

# A Cross-Canada Study of High School Art Teachers\*

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In *A Place Called School* (1984) Goodlad suggested that art teaching in American schools was characterized by make-work projects, lack of concern for individuality, and general fuzziness of goals. To determine whether the same could be said of art teaching in Canada, we studied 59 high schools across the country. We conclude that Canadian art teachers enjoy considerable autonomy in what they teach and how they teach it. Teachers' goals for the students, while often developed from personal experience rather than from identifiable prescriptive sources, nevertheless have sufficient commonality that their subject can be characterized as 'art.' Our study's profile of the Canadian high school art teacher is more complex than that in Goodlad's American research.

Dans *A Place Called School* (1984), Goodlad avance que les cours d'arts plastiques dans les écoles américaines sont au fond des cours de remplissage dont les objectifs sont en général assez flous. Pour déterminer s'il en est de même au Canada, nous avons étudié 59 écoles secondaires d'un océan à l'autre. Nous sommes maintenant en mesure de conclure que les enseignants en arts plastiques jouissent d'une très grande autonomie quant à la matière enseignée et aux méthodes pédagogiques. Si les buts que fixent les enseignants à leurs élèves sont souvent dérivés de l'expérience personnelle plutôt que de sources normatives identifiables, ils sont suffisamment semblables pour que la matière à laquelle ils se rattachent soit identifiée sous la dénomination 'arts plastiques.' Le profil que trace notre étude de l'enseignant en arts plastiques au secondaire est plus complexe que celui qui ressort de la recherche menée par Goodlad aux États-Unis.

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This study is at once commonplace and unique. It is commonplace in that it records what it is to be a high school teacher of art in Canada, what sorts of programs a number of these persons teach, and what kinds of products result. It is unique in that it has never been done before.

On the face of it, this last statement is difficult to believe. The literature of art education, in Canada and the United States, is filled with claims that, readers must assume, are predicated on empirically derived observation. To some extent, that is correct: writers in the field often have themselves taught art, and their professional lives may bring them into continual contact with teachers, administrators, and even students. But invariably their analyses—and their generalizations—are based on local knowledge, or on fragmentary evidence obtained from colleagues and from the literature to which they contribute.

Between 1985 and 1988, we visited 59 high schools across Canada. From our field notes and data we describe circumstances in which art is taught and learned, individuals who have a hand in its administration, and products that result.<sup>1</sup> Our study is not evaluative, either in the sense of judging the perceived success of a program, or in determining which of teachers' characteristics elicited favourable or unfavourable responses from the students. Instead our study deals with particulars, the dynamic here-and-now of teaching art in Canadian schools.

#### FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

Every piece of writing owes its existence to one or several progenitors that provide legitimacy and inspiration. We acknowledge that tradition of classroom case studies established by Phillip Jackson (1968) and supported by a generation of classroom ethnographers. Donald Schon's *Reflective Practitioner* (1983) offered a model for professional dialogue, along with evidence that being a professional required much more than fulfilling a job description.

The kinds of knowledge the professional teacher possesses have been explored by Connelly and Clandinin (1985), Clandinin (1986), and Elbaz (1981). Goodlad's *A Place Called School* (1984) spurred us to carry out our national study. These and similar sources kindled our interest in observing art teachers as they worked, and in questioning them about their practices.

Goodlad (1984) had noted that American programs tended towards make-work projects, individuality was not encouraged in class, and the goals

and objectives of art education were generally fuzzy. Was this as true of Canada as he alleged of the United States? We knew that, compared with other subjects, art in Canadian schools was taught with few prescriptive constraints. Although most provinces had curriculum guides, from years of conversations with teachers in various places we suspected that these documents did not furnish the goals around which teachers built their lessons. Indeed, we surmised that teachers were primarily idiosyncratic in their construction of programs, with their individual temperaments as influential as any body of theory or prescription.

The matter of teaching autonomy led to other, disarmingly simple questions. What goes on in classrooms? How does the community, in this case of art teacher and students, conduct its business? We designed research questions that would help to answer these more general questions and provide some initial structure for data collection. We began with a survey of literature on art teacher education, and found it dealt largely with three themes. One was teachers' aims and priorities, derived from training and experience, for the content of an art program. A second described classroom interactions, and the third concerned settings, equipment, and products.

These persistent themes led to our research questions:

1. What factors in art teachers' personal experience and interests affect the organization and conduct of their classes?
2. What kinds of classroom interactions characterize the conduct of art programs?
3. How are art teacher priorities and attitudes embodied in classroom environments and art products?

#### *Selection of Participants and Conduct of the Study*

Conventional methods of sample selection were not practical for this study: two researchers compiling data across ten provinces over periods that seldom exceeded two weeks at a time could not accommodate those geographic, economic, and demographic differences that might have yielded a stratified random sample of respondents. Instead, we undertook a series of observational case studies, with numbers of subjects varying from province to province. There being no lists of respondents who might satisfy various criteria for representing the art teaching body, in each province we contacted an art

educator with extensive experience and asked her/him to name teachers we might visit in the time available.

These adaptive steps produced a decidedly irregular patchwork, yet overall, we collected quite a range of histories and situations. Situations visited ranged from 18 in our home province, British Columbia, to two in each of New Brunswick, Newfoundland/Labrador, and Prince Edward Island. In British Columbia we studied both urban and rural situations; in Quebec, only urban schools. Teachers' professional preparation included several permutations of art school, university and teacher college; their teaching experience ranged from two years to almost thirty-five; they taught schools enrolling from 200 to over 2,000 students.

Each teacher we visited received a letter outlining the study's purposes, and was asked to obtain permission to participate from the school principal or district superintendent. We also enclosed information about the study to assist the principal or superintendent in making a decision on participation.

The teachers themselves provided information on their background and perceived professional role. Each teacher was then interviewed by the researcher responsible for that particular geographical area. Formal and informal interviews took place over two to three days, during and after school. The conduct of classroom activity was recorded by the researcher, who accompanied the teacher to class, and recorded events as they happened. The teacher later verified the accuracy of the researcher's notes and elaborated upon them in discussion with the researcher. Space and equipment were described by the researcher, while information on products came from a combination of researcher observation and anecdotal material supplied by the teacher.

#### PRESENTATION OF THE DATA

Material gathered from interviews with 59 high school art teachers across Canada was analyzed for content by each of the two researchers. This information was grouped under each of the three general headings from which the research questions were derived, and these groupings were then discussed and modified until we had an agreed-upon set of subheadings. The heading *teacher background and perceived professional role* yielded ten subheadings: experience, influences, professional commitments, attitudes to teaching and students, relations with other staff, ongoing studio activity, role of curriculum guides, special character of the school, role of art history, and role of art criticism. The second heading, *conduct of classroom activities*, had five

subheadings: lesson content, interaction, technical expertise, evaluation, and administrative duties. The third heading, *space, equipment, and products*, included physical plant, tools, equipment and material resources, and class or student products.

Rather than present numerical data as tables, general descriptors are used, sometimes along with numbers. Thus, *nearly all* means 90% or more of teachers interviewed; *many* means 70%–89%; *half* means 50%; *some* means 20%–49%; and *a few* means fewer than 20%.

#### *Teacher Background and Perceived Professional Role*

Art teacher preparation practices differed in each province. In British Columbia, half the informants had completed a five-year Education degree with an art major, while in the eastern provinces (Manitoba to Newfoundland) 10 of 27 informants possessed a BFA and teacher certification. Differences between the teachers' undergraduate programs had little effect upon their common sense of being centrally concerned with art as a body of knowledge. How they translated that knowledge into classroom practice was a consequence of personal preference, rather than of undergraduate training.

Citing major influences during professional preparation, most teachers named three or four persons, distinguished by their dedication and accomplishments. One teacher cited an entire class of fellow students. In a few cases, participants said classroom teachers who supervised their practica were negative influences. Said one, "I determined that whatever I did, I would never teach like that." Informants valued the practicum, experiences of art content, skill mastery, and classroom management techniques.

Continuing personal involvement in art production was an art teacher's individual choice; we found no differences from one province to the next. What sets arts teachers apart from other teachers is the expectation of the public, students, and teachers themselves that they *ought* to be active practitioners. The majority of teachers we surveyed were involved in their own work moderately, slightly, or not at all, and were frequently apologetic about this. Only one or two respondents said they derived sufficient creative reward from their students' work, and did not need to pursue their own studies.

The minority of participants who were heavily involved in their own work claimed it was vital to their well being. They worked individually, or with fellow art teachers, in which case they usually referred to the benefits of having a critical yet friendly audience for their ideas. Some exhibited professionally, while others used their time to explore new media, like computer graphics or video.

Although professional involvement as an art teacher occurred largely at a local level, several teachers (particularly in Ontario) mentioned that they taught courses for the Ministry of Education. Other teachers worked for provincial curriculum development committees, operated as faculty associates for universities, and served on professional executive bodies. Several had helped to plan and run the annual assembly of the Canadian Society of Education through Art, a national professional body that meets in a different province each year. Most said that lack of funding and travel time prevented them from participating in events outside their own province. Although most indicated willingness to participate in local inservice, they were not willing to give time to provincial inservice initiatives unless benefits to their own districts were clearly evident.

The role of the art teacher was generally defined as providing students with opportunities to realize their own goals, whether these were a career in art or taking an art class for enjoyment. Participants took pleasure in working constructively with students, and responded to students' exuberance and vitality. They frequently referred to their personal rapport with individuals and classes, a rapport confirmed on several occasions during our visits by the appearance of former students who dropped in to see the art teacher.

Positive remarks on the teacher's role far outweighed negative; these latter usually arose from perceptions of insufficient support by parents or administrators. Relationships between the art teacher and school administrators occasioned similar remarks in every province. Most teachers saw good in-school relations as means to maintain art's funding parity with other subject areas, and to ensure the program's visibility. In one Quebec school, where French and English programs coexisted, the failure of the English art teacher's attempts to convince the administration to equate the two art budgets was a matter of concern, even resentment.

The school community, rather than the community at large, influenced and shaped the art teachers' aims. Although one or two interviewees mentioned schools being rewarded for their community efforts by being given new equipment or an improved facility, and though art teachers frequently referred to the presence of community values in the attitudes of their students, the microcosm of the school, and the mutual obligations on which that community is formed, captured most of the teachers' attention. The schools we visited were a cross-section of economic and cultural differences; the ultimate multicultural challenge was offered by a Quebec school where students represented 51 nationalities, 41 languages, and 18 religious groups. Yet for most of our participants, a student's identity was conferred by belonging to a particular school rather than an ethnic or social group. References to "my

students' mean more than a recognition that certain students attend art class, and several observed events testified to the teacher's personal interest in students' general welfare.

One area where responses varied widely from province to province was in teachers' perceptions of the role of curriculum guides. Both the history of art curriculum development in the province, and the extent of the informant's participation in curriculum development, affected these perceptions. Further research might examine in depth the relationship between teacher perceptions of how curriculum is developed, and the official record of events that result in publication of a curriculum guide, since teachers were often unclear as to how the document originated, or why it took the form it did.

In Saskatchewan and Nova Scotia, informants rated the provincial art guide all but invisible. Teachers there developed their own programs to suit local situations or to reflect their personal priorities. In British Columbia and Alberta, where curriculum guides had recently been updated, teachers—especially younger, less experienced teachers—expressed considerable support for them. Ontario teachers were most committed to the aims of their curriculum guide. Almost all of the eight Ontario informants indicated commitment to making it work, and voiced support for its comprehensiveness and effective translation of theory into practice.

Since art history and criticism have in the past decade claimed an increasingly important share of art programs devised for North American schools,<sup>2</sup> informants were asked how they felt about teaching these subjects. A few had reservations about teaching art history, alleging student resistance. Nevertheless, at least half offered it, chronologically or thematically, as part of their program. One Alberta respondent spoke for teachers in several other provinces in dismissing as unproductive so-called "enrichment" art history, wherein history is tacked on to whatever studio area is currently being undertaken, on the grounds that what students are doing is part of a world-wide, ongoing tradition of making art, and the role of art history is to illuminate that tradition. This informant, and others of similar persuasion, created opportunities for students to focus on art history as a subject in its own right. These students made oral presentations, developed booklets and papers, and worked individually and in groups. One enthusiastic student presenter had driven 50 miles to make (and to pay for) colour xerographs for her classmates. "They wouldn't have got the real impact from black and white copies," she said.

The Ontario Academic Credit (OAC) program provided the clearest articulation of an art history course of study. One Ontario respondent pointed out, however, that it had nothing on minorities, nothing on women, and almost

nothing on Canadian art. Quebec programs alone allotted part of the art history syllabus to the art and architecture of the home province.

Across Canada, criticism occupied a more shadowy, less defined place in the curriculum than did art history. Its content varied according to whether the teacher defined it as self-reflection, or as the formal study of aesthetics. Some teachers encouraged students to visit galleries, to give reports on established artists, and to apply similar methods to their own work. Several times we encountered contextual analysis, questions related to why works have meaning, and why one interpretation may have greater validity than another. Feldman's (1969) categories of description, analysis, interpretation, and judgment were used most often for formal analysis.

Of the few observed instances where critical discussion of work was the sole focus, one involved series of photographs taken by students according to a theme each had developed. The teacher used this opportunity to point out that art works may have public meaning, accessible to most of an audience, or may be so personal that only the artist can know the meaning.

#### CONDUCT OF CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Classroom interactions vary with type of activity: working on a task, reviewing or organizing material, casual conversation between peers and between teacher and students. Sometimes the teacher, like a good squash player, controlled the "court" and kept the "play" moving. In other situations, information was dispensed casually, sometimes while the teacher worked on something else, and students were expected to listen peripherally while they themselves worked.

Technical advice formed a significant part of in-class dialogue, and usually took one of two forms. Process assistance described a sequence: mix this to get that. Rules assistance dealt with applied knowledge: invoking the rule that eye scanning begins near the centre of an object and travels to the edge helps to establish a centre of interest for a work in progress.

In every classroom we visited, much conversation between teacher and students was one-to-one. Frequently, the teacher moved all over the room during a single period, fielding students' questions and dealing with individual difficulties as these arose.

In classrooms where the teacher had a desk, it was almost invariably neglected, and often buried in bric-a-brac—evidence of the pervasiveness of practices that focused on the students' workspace. The desk of one teacher who taught art and social studies was systematically cleaned up for the social studies lesson, and the area around it became the locus of control and class

activity. When the next art class began, the desk reverted to being just another storage surface.

Interaction between teacher and students varied according to the stage of project completion: relatively formal while information was first handed out, and increasingly personalized as individuals sought advice or discussed what they had accomplished. Students criticized each other's work, shared technical advice, and offered opinions about the chances of bringing the project to a successful conclusion. Teachers mediated disputes, encouraged students (not always successfully) to push their ideas past the conventional, and sometimes worked directly on students' work when words failed.

Interaction carried over into evaluation of student work and even the assignment of grades. Evaluative comments might be facilitative ('Let's look at X's work to see how this was done'), or reinforcing ('This looks promising'), or extending ('You could carry this further by . . .'). In one classroom where work was being graded, the teacher said 'I think a C+ for this.' 'No, more,' responded the student. 'You convince me, then,' demanded the teacher, and the student, grinning, gave in, 'All right, then, C+.'

Patterns of interaction varied as seasonal activities intervened: work on the school yearbook, exhibition of work in the nearby shopping mall, involvement in art competitions, visits to and from feeder schools. Teachers accepted most tasks willingly in the interests of better dialogue with members of the profession and the public, though the limits of hospitality were usually reached with requests for throwaway posters for bake sales and car washes.

#### SPACE, EQUIPMENT, AND PRODUCTS

Of the art facilities we studied, most varied not so much by province as by the economic circumstances prevailing when the school was built. They ranged from basic block to well-equipped suite. Most facilities had a separate area for storage of supplies, and in almost half, teachers had an office separate from their classrooms, where they could keep their own books and teaching resources. Art rooms across the country fell into three groups: (1) a cube containing a sink, cupboards, and shelves; (2) a single area divided into bays where specialized activities like ceramics and printmaking were carried out; and (3) a number of specialized rooms, including one for showing slides or films.

Some teachers said the kind of facility available to them constrained their programs. In a few cases, toxic activities were carried out in relatively unventilated conditions, but it was more common for teachers to exclude potentially harmful activities from their program. Other cited reasons for

restricted offerings included lack of student interest, lack of materials, change in the nature of the curriculum, and lack of commitment to the principle of offering a variety of options or experiences.

Very few teachers volunteered information on why their art rooms looked the way they did, yet the effects of external events were sometimes clearly visible. In one situation, the art program was in temporary decline; a handful of students occupied an echoing suite of rooms. At the other end of the scale, expansion of working areas, or construction of an art gallery space in the school, indicated a program's health. In one instance, a work study program enabled the art teacher to claim that the art program's working environment extended beyond the school's walls into the larger community.

Art rooms often bear signs of having gradually assumed a character over the years, particularly where the teacher has a fondness for acquisition and a reluctance to throw anything away, reasoning that any object might provide a stimulus or serve as a resource. The shelves of one such area contained bottles, a 50-year-old typewriter, a merry-go-round horse, skulls of many animals, a B-flat baritone horn, hubcaps, a Canadian flag, an Oriental screen, peacock feathers, a toaster, model boats, radio innards, a sewing machine, fungi, plants, washing machine parts, signs, a bird cage, lamps, a hornet's nest, saddles, chains, calculator parts, and a gas pump dial.

Students in all situations we visited used a variety of materials, mostly in response to specific assignments the teacher set. Although the content was often derived from the popular culture of television, rock videos, and commercial advertisements, it was seldom reinterpreted in film, video, or computer-generated images. Instead, students used traditional art materials (paint, clay, cardboard) and supplemented their work with ideas from sketchbooks or workbooks completed outside school hours.

The tools and equipment used for these projects usually required a modest outlay of money. Whenever facilities for film or photography were being developed or expanded, expenditures rose sharply. Audio-visual equipment either belonged to the art area, or was readily available from the school's AV pool. Computers were relatively uncommon, though one or two art teachers had arranged to share computer time with another subject area.

The products of art programs showed relatively few regional differences. Instead, the most evident difference was between teachers who favoured subjects derived from students' first-hand experiences and teachers who permitted subject matter derived from the mass media. Although classes might produce a variety of work, it often was sufficiently influenced by a teacher's preferences to be readily identifiable as the work of a particular school. Two-dimensional work was much more common than three-dimensional.

Large-scale sculptures were rare.

#### CONCLUSIONS

Several of the questions that prompted our study can now be answered. Were Goodlad's American findings about make-work projects, lack of individuality, and fuzziness about objectives replicated in Canadian high schools? No. Although many of the activities in art classrooms were not arranged sequentially, every teacher had a plan for what she/he intended to cover in a semester or year. The encouragement of individuality, far from being neglected, was a central tenet of every teacher's credo, and a recurring feature of everyday interaction with the students in the classroom. That the products of these art rooms were seldom "radical" probably says much about students' own definitions of "art" and "not art." Teachers, for their part, had few doubts about their objectives, though it must be said that in many cases these were not formally articulated, and often only slightly resembled those in the provincial curriculum guide.

That art teaching in Canada is an idiosyncratic activity was confirmed. Two teachers at opposite ends of the country might find that their programs and attitudes coincided, while two in the same city might have created quite different situations and conduct strikingly dissimilar programs. Why does the assumption of unity persist, in phrases such as "the art teacher" and "the art curriculum," when the reality is so diversified? There is perhaps a level at which business has to be seen to happen, and another at which business actually occurs. Since the latter provides, as we have shown, anything but a uniform profile, it is tidier and more expeditious for writers to reconstruct reality in a more regular image. A curriculum planner who mistakes literary economy for the true state of affairs is doomed to disappointment.

Yet, idiosyncrasy is not synonymous with whimsy. Individual temperament affected the selection of experiences that the teacher considered to be in the students' best interests, and determined whether the space in which art education was conducted was treated as a workshop or a shrine. Each teacher surveyed would, however, have admitted that the other informants were teaching a form of art. Although they enjoy an autonomy partly attributable to art's non-examination status in provincial systems, and partly to the Western tradition of individualism that surrounds the arts, teachers have evidently fashioned their programs from a common body of material. We saw no programs so bizarre as to force us to reconceptualize our notions of the forms taken by art in school.

We have tried to convey the situational realities of art teachers across

Canada. Further research might now consider how materials developed for teachers might more closely accommodate those realities, doing justice to the complex theory/practice relationships our study described and implied.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The study was conducted under the acronym PROACTA: personally relevant observations about art concepts and teaching activities.

<sup>2</sup>The most potent example of a current program that emphasizes art history and criticism is Discipline Based Art Education. It is being implemented in various parts of the United States, under the aegis of the Getty Center for Education in the Arts.

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