

NAEA Advisory

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AN ADVISOR NETWORK FOR ART EDUCATION RESEARCHERS

Rethinking the Practices of Art Education: Research Methodologies
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Abstract: There is a need for a network of experienced researchers in art education who can serve as mentors, advisors, readers, and editors to assist research project teams on an *ad hoc* basis. An Advisor Network could be created to facilitate communication, collaboration, cooperation, and coordination among those with expertise and those with need.

In 1993, the National Art Education Association called for “creating a visual arts research agenda toward the 21st century,” and established the eight research task forces, one of which, under the stewardship of Doug Marshalek and Martin Rayala, is sponsoring this conference. At that time, and probably for some considerable time before, NAEA recognized the need for coherent research policy that would move us as an organization and as a field in the direction of sound, practical, intelligent research growth. By 1996, we produced the first *Briefing Papers* which laid out the initial, ambitious blueprint for that policy. In the *Briefing Papers*, Enid Zimmerman, the Research Commission Chair, wrote:

“The National Art Education Association is committed to an ongoing research effort at improving instruction in visual arts education. Toward this end, coordinated planning and research strategies, involving all levels of membership, are being developed that address major research need in the field. NAEA invites participation in research by facilitating communications between individuals and groups engaging in visual arts research that addresses issues relevant to art teaching and student learning in a variety of educational contexts. When appropriate and feasible, **cooperative** research efforts for gathering and interpreting data and exchanging and cross-referencing research findings will be promoted by NAEA.” (my emphasis) (Zimmerman, 1996.)

Coordinate. Communicate. Cooperate. These are hallmarks in an overall research agenda although we in art education do not seem to have responded to them. Perhaps it is our tradition as independent, solitary artists who feel only each of us alone must be responsible for our creations. Research in art education has generally been conducted on an individual basis, either as graduate work, as action research by art teachers in public schools, or by individual professors in higher education. However, research done by individuals is limited in quantity, quality, breath, depth, and sophistication. In many cases, good research ideas “die aborning” because the researcher encounters obstacles greater than he or she can surmount alone. This is particularly true of inexperienced researchers. In other academic areas, research is typically one by teams, who through their collaboration are able to employ a wider variety of experience and expertise and undertake tasks that are beyond the reach of any individual team member. In many cases, research projects are broken down into a number of discrete, but manageable components which are “doable” by smaller teams or individuals. In our field, the only example of this I know of is the research in teaching art history Mary Erickson has done at Arizona State University. (Erickson, 1996.)

Another factor mitigating against us as researchers is the structure of our higher education programs. In science, existing research is regularly replicated. Replications act as checks and balances, add support to the credibility of established research, and provide a healthy skepticism that continually refines methodology and theory. We have very few replicated studies in our field, and consequently, few credible theories upon which to base our practice. In science, many replicated studies are done at the master’s level where the novice scientist learns his or her methodology under the supervision of an experienced senior scientist. One might think of this as “guided practice.” It’s only at the doctoral level that the new scientist embarks on an “independent practice,” a research project based on a novel hypothesis.

In art education, many master’s programs consist of coursework similar in content and intent to that found at the undergraduate level. Research methodology may consist of survey courses. Master’s theses are often descriptive or qualitative, which may contribute to personal growth but adds little to the field at large. Master’s students may not be inclined (or encouraged) to publish. Research hidden under a bushel is not research at all. The great English scientist, Michael Faraday, once defined science as “to make experiments and to publish them.” (Bova, 1988.) Master’s theses in art education may focus directly on curricular application and teaching practice with only a cursory nod at theory. Certainly, a rare bird is the art education master’s student who replicates a study from our literature, and who contributes to the strength and quality of research in the field while gaining a solid foundation in research methodology.

NAEA has begun an important initiative to move research in our field out of anecdotal isolation and into mainstream art education where it can be a real influence on actual practice. It has done this through initiating the NAEA Research Task Forces, and by providing funding through National Art Education Foundation (NAEF) grants. However, there is still a need in art education for a research infrastructure if we are going to move beyond this embryonic initiative. If research in art education remains predicated on the model of the individual as researcher, the quality and quantity of our research will be self-limiting, and ultimately, lack the impact and credibility to influence actual practice in the artroom or in the field.

I conceive of a network of experienced and skilled researchers to assist researchers and research teams on an *ad hoc* basis with specific problems as they arise in research projects. There are undoubtedly many art educators with considerable research experience and expertise who would be willing to assist research teams in numerous *ways on a temporary basis*. However, these people with specific skills must be brought together with those people who have specific needs and problems. A network of mentors, advisors, reviewers, analysts, readers, and editors could provide the needed logistical assistance *if they were properly coordinated*. The purpose of such a network would be to create a systemic, logical infrastructure that will assist researchers and research teams, and to facilitate and strengthen the research process in art education.

1. The Advisor Network could identify and recruit experienced and skilled art teachers and art educators to serve as mentors, advisors, reviewers, analysts, readers, and editors. Issues Groups such as *Retired Art Educators*, the NAEA *Distinguished Fellows*, the *Seminar for Research in Art Education*, and many others have likely memberships who can be recruited.

2. It could develop a “research registry” in which research ideas can be proposed, discussed, and debated. In such a forum, ideas can be refined and other interested researchers can be recruited to their interest groups. People need to know about research *before* it is done if they are to become involved in it. The NAEA website could provide such a forum. I believe such a “research registry” would be instrumental in shifting away from an *auteur* approach in research and toward a team strategy.

3. An important function of the Advisor Network would be to coordinate “newcomers” with research teams and task forces. The Advisor Network can bring experienced researchers together with graduate students, public school art teachers, and people beginning in an unfamiliar research area or methodology.

4. It could provide a cohort of readers and editors for articles *before* they are sent to journals. Knowledgeable, capable, and objective readers are invaluable to even the most able researcher. Articles to refereed journals are often sent back to their authors for rewrites because they haven’t been sufficiently edited before being sent in. At the NAEA sessions for prospective contributors to *Studies* and *Art Education*, the editors invariably plead this point.

5. The Advisor Network could monitor the nature of the problems requiring assistance, and arrange workshops at national conventions or other venues to meet obvious or emerging needs. For example, if the Advisor Network receives many requests for advisors to critique grant applications, it could then develop a workshop or publication on grantsmanship in art education. Trends in research could be tracked and supported.

6. The Advisor Network could develop a cohort of post-publication editors who will edit published research from many sources (journals, books, dissertations, theses, etc.) for secondary publication in art education publications and newsletters.

7. The Advisor Network could coordinate communication, cooperation and collaboration between researchers, research teams, teachers, schools, universities, museums, state and federal agencies, and other organizations to clarify, strengthen and facilitate research efforts. It could identify and form groups who could apply for federal grants.

8. It could coordinate skilled, experienced researchers with researchers with specific problems. The Advisor network could act as a clearinghouse by matching expertise with needs. It can also moderate the level of commitment researchers might wish to make. A central feature of this proposal is that the experienced researchers will provide assistance on a *temporary, ad hoc basis*. That is, when the experienced researcher is called upon to engage a specific problem, he or she deals with it, and then withdraws from the research project when it is resolved. If the problem requires only a day’s or a week’s attention, there is no reason for the experienced researcher to commit to the life of the entire project. Conversely, researchers could specify when they are available, or how much (or how little) assistance they wish to undertake. In this way, the researcher is more likely to be willing to contribute to the research project because there is only a very limited commitment in time and energy.

9. Experienced researchers might assist in problem development and feasibility studies, reviewing research methodology and hypotheses, critiquing grant applications, developing analytical and statistical procedures, analyzing data, and editing articles and reports, among many others. Having a pool of experience and expertise to draw upon is likely to widen and deepen the sophistication of research projects. It can also help in avoiding problems by catching them early.

Who would serve on this Advisor Network? It could consist of those individuals who will develop and coordinate the various tasks already mentioned. These people should be selected (or self-selected) for their administrative ability as well as for their experience of both the theoretical and practical aspects of the research process. Several of the NAEA Issues Groups seem to me to be likely pools for such expertise.

How would this Advisor Network be constituted? While several members of the NAEA Research Task Forces and other NAEA entities support the idea of an Advisor Network, they also noted to me that another task force (let alone another bureaucracy) is not needed. They suggest a loosely knit working group instead. A working group could deal more flexibly with questions of the feasibility of an Advisor Network in the first place. Such a working group could be “housed” within the NAEA Research Commission, the Seminar for Research in Art Education, or another Issues Groups.

How much would an Advisor Network cost? Since the main function of this network is coordination, the cost is minimal. A website would facilitate its function greatly. The website could be linked to the NAEA website, or to a university that might want it.

In conclusion, research in art education would be greatly benefited by a shift toward a team strategy. The quality of research would surely increase, and we could gradually move toward basing our teaching and policies on best practices rooted in *bona fide* research. An Advisor Network provides the infrastructure for such a shift, and for the coordination, communication and cooperation Enid Zimmerman called for three years ago. It is now up to us to take the initiative.

References

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