



Theory Loves Practice: A Teacher Researcher Group

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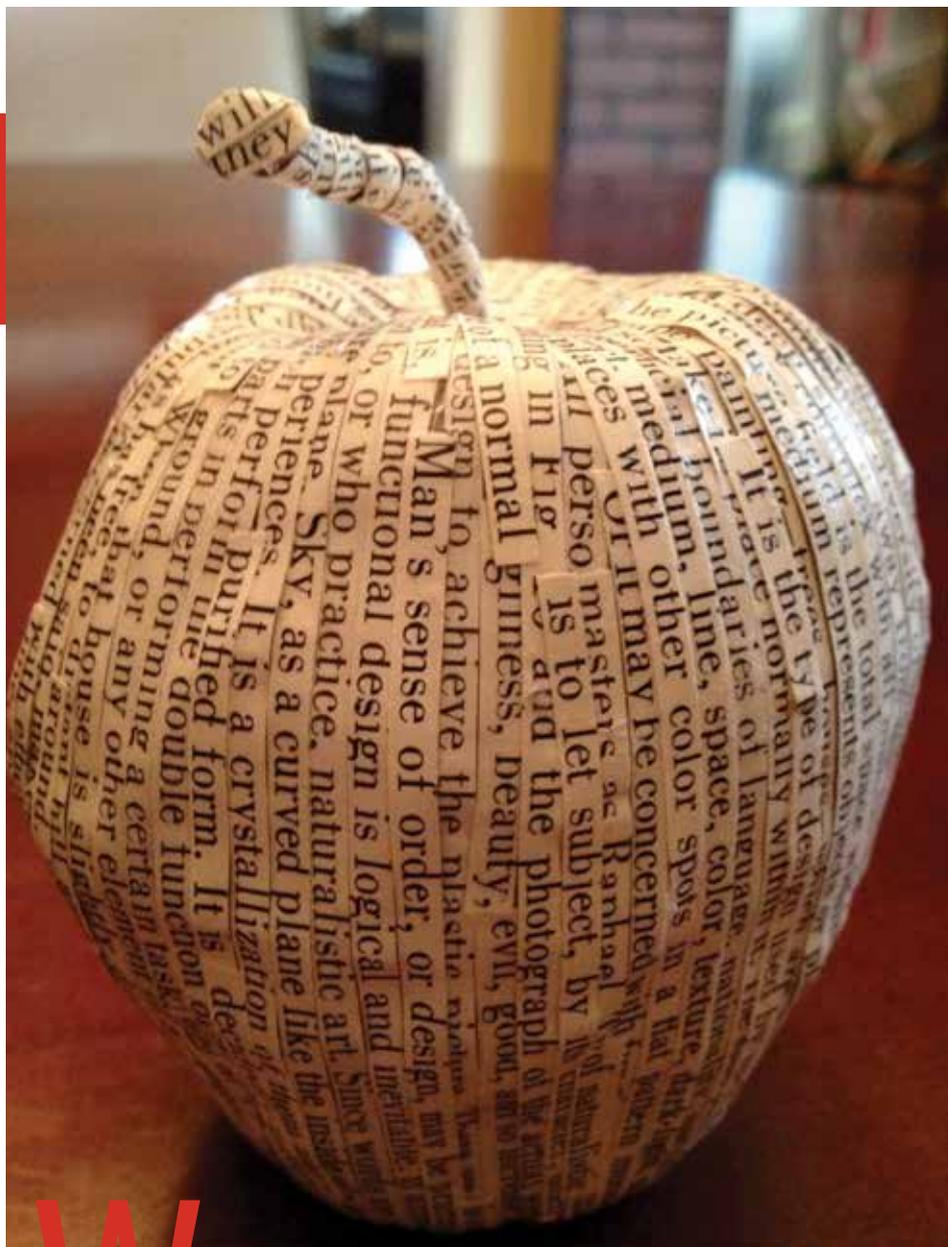


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Hochtritt, Thulson, Delaney, Dornbush, and Shay are describing the establishment of a professional development community in this article. They are suggesting that the theory/practice divide exists in many facets of art educational practice, but perhaps most prominently in the requirements that are reinforced in preservice art education. Margaret A. Walker offers a compelling counterpart to this description of professional development, in her Summer Studies article, "From Theory to Practice: Concept-Based Inquiry in a High School Art Classroom." In this article, Walker analyzes the teaching of David Miller, offering the reader a glimpse of a pedagogical model that is dynamic and dialogic. This model is open-ended, yet directed—one that points to possibilities for collaboration without becoming so decentered that it loses the productive force of art in the process.



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e can teach a student the skills necessary to shade an object or render a space, but why? Theory gives us that larger framework to draw upon as we ask students to connect their own experiences to larger and more diverse settings. Theory is what tells us why a lesson on the color wheel, or on shading shapes, is simply not enough. But theory doesn't have to worry about doing formative and summative assessments. And theory doesn't have to make sure that empty mixing trays aren't piling up in the sink.

—Sarah Shay, K-8 Studio Arts Teacher

Above: Rachael Delaney, *Redacted*. Photograph by Rachael Delaney.

THEORY LOVES PRACTICE:

A Teacher Researcher Group

LISA HOCHTRITT, ANNE THULSON, RACHAEL DELANEY,
TALYA DORNBUSH, and SARAH SHAY

Once a month, art educators from the Denver metro area have been gathering together in the spirit of inquiry to explore issues of the perceived theory and daily practice divide. The Theory Loves Practice (TLP) group was started in 2010 by Professors Rachael Delaney and Anne Thulson from Metropolitan State University of Denver (MSU) and now has 40 members. A fluctuating group of 10-20 art teachers meets monthly at the Center for Visual Art (CVA), an off-campus art gallery run by MSU and located at the heart of the Denver Arts District on Santa Fe Drive.

This article discusses the theory/practice divide and the process of collectively embracing contemporary ideas, initiation of the Theory Loves Practice group, monthly topics of discussion and action, a visual art teacher's experience in the group, and recommendations for starting such a professional development community. The story of Theory Loves Practice is told collaboratively through multiple voices: an art education professor outside of the immediate group who wanted the story to be told (Lisa Hochtritt); TLP originators and art education professors (Rachael Delaney and Anne Thulson); CVA Education Director and TLP member (Talya Dornbush); and K-8 Studio Arts Teacher and TLP member (Sarah Shay).

The Theory and Daily Practice Divide: Anne Thulson

When Carrie Mae Weems spoke at the NAEA National Convention in 2010, she said that if you want to know about the social power structures in a place, pay close attention to the architecture. At that particular conference, themed Social Justice, the class divide between the theoreticians and practitioners seemed ironic. Indeed, the gap was very evident in the architecture. Often the practitioners were in the basement experimenting among the pastels with the

Modernist-leaning vendors and publishers. The theoreticians were upstairs talking to each other about art-as-research, gender mash-ups, and deconstructing government and secrecy enclaves. And never the twain shall meet.

Why does this frenetic, parallel play occur at our conferences? Each occasionally acknowledges the other in rare moments: in passing, a professor warmly greets a previous student, now an art teacher; or the back row of an academic's lecture is turned colorful by orange, Dick Blick bags attached to courageous elementary teachers



Theory Loves Practice participants honing questions. Photograph by Anne Thulson.

who really want to get a grip on Foucault. But these are occasional encounters and we have few structures in place to lengthen their duration.

I believe bell hooks (1994) when she said that she came to theory because of pain. Many of us feel the rift at our conferences and it is a kind of pain. From this pain I've come to a theory. It is the theory of the intentional, durational bridge.

Soon after this conference, I left my K-8 art classroom to teach university students. I mourned the loss of my research lab of small

children, my primary source, my silver mine. I reassured myself. University professors rely on secondary sources, their colleagues teaching in the K-12 art room. But how does that work without the rich and profound duration of being with children 35 hours a week?

In my first semester at the university, Rachael Delaney, the art education coordinator, asked me if I wanted to help her develop a study group with local teachers. There are many professional development offerings in our town for art teachers. But

this one would be different. It would center on teachers' own inquiry into their current practice, with an emphasis on contemporary art. I wondered. This sounds like another mine—maybe not silver, but I think there's something precious in there.

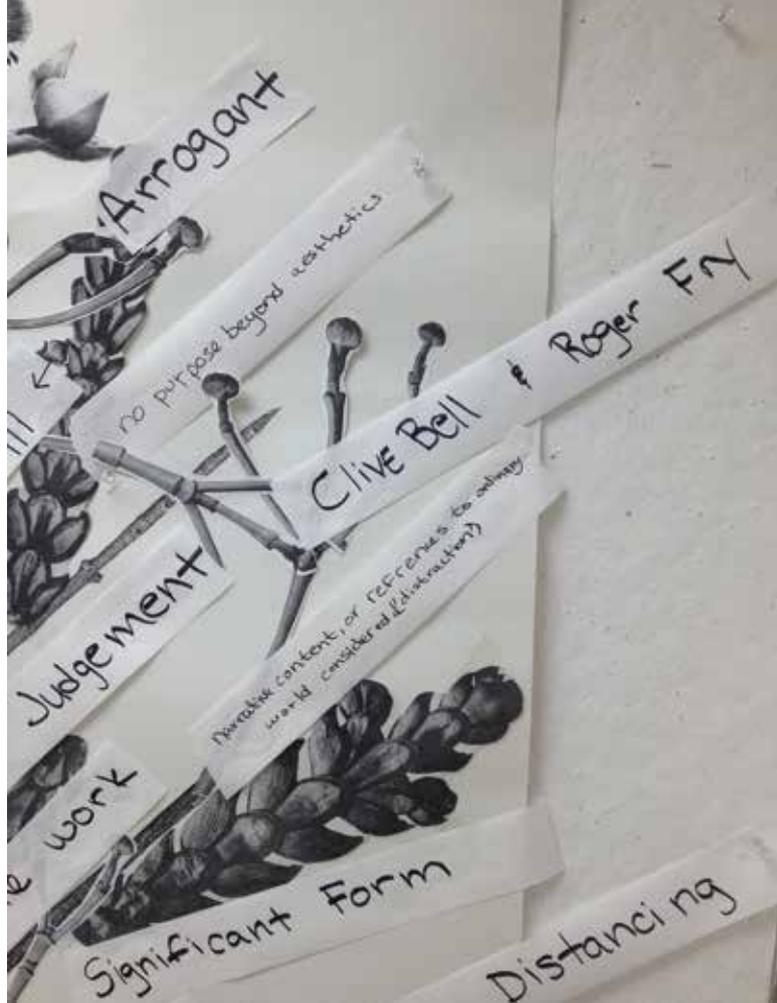
After our first semester of Theory Loves Practice meetings, it was evident that Rachael and I were not the main protagonists. We weren't even the best supporting actors. Instead, we were like bartenders in a coastal town serving drinks and listening hungrily for the tales from our sea-faring friends. We feasted on what we heard and with the whole group, listened to the stories, observed student work, asked questions, read texts, looked at contemporary art, and discussed the hardest parts of wedding contemporary theory with daily practice.

John Gardner (1984), in his advice to writers, notes that any literate, educated person can write a decent short story, but the commitment to the practice of writing over time is what makes a writer's work profound. Likewise, my occasional meetings with classroom teachers—popping in and out of schools, chatting at First Fridays or professional development events—creates decent relationships, but the commitment to meeting over time is what makes the theory and practice relationship profound. The key is duration. It is only through time that theory and practice can loop over and under one another with any kind of authenticity to form a robust web.

University and Kindergarten art educators need each other and they need each other over time.



Erin Lea-Dougherty, *Between Holding On Letting Go*. Photograph by Talya Dornbush.



Curriculum and instruction student collaborative classwork, Metropolitan State University of Denver. Photograph by Anne Thulson.

After Talya Dornbush—the Education Director at our university gallery—joined us the second year, the web got denser. We had a chance for an exhibition. Can a K-12 classroom teacher make art about teaching? Can that art be taken seriously? Jorge Lucero (2012), a guest lecturer to our group, gave some of us the courage to see that the work of teaching is the art. Others in the group saw this as a chance to use objects from their classroom in their art (confiscated toys, administrative memos, student writing). Several made lyrical odes to our current culture of assessment. To play poetically with our practice of teaching was exhilarating.

Starting our fourth year, I heartily believe that the bridge of intention and time works. Theory is alive and tested. Practice is revised and enlightened. University and Kindergarten art educators need each other and they need each other over time. ■

How Theory Became a Verb: Rachael Delaney

The idea of the Theory Loves Practice art education community stemmed from my direct experiences as a student teacher supervisor at the university level. Every semester, teacher candidates provide evidence of their ability to accomplish Integration of Theory during their teaching practicum experience. This required evidence is part of a series of documentation exercises in the Teacher Work Sample, a long and meandering document required by the State of Colorado that can be evaluated and then function as the certification of a successful student-teaching experience. For the category of Integration of Theory, student teachers are asked to define a theory and then describe how they incorporated that theory into their lesson to meet the standard for proficiency. They are supposed to use clear and affirmative language to summarize a theory into a brief paragraph describing how it was appropriately incorporated into an instructional moment. The messiness of theory as a tool for use in the classroom is omitted because theory is no longer seen as something with substance to tinker and reason with, and as a result the teacher candidate and their students rarely modify or adapt it.

The Real Site for Theory. Photograph by Anne Thulson.



Establishing a framework... meant finding ways to make theory less of a topic to think about and more of a tool that could be adapted and modified for use.

In the Teacher Work Sample, the animated conversations from the teacher candidates' history and philosophy courses are long abandoned for attendance, supply lists, staff meetings, and instruction. Theory quickly slips to the bottom of the priorities list and is easily categorized as a privileged practice to use when the fancies of the mind have the time to amuse themselves. Knowledge in this context is not subordinate to thinking (Dewey, 1916). Accurate accounting of a fact is used to evaluate performance in the classroom. The practice of student teaching as the urgency of instruction displaces the reflective experience.

As head of the department and a student teacher supervisor, it was an uncomfortable reality for me to face that I was an active participant in setting the stage for demoting theory as a sticker to apply to an action. I could see that teacher candidates were using

prior learning as they student taught, but the pieces of content they used seemed to be separated into two distinct and separate content areas: the discipline of art education and the practice of art education. The discipline of art education was more tautological in nature, where inquiry on the topic of art education was bound to thinking about the importance of information to the topic of art education, while the practice of art education focused more on the experiences gained from inquiry directly connected to the fieldwork completed in the K-12 classrooms. Establishing a framework for the authentic integration of theory that made the boundaries between the discipline of art education and the practice of art education porous meant finding ways to make theory less of a topic to think about and more of a tool that could be adapted and modified for use.

While our current format and space of student teaching created limitations and stifled the authentic integration of theory into classroom practice, there were other possibilities I wanted to explore what would provide a more hospitable environment for developing a dialogue with theory. Moving the conversation beyond the traditional classroom walls and the required coursework of the program meant beginning with research that originated from experiences in the classroom instead of just responding to those experiences. It was time to experiment in alternatives and privilege the conversation as a mode of inquiry that could have resonance within practice (Thompson, 2012).

The prospect of doing this type of work within alternative settings was an opportunity to highlight the interactive connection between theory and teaching; in the fall of 2010 the research group Theory Loves Practice was formed. The group has been continuously meeting once a month during the 9-month academic calendar. The initial start-up of the group involved Anne Thulson and myself working as facilitators to support communicative action with a focus on the teachers as the authors of their spaces. The continuous and evolving exchange of ideas for each meeting was informed by the participants in the group, driven by their interests, challenges, and questions. Conversations deemphasized the focus on uniform solutions because divergent viewpoints generated more questions and possibilities than answers.

The removal of evaluative criteria allowed for frank and honest discussions that put the unpredictable aspects of teaching at the center of the dialogue. Together we replaced proficiency mandates with conditional language that paid close attention to the processes of coming to an understanding



Theory Loves Practice participants sharing their classroom research. Photograph by Talya Dornbush.



Theory Loves Practice group looking at student work at the Center for Visual Art, Metropolitan State University of Denver. Photograph by Anne Thulson.

versus seeking complete knowledge (Dewey, 1916). This dialogic approach has been a central tenet of the group throughout the years we have been meeting. Theory no longer functions as a cantankerous and unruly proposition; instead, theory has provided the necessary framework needed to support the inquiry of each member. Theory became a verb, something to act upon through relational dialogue. Over time the group has grown and, with the addition of Talya Dornbush as another facilitator, we have been able to affirm our mission as a community-based research group committed to supporting professionals working in the field of education as they research ways to integrate contemporary art theory within their day-to-day classroom practice. ■

The Dialogue and Cataloging of Art Education: Talya Dornbush

I joined the TLP group when I was a public middle school art teacher and seeking engaging collegial opportunities. After 10 years in classrooms, I made the transition to the university community and the CVA at MSU. The CVA serves as an interactive art laboratory for MSU Denver students, alum, and the larger community. A division of the MSU Denver Art Department, the CVA is dedicated to providing its students with an unparalleled urban learning environment and a strong sense of community within the global arts population. The central location



Theory Loves Practice Exhibition, Center for Visual Art, Metropolitan State University of Denver. Photograph by Talya Dornbush.

and innate connection to a state university makes it an ideal space for professional conversations. The beauty of the vaulted ceilings, white walls, and ever-changing gallery of challenging contemporary art encourages transformative dialogue.

In many respects my professional move to MSU Denver reflects that of the group's move to the CVA: It was a conscious attempt to secure a passionate community of reflective practitioners who wanted the conversation about art education to be rooted in **art** in addition to pedagogy, community, cognitive

Theory Loves Practice
participant's research
question. Photograph by
Anne Thulson.



Rachael Delaney,
Redacted. Theory
Loves Practice
teacher exhibit.
Photograph by
Talya Dornbush.



development, 21st-century skills, and all the other reasons that we choose to work in art education. Housed in the CVA, we benefit from the access to research-based theories, exposure to incredible contemporary art, investment in urban Denver, and—perhaps most importantly—we identify as practitioners equipped to contribute to the field of art education through action research.

Each year the Theory Loves Practice group follows a thematic exploration that is influenced by theory, art, pedagogy, and community. This year we are looking closely at student work through inquiry protocols, making collective, hybrid curriculum-units by “mashing” together our isolated curriculum ideas, and discussing contemporary artists and scholars that we will hear present at the CVA. The themes we discussed frequently last year were documentation and research strategies and how they inform assessment of artwork. Colorado, like many states, has made significant strides in understanding and implementing authentic assessment. In response to statewide concerns—and our group’s keen interest in exploring these themes—research, documentation, and assessment became the foci of our group’s exhibition. This art installation was the culminating research event for the year. CVA donated a gallery space for the show and published an affiliated catalog.¹

In my role as Education Director I have been a primary contact for the Theory Loves Practice exhibition and catalog, sharing the story of the group with visitors to the space as well as documenting the process. Each artist was invited to present research through a visual medium. The exhibition became a catalyst for conversations, elevating the voices of 18 arts educators and making their research and practice more “audible” to the public. Sculptures, paintings, installations, etchings, videos, and more illustrated the context of art education including assessment, space, apathy, censorship, complexity, identity, disillusionment, inspiration, and conceptual frameworks. Through the artwork, this context was unveiled for an audience of

Theory Loves Practice participants
critiquing one member’s work for the
exhibit. Photograph by Talya Dornbush.

5,000 visitors during the 11-week exhibition. Audiences included children from neighborhood schools, a women's education philanthropy group, members of the Colorado Department of Education and the National Assembly of State Arts Agency Arts Education Managers, and the families and friends of Theory Loves Practice members.

An art gallery can facilitate curiosity and engage in the role of "town square." Contemporary art illustrates individual experiences and global perspectives illuminating concepts of the artists' concern. In this case the CVA chose to become an immersive space for observing, questioning, exploring, reflecting, and exhibiting art education research. In a world that thrives on innovation and the promise of newness, we are doing a great disservice to both our students and teachers if we fail to support conversations between educators and the public. The dialogue of art education reform relies on the perspectives of theorists, contemporary artists, children, and educators. Reform movements in education are often written about, spoken about, or calculated about. In the case of the Theory Loves Practice exhibition and catalog, teacher researchers amplified their voices in the production of critical works of art. ■



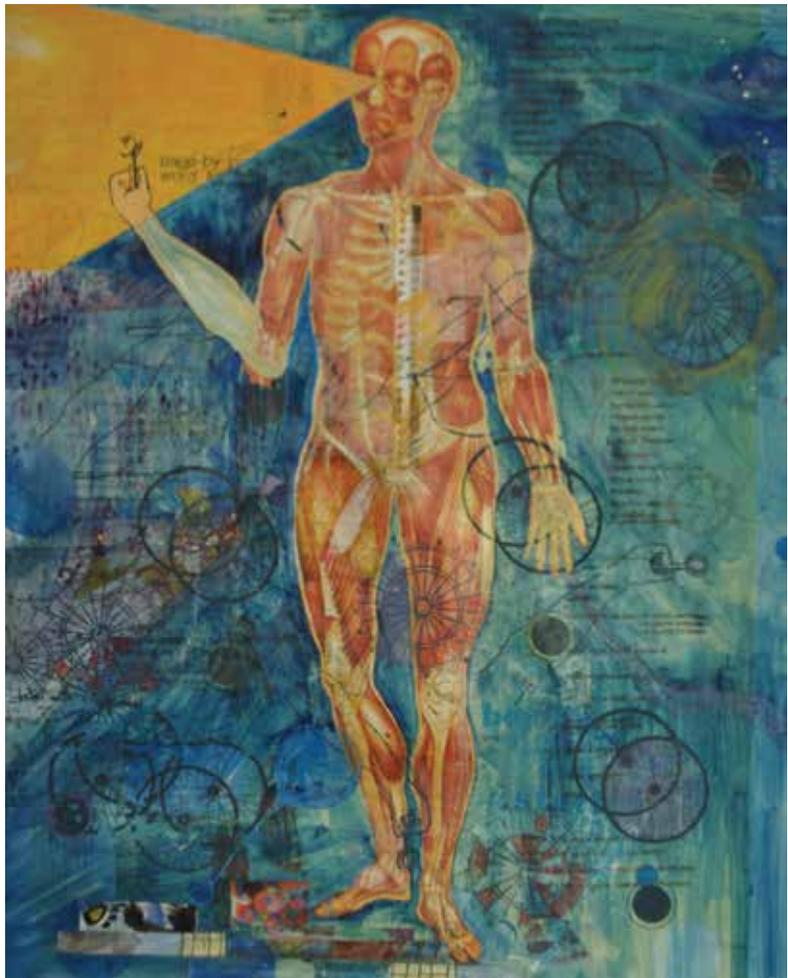
Theory Loves Practice participant in her classroom. Photograph by Elki Neiberger.

How Theory Informs My Teaching Practice: Sarah Shay

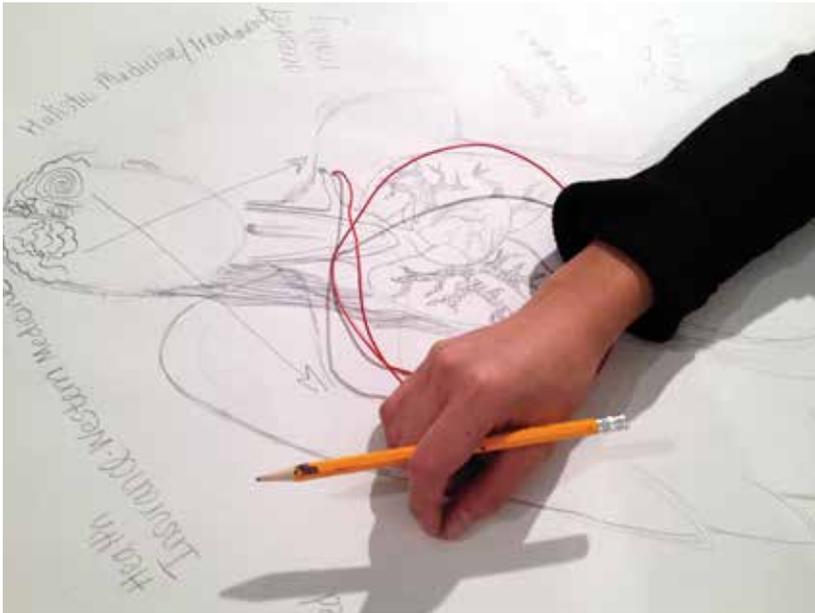
I have the fortunate opportunity to work with contemporary artists in their studios every day. Most days, in fact, I work alongside as many as 220 artists as they grapple with the big ideas of their work, craft the visual messages they wish to send to the world, and explore the materials and processes that will best fit their burgeoning artistic ambitions. I listen in as these artists engage in ongoing dialogue over the development of their work, give impromptu critiques to improve the quality of their work, and push each other to go beyond what they previously thought was possible.

Finding such authentic contexts for arts-based learning is rare, and not a day goes by that I am not reminded of just how lucky I am to be in an environment

where active research and discovery of new ideas are not just supported—they are the norm. The opportunity to work in this environment took me back to the K-8 classroom from higher education, where too often theory felt isolated from my own practice. In my K-8 Studio, the critical questions students are asking challenge me to dig deeper into contemporary art practices and to build stronger connections from art practice to their everyday. Every day, I am inspired to find each one of these students at a different place in their thinking than they were just one day before, and compelled to reach them with increasingly higher expectations as their thinking grows. I teach because it is how I learn—having to respond to a question I may not have considered on my own, being excited by a connection I could not have made on my own. Each day in our Studio,



Sarah Shay, *Play With Purpose*. Photograph by Sarah Shay.

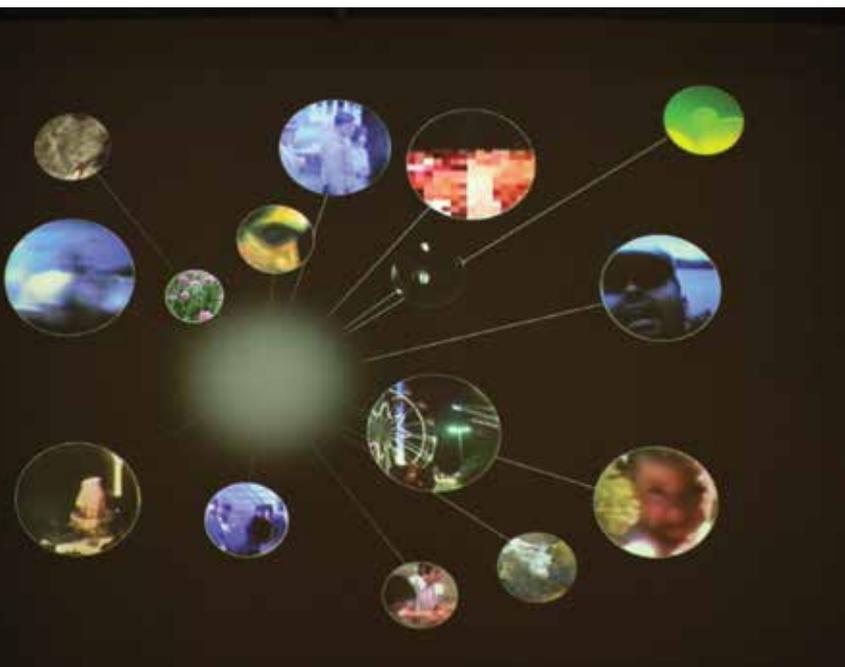


Planning work for the exhibition. Photograph by Anne Thulson.

I ask my students to develop a stronger visual vocabulary, and they in turn challenge my own experience with something unexpected, and often unimagined by, myself.

The challenge to engage in this dialogue with my students is a rewarding one, but one that art educators must often face alone. The sheer task of planning a scope and sequence for such a diverse age range, and then to differentiate for each student within that age range, is a daunting one. Then there is all the material management, the parent communication, and the assessment. All this, and still the hopeful task of staying engaged in one's own process of artmaking, of living the creative process in one's own life, and then determining how to translate the artistic process to even the youngest of learners. Simply said, education is not a one-person job—it requires ongoing dialogue, an active research of learning to inform one's teaching.

Too often, we art educators are the “only” person with our content expertise in our schools. We embark on this should-be dialogue on our own, often isolated from the collaboration that truly rich teaching requires. The TLP group is that dialogue; it is the collective discourse of peers who are trying the same things in their own classrooms, and willing to share the notes of their successes, their challenges, and their unexpected learning along the way. Through the collaboration of a team of my peer art educators, I am not only armed with a myriad of possibilities as I plan for my students, but I am also encouraged to create the very contexts that embolden students to raise their own questions through their engagement with contemporary artists and their artistic processes. With a network of peers who are all trying to go after something bigger, the task seems less daunting. ■

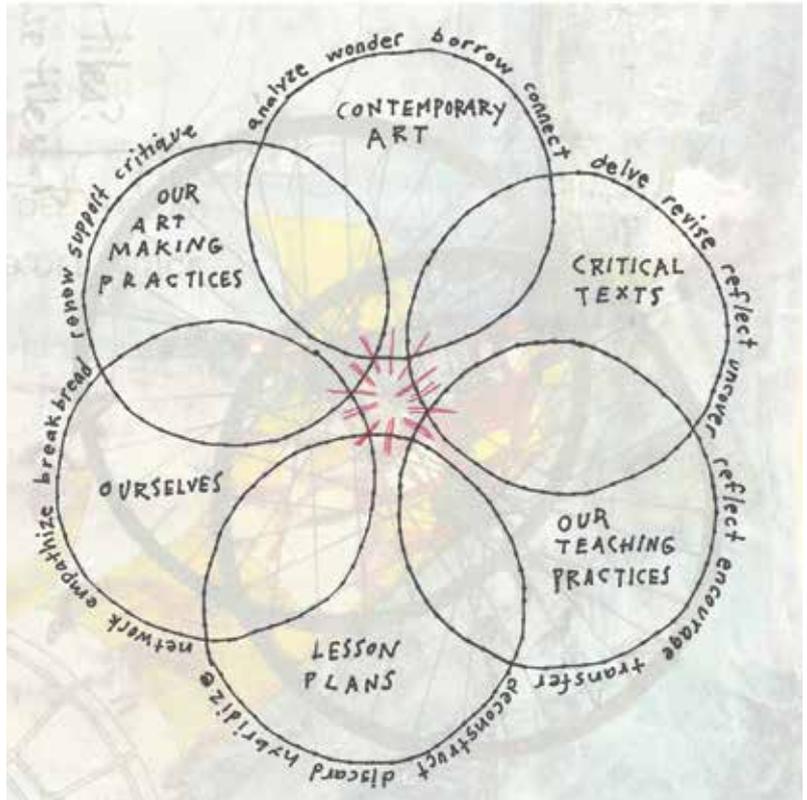


Jody Chapel, *Collections and Recollections*. Photograph by Jody Chapel.

Simply said, education is not a one-person job—it requires ongoing dialogue, an active research of learning to inform one's teaching.



Kat Potter, *The Desk*. Photograph by Kat Potter.



Theory Loves Practice Objects of Research diagram by Anne Thulson.

Closing the Divide With a Community of Teacher Researchers

The Theory Loves Practice collaborative continues in Year Four as a larger community of reflective practitioners and researchers working together to bridge the theory/practice conundrum. As a group we challenged assumptions about theory getting in the way of spontaneity and creativity (Gude, n.d.; McKenna, 1999) and we were inspired by ideas about professional growth from Buffington and Wilson McKay (2013); As they suggest, “Internalizing an attitude of openness and willingness, acknowledging the partial understanding of our practice, and a curiosity to know more deeply are skills that mark art teaching as an ongoing process aided through a research lens” (p. 7). These are strategies and recommendations that have emerged from the monthly TLP meetings and have helped to guide the growth and resilience of the group:

- **Create and practice a democratic culture.** The teachers are the primary participants. The job of the leaders and facilitators is to create an environment for that to happen.
- **Have a main administrative contact** to coordinate the meetings and inform participants.
- **Use social media and Internet-based tools** such as Facebook, Twitter, a blog, a website, or a listserv to reach out, bridge meeting times, and link/connect people who cannot attend in-person meetings. Our listserv is a dynamic place for teachers to pose questions and post resources and links to interesting artists and happenings.
- **Make sure people know the group is accessible to all.** No membership is required and they can attend when they are able.
- **Link to pK-12 professional development needs.** For example, use this opportunity to link what your principal is asking you to do to what *you* want to do to meet your needs. You could use this group to create your own professional development plan.
- **Share assessment and documentation strategies,** realizing this can take many forms and can exist in artful ways.
- **Renew your interest in research.** Teachers of students of all ages can share moments in the classroom where the theory/practice mix occurs. Reflection as a group can help to uncover the nuances of this action.
- **Collaborate with others to make it work.** This process cannot happen alone and the multiple voices can make this experience richer.
- **Provide opportunities for public dialogue.** The Theory Loves Practice exhibition allowed teacher researchers to enact praxis in a public space.



Dale Zalmstra, *Formative and Summative Assessment*.
Photograph by Talya Dornbush.

Studio Arts Teacher Sarah Shay discusses the cyclical process of teaching and learning in her K-8 classroom and how the Theory Loves Practice group has supported her:

My students' research drives me to seek out expertise and resources that extend well beyond my own areas of interest, expertise, and energies, while the Theory Loves Practice group drives me back to the classroom to challenge my own thinking about what students are capable of and the potential of art education as a center for creative thinking at its most impactful level.

Self-initiated and self-directed professional development learning communities for teachers are useful in supporting collaborative inquiry and bridging the aloneness that some teachers can experience in their classrooms. The research and theory mix of informing the daily practice can dissipate if the opportunities to infuse are not encouraged and nurtured. Teacher researcher groups are necessary to foster reflection, challenge notions, share new resources, reinvigoration and growth, and to encourage and support the important work of making evident possibilities for theory and practice connections.

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ENDNOTE

- ¹ See www.msudenver.edu/cva/education/theorylovespractice