sidetracked into the discussion about color.

Working to meet the aesthetic standards his teachers and classmates urge him to explore is not exactly the stuff of stand-up comedy. Maybe that is the rub. Having already

gotten a laugh from his classmates when he presented the unfinished toilet drawings at the October critique, Gary loses his incentive to improve the quality of their artistry. The jokes had already been told, and Gary was ready to move on. He tells a classmate who asks about the reason for the dramatic switch in subject matter: “When I did the bathrooms, I knew I could do that.”

Of course, if the portfolio class were organized around specific assignments given to the whole class with specific deadlines, as the other art classes at CCHS are, Gary’s insistence on doing things his way on his time schedule would never have become the problem that it is. The risk of offering students freedom from specific assignments is that students like Gary will mistake the relative freedom the class provides with absolute freedom. While the teachers threaten to wipe paint across one of Gary’s drawings to force him to deal with color, they never do. I suspect Gary knows that it is an idle threat. I never think to ask him how he would have responded had they done that or found some other way of forcing him to use color in his drawings. However, the solution to Gary’s problem may not be that he needs more structured assignments or deadlines or to use color at all.

The teachers could merely redefine the problem. Instead of thinking that using color is the only vehicle through which Gary or his work can grow, they could try to get him to think more deeply about the meaning he hopes to find by working in the way he chooses to work. Encourage him to explore that class clown identity of his, for instance. Gary’s choice of subject matter is not the problem. Everyone’s subsequent preoccupation with a single aesthetic concern is. Gary perceives the teachers as nagging him. The teachers perceive Gary as obstinate. Those perceptions block all other avenues the



teachers have for engaging Gary in thinking more deeply about his choices. Instead of arguing about color, for instance, had Gary taken Cathy's advice to build a narrative around his original characters he may have been able to develop his voice similar to the way his classmate, Neal, developed his—through humor.

Neal's distinct voice emerges in a series of paintings and drawings that juxtapose characters in ironic settings. In Chapter 2, for instance, Paulo described Neal's *E = MC Hammered* painting that portrays Albert Einstein spinning records hip-hop style. Neal develops his portfolio work by playing with the irony at the center of the Einstein joke and spinning it off into surprising variations. Two of my favorites are a painting of famous football coach, Mike Ditka, playing poker with Jesus Christ and another that depicts Jesus riding a surfboard next to Noah's ark.

Whereas Neal's humorous drawings and paintings grow from his appreciation of irony, an appreciation he is able to communicate visually in a series of comic juxtapositions of character and setting, Gary never imagines what might take his brand of humor further. That failure of imagination seems as much or more of an obstacle to Gary's growth as his failure to incorporate color into the drawings. The emphasis on the aesthetic qualities of the work presented during critique, at least in Gary's case, may have interfered with his finding a way to develop his need to make people laugh into the vehicle he would use to discover his voice.

That same observation could apply to Gary's experience with his second subject matter of choice, the more personally meaningful idea of paying homage to his brother and his line of work. Gary actually intends to become a policeman, too, if he ends up not liking the two-year college in Illinois where he plans to learn how to become an animator.

Gary's statement describes his rationale for his crime scene drawings this way:

I am also drawing, what some would call, extremely violent drawings involving police most of the time. Well, that is just the world that we live in. I exaggerate the drawing to a point, but it all happens in today's world, and I find it shocking that people don't realize that. I started off with the police theme because of my brother, Officer Matt \_\_\_\_\_. Every day for the past 4 years, he has busted his ass in the police department and has just graduated from the academy. I look at him and I see one of the most determined people I have ever seen before. The police theme is out of respect for Matt.

At the group critique when Gary presented this new work in progress, however, Gary's resistance to using color dominated the conversation. No one thought to direct Gary's attention to thinking more deeply about how best to represent visually what he had come to understand and admire about his brother. That kind of thinking is what Pat and Cathy were able to encourage in Ellie as they struggled to understand how best to help her realize that she could use art to represent the ideas and feelings she held most dear. At the very least, helping Gary examine the reasons behind all his free choices, not just the aesthetic ones, could have helped everyone get off the dead horse of urging Gary to start using color.

The teachers' mistake with Gary was conflating aesthetic concerns with concerns about voice. It may very well have been that Gary's use of color would have led to more aesthetically pleasing artwork, and using color may even have helped Gary feel a surge of confidence and pride in mastering a skill-set that had so far proved beyond his interest and ability. However, using color was not the right path to recommend to Gary if the goal of Portfolio truly is to help students discover their unique voices.

In the other cases presented in this chapter, aesthetic concerns and concerns about voice complement each other. Students seem to understand that the meaningful content that they choose deserves their most thoughtful aesthetic engagement. Steve, Ellie, and

Eva embrace the opportunity to experiment and take risks with both the style and content of their artwork. Gary does not, which is unfortunate. Eva believes such experimentation actually contributes to CCHS students finding their voices earlier because they can make their own rules earlier than students who concentrate on realistic rendering skills.

Hindsight, of course, is better than foresight, and Gary may have resisted urgings to think more deeply about the ideas he was trying to communicate visually as adamantly as he resisted suggestions to take some risks with color. However, the real value of giving students the relative freedom to work in ways that resonate with who they are, who they are becoming, and what engages their attention is that students do gravitate toward choosing content that can help them discover their unique voices. Gary may have been able to find more meaning and to explore emerging identities as cartoonist, policeman, or animator had he been asked more questions like, “How is your work going to keep us laughing?” or “How are we going to see how much you admire your brother’s determination to become a police officer?” instead of “When are you going to start using color?”

While Gary’s experience suggests that he may have been better off in a class that had more structure, even after his rough critique in March he tells me how much he enjoys being a portfolio student:

That’s really been a positive experience. I had no idea I could do some things that I could now. Like I really liked working out in the hallway ‘cause you had extra time. . . . It’s not like a class where, okay you’re there for three mods, you have to do it. It was kind of leisurely-like. If I’m in the groove in something, I can go up there, and I can get like four or five things done in a short time; then I feel really positive, like, okay, without the portfolio class I couldn’t have done this. And also, all four years leading up to this have been a building experience. Figure drawing has been the most influential class because of the people that I’m doing. It was very, very helpful. Portfolio is kind of like the main event out of everything

. . . you've done before all mixed into one. And if you really take into [it] what you learn before, portfolio is just a snap. It's really, really fun to do.

Of course, Gary's incomplete portfolio suggests he may have taken the class too "leisurely-like." I suppose, too, if one feels free to ignore the teachers' suggestions for improvement and the required amount of work, any course could be a snap. At the risk of losing some of the energy on the sixth floor that Amira attributes to students' relative freedom to search for and work from their voice, perhaps the teachers should consider ways of implementing a conceptual problem or two for students to solve in addition to the final (and very popular) loosely-defined self-portrait assignment. Creativity, after all, can profit from constraints (Eisner, 2002a), and students could profit from the discussion generated by their various solutions to a common problem. That certainly seemed to be the case when students unveiled their final self-portraits. An assignment as simple as "Show me your voice" might work, but I am sure the teachers could improve on that.

However, even without the addition of conceptual problem-solving assignments to guide Gary's efforts, the arc of participation Gary follows through the CCHS art program and into the portfolio class clearly has contributed to his experience of meaning and his identity within the CCHS portfolio's class's community of practice. He refers to his four years taking art classes as a "building experience." Like Eva, he says that you take the skills you have learned in each successive art class and keep applying them. The figure-drawing course was seminal for him, for instance, and in Portfolio, a class that mixes everything Gary had done before into one "main event," Gary claims to surprise even himself with the extent of the progress he has made. Unlike many of the other portfolio students, Gary never mentions the work of another artist as a source of his inspiration, and I wish I had asked him about that. I know that he had art history, and I

know that, like all other CCHS art students, he witnessed countless times when teachers pointed to the work of other artists and former CCHS students as examples.

For whatever reason, however, Gary seems content to follow his own path. He says he wants to be an animator, but he is always quick to add that his fallback plan is to follow in his brother's footsteps. Gary may not have explored those two emerging identities through his art in a way that led to the discovery of his voice—at least not in the way that his teachers hoped he would—but he certainly has found an identity within the CCHS art program's community of practice, an identity an admiring classmate describes during the March critique this way:

Gary, your train of thought is just pretty much amazing. Every time . . . when I see you up here working, you get so into it. You have your little eraser and your little pencil, and you do not move at all. . . . You have fun while you work, like you don't get frustrated like everybody else.

Gary's response says volumes about both his identity within the class and the meaning he derives from it: "You gotta have fun. I'm my number one fan. (laughter) No, I mean it. If I don't like it, I'm just not gonna do it. Why would I waste my time doing something I don't appreciate?"

### **Conclusion of Chapter 3: A Custom Job**

This chapter has focused on four portfolio students who make very different choices within the relative freedom the class provides them to work in ways that resonate with who they are, who they are becoming, and what engages their attention. Each of them becomes a particular kind of person within the CCHS community of practice, a community they value regardless of the extent to which they have been successful in producing a body of artwork "from their voice." When the process works as teachers

hope it will, it can be transformative. Steve changes his mind about his plans to become an English teacher. Ellie discovers there is in fact a way of using art to represent both the progress she has made as an artist and what she wants to do in life to try to make the world a better place. Eva's transformation from angry, sad, and depressed to increasingly confident is reflected in the transformation of her painting style. Even Gary, whose work does not measure up to the quantity or quality of the other three students, takes advantage of the freedom the class provides to explore two subjects that reflect different aspects of who he is as well as two career paths he is considering. The value, then, of giving students relative freedom of choice within the context of a search for voice comes as students find meaning and explore emerging identities within a community that provides them the opportunity to work in ways that resonate with who they are, who they are becoming, and what engages their attention.

John Dewey said that education should be a custom job (Eisner, 2002b). The portfolio teachers' efforts to guide students' choices and to hold the artwork that results from those choices to demanding aesthetic standards demonstrates their dedication to Dewey's ideal. Within the CCHS portfolio class each student has the opportunity to become a particular kind of person and a particular kind of artist within a valued community. A passage from my very first interview with Paulo offers a closing example of the way students' relative freedom to develop a body of work from their voice shapes the CCHS art portfolio class's community of practice and contributes to our understanding of its success. Paulo describes exploring his emerging identity as an artist this way:

Doing art, to me, it's not something that . . . all of a sudden clicked one day and all of a sudden, "OH, I want to become an artist." No, to me it's like, as I learn

more, I realize why I should be an artist. And why I need to . . . read more, first of all, . . . and not be narrow-minded. . . . It's not like I'm trying to become an artist, it's just that . . . it's a method that I'm using right now to give myself a voice, . . . to give myself something to do and . . . have a purpose, . . . to . . . say something that I want to say that I feel is true to me. . . . Doing art, and thinking about it afterwards, creates that voice. . . .

When I first . . . started I didn't think I was going to be in art at all. I was like, "Well, I guess I'll do something, you know?" but after awhile like I'd see that everybody else was acting like me. Everyone else was acting the same exactly as I was, because, it's not because we're like all these GIFTED individuals, it's because we're all normal and we do the same thing. And I guess that makes us artists. . . . We are just high school kids. We're . . . not like these artists everyone thinks you are like when they come here . . . they see our art and they're like, "Whoa, you guys are so in depth." Like we were in depth while we did that. You know? We were . . . thinking consciously about, at least in my work, I was thinking consciously . . . when I did that. You know, . . . [but] I'm a normal kid, you know? It's . . . a process to me. . . .

It's basically a method of clarity for me. It says what I want to say, but it clarifies my opinions, . . . 'cause I'm just like a mess. I'm a talking mess, I'm a compositional mess, and . . . as I do [art] with the guidance here, as I do it, I narrow it down, I narrow it down, and think about it. You know? I think about why I am thinking that. And think about what else do I need to do, you know? Either to bounce off of that idea, or just to be . . . exactly the opposite of that idea? But it's just, it's just thinking to me. . . . It's just something that has to be done. It needs to be done. I can't really explain it. I just, . . . ever since I, like I've been exposed to it, it's something . . . that fits me.

This chapter has elaborated on reasons the last of Wolf's (2001) invisible rules that shape successful art programs should be modified to read: "It's among *AND* within." The choices portfolio students make as they search for ways of working from their voice create opportunities for them to find meaning, explore emerging identities, and to discover through their particular kind of artistry "something that fits" who they are and who they are becoming.

## **CHAPTER 4: LEARNING WITH AND BECAUSE OF EACH OTHER IN A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE**

*The whole is more than the sum of its parts.* (Aristotle, *Metaphysica*, 10f – 1045a)

When presenting the rationale for this study, I cited Schon (1983) who suggests that best practices in many fields develop on the job as experience and intuition shape the decisions good professionals make. Teachers construct and reconstruct their teaching practices over time, developing repertoires of theories, practices, knowledge, and values that emerge from on-going classroom life. What eventually develops as teachers and students work together within a particular school's program is an identifiable community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) that sustains and renews itself in established but continually negotiated ways as new members join the group. In the preceding two chapters, I identified five themes as a way to describe the community of practice among CCHS portfolio students and teachers and to address the research question that has guided this study: *In what ways does the community of practice developed within a successful studio art program at a high school contribute to an understanding of its success?*

In this chapter, I summarize my analysis of the CCHS portfolio class's community of practice and identify four key practices that contribute significantly to an understanding of its success. Next, I present the implications of my findings for secondary art education in terms of the ways Portfolio intermingles vantage points from the historical tradition of expressionism and three models for best practices in art education to have emerged over the last several decades: Discipline Based Art Education (DBAE), Arts Propel, and Visual Culture Arts Education (VCAE). The next section



demonstrates that my analysis of the CCHS portfolio class has implications for improving education across a broad range of disciplines beyond art. Finally, I identify implications for future research to continue the discussion I hope to have contributed to in this dissertation.

### **Understanding the Success of the CCHS Art Portfolio Class**

Each of the five themes presented in the preceding chapters describes a valuable aspect of the CCHS portfolio class's community of practice that contributes to its success in the same way that a pattern of imagery (or any separate literary device) contributes to the success of a poem. For those who experience the poem's meaning, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. So it is at CCHS for those who experience the meaning of the portfolio class's community of practice. The whole team of teachers and students working together toward common goals is greater than the sum of the parts of the community of practice that these five themes represent:

1. The value of team teaching. Three portfolio teachers, plus.
2. The value of students working in the hallways.
3. The value of the portfolio class as a family or community.
4. The value of students serving as teachers and mentors for each other.
5. The value of giving students relative freedom to work in ways that resonate with who they are, who they are becoming, and what engages their attention.

Taken together, these themes describe the CCHS art portfolio class's community of practice. Taken together, these themes contribute to our understanding of its success.

Taken together, these five themes contribute to a vibrant community of practice that is more than the sum of its parts.

However, a summary of the ways the community of practice developed within the CCHS portfolio class contributes to an understanding of its success seems appropriate here. The most significant contribution this study makes to the discussion about what constitutes best practices in secondary art education is its examination of the ways CCHS art students learn with and because of each other in a community of practice. The mutual engagement of students and teachers in the joint enterprise of creating and evaluating the bodies of artwork produced within a capstone portfolio class sustains and renews CCHS's vibrant community of practice. Newcomers and old timers have open and easy access to each other both during the school day and on studio nights. The quasi-studio spaces along the walls of the sixth floor hallways contribute to the ease with which students of all ages are able to serve as teachers and mentors for each other, adapting elements of each other's styles both subconsciously and on purpose. Students and teachers engage in dialogue consistent with democratic practices, co-creating a cognitive culture that models the practices of adult artists. Teachers broker conflicts and decision-making in simultaneously caring yet demanding relationships that typically serve to motivate students to work hard.

The presence of teachers and parents on studio nights and the visits of the college admissions representatives every fall demonstrate ways that both fully participating and peripheral members of the CCHS portfolio community contribute to the ebb and flow of activity as successive generations of portfolio students engage in the process of making choices about how best to create individual bodies of artwork that represent who they are and who they are becoming. Teachers serve as art experts, counselors, and brokers between the CCHS portfolio community of practice and other communities of practice to

which they and their students belong or hope to belong. The community's focus on each student's search for voice provides opportunities for all students to find meaning and to explore emerging identities.

The above summary of my analysis of data gathered in focus groups, interviews, documents, photographs, and observations over the course of one year describes the particular success of the CCHS art portfolio class's community of practice. The interplay of structure and practice described in the five themes I have presented simultaneously carve and shape a successful community of practice year after year. Of course, high schools interested in achieving similar success in their own art or other programs need not try to imitate the specific features of the CCHS community of practice. If one looks beyond the particular circumstances at CCHS to the general practices underlying its collective community, four key practices emerge that not only emphasize the general ways the CCHS portfolio community of practice is successful but describe ways available to communities of practice across a broad range of disciplines to become similarly successful.

### **Practice 1: Teachers and Students Engage in Dialogue Consistent With Democratic Practices**

Eisner (2002a) identifies discussion, deliberation, and consensus building as democratic practices integral to a community of learners. All three activities describe the value that the themes of team teaching, working in the hallways, and the sense of family or community contribute to the natural ways CCHS art teachers engage in dialogue with each other as well as with the students themselves. Teachers benefit from having colleagues on whom they can depend for advice and special areas of expertise, and

students benefit from having teachers they can consult with independently as well as together to “argue it out” when there are different ideas from which to build a consensus about the best way to proceed. Knowing that their teachers can have different opinions also builds students’ confidence in choosing options that seem best to them, as Ellie pointed out in Chapter 2 when she described the value of listening to teachers’ multiple points of view: “Then you can decide because it’s true to yourself.”

Burton (2000) describes the virtues of teaching through dialogue in the art studio classroom this way:

In the first place it inhibits the kind of uniformity in making and appraising that is the consequence of “telling and demonstration.” A good dialogue will allow an interweaving of personal sensory, affective, and cognitive responses as youngsters reflect on their experiences and, through imaginative reconstruction, give them voice in and through visual materials. It will promote self-reflection, recognition and tolerance for diversity and an ability to listen to and learn from the thoughts of others. In addition, a thoughtful dialogue will offer youngsters insights into how ideas are constructed, related to each other in sequence, and build in complexity to larger ideas. It gives meaning to an individual’s personal development, by opening them to the powers of scrutiny, investigation, inquiry and questioning by others. By the same token, the teacher must be able to offer through dialogue insights about materials, techniques and visual ideas that meet learners where they are in their own personal meaning making. (p. 344)

In their commitment to Dewey’s ideal of customizing education to fit the learner as well as their expertise “about materials, techniques and visual ideas that meet learners where they are,” the portfolio teachers’ engagement with students and with each other in discussion, deliberation, and consensus building contributes to the realization of the virtues Burton describes.

### **Practice 2: Teachers Serve as Brokers**

In addition to brokering conflicts and decisions within the portfolio class’s community of practice, teachers also serve as brokers between the CCHS community of

practice and a “constellation of connected communities of practice” to which students belong or hope to belong. Wenger (1998) describes the role of mentors who serve as brokers among a constellation of communities of practice this way:

The job of brokering is complex. It involves processes of translation, coordination, and alignment between perspectives. It requires enough legitimacy to influence the development of a practice, mobilize attention, and address conflicting interests. It also requires the ability to link practices by facilitating transactions between them, and to cause learning by introducing into a practice elements of another. . . . What brokers press into service to connect practices is their experience of multimembership and the possibilities for negotiation inherent in participation. (p.109)

The portfolio teachers depend on each other for mutual support in brokering what can sometimes be stressful negotiations between the portfolio class’s community of practice and other communities of practice in which they have some form of membership. For instance, when Angela uses pages she has torn from a bible to fashion fabric for her Madonna dress, the teachers have to negotiate with CCHS administrators and theology teachers who, understandably, question the artistic merits of Angela’s choices. When the father of one portfolio student shows up unexpectedly during the set-up for Fine Arts Day to discuss a disagreement he and his daughter are having over which art college would be a better choice for her, the teachers drop everything to meet with them. The first-hand knowledge the teachers have of both colleges under consideration helps them broker the conversation.

More typically, the topic of conversation at times like these draws on the teachers’ personal knowledge of the campuses and programs of a wide range of art colleges and universities to help families do a cost-benefit analysis of the post-secondary options available to them. Teachers routinely contact the schools under consideration to inquire about additional scholarship or work-study opportunities that may make a student’s first

choice more affordable. In Chapter 2, for instance, recall the significance that Amira attaches to the visits of the art college representatives to the success of the CCHS art program. The impression these representatives form of Amira and her work result in three top colleges vying for her enrollment, much as other schools might vie for an elite athlete. During the ensuing application and decision making process, the portfolio teachers receive and initiate a number of phone calls and emails to help Amira and her family decide among the opportunities at each school. They engage in similar correspondence for many other students as well.

These examples of brokering contribute to our understanding of the success of the CCHS portfolio class's community of practice. The portfolio teachers share "legitimate peripheral participation" (Lave & Wenger, 1991) with the respective communities of practice that comprise CCHS teachers and administrators, students' families, and representatives of art colleges and universities. As a result, CCHS art students know they have advocates to negotiate conflicts or to share information between communities, and their families know they have a team of knowledgeable teacher advisors to help them evaluate and connect to post-secondary opportunities.

### **Practice 3: Teachers and Students Model the Practices of Adult Artists Within a Common Cognitive Culture**

Preparing artwork and accompanying artist statements for public exhibitions and juried competitions is a practice common to fine artists. When Mark includes both his colleagues and students in on his deliberations about which of his paintings to take to a New York gallery, for instance, he not only models what adult artists do, he engages students in the process of arriving at consensus. On countless other occasions, too,

students and their teachers participate in whatever activities or conversations draw their attention, a process Anne describes as “going with the flow.” These occasions often invite collaboration among students with each other and with their teachers as fellow artists. Recall, for instance, the way Amira describes the influence students have on each other’s work in progress:

If you really love something that somebody is doing or if you don’t like it, you can go up to the person and just talk about their work, and what you could say could completely change whatever they are working on. And that’s just such a huge influence that we all have on each other.

This openness and collegiality contributes to a cognitive culture among a community of working artists which Ellie believes “changes the way you think” and in which students feel free to critique each other’s work and to share intimate details of their lives—“the sixth floor things”—that they do not share as readily elsewhere.

Eisner (2002a) describes a successful community of practice as one in which the “milieu” contributes to a “cognitive culture that has as much to do with developing dispositions as with developing aesthetic and analytic abilities. It is a culture that, at its best, models what adults do in those realms” (p. 74-75). At their best, CCHS portfolio students and their teachers model for each other the practices of adult artists. Together they co-create and sustain a cognitive culture evident in their community of practice. The themes I have presented contribute to our understanding of its success. In Chapter 3, for instance, Ellie describes the cognitive culture in which she makes her transformation from mixed media portrait artist to social-activist artist this way:

You hear other people in the class like have these breakthroughs and . . . you want, like you strive for that. Like you don’t want something that’s superficial, especially after hearing people’s statements about . . . truth. . . . You know what I mean? Like if you’re sitting there and if your art’s not true and like it’s just for the class, . . . I don’t really know what that’d feel like.

Ellie and her classmates use the relative freedom students have to work in ways that resonate with who they are, who they are becoming, and what engages their attention to think about how best to discover and use their unique voices. When Ellie finds a way of connecting the passion she has for social justice with her emerging identity as a social-activist artist, she is developing a disposition as an artist as well as aesthetic and analytic abilities common to adult artists.

During an interview in which I followed up on Ellie's claim that "Portfolio changes the way you think," Ellie made an analogy to a "found poem" assignment in her English class that opened her eyes to the poetry of the whole novel, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*:

You just look at it differently like you're looking for this poem, like you're reading how poetic this whole book is. Like you see it so differently. And that's kind of what I think art is like, . . . especially in Portfolio, like you totally change your mindset on it.

This kind of thinking in which one sees an experience differently from the way the experience typically is seen characterizes one way adult artists often think. Whether it is seeing an unintended poem amidst the intended prose of a novel or rearranging grocery items in aesthetically pleasing patterns as Angela unloads her cart at the checkout counter, artists have the ability to transform conventional experience into unconventional and aesthetically engaging forms. As Angela in Chapter 2 said of her decision to emulate her artistic friend, Juan:

I realized that "artsy" people, quote unquote, . . . find the simplest things beautiful. . . . They find the things that everyone else thinks are ugly and the things that everyone else thinks are trash—they find them amazing. And I wanted to be part of that.



Students take on the dispositions of adult artists in the ways they learn to respond to and make meaning from their own experience. By changing the scale of a soup can and a box of soap pads, Andy Warhol changed the way the world perceives ordinary commodities on a grocery shelf. By using apples to change the scale and materials that ordinarily comprise a rosary and by fashioning a woman's dress out of sacred text, Angela demonstrates that she has started to think like an adult artist. The visual forms that result from this thinking, as with Warhol's oversized soup cans and Brillo boxes, are exhibited in art museums.

Angela and Ellie are not alone in taking on the disposition of adult artists, of course. Students actively try to teach each other to begin to think in these transformative ways. Recall, for instance, how Juan described his own mentoring work with younger art students: "What I try to do is just sort of . . . expand their thinking and go more conceptual with their ideas instead of just . . . doing projects for a class, or [I try to get them to] question . . . more things." Even the freshman, Woody, in his conversations with Amira about her paintings begins to understand that "the art part" is what one does as one thinks about how to use the tools of art to add meaning to one's work.

#### **Practice 4: Teachers Develop Simultaneously Caring and Demanding Relationships With Students**

Finally, the simultaneously caring and demanding relationships that teachers develop with their students characterize the CCHS art portfolio class's community of practice and emphasize another way of understanding its success. Paulo believes the relationships he has developed with all of his art teachers motivate him to work:

In my other classes, I get mad and I don't want to work and I turn away from my classes just because my teachers have this negative attitude. . . . Sometimes I get it

up here, but it's different, you know? . . . I respect their thinking a lot more than like my English teacher's thinking . . . because they really want . . . they really [are] . . . interested in what I think about [and] what I'm going to do with the rest of my life. Like my [English] teacher, she doesn't care. She just . . . wants the paper. [The art] teachers up here they . . . REALLY care, like they really want you to do good. That's why . . . I like it when they get mad at me. I don't like it when my teachers downstairs get mad at me. . . . I just feel like . . . they understand me a lot more. You know? And I personally, when they yell at me, I feel worse than when my teachers yell at me downstairs. Like I see two different worlds, up here and downstairs. That's . . . why I agree with calling them by their first name. . . . It's sort of like when I talk to Mark it's sort of like talking to my older brother. . . . I actually tell him what I think. I have to WATCH what I say downstairs.

I see [the art teachers] as equals. I see them as equal artists. Downstairs they . . . instill like in your mind that they're superior 'cause they have their teaching degree and . . . they're gonna teach you and you're gonna learn and you're gonna listen and you're gonna love it. You know? It's like, "NO." I'm not gonna respect you 'cause of that. I'm certainly not gonna love it. . . . Up here . . . that's not even stressed. . . . It's . . . in a cooler atmosphere. You know? But at the same time, you know, they . . . make you work. You know . . . it's just, it's different. It's like opposite ends.

In a separate interview, Juan corroborates Paulo's point of view about the value of the mutual respect that develops between students and their art teachers in the CCHS community of practice. Like Paulo, Juan believes that the teachers treat him as a fellow artist and that it is this feeling of respect that makes him work harder:

It's that professional friendship that we all have with them. It's really interesting and it's the one that . . . makes us do more. It like just never makes us stop. It . . . keeps us going. . . . I think one of the big things that maybe a lot of schools don't do is that they treat us like artists. . . . I understand that like all these goals, all these things I . . . expect for myself are not really gonna be accomplished within the next like 5 years or 10, maybe even 20. Just because I'm 18, you know, so, there is that sense that young kids can't be artists, but they see us as artists. They treat us like artists. We're not just like "art students." We're artists trying to do art, and paint, and stitch and so that's extremely important, and maybe that's where a lot of schools lack, . . . but yeah, the teachers definitely see us as artists.

Todd finds, too, that it is the relationship that his art teachers have worked hard to develop with him that keeps him working hard, even during those times when he feels he cannot find the intrinsic motivation to do so:

It really starts with just getting to know them more than just your name and what number you are in the grade book. They understand your family, they understand where you're coming from, they figure out more or less—high school kids aren't always willing to say well, here, I'm gonna spill all my stuff about my family, I'm gonna spill everything I like; you're just a teacher, what do you care—but they figure it out. They work to figure that stuff out.

[That] helps me push through it. I am inexperienced compared to professional artists . . . but I've already experienced little bits and pieces of how hard it is . . . what it takes to really constantly and consistently put forth this effort of making this great art. And . . . when you're down at that lowest level where you're no longer doing it for yourself, it's because of these teachers that you're like, oh yeah, wait a second. I do want to do this. . . . I'm always doing art for myself and these teachers have taught us to do that. Not only taught us but helped us to realize that it doesn't matter if you're not doing it for yourself, . . . but at times it becomes so hard, . . . it becomes to me so stressful, just with other subjects . . . and family and soccer and skiing [it] [be]comes so hard to carry on with . . . art, so when I do sink to that lowest level, it's because of the teachers that I just don't push it aside.

Even when the teachers head down a non-productive path in encouraging Gary to incorporate color into his drawings, Pat still reminds him that despite the demands she, Cathy, and Anne are making on him, “We are still going to be there for you. We are still going to support you. And it's one of the things you have to trust about the community here and all of us.”

The contribution these simultaneously caring and demanding relationships make to the CCHS portfolio class's community of practice and our understanding of its success seems self-evident. As Noddings (1992) points out, “Kids learn in communion. They listen to people who matter to them and to whom they matter. . . . Relation, except in very rare cases, precedes engagement with subject matter” (p.15). At CCHS, the art teachers

seem to have figured this out. All five themes I have presented contribute to ways “kids learn in communion” with “people who matter to them and to whom they matter.”

### **Implications for Secondary Art Education**

In describing the problem in the field of art education that this dissertation addresses, I cited Burton (2004) who concludes from a review of the literature on the practice of teaching art in K-12 classrooms that:

There remains considerable dispute about the subject matter teachers are expected to teach; whether the subject matter is derived from studio practice or from constitutive disciplines; whether it is confined to the traditions of fine arts or extended to embrace a more all-encompassing visual culture; whether it derives from the formal study of elements or from the life experiences of young people; or whether it is an intermingling of all vantage points and, if so, what are the interconnecting threads? (p. 572)

I argued at the outset that in the context of art teachers’ general freedom to shape their programs as they see fit and the lack of consensus in the literature about what constitutes best practices, it makes sense to take a close look at schools like CCHS where the visual arts have flourished. I do not expect that anything revealed here about the CCHS art program will help art educators arrive at a consensus about what art teachers should be expected to teach or how. However, I can contribute to the discussion by identifying the particular intermingling of vantage points that contribute to the success of the CCHS portfolio’s class’s community of practice.

### **The Search for Voice as the Keystone of the CCHS Portfolio Class**

Instead of borrowing Burton’s weaving metaphor to identify in Portfolio the interconnecting threads among the various traditions and sets of practices for which different camps of art educators advocate, I will draw a metaphor from architecture—the

keystone—to describe the ways elements from these traditions and models contribute to the success of the CCHS portfolio class. In the construction of an arch, the keystone locks all the other elements of the arch into place, and it also provides the focal point of the whole structure. Each wedge-shaped stone—or voussoir—is critical to the integrity of the arch, of course. Remove any one of them and the whole structure would come tumbling down. However, the keystone’s place at the apex of the structure provides, as its name implies, the key element on which all the others depend.

The keystone of the CCHS portfolio class is its focus on the search for voice. The relative freedom students have to work in ways that are “true” to who they are and who they are becoming grounds the course in the historical tradition of expressionism (Efland, 1990), a tradition that—despite having fallen into disfavor for its association with romantic notions of the child as a natural artist and Progressive era laissez-faire instructional practices—has advocates today (Burton, 2000 & 2001). For instance, in her reassessment of Victor Lowenfeld’s influence on the expressionist tradition of art education, Burton (2001) writes:

Perhaps we now have clearer and more sympathetic insights about Lowenfeld’s fear of the engulfing influences of models and motifs and his concern for the relationship of personal voice to an ideologically constructed field of discourse. For he surely responded to what he saw in Germany as the effects of a totalitarian regime on an art education for children that consisted of little more than endless copying from chalk boards and workbooks. In such a setting, he must have seen how adult models conditioned children’s artwork almost entirely. In another age and with more understanding, we now know that if youngsters develop visual voices that draw on their own experiences, both real and imagined, and that are rooted in rich interactions with materials, then the integrity of the personal voice is not so easily dislodged. This, of course, is what Lowenfeld wished to protect, what he believed was indigenous to all young people and that was the right to construct their own meanings and speak in their own voices.

In the CCHS portfolio class, discovering and maintaining the “integrity of the personal voice” adds meaning and gives focus to the whole enterprise. Britzman’s (1990, as cited in Connelly & Clandinin) description, for instance, of the struggle for voice as a process of making meaning within a community resonates with the ways portfolio students search for voice:

Voice is meaning that resides in the individual and enables that individual to participate in a community. . . . The struggle for voice begins when a person attempts to communicate meaning to someone else. Finding the words, speaking for oneself, and feeling heard by others are all a part of this process. *Voice* suggests relationships: the individual’s relationship to the meaning of his/her experience and hence, to language, and the individual relationship to the other, since understanding is a social process. (p. 4)

In the context of Portfolio, of course, communication “in and through visual materials” rather than through language alone enables students to participate in the social process of mutual understanding that Britzman describes. However, using language well, especially in the attention devoted to writing and presenting artist statements, also contributes to the pre-eminence of voice as the keystone of the CCHS portfolio class’s community of practice. Juan, for instance, defends the extra time it takes during the final presentations for students to read their artist statements aloud to the whole class this way:

A painting can speak for itself—and all that jazz—yeah, it’s very, it’s important, that it does that, but there’s more to that art. You know there’s the ideas behind it, there’s the person behind it, . . . art . . . is about making a statement and it’s . . . about expressing yourself—I hate using that word—but, essentially, . . . an artist becomes an artist because that’s the only way they have to connect, that’s the only way they essentially let people know them. It’s . . . really simple actually. Like art is nothing major. It’s just people painting because they want to be heard, they . . . just . . . want to be shown, they want to be known, they want to be talked to.

Juan’s comment certainly demonstrates the value of giving students the “right to construct their own meanings and speak in their own voices.” The practice of reading the

artist statements aloud at the final presentations brings together both the visual and language-based results of each student's search for voice.

However, as Juan's distaste for merely using the phrase "expressing yourself" suggests, CCHS students understand that there is more to their artistry than "frenzy, dream, or as Wordsworth would have it, 'the spontaneous overflow of strong feeling'" (Wolf, 1988). Indeed, a program grounded in expressionism and focused on *voice* need not be reduced to the equivalent of therapeutic self-help, as ample evidence from the preceding chapters demonstrates. Teachers and students hold each other accountable for their aesthetic choices. The *curve ball* acronym for the principles of design gives all participants in the community of practice a common vocabulary for appraising each other's compositions. Even Gary says that, aside from the impasse on his aversion to using color:

. . . the critique was really helpful in some areas. You know, like with the picture, I could change some things . . . [Pat] was really right with that. I got to change a few things in there . . . with the police car and the background [and] how I should put something in there to make it my own . . . to add that Gary element to it.

While the search for voice certainly provides the keystone of the CCHS community of practice, applying fundamental skills in the principles and elements of design provides an indispensable *voussoir*. Students as different from each other as Eva and Gary both talk about the importance of carrying the skills they develop in each CCHS art course along with them to the "main event" of Portfolio and beyond.

### **The Intermingling of Other Vantage Points**

This combination of skill building in the elements and principles of design with a focus on the search for voice already represents an intermingling of two vantage points

from the traditions of art education that suggest the possibility of a balance between what others have described as opposing forces. Efland (1990), for instance, describes the major conflict in art education over the 20<sup>th</sup> Century as:

. . . between those intent upon teaching the content of art and those seeing it as self-expression. In the name of self-expression children were frequently left to their own devices and were denied access to knowledge that could enlighten their personal investigations of art. And yet, in their insistence upon teaching art techniques, or the names and dates of art styles, or the elements and principles of design, one might easily lose touch with art as it enables human beings to realize their spirit and their destiny in the actions and products of the imagination.  
(p.263)

As my analysis of the CCHS community of practice clearly demonstrates, Efland need not wonder “whether it might be possible to strike a balance between these tendencies, something akin to the balance Plato sought between the music and gymnastics of his day” (p.263). For at CCHS, while students are “left to their own devices” within the relative freedom the portfolio class provides them to work in ways that engage their attention, they also have multiple ways of accessing “knowledge that could enlighten their personal investigations of art,” not only through instruction in the elements and principles of design but through their exposure to art history and other contexts for making and exhibiting art.

For example, vantage points from the three models for art education that have emerged over the last several decades—Discipline Based Art Education, or DBAE, Arts Propel, and Visual Culture Arts Education, or VCAE—influence the interplay of structure and participation within the CCHS portfolio class’s community of practice. Elements of both DBAE and Arts Propel surface in the two ways art history content complements the focus on the search for voice in the CCHS portfolio class. In DBAE (Greer, 1984; Clark, Day & Greer, 1987) art history represents an independent body of



knowledge to be studied and valued for its own sake. In *Arts Propel* (Zessoules et al., 1988), art history content is integrated within the context of the student's own artwork as offering points of comparison in setting standards for achievement.

In the CCHS art program, most portfolio students learn art history content by taking a stand-alone course in the fall semester of their junior or senior year, team-taught by Cathy and a social studies teacher. This arrangement allows art students to count Art History as one of the required units of social studies credit for graduation. That Art History exists as a separate class at all provides another example of the role of art teachers as brokers between related communities of practice. In this case, the art teachers had to negotiate with the CCHS curriculum committee and administration to approve Art History and to provide the additional staffing the team-taught course required. The art teachers' advocacy for their discipline's content in the context of a high school curriculum already crowded with required courses and electives in other disciplines represents another way that such brokering contributes to the portfolio class's community of practice and our understanding of its success.

The ultimate beneficiaries of this brokering, of course, are the students. Recall, for example, that content from Art History contributed to Ellie's familiarity with artists and art trends that informed her choices for both her School of the Americas protest installation and her final self-portrait. Another example comes from Todd who describes the critical role learning about art history plays in the four-year process of becoming a portfolio student. He explains in an interview that, beginning freshman year, he and his fellow art students are:

. . . not only developing your artwork . . . starting from technical to the way you see things, . . . not only that, but [developing] as a person and interacting with

other kids who are in the same boat as you. Every other kid freshman year, we knew two artists. Now senior year I could just list them, not only from history class but . . . [we] just . . . understand the art world, as big as that is, . . . [we] understand . . . the big picture; that development is just such a key aspect of developing . . . [into a] great artist.

The stand-alone art history course, often recommended in DBAE models of art education, provides one vantage point from which Todd and his classmates begin to understand the “big picture” of the art world and the influences the work of other artists can have on their own development.

The other way art history content shapes participation within the CCHS portfolio class’s community of practice corresponds with methods recommended in Arts Propel studio classrooms. The CCHS teachers constantly look for opportunities to direct students to artists whose way of working may inform their own. As Steve’s and Eva’s cases have demonstrated, the introduction to artists like Basquiat and Freud serve to offer points of comparison and set standards for achievement. This way of tailoring art history content to the individual student on a case-by-case basis characterizes the CCHS portfolio community of practice and, in terms of my “*voice as keystone*” metaphor, provides another indispensable *voussoir*. When Paulo was describing his idea for his Haggerty installation piece to Pat, for instance, one of the first things Pat did was to show Paulo a book on Rauschenberg with an illustration of his famous installation or “combine” entitled “Monogram” (1959) that juxtaposes a stuffed angora goat, a tire, a police barrier, the heel of a shoe, a tennis ball, and paint. Pat told Paulo that he would actually do Rauschenberg one better because his plans to sit with a boom box among the turntables, milk crates, and assorted graffiti-laden objects in his homage to the origins of hip-hop culture meant that he actually would become part of the art he created. Paulo would tell

me later that leafing through all the illustrations in the Rauschenberg book made him realize that Rauschenberg was not afraid to take risks.

Elements of Visual Culture Art Education (VCAE), the third and most recent model of art education to have surfaced over the last several decades, provide other contexts for making and exhibiting art that shape the practice of the CCHS portfolio class. These elements influence the CCHS community of practice primarily through the annual Haggerty museum installation show. In VCAE classrooms, art making often becomes polemical, a visual advocacy for a wide variety of social, personal, and cultural concerns, and its forms may include non-traditional media such as installation, performance, video, and computer art. Advocates believe that VCAE broadens students' understanding of what can count as art and how art can be made. Thus, images and experiences gained through popular culture and/or students' personal interests have as much claim to legitimacy as the traditional processes and products of the art studio (Freedman, 2000, 2003a; Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005). For instance, when Angela decided she did not want to wear her Madonna dress for the Haggerty show and decided to build an altar around it instead, complete with a rosary fashioned from dozens of apples draped over a genuflector, this larger than life allusion to the story of Adam and Eve and the forbidden fruit, Catholic religious practices, and the worship of the Blessed Virgin could have resulted from an assignment within a VCAE-based art program.

However, when the search for voice provides the central focus of an art studio classroom, as it does at CCHS, elements of VCAE find their way into the work of students like Angela, Ellie, and Paulo who—because of who they are and who they are

becoming—discover in VCAE’s non-traditional methods and materials a way to give voice to ideas they value and to questions that genuinely concern them.

The implication for art education, then, comes with knowing that a high school studio art program grounded in expressionism need not have to choose between self-expression and demanding aesthetic standards, or among DBAE, Arts Propel, or VCAE practices. When the search for voice provides the keystone, the dichotomies Burton (2004) describes between seemingly antithetical practices, need not be dichotomies at all. Instead, elements of each vantage point can emerge through participation and dialogue among the whole community of practice to support the needs of individual students as they give visual form to their particular voices. Efland (1990) wonders whether art education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century will be able to find a “harmonic confluence” among historically conflicting influences. He need look no further than the model that the art program at Central Catholic High School provides.

### **Implications for Education**

Wenger (1998) understands that developing such a community of practice within a school setting for art or for any discipline will be challenging, but he believes it is possible:

If we believe that information stored in explicit ways is only a small part of knowing, and that knowing involves primarily active participation in social communities, then the traditional format [of schooling] does not look so productive. What does look promising are inventive ways of providing access to resources that enhance [students’] participation, of opening their horizons so that they can put themselves on learning trajectories they can identify with, and of involving them in actions, discussions, and reflections that make a difference to the communities that they value. (p. 10)

The four key practices I describe ways of understanding the success of the CCHS community of practice could be transferable across a broad range of disciplines throughout all levels of schooling. Education everywhere is likely to improve if schooling practices included trying to develop communities of practice in which the following four practices were widespread:

1. Teachers and students engage in discussion, deliberation, and consensus building;
2. Teachers serve as brokers between their respective communities of practice and other communities of practice to which they or their students belong or hope to belong;
3. Students and teachers engage in practices that model the practices of adults within the context of a particular discipline; and
4. Teachers develop simultaneously caring and demanding relationships with their students.

It helps, of course, if teachers have expertise in and a passion for their particular field as well as for working with young people. Having colleagues on whom one can depend for advice and mutual support is also a plus, and creating an environment in which beginning students have open and easy access to more accomplished students seems essential.

None of these attributes is easily realized, of course, especially in a climate in which it is too easy to recognize the legitimacy of Paulo's complaint about teachers who "just want the paper" or expect that "they're gonna teach you and you're gonna learn and you're gonna listen and you're gonna love it." Unfortunately, the transmission model of education remains the default mode for the ways too many teachers teach and too many students expect to learn. However, even if that mode of teaching and learning remains the default one, there are still ways education could improve if teachers in all disciplines took the implications of the above practices to heart.

For example, teachers could spend more time working to get to know more about their students' lives outside the classroom. Todd appreciates the way his portfolio teachers "work to figure that stuff out" about him. He, Juan, Paulo, and others all suggest that professional friendships grow from mutual respect and from the genuine interest that teachers demonstrate for them and for what they hope to accomplish with the rest of their lives. These relationships make students want to persist and excel in their work, even when other challenges interfere. Teachers' knowing, respecting, and caring for their students motivates students to care to know and respect their teachers in return. In mutually caring relationships, all sorts of work can get accomplished even in classrooms where the transmission model describes the primary mode of teaching and learning.

Education would also improve if more teachers could embrace their roles as brokers within multiple spheres of influence. Resources are always limited, and teachers who are good brokers understand how to negotiate with the best interests of their programs and their students in mind. The portfolio class itself, as well as Art History, studio nights, and "in-house field trips" during the visits of the college representatives would simply not exist if the CCHS art teachers were not effective brokers for their discipline and their students. Building a successful program in any discipline takes more than just good teaching.

CCHS art teachers invite the participation of parents and representatives from colleges and universities into their community of practice, and, as my analysis has demonstrated, the results prove mutually beneficial. It is not in the job descriptions of the art teachers at CCHS to facilitate a parents' support group, to host studio nights, to enter regional or national art contests, to get to know the campuses and programs of post-

secondary institutions that may have an interest in recruiting their students, or to take an active role in guiding their students through the college admissions process. The CCHS art teachers could just teach their classes and go home as so many teachers do. One can be a good teacher and a terrible broker, I suppose. However, more teachers need to realize the benefits of acquiring and using legitimate participation within the constellation of communities of practice related to their own. I am suggesting that successful communities of practice are more likely to develop in programs in which good teachers are also good brokers. That certainly seems to be the case at CCHS.

In terms of promoting the democratic practices of discussion, deliberation, and consensus building and of modeling the practices of adults within disciplines other than art, emerging constructivist educational models will need to exert more influence on collective expectations about the ways teachers teach and students learn. Given the reification of schooling practices into a kind of grammar that constrains our imaginations regarding what is possible (Tyack & Cuban, 1995), developing models based on Wenger's (1998) belief that "knowing involves primarily active participation in social communities" will present enormous challenges but not insurmountable ones.

Already constructivist teaching and learning practices that reflect the influence of educational theorists like Vygotsky (1978) and Bruner (1990) are having a significant impact on teacher training, professional development, and schooling practices (Mintzes, 2007; Rodriguez, & Berryman, 2002; Nyikos, & Hashimoto, 1997; Kaufman & Brooks, 1996). The alignment of CCHS practices with constructivist practices is evident in their mutual emphasis on pursuing students' interests and questions through interactive dialogue rooted in collaboration and negotiation (Brooks, 2004). Across a wide range of

disciplines and levels of schooling, certainly more emphasis can be placed on students collaborating with each other under the guidance of their teachers to solve problems that have meaningful relationships to communities that students value. Inquiry science, mathematical modeling, integrated project-based learning, and computer-based simulations of real world problems describe some of the promising constructivist alternatives to “sit and get” transmission models. Like art, these “open concept” (Anderson, 1998) approaches to teaching and learning intend to develop thinking skills that some contend are common to geniuses across all disciplines (Root-Bernstein & Root-Bernstein, 1999).

The most significant implication for education from my research, however, has less to do with the particular nature of these thinking skills and more to do with the importance of creating an environment in which beginning students have open and easy access to more accomplished students. If constructivist practices are restricted to individual lessons in individual classrooms behind closed doors, then there is no easy way for novices to learn from old timers, no structure to enable a freshman like Woody to roam the hallways to interact with students who are further along the trajectory of becoming the kind of artist (or scientist, mathematician, historian, writer, economist, etc.) he hopes to become. Along the way, Woody learns a closed concept skill from Yale about a stencil making technique, but he also learns that art is an open concept, that it will ultimately be up to him to figure out how best to use all the skills he is learning to add personal meaning to the products of his thinking in order to represent that meaning to others. Is not that what adults in any discipline do? Use the skills and tools at their command to make meaning for themselves and others?



What if the students most interested in any given discipline were somehow able to serve as teachers and mentors for each other in the four contexts in which CCHS students learn with and because of each other? What if other disciplines hosted open studio nights, facilitated a parents support group, held public exhibitions of their students' work, entered regional and national competitions, and invited university representatives into their classrooms? Some who read this dissertation might raise the concern that it is easier to create this kind of community of practice in a discipline like art. My response is that there is nothing easy about creating a successful community of practice in art or any discipline. The situation teaches, as Dewey said, (Eisner, 2002a) and education everywhere will improve if schools can figure out how to create situations in which students of all ages and abilities are able to model for each other the dispositions and practices common to adults in any field of endeavor. For it is in such open environments in which all who aspire to achieve at the highest level of a particular community of practice have the opportunity to learn with and because of each other.

### **Implications for Future Research**

This study suggests implications for future research concerning both my methodology and the analysis that results from it. In collecting data for this study, for instance, my asking students and teachers to respond to photographs of their community of practice proved incredibly valuable. That strategy may have implications for future research. Both in focus groups and in follow-up interviews with individuals, the photographs proved an excellent way to get students and teachers talking with minimal intrusion from me. Asking both what the photographs revealed and did not reveal about Portfolio elicited thoughtful and detailed responses that I doubt very much mere

questioning would have brought to the surface. Asking both what the photographs revealed about Portfolio that everyone should know and also that only participants as individuals might know proved similarly successful.

A concern, of course, may be that since I was the one taking all the pictures and choosing which ones of them to show to the focus groups, my own selection process may have influenced the data in ways that I could not anticipate or ameliorate sufficiently merely by asking for information about what the photographs did not reveal. Gathering data through photographs taken and selected by the participants themselves could prove a helpful way of investigating another CCHS portfolio class, communities of practice developed within other successful high school art or other programs, or in entire schools that hope to develop successful communities of practice across their entire curriculum.

If I were to design another study of the CCHS community of practice, for instance, I would like to follow a cohort of Art Fundamentals students, put cameras in their hands, and periodically ask them to select images from their collected photographs to represent ways they believed they were progressing or not progressing from the early skill building courses to Portfolio and Art History. Through focus groups, interviews, documents, and classroom observations, I would hope to gather data as a way of exploring a number of interesting questions. Why do some students persist in taking four years of art courses and others do not? When and in what ways does the search for voice intersect with building skills in the elements and principles of design? When and in what ways does art history content begin to inform students' choices? In what ways do teachers serve as brokers over time with a particular cohort of Art Fundamentals students? The possibilities are numerous, to say the least.

In terms of implications of this study for future research concerning communities of practice developed within other successful high school art programs or, indeed, in programs in other disciplines or even in whole schools, many questions also seem worth investigating. In research that investigates other successful studio programs in art, for instance, in what ways might practice be grounded by vantage points from traditions other than expressionism? In what ways, if any, might the search for voice influence such communities of practice? In research on successful communities of practice in any discipline, will similar themes emerge as students and teachers reveal ways they talk about community, practice, meaning, and identity? What conclusions will emerge as ways of understanding the success of other communities of practice? Will open and easy access beginning students have to more advanced students prove as essential to understanding ways other successful communities of practice sustain and renew themselves? Will the roles of teachers as brokers again contribute to understanding the success of other communities of practice? In what ways might a whole school's teaching and learning practices foster development of successful communities of practice across its entire curriculum? Again, the possibilities are both numerous and intriguing.

In a personal context, I am curious about what has happened to the participants of this study over time. I have continued my close relationship with the CCHS art teachers, of course, but I can imagine conducting research similar to Barone's (2001) that includes the CCHS teachers and some of the student participants who contributed to this study. Like Barone, I am interested in the lasting influence that students and their teachers have on each other. The CCHS portfolio class of 2004-05 has lived in my head long enough for the students in it to have completed college by now. Successive generations of

portfolio students at CCHS have followed in their footsteps as Steve at one point imagined they would. I have learned much with and because of all the participants in this study, and I am certain that if I kept looking I could learn so much more.

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## Appendix A: Student Participants

- Amira: Amira's mother is Malaysian and her father an American of German descent. She gave up participating on the cross-country team when her coach would not allow her also to belong to the creative writing club if it meant she would miss some practices. She serves as president of the "Far East Siders," a new club she and her fellow students of Asian descent co-founded, inspired after a history teacher upset them by lumping all Asian cultures into one during a class discussion. Her paintings and drawings investigate "the complex relationship between memory and loss." Recruited heavily by top art colleges in New York, Maryland, and California, she selects one in California.
- Angela: Angela is proud of her Puerto Rican heritage and her friendship with Juan. Her drawings, photographs, and sculpture investigate her questions about beauty and religion. She turns down a full scholarship at the local art college to attend the same East coast art college Juan selects.
- Daphne: Daphne's mother is a math teacher at a Jesuit high school for boys. Her father is an engineer. Her older brother is a doctor. She travels 40 miles each way in order to attend CCHS for its art program. She also plays varsity soccer and describes herself as a perfectionist. Her paintings and drawings investigate personal identity as evidenced by one's preferences. She selects a prestigious university in Pennsylvania where she will major in Design.
- Ellie: Ellie wants to commit her life to making the world a better place. She aspires to join the Peace Corps after attending college in Minnesota. Her work evolves from collaged self-portraits to social-activist installations and photography that she finds more meaningful. She believes "Portfolio class changes the way you think."
- Eva: Eva knows she wants to attend an art college as early as her freshman year. She investigates her sexual identity through a variety of media but is primarily a painter whose work becomes increasingly abstract as she gains more confidence in who she is and who she is becoming. She selects the same prestigious East coast art college that Juan, Angela, Will, Yale, Martha, and Martin will attend.
- Gary: Gary is a late addition to the student participants in this study. He plans to enroll in a two-year college in Illinois to become an animator. His back-up plan is to follow in his older brother's footsteps as a policeman. He resists his teachers' urgings to begin to add color to his pencil drawings of two dramatically different subjects: cartoon-like monsters emerging from toilets and large-scale crime scenes.

- Juan:** Proud of his Mexican heritage, Juan is a self-proclaimed “art-geek” and co-president (with Nadine and Will) of the CCHS art club. His paintings investigate the nature of painting as a vehicle of self-discovery and communication as well as insecurities about his body image. His large, lush canvases reveal the influences of the surrealists and the paintings of Frida Kahlo. His mother speaks only Spanish, a circumstance that sometimes frustrates his attempts to communicate with her.
- Kurt:** Kurt is the only child of two teachers. His father is one of the CCHS art teachers; his mother teaches French in a “language immersion” public elementary school. His artwork primarily focuses on detailed, realistic renderings of artists’ hands in the act of drawing. He plans to major in art in a local university or art college.
- Martha:** Martha is both a painter and a sculptor. She tended to be quiet and reserved during focus groups. She is a close friend of Will’s although their walls are on opposite ends of the 6th floor. Her paintings are primarily self-portraits, and her sculptures are abstract combinations of fabric and long tree branches or other found objects. Reluctantly, she agrees to select the East coast art college where Will, Eva, Juan, Yale, and Martin will also enroll and where her father prefers she attend.
- Martin:** Martin is a junior who aspires to follow in Juan’s footsteps as a leader of his class’s Portfolio cohort. His father is a museum administrator; his mother was his elementary school art teacher, and his grandfather was an artist and gallery owner. To his parents’ dismay, he elected not to take art classes as a freshman, preferring acting classes instead. However, he fell in love with art when he took Cathy’s Art Fundamentals class as a sophomore.
- Nadine:** Nadine is another student who feels torn between theater and art. An only child, she lives with her journalist mother but enjoys visiting her father who lives in the South. She produces much of her work at home, using a blowtorch to color and shape plexiglass, plastic bottles, and steel into wall sculptures and drawings. She selects a prestigious art college in California.
- Neal:** Neal plans to become an engineer and selects the University of Wisconsin. His ironic drawings and paintings juxtapose unlikely people in comic situations and settings, the best of which is probably one of Albert Einstein as a DJ, spinning records hip-hop style.
- Neely:** Neely plans to attend the Rhode Island School of Design, following in the footsteps of the student she admired the most from the previous portfolio class who was able to maintain a high grade point average in the most challenging classes while excelling in both art and athletics. Her first semester paintings investigate her anger and resentment about her belief that she can never measure up to the expectations of her parents. As Pat keeps encouraging

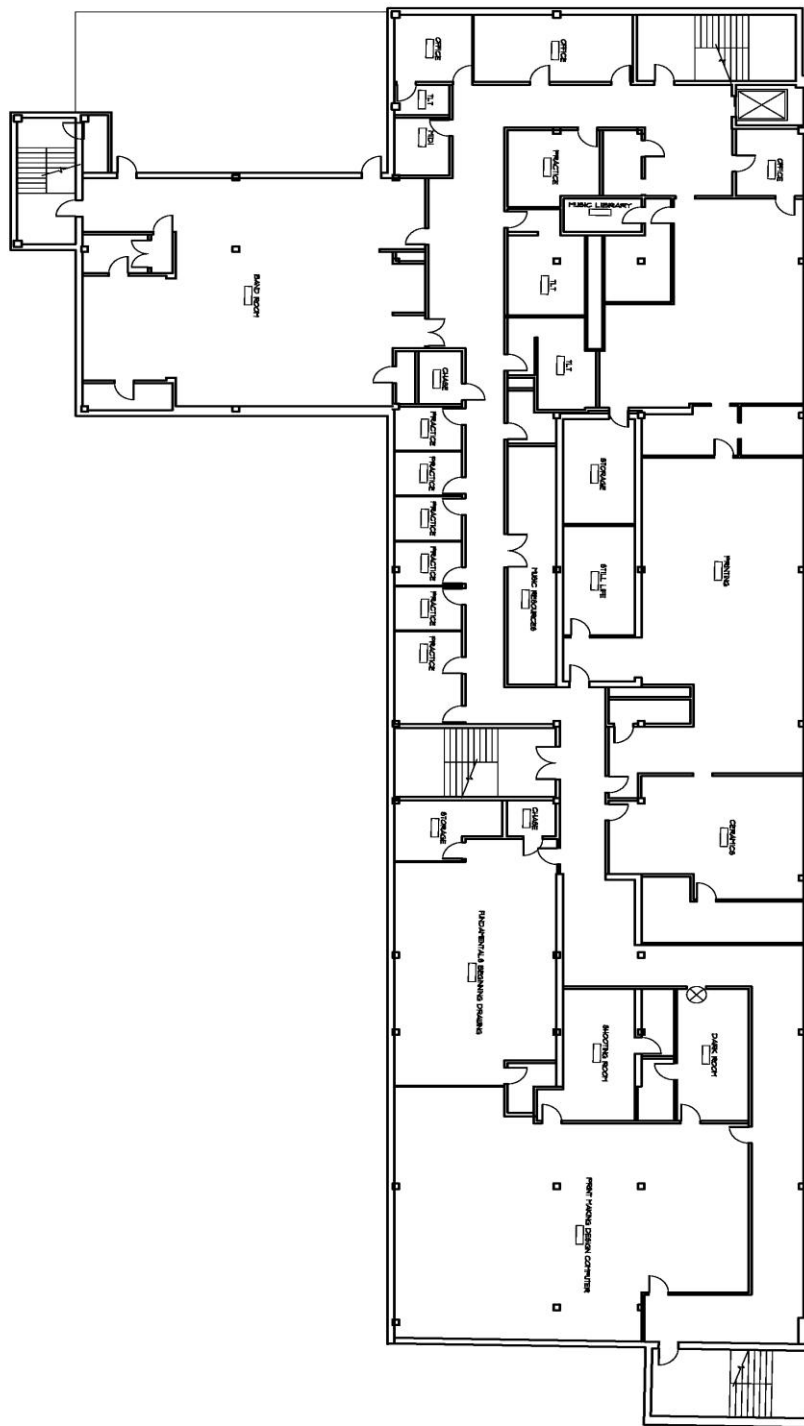
Neely to see herself as both lovable and capable, Neely's painting style changes dramatically, from realistic narrative scenes to large abstractions. In many ways, Neely's transformation mirrors Eva's. Their respective growth in self-esteem is reflected in more confident, free, and abstract painting styles.

- Paulo:** Paulo feels proud of his Mexican heritage and the urban, graffiti-based, hip-hop culture that influences his work. His political beliefs influence his paintings and drawings, many of which reflect his disgust with existing social inequities. Ultimately, he selects the Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design after considering enrolling in an art school in Kansas or as an art major at the local state university.
- Steve:** An Eagle scout and skate boarder, Steve gives up on ceramics at his teachers' recommendation but becomes a prolific painter once he discovers the work of Basquiat and, later, of Cy Twombly as sources of inspiration. He selects the Boston Museum School of Fine Art.
- Todd:** Todd is an athlete and a painter who intends to become an architect. His drawings and paintings investigate conceptual relationships among space, color, and line—sometimes in realistic, narrative scenes and at others in pure abstraction. His interest in art emerged while he was still in grade school as he noticed his older sister's progress in CCHS's art program. He selects a prestigious university in Pennsylvania.
- Will:** Will is a painter and photographer whose parents are both musicians. He always wears a sport coat, and among his most interesting self-portraits is an atypically non-representational one: He attaches an actual sport coat to the surface of a large, industrial shade on which he paints the words, "This is a self-portrait." He selects the East coast art college favored by many of his classmates and where he had attended a summer program between his junior and senior year.
- Woody:** Woody is an inquisitive and eager freshman who takes every opportunity to learn with and because of the older, more accomplished art students at CCHS. His mother teaches art on the college level, and his father runs a recording studio. His parents' decision to enroll him in a Catholic high school based on the reputation of its art program causes his devoutly Jewish grandparents some concern.
- Yale:** Yale is an illustrator and graphic designer influenced by his father who runs an advertising company. His illustrations investigate his interest in Retro culture. He enjoys mentoring Woody as well as offering spontaneous critique to his portfolio classmates. He selects the East coast art college that many of his classmates also select.

- Ying:** Ying is shy and self-conscious about her command of English. She finds in art a way to express pride in her Chinese culture through both narrative and still life paintings and abstract sculpture. She selects the local state university where she plans to study architecture.
- Yvonne:** Yvonne wants to become an interior designer, but her best portfolio work emerges in paintings, drawings, and sculpture that investigate her feelings as an adopted child of recently divorced parents now living across the country from each other. She selects a Midwestern university known for the reputation of its interior design program.
- Zoe:** Over the course of the year, Zoe brings a menagerie of pets to studio nights including a rabbit, a duck, a goose, and lizards and small birds of various types. Her love of animals influences her paintings and drawings. She favors realism and struggles to understand her classmates' abstract work. Personal problems occupy much of her time, and Pat, especially, spends as much time counseling Zoe as she does in guiding her artistic choices. She selects a Midwestern university where she plans to study business if she cannot master the science courses that would lead to her dream career as a veterinarian.

### Appendix B: CCHS Sixth Floor

Figure 1: CCHS Sixth Floor



## Appendix C: CCHS Art Curriculum Guide Excerpt

Our curriculum is designed to be taken all four years. CCHS has no fine arts requirement, although many colleges and universities do. Most art schools and universities with strong Visual Arts departments require a portfolio for admission. (The Visual Arts include, but are not limited to: Architecture, Computer Graphics, Animation, Fashion, Film, Video, Fibers, Photography, and all design programs. Design includes such things as: Graphic Design, Illustration, Communication Design, Interior Design, Industrial Design, Environmental Design, Stage and Set Design, etc.) Art Fundamentals is the base course for our curriculum, as the emphasis in the course is on learning to see well enough to draw accurately. All of our other courses build on this visual precision. Consequently, we strongly encourage you to begin your studies as freshmen. You can take a ceramics class sophomore, junior, or senior year, or a photography class junior or senior year without having had Art Fundamentals. We focus on bringing out your best creative thinking skills so that you will stand out in any career field you choose to pursue. We believe there is an artist in you. No prior experience is needed for you to begin. If you love art and would like the opportunity to develop a portfolio, we recommend this sequence of courses. If you need help with scheduling please contact the department chair at ext. 184.

**Table 2: Recommended Sequence of Art Courses**

Freshman (9)	Sophomore (10)	Junior (11)	Senior (12)
Art Fundamentals	Figure Drawing + Design or Ceramics I	Advanced Drawing + Painting I	Portfolio + Art History
		Plus, add any of the following studio classes that fit into your schedule: Photography Sculpture Fibers/Fashion Environmental Architectural Design Experimental Drawing Photography II Ceramics II Calligraphy	