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## An interview with Olivia Gude about connecting school and community arts practice

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### ABSTRACT

Olivia Gude has a long and distinguished career as both a public artist and an art educator. She is currently the Angela Gregory Paterakis Professor and Chair of Art Education at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC), where she works with graduate and undergraduate students to prepare for working as artist educators in school and community settings. Her scholarly work includes a number of articles and book chapters about art education and community art. Prof. Gude has worked as a community public artist for many years and has created over 30 large-scale mural and mosaic projects, working with intergenerational groups, teens, elders, and children. I interviewed Prof. Gude at the SAIC building in downtown Chicago to discuss how her school, university, and community art engagement as well as her work with the National Coalition for Core Arts Standards, might offer suggestions for transforming arts education for the twenty-first century and provide authentic connections between school and community. Prof. Gude discusses important enduring understandings and big ideas from the new Visual Arts National Core Arts Standards, the Spiral Workshop youth art and research project she created while at University of Illinois at Chicago, and how her experience as a community artist informs her work with students in classroom settings.

### KEYWORDS

Arts assessment; community arts; national standards; public art

### Introduction

Olivia Gude has a long and distinguished career as both a public artist and an art educator. She is currently the Angela Gregory Paterakis Professor and Chair of Art Education at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC), where she works with graduate and undergraduate students to prepare for working as artist educators in school and community settings.

Prior to SAIC, she served as a Professor in the School of Art and History at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC). Her scholarly work includes a number of articles and book chapters about art education and community art. Her articles have appeared in *Art Education*; *Journal of Korean Society for Education through Art*; *Studies in Art Education*; and *Teaching Tolerance Magazine*. She has contributed chapters to many books including *Art, Culture, and Ethnicity*; *Art and Social Justice Education*; *Debates in Art and Design Education*; *From Our Voices: About LGBT Issues*; and *Transforming City Schools Through Art*. She served as one of 10 writers on the National Coalition for Core Arts Standards (NCCAS) Visual Art Writing Team.

Prof. Gude has worked as a community public artist for many years and has created over 30 large-scale mural and mosaic projects, working with intergenerational groups,

teens, elders, and children. Her public art commissions include the Chicago Transit Authority Central Park Station, Harold Washington Library, American Creates for the Millennium (Kentucky), S.P.A.R.C. Los Angeles, and Northern Illinois University. Prof. Gude holds a Bachelor of Arts degree from Webster College in St. Louis and a Master of Fine Arts degree from the University of Chicago.

I interviewed Prof. Gude at the SAIC building in downtown Chicago to discuss how her school, university, and community art engagement as well as her work with the National Coalition for Core Arts Standards might offer suggestions for transforming arts education for the twenty-first century and provide authentic connections between school and community. Prof. Gude discusses important enduring understandings and big ideas from the new Visual Arts National Core Arts Standards, the Spiral Workshop youth art and research project she created while at UIC, and how her experience as a community artist informs her work with students in classroom settings.

### Interview

*You were one of the writers of the new National Core Arts Standards in Visual Arts. Can you talk about your work*

*in that and whether there were any specific concepts or ideas that you advocated for in that process?*

I was honored to be one of the 10 people on the writing team for the new visual arts standards. It's hard to say "this is what I advocated for" because it was such a strong, collaborative process. After much discussion and debate we came to some understandings as to what really big ideas ought to be infused throughout the visual arts standards. One of the things that I think is very important is that the visual arts standards begin with the sentence "Creativity and innovative thinking are essential life skills that can be developed." This affirms the importance of a curriculum that includes playfulness, that allows for creative ideation, that allows creativity to emerge individually and collaboratively. These twenty-first-century skills are central to the new standards.

Another really big idea that is infused throughout the standards is the emphasis on meaningful student choice over merely demonstrating knowledge of various forms and techniques. The new standards clarify what may have been a misunderstanding brought about by earlier standards that were sometimes read as suggesting that a preliminary base of technique had to be developed *before* students could make meaningful creative work. The new standards place equal emphasis on both experimentation *and* skill building. Time in art classes is not simply about mastering a pre-existing technique; it's about experimenting to figure out what ways of making will further each student's unique artistic investigation.

I'm most proud of the Visual Arts Enduring Understanding: "Artists and designers balance safety and experimentation, freedom and responsibility." This is the most essential enduring understanding for students in a democratic society. These standards recognize that safety is not just a matter of a timeless and universal way of "doing it right"; it's a matter of responsibly understanding *why* we're committed to "doing it right." What are the ecological, social, and personal implications of our choices? The second part of the sentence asks students to consider the balance of freedom and responsibility. The standards affirm the importance of artistic freedom as the foundation of a democratic society. They also recognize that we must always teach our students to take responsibility for how their creative contributions affect the world.

*You wrote an article in 2007 entitled "Principles of Possibility" that explored how the field might re-conceptualize twenty-first-century art curriculum. In a way, that article introduced some of the concepts seen in the new visual arts standards. Can you talk about the thought process behind that article?*

I was thinking about the experience of a student, of a child in an art class. I was thinking about what happens when that student leaves school and goes home or goes out into the community. I imagined a conversation between a student and a parent and asked myself "When discussing art class, would we want a student to say 'Art is *about* line, shape, and color; art is *about* balance.'" No. What do we want students to say? Can big ideas about the arts and life be at the core of arts education?

I'd want a student to say things such as "I made an amazing artwork today where I told a story about the time I went on a picnic with Grandma when I was really little." Or maybe the student will make a piece about something that they heard about in the news that was compelling or confusing and they wanted to talk about it. I asked myself, "What are the sorts of things we would hope that our students would go to the school cafeteria and talk about with their peers or would go out into the community and talk about with others?" That's how the idea of Principles of Possibility emerged. The Principles of Possibility include such ideas as *Playing, Forming Self, Exploring Community Themes, Encountering Others, Deconstructing Culture, Reconstructing Social Spaces, and Not Knowing*.

I quickly realized these are not shockingly new ideas for arts education. If you look through the literature of arts education, educators have proposed (and are proposing) all sorts of important, life affirming aspects of an arts education. Yet somehow or another much arts education has gotten overly focused on recalled knowledge and technical skills, rather than beginning with the "big picture" ideas. What is the purpose of this collective endeavor? How does art fit into our lives?

How do we ensure that art in schools contains the sorts of experiences, the sorts of understandings, the sorts of connections that we truly believe are what art provides for people in their lives? Let's make *these things* the center of the curriculum. Those are the principles on which we should design curriculum. There is one thing that is unfortunate about the new arts standards—the organization mirrors that of the first national arts standards—big ideas about art and society are at the end. In the new arts standards the Artistic Processes are organized as *Create, Perform/Present/Produce, Respond, Connect*. *Connect* should be at the beginning. I hope that in the next, next generation standards we use the structure to emphasize the role of the arts infused in peoples' lives.

*Two of the principles from the article—Playing and Not Knowing—are too often missing from arts education experiences in the U.S. today. Can you talk about what you see as the value of those principles?*

Materials-based and imaginative play, being able to engage artmaking without pre-conception, is deeply ingrained in the history and practice of our field. However, as standards-based movements developed in art education over the last 20-plus years, educators weren't always prepared to adequately answer the question, "What is it that you are teaching? What are the students learning?" One of the easiest ways to prove and assess outcomes is to have very specific curricular objectives, rather than providing environments that are rich enough that play, creative dispositions, and unexpected outcomes can unfold. Sadly, against overwhelming evidence from research about early childhood and childhood development, against the practices of countries with the highest rates of educational attainments, and against the example of how top-notch art schools support the emergence of creative careers, sometimes teachers, administrators, and schools still feel pressured to prove that they are successful by focusing on limited bits of arts knowledge and skill, rather than more process-oriented and holistic conceptions of learning in and through the arts.

It was so sad to hear some of the national standards writers explain that while they knew that playing was essential to the cognitive, creative, and social development of students, they worried that they couldn't "sell" arts education to administrators or school boards if they mentioned play. Arts educators need to represent to the field of education that, as Maria Montessori affirmed, playing isn't being off-task and silly; playing is the *work* of children. *Playing* is the serious endeavor of students pursuing their own creative research agendas.

I use *Not Knowing* in the article as a reminder that there are always gaps between reality and representation. There are many things that are not quite as certain as we may have once thought they were. When we learn a language, including pictorial, symbolic structures, we are always learning an oversimplification of the world; we learn categories into which we fit the world, even if that fit is forced and uncomfortable. Through the arts we can be reminded that reality is always more complex, more heterogeneous, more complicated, more elusive than can be summed up or contained within a simple one-to-one symbolic system.

Good community arts practice involves participants in investigating the nuances, complexities, and contradictions of their life experiences. Such artistic practices challenge people to take seriously the potential of *not knowing*, of exploring the possibilities inherent in reviewing and re-presenting themselves when viewed through various lenses. Participants in community arts projects learn to value the diverse perspectives of diverse communities. Imagine teens using culture to investigate questions such as "What does it mean to be a 'man' today?" or "What does it mean to be a 'woman'?" One of

the outcomes of a community arts investigation of such an important life question is beginning with lived experience and then recognizing that the experiences themselves as well as our understanding of those experiences are culturally constructed and thus can be reconstructed individually and as a group. Understanding the world through the arts reminds us that instead of being quick to categorize and judge, we can embrace fluid and complex ways of knowing.

*What do you see as the relationship between formal skill development and concepts like student experimentation or student choice?*

In a recent article called "The Project of Art Education," I explored the problem of how arts curriculum can incorporate specific projects, learning tasks, skills, and objectives while teaching and valuing authentic artistic investigation, experimentation, and student choice. Much K-12 arts education in various disciplines has modeled itself on traditional, often skill-based professional artistic training. In this worldview, a person couldn't be an artist without what was then conceived of as "foundational training." Some educators still try to enforce this paradigm, reciting the old canard, "You have to know the rules before you break them," effectively setting themselves up as the gatekeepers to beginning true, experimental creative practice. This raises the important question—how should school art curriculum differ from professional or "pre-professional" arts education when 99% of the students are not planning to be a particular type of professional artist?

In today's heterogeneous and evolving art worlds, it's more useful to conceive of arts education (for everyday citizens and future professionals) as introducing students to a wide range of traditional and emerging artistic practices and to how each artist selects from past knowledge and practices as well as the contemporary scene to form unique ways of making or performing. The new Visual Arts Standards use the term "art-making approaches." Students choose, assemble, or invent approaches that will work best to investigate the sorts of things they are interested in.

It's our job to expand students' aesthetic capacities for engaging and making. We educators also need to be attentive to what students see as engaging cultural activities and artifacts (whether or not the students or we consider them to be art), including such (to us) oddities as fan video reenactments of classic movie scenes or augmented reality apps and games. The most interesting artistic practices of the early twenty-first century have yet to be invented. The ideal endpoint of all arts education is that students think of themselves as cultural

creators—whether that’s the process of actually making an artwork or it’s being part of an extended community of people who experience, process, and interpret artworks and think together about the meaning such work contributes to their lives and the lives of their communities.

*What do you see as the challenges arts educators face in incorporating the new arts standards into an educational setting?*

It’s difficult for me to speak to all the arts disciplines, because each discipline faces unique challenges. For instance, often schools don’t currently have certified dance teachers and there are still comparatively few programs that are certifying people to teach dance. Theater, while common at the high school level, is often not available for elementary and middle school students. Music and visual arts are the most established arts disciplines in schools. Music has a very specific tradition that both empowers and weighs on the field, especially in this age of digital technology and digital music making.

There are many visual art teachers in American schools, but it’s important to remember that most elementary school visual arts instruction is delivered by classroom teachers. The new standards are very popular with visual arts teachers despite the intense, sometimes contentious writing process. I say this based on the survey data from the field compiled during the writing and review process and from speaking with teachers at arts education conferences and school districts throughout the country. Teachers are excited and are readily basing curriculum on the new standards even before official adoption/adaptation in their home states. The language of the old (original) national Visual Arts standards often wasn’t sufficiently connected to the way artists and educators actually talked about making and interpreting art. Now beginning with big understandings about the processes of making art from ideation to experimentation to presentation and interpretation syncs with how teachers think about building curriculum.

Visual arts teachers have most often been the educators teaching content also covered in the new area of Media Arts standards so that is another layer of complexity for teachers and schools as they develop programs and curriculum that address these new possibilities for twenty-first-century makers. It’s important that these powerful new technologies are explored for creative possibilities in service to kids and communities and not merely as job skills for commercial purposes.

One criticism people sometimes make about the new standards is that they are *too* process oriented and don’t identify particular curricular content, for example,

mandating that everyone must study Impressionist art or a particular genre of theater or dance. However, I believe this lack of content specificity was a wise choice. The standards’ affirmation of the importance of the arts in individual and collective life suggests that each area—state, city, district, or school, can participate in identifying important aspects of local culture that ought to be incorporated into the curriculum. The accessibility and clarity of the new standards create a potential space, a space of potential for teachers, students, and communities. Art classrooms become places where culture is not merely taught; it is created. Together we investigate the world through artmaking; we deconstruct the culture as it now is by thinking about how it came to be, and then we reconstruct culture; we construct spaces in which we can collaboratively and individually make and share meaningful culture. This is an important contribution to democratic life.

*What do you see as the role of assessment in arts education?*

In an effort to prove that arts education is purposive and rigorous there’s perhaps been an overemphasis in recent years on evaluating outcomes based on students’ artworks or performances. While it’s vitally important that we identify a range of significant learning objectives for arts education—aesthetic, conceptual, skill-based, experiential, and behavioral objectives—not recognizing the limitations of product-based arts assessment can lead to narrowing arts curriculum and arts experiences for participants. It’s not our job to assess student artwork; it’s our job to assess students’ learning, students’ developing capacities for creative experimentation, and students’ capacities for making meaningful connections to their lives through art experiences. Assuming that we can write air-tight rubrics that objectively rate the quality of student work (or student experience) is counter to the open-ended thinking that we hope to stimulate in arts education.

It’s my sense that people sometimes confuse the need for program assessment with the necessity for judging the artwork of students. Consider an arts program for early elementary children. Of course, we want to look carefully at whether an in-school or out-of-school program is successfully teaching ways of approaching artmaking, using a variety of indicators. However, to share these ratings/rankings of students’ performances with children can be impinging and harmful to creativity in ways that will have life-long negative consequences.

When the Spiral Workshop, a Saturday art program for teens in Chicago area communities, had been operating for over 10 years, someone asked me how we assessed

students' artwork. I was truly surprised by this question. I suppose our major assessment of the quality of the program was that teenagers were willing to get out of bed on cold Saturday mornings and come to the university, not for credit, but for the experience of engaging with ideas and making art. Students and faculty discussed what we were making and why; we gave the students lots of feedback, but we did not do this under the paradigm of judgment. We were making culture together—the students and the teachers. We thought of the youth artists as partners, as collaborators in using art to explore ideas and issues that were important to us all.

If art education is really *art* education and not education about some other thing that is not really art, we have to be open to standing back from demanding predetermined techniques and forms. This is sometimes difficult because these are forms and techniques that we as artist educators have perhaps invested our lives in developing, but as contemporary artist educators who are truly educating artists we have to be willing to say, “The technique has to evolve to meet the challenges of the form and content that are emerging.”

*How did your work in art assessment lead to the “Skeptical Assessment Society,” and how has that group engaged art educators in rethinking the purpose and practice of student assessment?*

The Skeptical Assessment Society began as an ironic observation about the necessity of being skeptical of the assumption that we can achieve objective measurements of subjective aesthetic experiences. Art “happens” in human subjects; without people’s subjectivity there is no art. Although there might be a great deal of agreement among arts professionals about what quality looks like or sounds like, this is based on highly educated shared *subjective* perceptions. Then in 2013 I was asked to hold a Skeptical Assessment Society [SAS] event for the Art Education department at Virginia Commonwealth University and since then have led a number of other SAS meetings, including for the Art Educators of Iowa, the Missouri Art Education Association, and the Singapore Ministry of Education.

Skeptical Assessment Society events can be thought of as social practice art experiences that use the methods of community arts to investigate how arts assessment is affecting the lives of teachers and students. Participants commit themselves to listening to each other’s stories, suspending judgment, and recognizing the paradoxes, problems, and possibilities of arts assessment within a community of art educators trying to imagine fresh frameworks for high quality twenty-first-century art education. Many excellent art teachers are stressed out and

grieving because they are experiencing the emphasis on arts assessment as shutting down creativity, spontaneity, and joy in the art classroom. I want to be clear here, I’m not saying that this is the inevitable response to assessing arts learning, but I do think that it’s irresponsible for us not to listen to teachers’ accounts of how current conceptions of arts assessment are affecting them.

We conclude Skeptical Assessment Society meetings by convening a Strategic Assessment Association in which art educators talk about the most important arts learning that they see happening in their classrooms and then together imagine how this learning might be “captured as data” for assessment purposes. I always suggest that as part of their re-imagining curriculum and related assessments, teachers look carefully at the Model Cornerstone Assessments developed for the National Core Arts Standards. Because the arts standards are process-oriented, the national Model Cornerstone Assessments include many examples of criteria and rubrics that focus on process, rather than end products.

*Can you talk more about your work at the University of Illinois at Chicago with Spiral Workshop and how that connects to the cultures of contemporary art and community art?*

I went to the University of Illinois at Chicago in 1995 to refocus my work as a community artist into the field of visual arts education in schools. I wanted to develop community-based arts education practices that would affect the day-to-day lives of students. I became a public school teacher when I was 22 years old, so I had lots of experience teaching in schools and then later worked as a teaching artist doing public art residencies in schools—urban, suburban, and rural. Working as a teacher educator, I became familiar with the visual arts programs at many more public schools and I was shocked by how little some of the big ideas in contemporary art and culture were represented in public school art curriculum. So much of the curriculum was focused on the vocabulary of elements and principles, traditional academic drawing and painting, and a limited number of canonical “great artists.” Important ideas about the diverse aesthetics of various communities, artists as contributors to the cultural conversations of the times, or emerging “postmodern principles” of making and understanding culture were absent from core curriculum.

UIC’s Spiral Workshop provided arts experiences for urban youth as well as a curriculum research project that developed new approaches to visual art and media education, opening up possibilities for students to make meaning by introducing unfamiliar artmaking approaches, building skills, and perhaps most importantly supporting

students in identifying content that wanted to explore and then learning the sorts of “metaphorical moves” that artists make when developing their practice or projects.

Spiral Workshop was organized in groups that combined a theme and an artmaking approach. The themes were sort of “quirky,” because as an artist designing collaborative projects, I’d learned that if you begin with a generic theme such as “ecology” or even something closer to the participants’ lives such as “bullying,” it’s hard to enter into artistic investigation in a complicated way because in a sense the answer is already built into the topic as stated. “Don’t destroy the environment. Bullying is bad.”

Themes were carefully (if playfully or provocatively) chosen to be both specific and open-ended. One of my favorite groups was “Drawing Dirty Pictures,” an exploration of “post-neat art.” Student artists embraced messy making and investigated how the notion of what is “dirty” is always within the context of a particular community and culture. Many students were stunned to learn such facts as that in many places in the world using your left hand to eat food is considered very dirty; this led to reflecting on their own cultural values and expectations—giving students the space to question or confirm these. Many fascinating artworks were created that explored how culture shapes our ideas of what is taboo and what is acceptable and how this might shift thinking on big questions about such things as “dirty energy” and sustainability. The paths of student investigations are unpredictable. A group called “Liminality: Alternative Practices” made art exploring the changing spaces of contemporary life. A powerful theme that emerged in their discussions and artworks was the dilemma of being “in-between” as children developing into adults, and often simultaneously as first (or second) generation immigrants negotiating the demands of family, local community, and becoming engaged citizens with global perspectives.

The “Painting: So Cute and Creepy” group explored the minor aesthetic concept of “cuteness.” Too often schools have tended to either exclude popular visual culture entirely or perhaps to surrender to it too completely as in the plethora of “cute” things such as stickers, display items, holiday decorations available at teacher stores. The students brought in cute things, categorized their relative degree of cuteness, and developed criteria lists to explain their ranking system. They made great paintings of cute objects and then made bigger and bigger paintings, asking when does “cute” become “creepy”? We introduced an autobiographical assignment—how does cute function in your life? Students made artworks about longing to be cute, acting cute so as not to get in trouble or to get what you want. One of the teen artists

made a work about seeing TV commercials to raise money for darling starving African children; she asked, “Do you have to be cute for people to care if you’re starving?” That’s a profound question! There is real social and educational value in students being able to discuss how conceptual orientations to everyday things shape their lives. Many Common Core standards focus on the ability to interpret texts, using a broad definition of texts. Through Spiral-type entwined visual and verbal curriculum students learn to “read” the world in more complex ways.

*Your artistic career has alternated between and intertwined public and community art with art education in schools. Can you talk about ways that arts educators can bridge the gap between the classroom and the community?*

As engaged artist teachers we must open ourselves to the lives of our students and their communities. There is power and potential in sharing stories. When you hear someone else’s story in all its complexity and its depth, you feel connected to that person, and the way in which you interact with that person (or group) will be different. The arts in schools can have a very important role in helping students to share experiences through nuances of sight, sound, movement, words.

On a very basic and profound level, the philosophy of community arts practice is that everybody’s experiences count. This can become central to the meaning of arts education in schools. Every form of artmaking can generate and achieve its own criteria of excellence.

Most arts teachers would say that they believe that the arts should empower students to tell stories about their lives, but if you survey established curriculum, there’s still relatively little opportunity for students to be able to do that. However, this is changing as school curriculum includes wider ranges of artistic practice, stepping away from old-school canonical works and methods. (For example, who could have imagined in the early eighties that hip hop dance would become a form taught in schools?) Arts teachers and teaching artists are often at the forefront of introducing local cultural forms into school curriculum. They develop projects through which students connect social and personal issues and create opportunities for “school art” to be shared with the wider community.

Back in the nineties, many arts education advocacy groups argued that to protect arts education in schools (especially through difficult financial times) it was important that school boards, administrators, and parents be convinced that art was a “real” and rigorous subject by promoting standardized testing or rigidly rubric-based assessments of art products. We still see and hear the legacy of

these (not research-based) public relations campaigns today. I'd like to close with arguing that what really preserves art in the school curriculum is the perception by parents, administrators, school boards, and community members that the arts are vital to students' sense of self-worth, ability to communicate, and capacities to empathize with others. When school arts activities dissolve boundaries between the school and surrounding communities and when the subjects and themes of school art are relevant to contemporary life the arts will survive and thrive in schools and communities.

My hope is that the attentiveness to the importance of process in the Next Generation Core Arts Standards will encourage experimentation and meaning making beyond pre-established conceptions of skill and quality. The new art standards go beyond describing "art as expression" to conceiving of "art as investigation." This is not to say that we don't express what we feel through the arts, but to also emphasize that the arts are a form of inquiry. Artistic practices allow us to investigate and reshape our understanding of our lives and times, so you are not just expressing what you already know; you're generating new ways of knowing, generating new ways of feeling. The arts thus generate new ways of being—both individually and together.

### Final thoughts

While Prof. Gude offers a number of very interesting and salient points about the role of the arts in a twenty-first-century education, her thoughts about the

balance between formal skill development, student choice, and assessment are perhaps the most intriguing. As measures of teacher effectiveness begin to utilize benchmarks based on assessing student progress through demonstrable skills and other indicators, there has been a call for more rigorous, research-based arts curricula. As Prof. Gude notes, however, engaged and rigorous artmaking is still possible without reducing the process to a checklist of concepts to be learned or skills to be developed, and her ideas about connecting a theme with an artmaking practice might be one way to allow authentic arts education to flourish in an era of teacher evaluation. Working toward understanding a particular form or technique while allowing space for that form to evolve is crucial to the artistic process. Engaging the community in which our students live, asking about what interests our students, and working to understand their lives are all important in the development of student artists. While an external push from legislators and school officials may place pressure on teachers in the arts to make curricular changes, many arts educators, including Prof. Gude, are working to reshape arts education from within, through the standards, and through connecting the arts classroom to the community in which it resides.

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