EDITORIAL

Taking Our Citizenship Seriously

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The impetus for this special issue of Studies in Art Education on policy is traceable to Laura Chapman’s ongoing critique of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and its implications for public education generally, and education in the arts specifically. Another motivation for this issue of the journal is Doug Boughton and Kerry Freedman’s participation at a United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) meeting in the summer of 2005 in which art education professionals were being largely ignored in developing international arts education policy. Artists in the schools programs were being favored without noting the necessity of ongoing art education curricula conceptualized and taught by professional art educators. Associated with each of these is the importance of understanding the implications of policy, the process through which such policy is implemented, and the ways in which art educators can influence policy.

In response to the above, Kerry Freedman, Richard Siegesmund, and I facilitated a policy-oriented meeting on March 13, 2007 in New York City, which representatives from most of the major College and University Art Education Programs attended. Two initiatives resulted from this meeting. One is this special issue, and a second is the formation of a Higher Education Policy Committee within the NAEA Higher Education Division.

This issue of Studies in Art Education includes six articles and three commentaries by authors who research, critique, review, and/or suggest policy as it relates to art education. Each contributor offers significant insights into the ways in which policy is important to the profession. However, although broadly focused on policy matters, this issue of the journal cannot be considered a comprehensive overview of policy as it relates to education in the arts. It should be read as representative of some of the policy issues that are challenging the field.

In my Spring 2008 editorial, I advocated that the field embrace the systemic orientation to the arts and culture, comprising three interdependent sectors—the not-for-profit, for-profit, and volunteer or informal, posited by the American Assembly (2007). Education in the arts and culture is integral to all three sectors. Policy informs, shapes, and sustains this education through the formal and informal codification of values, attitudes, beliefs, and public preferences influencing decisions and defining courses of action around, within, and among these three sectors. Policy informs government, professions, interest groups, and associations, among many other social groups. How decisions are made, and actions taken (i.e., autocratic, consultative, democratic, consensus), impact working relationships and establish
authority and credibility. Given the ubiquity of policy, and the profound influence that it exerts on education, it is essential that policy be studied critically and thoroughly as a part of education in the arts.

Policy debate, formation, and implementation are a political activity. The policy environment requires people to come together in multiple ways to make decisions about how policy should be formulated, approved, and applied. The ability to participate wisely and strategically in this political process is a primary and necessary reason for a critical and thorough engagement with policy. All of those concerned with advancing art and culture within democratic societies should know how democratic process aligns with the arts and culture as well as how to advance public/civic purposes within the arts and cultural sectors.

Dewey (2008), in his 1939 essay “Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us,” recognized political participation as an inventive and creative activity. Dewey conceptualized democracy as a way of life, with education being a source of effective participation. Preparing our students, as well as ourselves, to participate in this way of life requires that citizenship be taken seriously. This way of life requires taking responsibility for learning about the political process, policy analysis, strategies for exercising influence, creating arguments, effective communication through multiple medias, listening, building coalitions, negotiating competing interests, maintaining civility, and finding common ground. Important to this way of life is a willingness to engage in the political process and to not shrink from taking leadership roles associated with policy development. We can learn from past efforts, both successful and unsuccessful. Learning from the efforts of other organizations is crucial. Necessary is identifying those many venues and contexts in which political participation is possible. It is also necessary to appreciate and respect the constraints of those professional organizations like the NAEA that, because of their charters, cannot act politically. However, such organizations can provide evidence to support policy and development and can become forums within which contentious and controversial discussion can take place for the purpose of clarifying positions.

 Appropriately infusing art education curricula with goals and objectives for preparing students for political participation should also be primary. Such goals and objectives will not focus on encouraging students toward a particular point of view, but will inform students about arts and cultural policy and the means through which policy can be conceptualized, implemented, critiqued, and modified. Encouraging students to take their citizenship seriously by participating in the political process will be equally important. I can imagine no more important work than inspiring and facilitating civic engagement among future leaders with the capacity to advance the arts and culture within democratic societies.

References
