

The Teacher as Public Enemy # 1, *a Response...*

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BY ELIZABETH M. DELACRUZ

At the annual conference of the National Art Education Association in March of 2011, I delivered an acceptance speech on the occasion of receiving the United States Society for Education through Art (USSEA) 2011 National Ziegfeld Award.

My speech was written over the winter and into the spring of 2011 amidst an unprecedented escalation of highly publicized attacks by politicians, the media, and ordinary citizens on public workers and teachers in particular; the outlawing by some states of teachers' collective bargaining rights; increased (questionable and largely unchallenged) reliance on standardized testing as a measure of teacher effectiveness; and massive government and corporate efforts to privatize public education. The enterprise of public education was shifting right before my(our) eyes, and business as usual (merely being great teachers and public servants) was no longer sufficient.

Wanting to say something hopeful for the future, I suggested four frameworks to guide contemporary educational thinking in art education: asserting the value of teachers as public intellectuals in their own communities; adopting entrepreneurial strategies to strengthen both our aims and work; networking through new digital social media; and establishing common aims in service of civil society across our diverse disciplines and communities of practice. My speech ends with an affirmation of the importance of the work in which we must now engage. I don't think any of this will be easy, nor do I think I have great answers to teachers' current working conditions. Nevertheless, from the perspective of a highly experienced art educator, I wanted to directly address these depressing and shocking conditions, and to offer something positive and proactive. Most of all, I wanted



Elizabeth Delacruz (left) receives the 2011 USSEA National Ziegfeld award from Alice Arnold (right).

K-12 teachers at all levels (teachers I believe to be bearing the brunt of public attacks) to know that many individuals in the higher education community (similarly under attack) are deeply committed to addressing these issues and supporting public school teachers throughout the US.

The body of this article shares my USSEA award speech, with endnotes containing many references to provide further reading and resources for those who, like me, believe in public education and want to find out more about the issues.

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The Teacher as Public Enemy # 1, a Response: NEW APPROACHES

Thank you for this incredible award, and to my good friend Alice Arnold, thank you for nominating me. I also want to thank Laura Chapman, who has long been an inspiration to me. I have subtitled this speech in tribute to Laura's important book, a book that shaped my early years as an art educator: Approaches to Art in Education (1978).¹

I want to use my time today to comment on recent events in public education in the US, and to offer my insights about how we might respond as a community of art educators.

Public education today is mired in controversy, fraught with well-orchestrated attacks on teachers at every level, from Head Start to higher education.

As pointed out by leading educational theorists Henry Giroux (2009) and Diane Ravitch (2011), under the guise of fiscal responsibility, powerful interests in this country have been able to convince large sectors of the public that educators (Pre-K through higher education) and young people are now the enemy within: a drain on resources, expendable, untrustworthy, and undeserving of public support.² These attacks have little to do with genuine accountability, educational excellence, or fiscal responsibility, and everything to do with furthering the personal fortunes and political agendas of the already obscenely rich and powerful (Goodman, 2011).³ Media scholar and cultural critic Naomi Klein and many others observe that these are also attacks on women (Goodman, 2011),⁴ who do the bulk of teaching and care giving in this country, and on our children, our most precious “commodity.” As third-wave feminist scholar and cofounder of the Woodhull Institute for Ethical Leadership Naomi Wolf (2008) observes, all of this is taking place through the artifice and hype of what she identifies as *fake patriotism*, *fake democracy*, and *fake crisis*.⁵

Harry Boyte, civil rights activist and Director of the Hubert Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota, observes that US schools in towns across America were once vibrant places for community gatherings, town hall meetings, adult education, and social events for all sorts of people (Boyte, 2002). Today, far too many of our schools are dilapidated,

locked down, inhospitable, and, in neighborhoods serving poor and minority communities, outright dangerous. I am reminded of the investigative reporting and poignant case studies written by journalist Jonathan Kozol in his book *Savage Inequalities* (1992). Kozol provides a biting critique and historical analysis of the inherent injustice of municipal, state, and federal tax and funding policies that gave rise to the shocking conditions of education and community life in the poorest and most racially segregated neighborhoods of East St. Louis, Washington, DC, Chicago, New York City, and elsewhere.⁶ Today, 20 years later, these injustices persist throughout the nation (Kozol, 2007; Strauss, 2011).

The orchestrated erosion of support for our public school sector in the past decade in particular is without shame.⁷ And the more recent Obama/Duncan⁸ administration's misguided initiatives, including “Race to the Top,” championing of mandate-free publicly funded charter schools, and this administration's unchallenged reliance on an outrageously expensive standardized testing system, are equally troubling.⁹ As Laura Chapman noted to me in a recent e-mail (L. Chapman, personal communication, March 10, 2011), we are witnessing a triumph of econometric thinking over all other frames for addressing today's complex

issues. These programs measure and reward or punish teachers and schools in what Laura referred to as a “value-added system,” and what Diane Ravitch (2010) finds to be a pernicious and punitive system that places all bets on student standardized math and reading test scores to the detriment of other forms of learning that should be taking place in schools—science, social studies, history, literature, and the arts. Moreover, as Ravitch (2010, 2011) and others point out, despite empirical evidence to the contrary that for-profit corporations and publicly funded charter schools can do a better job of educating our failing students, this thinking persists (Dutro, 2011; Hamlinson, 2011; McQuillan & Solomon-Fernandez, 2008; Moscovich, 2010). Public school administrators—people who really should know better—are either silent or buying-in wholesale. I note the lone dissenting voice of Philadelphia Schools Superintendent Arlene Ackerman, who wrote in the *Washington Post* in October 2010 the following:



to Art Education in These Most Uncivil Times

The truth is our public schools have been asked not only to educate children but also to solve many of the ills that the larger society either cannot or will not fix. I am speaking of issues directly related to poverty—like hunger, violence, homelessness, and unchecked childhood diseases. In spite of these challenges, there are thousands of dedicated and committed educators who are working hard to make access to a quality education for all children who attend public schools a reality. (Strauss, 2010)

What our K-12 colleagues may not know, but we in this room are fully aware of,¹⁰ the higher education sector is also under attack,¹¹ with concerted and successful efforts to privatize higher education;¹² abolish the tenure system;¹³ deny educators their rights to academic freedom,¹⁴ due process, health care, and retirement benefits;¹⁵ to transfer the teaching of our courses to armies of underpaid part-time adjuncts;¹⁶ and to convert the public higher education enterprise in the US into a market-driven, cash-commodity, limited-liability venture.¹⁷ Despite my own privileged position in the academy, I must admit I too often find this environment brutal and demoralizing.

At the same time, I would add to this depressing observation my belief that art educators in post-secondary institutions now need to champion, support, mentor, and collaborate with local K-12 teachers in and around our communities, as together we refine our own tools, strategies, and resources for developing reasoned and persuasive political speech, and for tapping into influential power structures at the local and state levels. This is a very grassroots endeavor, fraught with difficulties and setbacks. But we are not without our own resources and devices. We have our vote, our voice, our intellectual skills, our compassion, and each other in our collective endeavors to inform and shape the public debate over education. Moreover, our professional

associations, publications, conferences, and social media give us greater opportunities to engage these issues. We are, in fact, what social learning theorist and business consultant Etienne Wenger (2006) identifies as a “community of practice” (<http://www.ewenger.com/theory/>). We are a multifaceted, many-layered, amply talented community of practice dedicated to common aims and engaged in learning from one another in furtherance of these common aims. And we have a new generation of scholars and artists and educators to mentor and groom for the rough road ahead.¹⁸

We have our VOTE, our VOICE, our INTELLECTUAL SKILLS, our COMPASSION, and EACH OTHER in our collective endeavors to inform and shape the public debate over education.

With this in mind, I suggest four frameworks that might facilitate this work.

1. We need to reassert how we envision ourselves as teachers. Many of us have set forth a notion of the “publicly engaged artist/scholar/teacher.” After teacher/educator Marilyn Cochran-Smith (2005, 2006) at Boston College, I see teachers as local “public intellectuals” in their own communities (although positioning the teacher as a “public intellectual” is hardly a catchy phrase in the current anti-intellectual fervor that appears to have taken hold in the this country). Teachers have many of the same skills and dispositions that public intellectuals in civic life have, and they play a vital role in the life of a community. Both teachers and public intellectuals pursue cross-disciplinary understandings. Teachers and public intellectuals have the ability to communicate well to general audiences, and they encourage their audiences to

ask difficult questions—questions such as “Why?”, “Why not?”, and “What if?” And they consider both ethical and pragmatic implications of actions and inactions—local, regional, and global, understanding that it’s not an us/them scenario; rather, we’re all in this together. Intellectual rigor, inquiry, imagination, and civic engagement permeate everything teachers do.

This is no simple task. Teachers’ plates are already full, and they/we are untrained in the sophisticated ways and frenzied pace of the media-muddled world of U.S. public discourse today. This is compounded by the fact that in US public life, we don’t have conversations; we have shout-outs and slap-downs, carefully vetted (as pointed out to me by Laura Chapman) through well-endowed political think tanks and focus groups for just the right effect on just the right faction of an increasingly fractured public. As social historian Jean Bethke Elshtain from the University of Chicago warns, “Without an engaged public, there can be no true public conversations, and no true public intellectuals (2001, p. 50). We so desperately need an intellectually and morally engaged public.

2. We need to borrow from a framework already well-regarded in the world of corporate capitalism, the language of entrepreneurship. Borrowing from a recent paper I wrote, an *entrepreneurial disposition* refers both to a conceptual outlook and a cluster of behaviors that include the following: ability to understand particular needs in particular contexts; to discern meaningful patterns; to think big; to innovate; to envision something new and useful; and the ability to conceptualize, design, and carry forward concrete plans of action with specific intended outcomes (Delacruz, 2011). Entrepreneurs are good at creative problem solving, social networking, and resource development. Impediments are challenges to overcome, and fear of failure does not truncate entrepreneurial thinking. Most importantly, entrepreneurs create something of value to others.¹⁹

These are also dispositions identified by Daniel Pink (2007) and Richard Florida (2002) as attributes of the creative class or cultural creatives who, Florida argues, will be the driving force of economic development in the 21st century. These are the skills and dispositions we hope to foster in our students. If ever we needed to educate both our students and the wider public about how essential it is to be innovative, creative, critically informed, and ethically engaged citizens, it's now. An entrepreneurial disposition will also include thinking "outside of the box" in our efforts to shape public perception about the value of publicly supporting those teachers and schools in pursuit of such aims (Delacruz, 2011; Jackson, 2011).



We need to EXCITE students about the notion of being a GLOBALLY CONNECTED and ETHICALLY CHARGED citizen as a means of facilitating our creative, educational, and civic goals as a society and as world citizens.

3. I call this framework "DIY meets the Cloud" or, pardon the mixed metaphor, "pie in the sky." New social media is a game-changer in the enterprise of education. Despite adherence in this country to a social Darwinian myth of rugged individualism, and despite the seductive belief that one can "do it yourself," the fact is we just can't to this alone. Peer-to-peer teaching and learning, creative and cultural production, design thinking, and problem-solving are now immensely more powerful through collaboration in online social networks (Delacruz, Carlos, Danker, Flugelstad, Roland, & Stokrocki, 2011). Henry Jenkins, former Director of the MIT Comparative Media Studies Program and now USC media and communications scholar, and his colleagues describe something quite remarkable that is happening online; something he believes to be a distinct yet still emerging form of human intellectual and social evolution (Jenkins, Purushotma, Clinton, Weigel, &

Robison, 2007). These media scholars sees the rich and powerful online behaviors and the knowledge it produces as a form of *distributed cognition*.²⁰ I rather like that concept. It is not just about working together across geographic, cultural, and disciplinary enclaves; rather, it's both the individual and the collective. It's about synergy, and the power of *we*.

4. Fourth, and most importantly, I want to advocate for a notion of the commons and the pursuit of global civil society (Delacruz, 2005, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c).²¹ In olden days, the commons was the meadow, the park, and the public square. These were our shared places that were decidedly public, accessible to all, and, importantly, requiring careful stewardship. Today, our *commons*, or common public assets, include green spaces in our municipalities, the air we breathe, protected wilderness habitats, outer space, the Internet, architectural and artistic monuments, the global knowledge commons, and public education. Our very survival now depends on this stewardship. It requires the joint efforts of civil society, which has been broadly defined as *that realm of public and private individuals and entities working for the common public good*. "Business as usual" clearly cannot continue. We need to come together across ideological, disciplinary, and cultural boundaries to craft new solutions for old problems. In the aftermath of what is now referred to as the Great Recession (our current global economic meltdown), and in these most uncivil times where the mean-spirited but well-vetted sound bite, "gotcha" journalism, spectacle politics, and public rancor rule the day, this is no easy task. But we have in our midst some public intellectuals who suggest ways to re-envision our future. In addition to those I have mentioned throughout this speech (Naomi Klein, Naomi Wolf, Diane Ravitch, Laura Chapman, and others) I cite as another example Stewart Brand, one of the founders of the *Whole Earth Catalogue*. Brand (2009) tells us that the environmental movement needs to move forward in concert with business and industry interests. Environmentalists and for-profit corporations working together?²² Is he serious? Communications scholar Howard Rheingold (2007) observes that the tools for cultural production are in the hands of 14-year-olds

who know more about emerging technologies than their teachers.²³ Rheingold's point is not just that kids are tech-savvy; rather it's that because of this fact, teachers now have a new and more important role to play: teaching ethical behavior and cultural citizenship. We need to excite students about the notion of being a globally connected and ethically charged citizen as a means of facilitating our creative, educational, and civic goals as a society and as world citizens.

My argument here is that grooming our own public intellectuals, utilizing entrepreneurial thinking, networking, and promoting civil society is now part of our business as art educators in the creation of what former Executive Director of Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility and senior lecturer at the LBJ School of Public Affairs Gary Chapman (n.d.) called the "good life" for all citizens of the world.²⁴ We start with the children in our classrooms, and work our way up to their parents, to fellow teachers and community and business leaders, and to those public servants who make, administer, and judge the laws by which we organize ourselves as a society.

I end this commentary where I began. Education is a public venture of utmost concern. In USSEA, in NAEA, and beyond, we need both to address the present situation and to shape our collective future as a society. We need to strategize about how to pursue these aims with our best minds, young and old. These are troubling times, powerful beliefs, and it's now time to roll up our sleeves and get a little messy.

In closing, thank you again for this award, an award I am quite sure that I am most undeserving of receiving. I promise you that, in return for your trust and kindness, I plan to leverage this distinction to the utmost of my ability on behalf of our mutual aims as art educators, public intellectuals, and change agents for a better society through art.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Without attributing any of the errors in thinking contained within this speech to her, I want to thank Laura Chapman for her generous and gracious advice to me as I was preparing this acceptance speech. Laura Chapman's *Approaches to Art in Education* was one of my primary resources when I first began teaching art, and this book remains relevant today. Chapman's *Instant Art, Instant Culture: The Unspoken Policy for American Schools* (1982), published by Teachers College Press, also forecast today's issues in education. June McFee's and Rogena Degge's *Art, Culture, and Environment: A Catalyst for Teaching* (1980), published by Kendall Hunt, also remains a highly relevant textbook for my art teaching today.
- ² See Hirschfield, P. J. (2005, August). Preparing for prison? Inner-city schools and the extended reach of criminal justice. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association. Retrieved from www.allacademic.com/meta/p20340_index.html. See also Giroux, H. (2003, December 8). Authoritarianism's footprint and the war against youth. *Dissident Voice* [Online Newsletter]. Retrieved from http://dissidentvoice.org/Articles9/Giroux_War-On-Youth.htm
- ³ See also Moyers, B. (2010, April 23). Interview with William K. Black [Transcript from the PBS television series, *The Journal*]. Retrieved from www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/04232010/transcript4.html; Drum, K. (2011). Plutocracy now: What Wisconsin is really about. *Mother Jones* (March/April). Retrieved <http://motherjones.com/politics/2011/02/income-inequality-labor-union-decline>; and Lakoff, G. (2011, February 19). What conservatives really want [Blog]. Retrieved from <http://georgelakoff.com/2011/02/19/what-conservatives-really-want/>
- ⁴ See also National Women's Law Center, (2011, March 10). *Women's stake in the battle over public employees' collective bargaining rights* [Web log post]. Retrieved from www.nwlc.org/resource/womens-stake-battle-over-public-employees-collective-bargaining-rights#11
- ⁵ See Goodman, A. (2007, November 28). *The end of America: Feminist social critic Naomi Wolf warns US in slow descent into Fascism* [Interview with Naomi Wolf for the PBS television series *Democracy Now*]. Retrieved from www.democracynow.org/2007/11/28/the_end_of_america_feminist_social. See also Seattle Community Access Network (2008, October 4) Interview with Naomi Wolf. Retrieved from www.youtube.com/watch?v=_XgkeTanCGI; and Wolf, N. (2007, April 24). Fascist America, in 10 easy steps [Commentary published in *The Guardian*]. Retrieved from www.guardian.co.uk/world/2007/apr/24/usa.comment. An excerpt of Wolf's book may be found at Wolf, N. (2008, October 2). *Fake patriotism* [Excerpt of the book *Fake*