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Historizing the Past: New Histories in Art Education

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Evolutions within the field of historiography have been followed closely by historians of art education, and in recent years, a shift to arts-based constructions of history has radically redefined art education history. The question of how to do this new kind of history, both methodologically and theoretically, has been addressed periodically in art education literature. In the following article, I will first provide a review of key literature from the past 30 years, chronicling a shift toward more artful histories, and then introduce recent historiographic theory as a way to articulate the practice of *historizing* the past, taking as an example the art department at Central Technical School in Toronto, Canada. Bringing theory and practice together creates a synergistic link between the concept of *new histories* and the unique positioning of an art education historian.

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The following article proposes ways that art education histories can be made more inclusive and artful, contributing to the ongoing conversations around the theory and practice of new histories in art education (Congdon, 2004; Garnet, 2016a; Kummerfeld, 2015). I begin by providing a brief review of key publications from the past 30 years that address the “how to” of writing art education histories. These publications are presented in chronological order, but within each discussion theorists from different time periods are noted to highlight an evolution of historiographic thinking. Next, I discuss the theoretical framework of *new histories* and show how this form of historical craftsmanship is uniquely suited to art education through a discussion of *historizing* as a mode of artfully rendering the past.

The disciplinary morphology of research and scholarly publication in art education history has closely followed broader postmodern trends in historiography. Contemporary historian Alexander Lyon Macfie (2015) describes as an almost complete disciplinary shift from the view of history as an objective or “true” rendering of a past to the view of history as “a literary construct... [of] a past that may or may not have existed, at least in the manner conventionally supposed” (p. 1). The specialized study of art education history is still a relatively small field, and although historical writing on art teaching and learning existed prior to modernity, only a handful of art educators have chosen to make a concerted effort to investigate

issues of historical import. Following the lineage of contemporary art education scholars, I will outline key publications that trace historiographic recommendations for writing histories of art education. Authors of these publications were chosen in part due to their prolonged engagement in the field of art education history, and while the works discussed do not represent a comprehensive literature review, they offer a selection of notable perspectives from the 1980s to the present that show a development of thinking toward the creation of an “artwork history” (Munslow, 2010, p. 183).

Historiography in Art Education

The “narrative turn” in the humanities and social sciences, and the resulting academic legitimization of storytelling genres, have been largely the result of the ascendance of literary theory to prominence in arts-based educational research (Gallagher, 2011; Sinner, 2013). Educational theorists Tom Barone and Elliot Eisner (1997) argue that for the reader, the story format promotes “epiphanic moments”—major transactional events that disrupt the ordinary flow of life by calling into question the definitions of important facets of one’s world (p. 81). I illustrate the relational qualities of *historizing* by drawing from my research on the history of the art department at Central Technical School (CTS) in Toronto, Canada, to offer a conceptualization of new history in action. As paradigms have shifted, so too have the way histories are written in art education.

Art education scholar Donald Soucy (1985) points to educational historians such as Frederick Logan (1955), Stuart MacDonald (1970), and Foster Wygant (1983) as having constructed the much-needed skeletal framework for art education’s history, even if their

foundational works were broad surveys that favored breadth over detail. In the mid-1980s Soucy (1985) called for more localized histories that could “play a vital role in distinguishing actual influence [of characters and events] from mere visibility” (p. 7). He saw the importance of localized histories as a way to “test the load bearing capacity” (p. 8) of these foundational publications, stressing the importance of using primary sources as a way to “append, contradict, support, and otherwise clarify” (p. 3) written histories.

Art educator Mary Erickson (1985) shed some light on the relationship between the philosophy and the methods of history by looking at four styles of historical writing: realistic, formal, expressive, and pragmatic. For each style she considered “the philosophical position of the historian, the methods employed, criteria for judgment, and examples of the style in the literature of art education” (p. 121). She explains each historian “approaches art education from a different perspective and with varying goals for its future. There is no agreement among historians about the basic nature of historical inquiry. Some call history an art; others, a science” (p. 123). Erickson concludes by noting “in histories of art education, as in the art world, we should not expect or seek unanimity, but rather should prize the insight that diversity can bring” (p. 124). Currently, this diversity is represented through a broad spectrum of voices in art education histories: of students, teachers and community facilitators, as well as policy makers and administrative leaders.

Twenty years ago art education scholar Paul Bolin (1995) introduced “new histories” to the field of art education by way of historian Peter Burke’s (1991) description of what this kind of history looks like. For Burke, new history was defined by: (1) moving beyond political concerns to a wider scope of human activity; (2) analyzing the underlying structures of history, rather than recording its narrative events; (3) a shift from exploring the lives and influence of great men to the overlooked people and

cultural groups that had been neglected in the past; (4) an expansion of historical methods to include oral histories, photos, and other objects; (5) a move from a narrow, singular historical focus to the acceptance of multiplicity in historical understanding; and (6) acknowledgment of the historian’s perspective and the impossibility of objective historical writing. As Bolin notes, Burke’s characteristics do not capture “the entire breadth and meaning of ‘new’ history” but they encapsulate many of its primary goals (1995, p. 47). These new directions characterized what Bolin already saw emerging in historical research in art education: a movement toward an arts-based trend of opening up history and expanding perspectives on ways of knowing about the past.

Art education historian Mary Ann Stankiewicz (1995) proposed historians put more emphasis on the role of narrative in historical interpretation in order to bring their work into focus and “make it more meaningful to readers” (p. 53). The engagement of art educators with their own history requires a thoughtful narrative constructed within literary and relational tropes. Stankiewicz applies Hayden White’s (1978) model of history as narrative to a variety of published art education histories to demonstrate the artful literary qualities found therein. In her study, she overlays modes of emplotment and literary tropes onto written histories by Harry Green (1966), Diana Korzenik (1985), and Arthur Efland (1990) to show how these literary elements function. Stankiewicz (1995) argues along with White that “history gets its meaning from narrative, that historical narratives derive plot structure from the myths of a culture, and that historians tend to employ one of four distinct ideological positions” (liberal, conservative, radical, and anarchist) in “determining the form that any historical representation must take” (pp. 57-58). In contrast to the recent art education history that pays more attention “to describing data than to telling a story” (p. 59), Stankiewicz suggests “historians of art education might want to consider questions of plot type, explanatory

model, ideology, and figurative language as they write" (p. 60). Intriguingly, she theorizes that past criticism of art education histories "may reflect not so much our attention to irrelevant research problems as our failure to tell the tale in a way that engages readers and encourages them to find significance and meaning" (p. 60).

In a literature review of research in art education history from 1885-2001, Graeme Chalmers (2004) focuses on English, North American art education history publications. He commends the work of Soucy and Stankiewicz (1990) and Bolin, Blandy, and Congdon (2000), among others, for reminding us "each writer and historical document offers only a limited perspective on issues which are extremely complex, both in their occurrence and in their interpretation" (p. 2). Chalmers notes styles of historical investigation, selection, and interpretation vary, and recommends art education histories continue to be presented as "attempts to understand what really happened within wider ideological and social contexts" (p. 13). Chalmers (2004) concludes his discussion of art education history by stating "art educators are increasingly realizing that, even when dealing with the same subject, many different histories can be written" (p. 13).

Bolin (2009) recognizes scholars engaging with histories of art education "choreograph a dance of compatibility between the fragments of a known past" (p. 110) and a "critical feature of any historical analysis is the historian's act of selectivity" (p. 116). He asks readers and writers of art education histories to "consider that thoughtful and grounded speculations and wonderings of the imagination are profitable motivators that assist the historian in initiating and carrying out lively and meaningful investigations" (p. 111). Bolin points to a variety of historians (e.g., Gaddis, 2002; Sharpe, 1991; Walch & Harding, 2007) who "recognize the beneficial roles imagination, contextual understanding, and grounded speculation may play in searching out and participating in provocative historical inquiry and discussion" (pp. 111-112). Examples that correspond

to Bolin's theorizing are found in the following section. In the conclusion to his article, Bolin (2009) notes a diversity of critically examined perspectives, purposes, practices, individuals, and institutions could create a foundation for the future expansion and complexity of art education.

New Histories and Historiography

The discipline of art education history could benefit from conceptual shifts in the broader fields of educational history and historiography, but as a field it is uniquely positioned to explore the concept of history as an artful form. Recent examples of innovative plotments and literary aesthetic considerations that build upon Bolin's introduction of new histories to the field of art education can be found in Harold Pearce's (2006) collection of Canadian art education histories; Ami Kantawala's (2012) postcolonial exploration of art education histories from India; Gina Wenger's (2012) study of children's art education inside Japanese American internment camps in World War II; Laura Trafi-Prats and Christine Woywod's (2013) study of three art teachers' life histories in a time of policy changes and budget cuts; and Melanie Buffington's (2013) investigation of the stories behind the sculptural commemoration of the U.S. Confederacy. The most recent conceptions of new histories emphasize multiple perspectives, literary artistry, and the customization of creative methods and methodologies.

According to contemporary historians Alun Munslow (2012) and Keith Jenkins (2009), scholars have used the term "new history" since the mid-1900s but the term's resurgence in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s has challenged traditional historians' conventional methods, resulting in evolutionary changes affecting historical writing across disciplines. Proponents of new histories believe there is no way that any historical closure can ever be achieved. This unavoidable openness allows for new radical readings, re-readings, writings, and rewritings

of the past. New histories are always a subtle production, a performative exercise “*subject to some interest and aesthetic choice more than simply being ‘built’ out of data traces*” (Munslow, 2010, p. 132). As discussed by Munslow (2015), the new historical lens accepts there is no one true history or meta-narrative and, in reality, every history embeds traces of the historian who in some way imparts a bias that affects the reality of the story told. By focusing on the plurality of stories that construct a holistic account of art education, we engage meaningfully with the presumed past, a process that requires “being self-conscious about how [we] go about it—at every level of thinking and practice” (Jenkins & Munslow, 2011, p. 580).

Art educators may be well suited to produce new histories due to the creativity and aesthetic judgments needed to construct artful renderings of the past. New histories are literary constructions not bound to any one style or format. This allows substantial flexibility on the part of the art educator to appropriate images, text, video, and sound (as collected data) from historical sources and to design or craft a process of *historizing* the chosen subject. Historizing is the process through which the historian turns “the past” into a “history narrative” (Kreiswirth, 2005; Munslow, 2015). The process of *historizing* comprises three distinct parts: “(a) the locating of the evidence, (b) the imaginative inference as to the most likely meaning of that evidence, and (c) the fictive representation (authoring) of (a) and (b) as a history” (Munslow, 2015, p. 33). Such an understanding of *historizing* is vital to creating synergy between art education and historical research. There are two key features of “*historizing*”: the exercise of the historian’s imagination and the deployment of his or her powers of narrative creation. In my own experience of constructing a new institutional history of a high school art department, I developed a hybrid artistic framework incorporating visual aesthetic qualities, contemporary historiographic theory, and the literary stories of teachers and students.

Authoring a New History: Central Technical School

My new history is a layered collection of 11 historical stories that trace 122 years of art education at CTS in Toronto, Canada. The art department at CTS, where I have been a specialized art instructor for the past 12 years, houses the only specialized high school and adult programs in the country for both applied and fine art instruction. Through educational stories, I have gained an insider’s perspective on the legacy of this institution (Garnet, 2015a). My research is not a definitive account of art education at CTS, but rather a reflexive history, self-consciously produced: selected, ordered, and interpreted to make sense of the voluminous data I collected. The process of constructing a transgenerational new history through the stories of CTS students, teachers, and administrators revealed a complex network of relationships with, in, and through the institution (Garnet, 2014) (see Figure 1). The number—and the complexity—of potential stories that emerged in this construction required consideration of many layers of connectivity across broad time periods. Working initially with interviews as my starting point, I elected to write the collection of stories from a perspective of living history; that is, I moved from the present to the past through the emplotment of individuals, shifting between generational boundaries to demonstrate how *historizing* operates by interweaving everyday voices—voices that are echoed in other stories found in archival documents and material culture, in addition to interviews.

From these primary sources, I mapped the branches of relationships that diverged and converged through the stories of individual participants, allowing the stories to unfold organically in response to our conversations. Through such responses, which ranged from explicit recollections to passing observations of people or events, I began to create a new history for the art department at CTS, conceptually based on the polyptych form. This

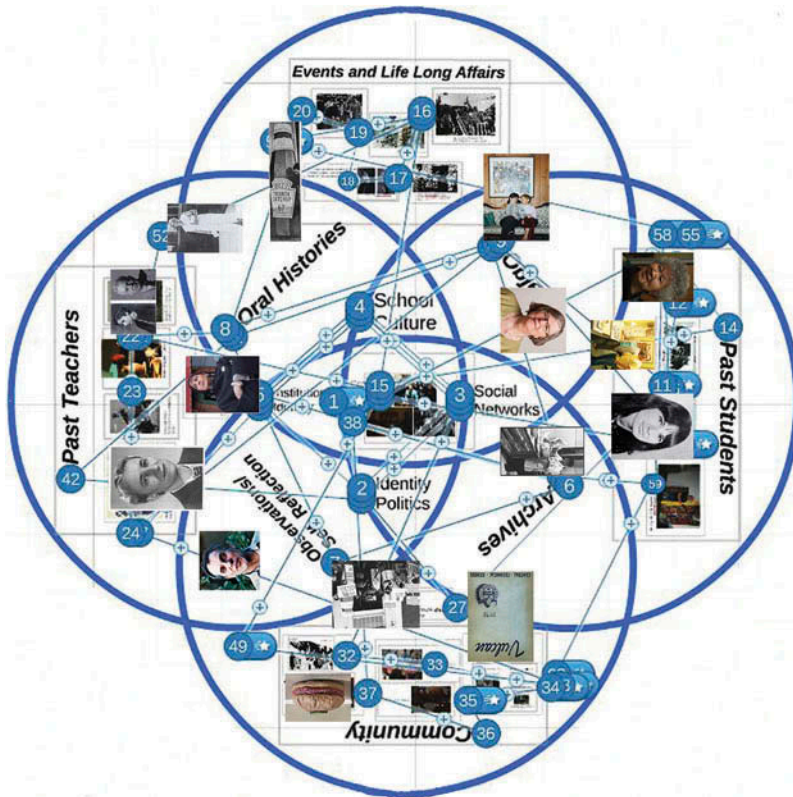


Figure 1. Polyptych framework of the institutional history of the Central Technical School art department.

polyptych framework is a prototype of a theoretical model that allows stories to function in their own permeable spheres and also to push into one another, merge and overlap. The dynamic nature of the form allows the reader to enter the stories from any location and from various perspectives, thus aligning the polyptych model with much of the theory on literary writing and new histories.

In piecing together stories throughout my 4-year study, I narrowed my selection to what I considered to be key characters and/or events that had informed a given generation; in transmitting them, I embraced a decentering of

authority, highlighting diverse forms, styles, and narrative modes for maximum variation. Over the course of their retelling, I sought to identify links that wove into art education networks from the past, present, and possible future. To render these stories as a transgenerational history, I took up openings within stories to embed secondary or tertiary stories before circling back to the primary narratives, emphasizing linkages rather than linearity as a means to construct historical narratives. Through this approach, I was drawn to reassess and reevaluate my initial sense of the discourses and knowledges of art education histories and to

question “official” accounts of the school and how they worked to limit the stories being told. In this regard, it was the participants in my research—the former students and teachers—who helped to shape my understanding of the CTS art department during the early 20th century.

Norma’s Contribution

Before I began formally collecting oral histories, I was contacted by the CTS art department head, who knew of my research and informed me that an elderly woman had recently come into the school with her daughter, both of them alumni who were interested in discussing their experiences at CTS. This chance encounter presented one of the most vital learning opportunities for me as a researcher, not only in terms of articulating my research methodology, but in showcasing the value of one-to-one conversation with a subject who represents living history. Norma Duggan (nee Lewis) attended CTS from 1924 to 1927 as a high school student and was 99 years old at the time of our interview. Through Norma’s perspective as a middle-class Anglo-

Canadian girl, I gained access to a generation that is nearly a century on, a remarkably rare opportunity afforded in any historical research. On November 14, 2012, I was invited to Norma’s home for a double interview with Norma and her daughter, Mary Elizabeth Duggan, who took the adult specialized art program from 1970 to 1973. Together this mother–daughter legacy not only demonstrated a remarkable crossing of generations, but also foreshadowed the dynamic nature of the rich discoveries that I would make in the course of this study.

Norma’s oral history was most significant because her stories created a link to the roots of the art department, something that no other participant could provide. Norma’s stories and her artworks, which operate as material culture in her story (see [Figure 2](#)), connected her instructors in the 1920s to the initial vision and curriculum of the art department at the turn of the 20th century (Garnet, 2015b). The majority of art instructors who taught at the predecessor of CTS, known as the Toronto Technical School (TTS) between 1892 and 1914 enjoyed strong reputations in Toronto,



Figure 2. An image of Norma B. Lewis (Duggan) (left) and her painting *Historic House* (right). The back label shows that the artwork was accepted into the Ontario Society of Artists Annual Exhibition, 1933. Reprinted with kind permission of Mary Elizabeth Duggan.

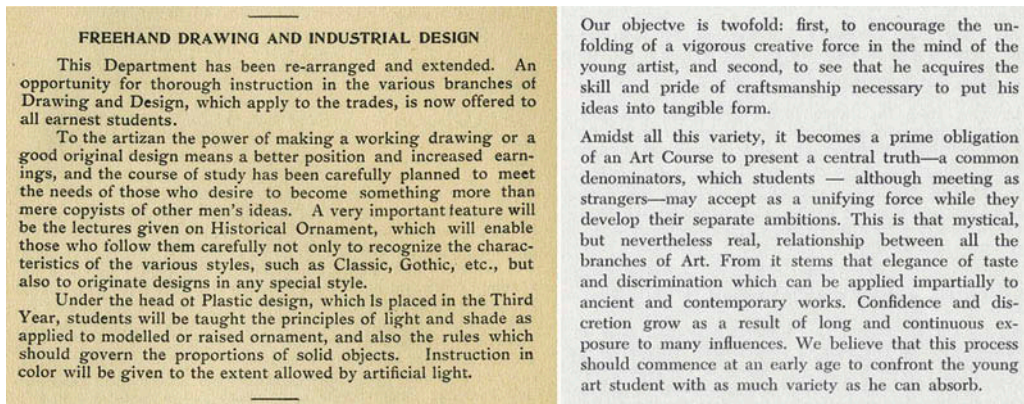


Figure 3. Segments of student handbooks from the 1890s (left) and the 1920s (right) showing the synergistic philosophical orientations of industrial and fine art practice.

as can be seen in the various public monuments and private commissions completed during their teaching careers (Ardiel, 1994; Baker, 1997). The number of industrial art and design courses being taught at TTS steadily grew, resulting in the formation of a focused department of industrial art and design. The shift in focus from industrial art and design to include the fine arts came in waves, first with the amalgamation of the technical and public high school boards in 1904, second with the hiring of Principal A. C. McKay in 1911, and third with the amalgamation of TTS into Central Technical School in 1915.

The examination of key artist-teachers from Norma's high school experience through archival documents and Norma's oral history mapped the establishment of two solid realms of art education—technical and fine art—and, at the same time, two competing forces in the curriculum that would continue to shape the identity of the institution for the next century. Curriculum materials from 1898 to the 1920s (see Figure 3) clearly show that the philosophical influences and artistic styles promoted by the CTS art department were carried from the first to the second generation of the program.

The curriculum documents speak to the importance of skill and craftsmanship, to the need for historical knowledge of art to create original work, and to a greater purpose of training a creative workforce. Both a program-oriented approach, influenced by the South Kensington system, and a more student-centered or humanistic approach, focusing on experience (Dewey, 1938/2008) are at play.

My research contributes to the literature on the nature of the personal and professional knowledge (Bachar & Glaubman, 2006; Page, 2012) that accumulates as a result of recording the "local detail and everyday life of teaching" (Ayers & Schubert, 1992, p. v) and the storied lives of students, teachers, and administrators (Corcoran, 2007; Daichendt, 2011; Garnet, 2016b). Taking as its starting point a description of the classroom as "an arena of things ignored, things obscured, and things suppressed" (Siegesmund, 2014, p. 9), my new history is crafted in the spaces between stories. Invoking the word craft follows other metaphors of "weaving" (Carter, 2004, p. 2) and "braiding" (Sullivan, 2005, p. 103)¹ that point to a creative complexity necessary in the historical work I undertake as part of arts-based educational research. Stories offer a flexible

and improvisatory arts-based architecture, spawning “performative outcomes” that weave together with more traditional qualitative research methods to create hybrid methodologies that embrace the particular and the local (Rolling, 2014, p. 167). In a polyptych framework, the stories themselves may provide beginnings, middles, and endings, but they also form strands that weave through every story, creating a conductivity and the potential for readers to construct their own meanings as they discover the relations between them. This construction “privileges the outlier” (Siegesmund, 2014, p. 2), moving from the perspective of distance to closeness. Moving in close reveals the multiplicity of stories possible and confirms that the new histories produced are not end points, but rather hinges allowing stories to connect to each other and leaving openings for future stories to be written.

The relational arts-based nature of my work permitted the relationships and comradery of past students and teachers to grow through transgenerational threads, forming the beginning of an expanding oral tapestry that captures the unique perspectives and personalities, and the passions and feelings shared by my participants, often through material objects. In this way, my study introduced a kind of knowledge and a lens through which to view the change forces affecting the art department in the early days of CTS. This arts-based orientation enabled my personal connections to form part of the research (Barone & Eisner, 2012), adding to the already rich repository of information, motivating me to produce a history that neither blindly valorizes nor objectifies the art institution at CTS, but instead respects the rich diversity within its history and attempts to present the contextualized memories and lives of those connected to it.

New History and Art Education

Scholarly histories of art education are a fairly recent phenomenon (Chalmers, 2004, p.

12), and Stankiewicz (personal communication, April 6, 2015) notes only a “committed cadre of art educators maintains historical research as a primary interest.” The opportunity for expansion is virtually limitless, and I believe that knowledge of new histories as an innovative historical practice could entice art educators from diverse specialties to take up this form of artful construction. New histories open avenues for unrepresented or marginalized groups to articulate their experiences. Histories from the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer+ (LGBTQ+) community, the disability community, First Nation communities around the world, as well as under-recognized specialties like community art education and art therapy, could all incorporate methods of oral history, conduct interventions in archives, and perform presentations as versions of a constructed past. My research utilizes the textual and visual, but the act of historicizing can be accomplished through a variety of forms, providing art educators a way to experiment and discover new conceptions of what history could look like.

The process of historicizing that I envision does not in any way diminish the importance or ethics of constructing the past. Authors of new histories can and must reflect on their historical evidence and then demonstrate their findings through the literary aesthetics of historicizing. Creating contemporary art education history requires layering subjectivities and thinking outside singular understandings in order to move this specialized subfield toward useful ways of knowing (Soucy, 1990). Recent interest in art education history has resulted in both special issue publications (Daichendt, Funk, Holt, & Kantawala, 2013; this issue) and the well-attended *Brushes with History* conference at Columbia University’s Teachers College in 2015. The value of bringing forward new and diverse histories is highlighted through the stories of struggle, achievement, and

innovation in the field of art education. Art education scholar Doug Blandy (2008) aptly explains our histories are “fluid, cyclical, permeable, transformative, unpredictable, and antiauthoritarian” (p. 4), made from “complex networks of relationships” (p. 5). For a new generation of scholars, new his-

tories have begun to bring forward meaningful stories and inventive ways of showing and telling our pasts. I look forward with optimism and anticipate a growing community of creative thinkers that will promote artful ways to reimagine the legacy of art education.

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ENDNOTE

- ¹ Sullivan's use of *braided* is informed by Murray Gell-Man's (1994) conception of *plectics*. Plectics is a broad transdisciplinary subject covering aspects of simplicity and complexity as well as the properties of complex adaptive systems, including composite complex adaptive systems consisting of many adaptive agents.