

“ A Collective Portrait of the Pedagogical Culture of Four Arts and Crafts Schools
in the Southern Highlands”

Chris Dockery
PhD Student
Department of Art Education
The Lamar Dodd School of Art
The University of Georgia

Chris Dockery
PO Box 268
Demorest, GA 30535
cddockery@windstream.net
1(706) 754-5062

When I was 12 years old, I burned off the tip of my cousin Carla's nose with a white-hot poker. I was in a blacksmithing class. It was great-the class, not the incident. In fact, the whole summer was great. I was a pre-teen taking summer workshops at the John C Campbell Folk School in Brasstown, NC. The Campbell Folk School is one of a handful of unique organizations in the Appalachian mountains that take a different approach to teaching craft, art and culture. This project is an examination of places like the Campbell Folk School, specific learning environments in the arts and crafts in which the structure is unique in comparison with more traditional learning environments in the visual arts. In the spirit of contributing to a more comprehensive picture of where art is taught and artists/craftspeople learn their skills, this project will articulate the distinct educational structures of organizations that differ from the traditional, academic models. This research was inspired by a memory of a particular experience at one of these schools, that became formative in what would become my life's work in creative production and education.

In the Southern Highlands (three states comprising the mountainous regions of Western North Carolina, North Georgia and Eastern Tennessee) the concept of a creative utopia inspired the establishment of a group of schools centered on handicraft. The John C. Campbell Folk School, Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, Penland School of Handicraft, and the Hambidge Center for Arts and Sciences are examples of these types of organizations. They collectively emerged from a historical and political context rooted in the aspirations of a social utopia centered on creative production. They all have a variety of curriculum structures and objectives and are generally categorized as Visual Arts Organizations. Collectively, there are hundreds of visual arts organizations in the United States and even more abroad. Most of the schools are some variation on the workshop model, offering both short term courses in the arts and crafts, as well as long term residencies and/or retreats for working artists and crafts persons. They belong to a classification of educational models that focuses on process, experience, atmosphere and experimentation. The goal of this research project has been to articulate their role in contemporary art education and gain an understanding of their culture as a pedagogical environment.

So why does this matter? Adler (1979) reflected on recent assessments of scholarship in the sociology of art, noting that sociologists have focused exclusively on the cultural products of artists while the organizations from which these works flow remain unexamined. She argues that more attention should be paid to the organizational settings in which the arts are produced. And Sullivan (2005) says that the study of the studio setting as a place of inquiry and as a site for sustained research that has the potential to yield significant knowledge is not so apparent in our art educational literature. He writes,

“This framework for theorizing visual arts practice incorporates several of the dimensions of inquiry covered in the art educational literature, especially debates about the importance of interpretation, the study of artworks, and the advocacy for visual culture. What is not so apparent in the field is the study of the studio setting as a place of inquiry and as a site for sustained research that has the potential to yield significant knowledge.” (Sullivan, 2005, p.81)

Our efforts to understand the structures by which a formal system of education fortifies the activity of artists is fundamental to understanding the forces that shape the contemporary art world at large, and therefore relevant to my pursuits as an artist and an educator.

Art education literature is thick with research on the academic and professional education of the visual artist. There is research about both historical and contemporary institutions of artist training and about the many models of curriculum and instruction. Research towards the educational structure of the arts and crafts schools however, is conspicuously vacant. Ironically, there is significant research in visual arts organizations that define themselves as *community based*. But the research to this end has examined the role of the community based art center in terms exclusive to their social and cultural benefits of the arts on the community at large. There is another dimension located somewhere in the middle of these two conclusions and my research is situated there. The artist community type organization has been characterized as *research and development* centers for creative people. They are hybrids of artist training, networking exchange and

community resources in arts and crafts, informed by and best understood as part of a specific heritage.

Abbreviated Historical Framework. That heritage is one informed by a variety of social change and theory all converging in the early part of the twentieth century. When the schools were established, it was a time characterized by a number of social movements including a critical chapter in the history of education in twentieth century America. The Depression era was a time of turbulence in which the nation's artists and educators were weaning themselves from European traditions and expectations to create forms that were characteristically American. The arts became an important vehicle for establishing a national identity.

The ideological and political current underwriting these changes saw a series of social reform movements that inspired the founding of the craft schools. All in the spirit of Socialism, the Settlement House Movement, the Country Life Movement, Regionalism, the Arts and Crafts movement and the Southern Handicraft Revival provided the fertile ground for the establishment of schools who sought to educate through creative and cultural expression (McLaughlin, 2004; Harris, 1987; Dorman, 1993; Wyzomirski, 1985). The Settlement House Movement inspired four young women who would see their vision of educational craft schools become a reality in the Appalachian mountains. The women of Pi Beta Phi Sorority, Lucy Morgan, Olive Dame Campbell and Mary Crovatt Hambidge all had association with the movement which grew to expand its reform agenda out side of the city, to include economic reform for the cashless agrarian market in regions like the Southern Highlands. These four ladies who traveled to the region repeatedly turned to art and craft as transformational activity in various areas including society, health care, education or material goods. They opened workshops in the rural communities of Appalachia based on the craft traditions of the local residents. Soon participants included teachers, social workers, and occupational therapists coming to learn a craft in their own holistic approach to treatment and education.

In the 1950s and 1960s the schools evolved into programs that were modeled towards total immersion workshops. A sense of the *working studio* and retreat became a

part of the organizational concept as the GI Bill influenced the organizations and their access to government funding. Postwar optimism of the fifties and counter culture movements of the 60s furthered this access to the schools as new and alternative possibilities in the visual arts became a part of the art world discourse. The instructors, initially identified with the socially conscious reform worker, were replaced by a mix of university and studio teachers. They became, as Dreyer notes, “crossroads for craft information” and the model of the workshop became rooted in relationship with materials and process as opposed to traditional objects. (McLaughlin, 2004, p.20)

My research today, presumes that they have a unique role in terms of education and in partnership with the academic university/art school. In order to talk about their differences and parallels with more formalized art education, I had to find a framework on which to build my ideas. I am using a number of theoretical constructs to define the schools qualities in art/artist education. The following paragraph is a sampling of this complex framework.

Abbreviated Theoretical Framework: The structure of the craft schools is typical of most visual arts organizations and this type of structure has certain pedagogical implications. Historically, we could reduce the goal of every art program to the acquisition of skill or technique in the arts. Smith (1996), writing about arts curricula, places technique in terms of its acquisition and development in the training of artists. He defines *technique* as information artists need to know which embodies a number of definitions as the curricular context that defines it changes. In art education history, two models emerge that are different on the basis of the ways their curricular structures define technique.

The first model places emphasis on teaching basics of skill, an idea that descends from the Greek notion of artistic inspiration as central to our human essence and therefore not reducible to the confines of a formal curriculum. This model’s emphasis is on teaching skills and not ideas. The second model is the opposite extreme in that the making of work, in terms of skill and material, is reserved for individual experimentation by the artist and the role of education is to contribute to the intellectual and philosophical issues central to the arts. Technique in this sense comes to describe the intellectual disposition required to think and speak like an artist. We can think of these pedagogical

models in dichotomous groupings of *Work/Skill vs. Theory/Language*. There is a third pedagogical model that describes what is loosely referred to as a curriculum in the craft schools of my research. This third emphasis can be described as *Process/Exchange*. The model that privileges communal exchange and process offers different perspectives on artistic practice, production and working atmosphere. At the heart of this curriculum emphasis is the creation of a community in which teacher and student contribute equally, and take the information that they need for the development of their own work. It is an aspect of the other models, but at the arts and crafts schools it is a major characteristic.

There are many ways to conceptualize the craft schools and their organizational structures, which are addressed more comprehensively in the project itself. A second major conceptual framework includes looking at the schools curriculums through the lens of Eisner's Explicit, Implicit and Null Curriculums (Eisner, 1994). Additionally, the schools are being examined through their common ideological characteristics such as craft, process, ritual, skill and community.

At the completion of this research project, administration, instructors and students will all contribute their opinions on the contemporary function of the school. When presented in the context of historical, theoretical and conceptual ideologies, my hope is that our understanding of their educational contributions to the field of art and craft will be clarified. The operational models of *work* and *research* are facilitated at these schools. The complexity of their historical origins and evolutions have made them alternative educational opportunities that are available for many different individuals outside of the hierarchical structure and long term commitment of the university or art school. Historically, art scholars have given forum to debate about what function art serves, where it fits into society, and where emphasis should be placed, particularly in the realm of art education. The controversies that emerge in regard to their purpose, both historically and currently, place their work at the center of those raging in the broader contexts of art and art education offer a subject area rich for further research. Considering the impact of regionalism, and government funding in their educational programs; comparing art and craft education in the university to the model in which it is offered at the visual arts organization; and thinking about the pedagogical emphasis on work in

contrast to theory/research/inquiry has opened a door to further examination devoted to their broader role in the education and production of the visual artist/crafts person as well as the creative enthusiast. This project, however, is an initial effort towards representing the four organizations as a collective portrait in order to build a bridge between these schools and the rest of the discourse on the education and training of the creative individual.

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