

IDEAS AND INSPIRATION: LOW AND HIGH TECHNOLOGY FOR TEACHING CONTEMPORARY CANADIAN ART

by

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Saskatchewan education began developing support material for their arts education curriculum because of its teaching philosophy which is resource based learning and the fact that most Saskatchewan students and teachers lack access to the most contemporary of Canadian art practice. The slide set and the CD-ROM allow rural students and teachers to see and to develop an understanding of the most advanced art practice that would be exhibited in urban environments. Because of that need, the curriculum writers in partnership with the university, the art community and a new multi-media firm, they began to develop *ideas and inspiration: Contemporary Canadian Art*, the low tech and hi tech versions, for both high school students and their teachers.

Partnering

Partnerships were formed between various provincial government departments, the federal government, educators, the University of Regina, arts organizations, new media developers and the visual artists themselves. These partnerships were formed to access funding and expertise for the development of a high quality Canadian-produced art education material. [Saskatchewan's positive experience in this regard may easily be modelled. In addition to '*ideas and inspiration*', Saskatchewan has also developed a comprehensive curriculum resources available to all educators via the Internet. This is called the Evergreen Curriculum, it will be discussed at the end of this paper.]

Low tech: The slide set

The first stage of the support material was the creation of a slide set of 100 works of art with a teaching guide. That material was later augmented and incorporated into an interactive CD-ROM. In both low and high tech versions of *ideas and inspiration* the Canadian art works were discussed, analysed, and contextualized in the teachers' guide. Keeping in mind the philosophy of Saskatchewan education's arts education philosophy, which like many curriculum in North America, is structured with three components.

Creative/productive	to make art
Cultural/historical	to contextualize art
Critical/responsive	to develop discourse on art

Curating and developing the teaching guide

The low tech support material was first developed as a slide package of 100 works of art and text material that put the image into the context of the artist and the ideas s/he was trying to present in their work. It was developed in partnership with the University of Regina's department of visual arts', art historian, roger lee. His role was much like that of a curator of an exhibition. His selection tried to attain a cross section of Canadian art, reflecting the various approaches to contemporary art practice and discourse in Canada.. There needed to be a balance of the number of male/female artists and very importantly the inclusion of the art voices of the minorities and marginalized ethnic communities was important because it reflects the changed demographics of Saskatchewan and Canada.

Once the works of art were chosen, the researchers, art history and visual arts students at the university and the curriculum writers used a post modernist approach to open up the discourse for each work of art. Research into the life of the artist, an artist statement and other contextual information relevant to the work of art was included in the teachers' guide. Questions were also included for the teacher and the student so that group discussion on the art works could be undertaken by the student and lead by the teacher. [The art works included was often 'on the edge' of art practice

and difficult for the teacher to present and discuss, if support material was not included.] The goal of the slide set was to encourage a discourse on art that was contextual, so that the student would realise that art was about ideas.

Post Modernist Art Discourses

There were very few images, save one, that was purely formalist/modernist in approach. Most art teachers are well acquainted with the analysis of a work of art for its elements of art and the principles of design; that is the quality of line, shape, mass, texture, balance, composition, etc. Post modernist art discourse, which focuses on personal and social issues, art as ideas, was the basis of the textual information for the slide set and the CD-ROM. Contemporary post modernist critical theories and approaches to art discourse such as feminism, marxism, questions of identity, mediation, [structuralism] social issues, be they political, post colonial, environmental, media and representation were included in the slide set's teacher guide, in both English and French. While the CD-ROM packaged the art images into five general themes or galleries, such as social issue, environment, ways of seeing, identity, innovations, it should be understood that those thematic galleries attempt to take into account post modernism's ability to look at a work of art from many different points of view. The themes and ideas incorporated in the works of art were chosen because of the special interest they presented to young people.

Identity

The theme of identity is crucial for teenagers who are in the process of developing their own identity. This is comparable to the whole movement of artists, in this post-colonialist period, who are trying to find their own voice. Identity can be seen as to how individual artists construct or deconstruct their self images. In the work of Suzy Lake, she plays with her own face and body image. Sexuality/gender is another issue confronting young people that was illustrated and discussed in which a gay male artist, Patrick Traer, hires female craft persons to embroider and to communicate his empathy for those suffering with aids. In order that ethnic minorities, the marginalized voices are heard, work by one of the largest ethnic minorities on the prairies, Ukrainians, were included. Canada's native [Indian] population is undergoing a renaissance and artists such as Bob Boyer present how their work can be both Indian and modernist while Ed Poitras shows clearly how the Indian people has been displaced by the modern 'host' European society and how they are displacing the natural environment. The Chinese Canadian, Ed Pien, plays with Chinese stereotypes such as the queue, chopsticks, folding screen and rejects them by throwing away crumpled paper with his name written in Chinese.

Environment/place

As an artist's work is determined by the place s/he works in, environmental/place is a significant component in both the low and hi tech support packages. Canadian artists present and represent their knowledge of place and their concern for ecology and the environment. Be it the nationalist fervor of the work of Joyce Wieland or the picturesque view of the Maritimes by Alex Colville, the various urban and rural aspects of Canada are identified and depicted. The environment has changed with the arrival of the European host society and Giselle Amantea has nostalgic memories of the Canadian Rockies in her installation. In the installation/sculpture work by Liz Magor, nature is controlled, while Eleanor Bond painting tries to humanise an old industrial site.

Applied art/design

Art is not defined only in the 'high art' tradition of painting, sculpture and prints. *Ideas and inspiration* takes on a non-elitist/open point of view of art and include the applied and functional arts and crafts. Paul Mathieu's ceramic table setting and Cornelia Biegler's clothing design for the young are juxtaposed to the grandiose architecture of the Canadian embassy in Washington, designed by Arthur Erickson, with its open spaces and barely defined borders.

Social issues [feminism]

Art speaks not only of the artist's self but also his/her involvement with the society/culture around him/her. Art is about ideas. All art ultimately becomes political. The 60's image of women is objectified in the work of sculptor, Michael Snow, while feminist artist, Elizabeth Mackenzie is empowering in her essentialist view of woman as reproductive and nurturer. Donegan Cummins questions and satirises society's stereotype of female beauty in the fashion industry. Is media's definition of beauty mired in the notions of the svelte figure and the ageism?

Marxism

A marxist discussion entails the understanding of power and class struggle that can be national, economic and/or personal. Jamelie Hassan, an Arab-Canadian artist, questions the military power of the United States and the status of Arabic culture in North America during the Iraqi war. A middle class rural church group organise a fowl supper in the photograph of Francis Robson and the affluent can be seen in Alfred Sung's haut-couture designs for the wealthy upper class taste indicated by the clothing and the setting.

Advanced art practice

Advanced art practice, innovation in contemporary art practice, is 'on the edge' art that is often unavailable, let alone understood by teacher and students alike. The slide set and CD-ROM invite the viewer to interact with the most avant-garde art work to further the students' and teachers' knowledge of contemporary art practice. Eric Cameron poses the question and the idea that art is process. Art is obsessive when he paints the same Danish pastry every day for 2 years, as an act of art practice.

Contemporary installation art utilises real space, involves the audience, is often site specific and changes with each venue. By combining that with new technology, Krzysztof Wodiczko's image projection on grand central army plaza, Brooklyn, reiterates the power and militarism inherent in American and Russian society. By placing the art [projection] outside of the gallery context, art is visible to everyone and thereby denies the power of the gallery or museum as a taste-maker.

The advent of new technology has affected contemporary art practice and one can see how Ruth Chambers juxtaposes ancient technology, fired clay balls, with new technology, video projection, thereby questioning the significance of present day technology.

Performance art is represented in *ideas and inspiration* with Sharon Alward's real time actions. While she may use some of the conventions of theatre, her performance is taken from a visual artist point of view in which bovine fluids are used in a ritualistic performance, suggesting pollution, purification and death with an added reference to aids. This art is tough and aggressive and would not normally be seen in the average art classroom. But technology has allowed the performance to come alive in the virtual gallery that is the interactive CD-ROM. We reiterate again that the quality of CD-ROM is not only the hi-technology of the software but most importantly, the content in the CD-ROM. The success of any interactive CD-ROM teaching/support material depends primarily on the quality of the content.

High tech: CD-ROM development

The development cost of the CD-ROM was approximately \$250,000 which was made possible because of funding partners between Saskatchewan education and other provincial government department, federal funding from industry Canada, the University of Regina, and Tyndal Stone media, a Regina based new multi-media production house. It was from the content of the slide set that the later interactive CD-ROM was developed.

CD-ROM additions

In creating the CD-ROM, the one hundred artists' work was augmented by 80 audio tracks of the artists speaking of the development of their work. 165 Secondary images were added to further contextualise the art works, 35 video clips of the artists discussing their education and their careers and 6 virtual realities spaces allow the art to be viewed in five thematic galleries along with a virtual reality tour of an artist's studio.

The galleries

The works of art were organised thematically into five galleries: the ways of seeing gallery, the social issues gallery, the innovations gallery, the identity gallery and the environment gallery. Some works of art appear in more than one gallery because a work of art can be viewed in a post modernist sense from many different points of view. As the user enters a gallery, student guides appear and briefly explain the gallery's theme and content. A security guard acts as the help icon.

Using the CD-ROM

The disc has two operating modes: reference and interactive. The reference mode contains all of the information listed above organised into the five galleries. In addition, it has a list of all artists represented on the disc, so that the student can go directly to the work of a particular artist for specific information. The reference mode is intended to act as a resource for students doing research on Canadian art and artists. It can be useful to individual students, or students working in pairs or small groups. The interactive mode contains the same information, accessed through the five galleries. Within each gallery are interactive exercises or activities which, encourage students to think critically about the content and cultural/historical contexts of the works. The interactive mode is intended to act as a learning tool for students working on their own or in small groups. When students select interactive mode, they enter their names and their instructor's code. The instructor's code is to be established by the teacher and is included so that each different teacher using the disc can access his or her students' work saved to disc or to the hard drive.

With its reference and interactive modes the CD-ROM can be used in two ways: as a source of information to be accessed for research projects and presentations, and as an interactive tool for learning about Canadian art and artists through assigned activities or informal exploration.

Contexts for understanding the works of art

The CD-ROM contains images of contemporary Canadian works of art, artists' biographies, information on the works, video and audio interviews with artists. It also contains background information to help students understand the works (information on "installations", for example), and interactive exercises or activities that students can do on their own or under the direction of a teacher. Audio instructions, narration and text on the disc are in both French and English. Works of art are sometimes difficult to understand when the viewer does not have the necessary background information. This CD-ROM resource provides users with such information. Each work has a listing of relevant "contexts," from which the user can select. The particular contexts provided on this disc were chosen for their relevance to the art works included. They are as follows: popular culture, women in art, aboriginal art, sculptural traditions, installations, abstraction, social contexts, art in the public environment, performance art, realisms, documentation, formal concerns, technology, printmaking, place, symbolism, conceptual art, historical references, humour in art, everyday objects in art and design. In addition to this information, users are provided with some key words that they can use to locate further information in other resources such as library reference books or periodicals.

Using the disc in a variety of settings

This resource is designed for use at the high school level but is not grade specific and can be used in a variety of settings, including multi-grade classrooms. Many classrooms will have access to one or two computer terminals with CD-ROM capability, in which case students should use the resource in learning centre types of activities, working on their own time or at scheduled intervals. In schools or classrooms with several computers and copies of *ideas and inspiration*, students can work simultaneously (alone or in small groups) under the teacher's guidance. In either case, the program is designed to encourage student exploration and interest in contemporary visual arts.

Activities in the interactive mode

There are three sets of activities for users working in the interactive mode: compare and contrast, create an exhibition and time capsule. Each requires users to select works of art from the particular gallery in which they are working, and then answer questions about the choice of works and the works themselves. For each activity, there are several sets of questions which, appear randomly, so the user can complete the activity several times with different art works, and not get the same questions. Both slide set and CD-ROM have open ended questions allowing for individual student input. Responses are recorded either on the computer hard-drive or disc so that teacher can review/mark the students participation and understanding. There are no single right answers per say. This encourages divergent thinking and a wide range of possible answer if based on the actual work of art. Students must research and look to his/her understanding of the world around them in order to contextualize the art objects presented.

After thoughts

Low tech: the slide set allows access to excellent high quality art images but students and teachers view the works from a limited context, i.e. one cannot hear the artists talk about their work and the limited contextual references. Etc. The unsophisticated technology of a slide projector and screen is not an exciting format for our students who are relatively technologically advanced. The teacher and students, however, are required to react on a very human interpersonal level. The slide sets are relatively easy to update by adding pages and slides to the existing slide set and its binder. This is important if all teaching materials are to remain current.

Hi tech: this technology and software allows students to obtain a good understanding of the contemporary Canadian art material when there may not be an art specialist in the school or community. As independent learning is an important aspect of Saskatchewan's secondary level arts education programs, students are encouraged to undertake independent exploration in order to develop their own ideas and learn at their own pace. The cost of the hardware technology can be a challenge for some schools because the CD-ROM software requires a CD-player, 16 megs of ram and a good monitor. [Most schools in Saskatchewan and Canada are now catching up to this minimum requirement.] Updating the material can be expensive because a new CD-ROM would require redevelopment and distribution. Because of budget restrictions, the art images could not be scanned to the best resolution possible. The gallery format may not be the best site for all the images because recent contemporary/experimental/installational art is not exhibited in galleries. Time base art such as performances could have included a video clip so students can grasp the temporal aspects of an actual performance.

Conclusion

Both these low and high tech versions of *ideas and inspiration* has been a positive step towards facilitating access, empathy and understanding of contemporary Canadian art images and information for both students and teachers in Saskatchewan and Canada.. The success of both the slide set and the interactive CD-ROM is determined not only by the technology used, but primarily the quality of their content.

Post script.

Saskatchewan education recently developed a internet-based 'evergreen curriculum and resources.' It is Saskatchewan education's vision for an electronically-delivered, continuously-renewed and interactive curriculum. More than sixty Saskatchewan curriculum guides can be accessed through Saskatchewan education's web-site at <http://www.sasked.gov.sk.ca/docs/evergrn.html>.

These online curricula are "evergreen" in that they can be enhanced without the complications and expense associated with printing and mailing documents. The evergreen curriculum embodies the concept of continuous renewal, making a curriculum that is current, relevant, and evolving. The evergreen curriculum can be instantly accessed by teachers. New curricula are being added to the web-site, until eventually all curricula are on-line. In addition to curriculum guides, the evergreen site includes bibliographies, policies, on-line activities, discussion groups for different subject areas, links between and within curriculum guides, and links directly from pages within the curriculum guides to teacher-developed units, projects and resources, and World Wide Web sites.

To see how this unique slide kit and CD-ROM resource has been incorporated into high school arts education programs, visit the Saskatchewan education internet web site and search the evergreen curriculum using the phrase "ideas and inspiration" at <http://www.sasked.gov.sk.ca/docs/evsearch.html>.

To learn more about Saskatchewan's arts education program visit the homepage at http://www.sasked.gov.sk.ca/curr_inst/artsted/homepage.htm