A thematic approach to art can provide a basis for integrating subjects in the school curriculum and, when an important topic such as ‘peace’ is the chosen theme, it can serve to link people in communities and nations around the world. This article is about conceptions of peace and the role of art education in empowering young people to become responsible citizens of the world. Through artworks and written statements gathered by the Commonwealth Association of Museums from children and youth in fifteen countries, this collection of work provides a window on local issues and also expresses the hopes of youth for all of humanity.
Creating Art and Constructing Knowledge

Creating art is an important means of learning and teaching. When children create an artwork, they’re not simply representing what they know; they select and organize information in order to formulate ideas. They construct knowledge as they compose their work and as they do so, they come to new understandings or make meaning. And because a work of art may be viewed by others and interpreted, it serves as a means to communicate – to share those ideas with peers or even an international audience.

New advances in cognitive research are leading us away from regarding learning as situated within discrete disciplines and more towards connecting knowledge in an infinite number of ways that cross discipline boundaries. In the 1980s and 90s, the dominant movement within the field of art education was Discipline Based Art Education (DBAE). Supported by the Getty Center for Education in the Arts (1985) and with Elliot Eisner as its leading proponent, the influence of this U.S. centered movement was felt around the world. With DBAE, four disciplines identified: studio production (creating art), aesthetics, art history, and art criticism. Students were encouraged to engage in research, emulating the distinct methods used by artists, philosophers, critics, and historians.

Today that emphasis is shifting. In his book Art and cognition: Integrating the visual arts in the curriculum, Efland (2002) argues that the arts make heavy demands on the intellect and that “encounters in and with the arts can widen the powers of understanding in growing minds” (p.2). He calls for a re-visioning of art education that overcomes what he calls ‘compartmentalization’ so that students can approach the study of art in ways that establish links with all the areas of knowledge to which it is related. He proposes a model – integration of knowledge through the arts (p.165) – in which the arts stand as the central element with four broad areas surrounding it. Through arrows pointing to and from each of the four, Efland indicates that learning must investigate the many possible links the arts have with the physical sciences on one side and the humanities on the other, and the numerous links with history above and the social sciences below. Arthur Efland is part of a growing movement among scholars and educators seeking to counter the modernist-inspired idea that art is entirely unique in the cognitive and affective demands it makes and in its mode of coding and communicating its ideas.
The modernist phrase ‘art for art’s sake’ implied that the role of artists was to investigate the nature of art with little interest for its value to society or for the education of the young. It was left to others – art teachers, designers, and commercial artists – to explain and find applications for the advances made. Efland argues that art’s rightful place in schools is in the center, not clinging to the margins of the curriculum. In the broader social context, we might add that art’s rightful place in society is also in the center. Artists should be socially engaged rather than outsiders cloistered in their studios, and their work should be viewed in public spaces, not solely available in elite galleries or museums. We must come to recognize that art is a form of cultural production – one that is relevant to peoples lives here and now, just as it is across cultures and has been throughout history.

The study of art can cultivate the full capacities of mind, making connections that facilitate meaning making in education. One of the most effective methods of crossing disciplinary boundaries in education is to select a theme or topic for investigation. This is a strategy recommended by art educators such as Marshall (2005) who argues that issues-based art education supports the contexts of knowledge and the many meaningful conceptual connections that students can make when they take on such an enterprise. Numerous curriculum guides and pre-service textbooks for teachers have been written to offer guidance on how that might be accomplished. Naested’s text (1998) is one example aimed at Canadian elementary and middle school populations.

A thematic approach not only supports the hoped-for connections children will make between subjects in the curriculum, it also sets the conditions for children to discover relationships between ideas that a teacher might not have thought to make. Beyond these academic connections, a thematic approach encourages the forging of links among students as they bring their particular perspectives and interests to bear on the social construction of knowledge. And finally, it offers the possibility of connections around the world. Today, more than ever, instant and inexpensive communication can occur through school websites and virtual galleries. Art is able to speak across language barriers and travel instantly around the world. What follows is a description of a collection of art that has been gathered by the Commonwealth Association of Museums and is currently being shown abroad – a collection that was exhibited in January 2007 at the University of Victoria. The theme or topic is one of relevance to all of us – the theme of peace. The website is www.maltwood.uvic.ca/cam/programs/what_peace_means.html

Building Peace

Knowledge is power. When students are asked to respond to the prompt, “What does peace mean to me?” they begin to understand there isn’t a single, correct answer to the question. Teachers ask each student to prepare a thoughtful and meaningful response based on their own ideas and experiences. As they do so, students come to see that their ideas have value and their opinions matter to others, including teachers and a wider audience that may view their work. Implicit in this approach to art is a sense of child honoring. When adults ask youths to offer their opinions in a genuine climate of acceptance, young people tend to develop self-esteem and even gain a greater sense of self-efficacy – they begin to realize they may actually become agents for positive change.

At risk of stating the obvious, children are the future. The kind of world they inherit from their parents and the kind of world they provide for their children depends a great deal on our current actions and the degree to which we adequately prepare them for the responsibilities that lie ahead. Sowing the seeds of peace through engaging them in thoughts and actions about peace is one of the most important missions we will undertake as educators. This is building peace.
Children’s Art from the Commonwealth Association of Museums

The University of Victoria supports a gallery of children’s art as a resource for students preparing to enter the teaching profession. Located within the Faculty of Education in the A wing of the MacLaurin building, our A. Wilfrid Johns Gallery is dedicated to showing work created by children and youth. The gallery provides an opportunity for pre-service teachers to study the artistic production and artistic development of young people. Teachers welcome it as a place that will show work created by their students. Accompanying their children to openings, parents are generally quite pleased to view their children’s art in a setting like this – framed and presented in a way that is more professional than push pins and construction paper on a bulletin board in the classroom or the corridors of the school. In recent years the gallery has seen a number of exhibitions from countries as distant as the Philippines and Afghanistan. In January 2007 the exhibition of children’s art from Commonwealth countries was made available to the A. Wilfrid Johns Gallery. An extraordinary collection and one that fit our mandate very well, we accepted the work and mounted an exhibition.

The Commonwealth Association of Museums (CAM) is a professional association and an international non-profit non-governmental organization working towards the betterment of museums and their societies, in the Commonwealth family of nations and globally. Among their programs and activities is a goal to involve children and young people, not only as audience for museums but also as participants through workshops and projects. The timing of this initiative is understandable, it was not driven by a particular world crisis but more by the reflection that often comes with the end of a decade or the end of a century, taking stock of all that has happened and setting goals for the future. In 1999, CAM developed a theme program on Museums, Peace, Democracy, and Governance in the 21st Century. The theme of ‘peace’ was selected to pursue the Association’s focus on children and youth. An art contest was organized and generated artistic responses from 15 countries. From the over 300 entries, 35 were selected for a traveling exhibition.

Students were not asked to offer up commonly held definitions of peace but rather to personalize their responses. They were asked to answer the question: What does peace mean to me? Through their responses, they described/defined peace and something more – they presented their ideas for achieving peace, preserving it, and celebrating it. Museum curators and teachers that chose to participate gathered a collection of artwork from young people ranging in age from 9 to 17 years. Most provided written statements to explain or extend their ideas about peace. This international initiative a) links children around the globe b) reveals their thinking about the meaning of peace and methods of achieving it, and c) empowers young people to believe they can make a contribution to peace, both locally and globally.

Understanding Children’s Art

Knowledge and Experience

Comparing the artworks of young children and older youths, there are marked differences, not only in conceptions of peace but also the ways their ideas are represented. Varied conceptions have much to do with age, gender, and their knowledge and experience with the world. Young children can be highly imaginative but when drawing upon personal experience, they are likely to represent ‘peace’ in their immediate social world of family, friendships, and school.

Any attempt to analyze the work must also take into account the ways in which children and youth construct their understandings of the world graphically. Having less experience in representing their ideas visually, young children tend to draw fewer figures and to present them
in a more schematic or symbolic way. Older youths tend to make more sophisticated use of the techniques of realism, drawing on perception to render figures that are more anatomically correct, in poses that are more varied and using such devices as perspective and modeling of form in light and shadow. Greater complexity of compositions is another common feature of adolescent art.

Knowledge and experience are linked to age and also to gender socialization, but there are other factors involved: access to mass media, rural versus urban experiences, and many other differences may be included. Where there are personal concerns at the local level such as family discord, problems at school or in the community, high crime rates, or even guerilla actions, these topics tend to find their way into the artwork. The content of the art may speak directly to the problem as a need for peace or ‘peace’ may be expressed in the absence of the difficulty. What may appear to be a very ordinary, even mundane subject may, actually represent a longing for ‘normalcy’ or a celebration of the return of normalcy – being able to go about one’s daily activities without fear or privation. A drawing of a bountiful harvest, for example, might come from a region where children have known drought or food shortages.

Where young people enjoy a life that is largely free of difficulties affecting them personally, they tend to react to wider global conditions and concerns such as international terrorism, or concerns about the environment. When ‘peace’ is generalized to a broad concept, young people are more likely to use universal symbols in their art such as the globe, clasping hands, or a dove.

**Communicating with an Audience**

When teachers introduced the CAM project to their classes they no doubt told them some works would be selected for an international exhibition. The possibility of ‘speaking’ to such a wide audience could change the character of the work from a personal response to a more public one – perhaps taking the form of a poster to persuade viewers around the world. There may be other concessions to audience as well, especially with older youths who may be aware that their experiences or cultural practices might not be understood outside the local context or the symbolism might not be fully grasped and would require explanation through the written statement. Children often combine image and text to more fully present an idea, having access to two modes of communication, each one complementing or completing the other. Speech balloons, for example, are used to advance a narrative where imagery alone might be insufficient to convey what is going on. Found text in the form of newspaper headings ties the work to current events, adding a sense of urgency. This kind of work looks ‘serious and grown up.’

**Finding Themes within the Collection**

For the researcher, the collection of art is data. After familiarizing oneself with the context in which the work was created and gathered, the next step in analysis involves examining the individual works – getting to know them and coming to understand the ideas represented. Then, a wider view must be gained, one that involves noticing similarities and differences in the themes or ideas advanced in the works, and grouping them in ways that seem natural. An important principle is that those groupings should not be predetermined but should be suggested by the works themselves. Researchers independently investigating the same collection might identify different categories, just as critics could develop differing interpretations of a contemporary work of art. The categories below represent one approach to organizing the work to better understand its range of ideas and to appreciate its significance. The following is a discussion of eight examples from the collection covering a range of views on four perspectives: a) the need for peace, b) changing course, c) living in harmony, and d) united in friendship and solidarity.
Four Points of View

The Need for Peace

9/11 in New York City

September 11, 2001 was a day that shocked the world. Al-Qaeda terrorists hijacked four airliners; two were deliberately flown into the twin towers of the World Trade Center, causing them to burn and collapse, leaving approximately 3000 civilians dead. That event occurred shortly before the Commonwealth Association of Museums project was introduced and it clearly made a powerful impression on a number of the children and youths as they thought about the need for peace.

Eleven-year-old James Hood of Northern Ireland used silvery reflective wrapping paper, cut into pieces and glued together as a kind of mosaic to resemble the windows of the office towers (figure 1). A strategically placed aircraft, turned to a top view so its profile will be unmistakable, appears to either fly past the buildings or circle back to make collide with one of the towers. The uncertainty that this presentation offers draws us into making our own conclusions. Will history be revisited or will Janes re-write it with a happier ending? The title “Make peace, not war, seems to offer hope that disaster can yet be averted.

The Face and Outcome of Terror

For months following the al-Qaeda attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the face of Osama Bin Laden appeared in newspapers, news magazines, and on television news broadcasts. The instigator of the attacks has become well known. For some, though not all, his is the face of evil. For thirteen-year-old Christopher Sharkey, Bin Laden is described by newspaper headlines: killers, extremist, danger, fear, living hell, and so forth (figure 2). One newspaper caption colored in red seems to sum it up with the word ‘disaster.’ Newspaper collage seems a very effective medium to convey such a message – it makes its announcements with blunt objectivity and in a very public way. This is a gravely serious message.

Changing Course

Renouncing Violence

In his drawing, Jeremiah Kaonga of Malawi refers to a different type of warfare, one that is far more common. In many countries there are guerilla armies, some employing mercenaries to achieve independence or to overthrow a government. These conflicts often receive little international attention and many continue for decades. Shown here is a soldier in combat.
fatigues raising his hands (figure 3). Falling from one hand is a sidearm and from the other, a grenade. At his feet are explosives and other weaponry. The war is ended. In his statement, Jeremiah wrote of the cost of war in the tragic slaughter of so many innocent civilians. “People, let us reason together.” It would appear this soldier has resolved to lay down his arms, choosing instead, the path of peace.

Admitting to Wrong Choices
Gift Nkanda Blantyre, also from Malawi, has offered a very personal response to the project. It is a self-portrait of the teenager standing outside the school, having been expelled for what he describes as his arrogant behaviour and poor judgement in smoking Indian hemp (figure 4). Speech balloons in what is likely Swahili, add to the narrative aspect of the work. He came to see the error of his ways, “My future has been doomed. I wonder if I will succeed in my life as a useful citizen.” Sober reflection and admission of wrongdoing is the beginning of changing course. His drawing seems to take full responsibility for his actions and offers a genuine expression of regret; the fact that the school accepted Gift’s drawing as an entry to the competition may suggest he was reinstated as a student.

Living in Harmony
Family Togetherness
The graphite pencil drawing by Adebeyo Alaba from Nigeria shows a family of six sharing a long couch (figure 5). Each member of the family is reading, being read to, or has just set down their book on a coffee table in front of them. Reading is largely a solitary activity but this idealized family appreciates one another's company; a solitary activity has become a social event. A bird, perhaps a dove, seems to hover as though it were a source of light, shining its favour upon the scene. The sixteen-year-old has taken enormous care in developing all of the details of this challenging artwork – a possible indication of the importance the topic has for him.
A healthy society

From the family living room to a vision of the smoothly functioning nation as a whole, the artwork by Gilbert Quansah-Hayford, a seventeen-year-old from Ghana presents ‘peace’ from a very broad perspective (figure 6). “When a country is at peace it will develop its agricultural land, factories will be in process, and schools will produce intellectuals to plan the country’s development.” Freed from disruptions, a peaceful nation is able to effectively manage its affairs. In a progressive and harmonious society each sector functions in an interdependent manner to the benefit of all its citizens. Gilbert’s artwork is divided into quadrants balanced by diagonal imagery, buildings balanced by people; there is a factory in the upper left and school in the lower right, and intellectuals in a meeting in the lower left and a farmer tending crops in the upper right. The concept of an institutional balance is supported by compositional balance.

United in friendship and solidarity

Friendship at school

One of the simplest representations of peace is warm physical contact – holding hands. Niahm Downey from Northern Ireland has indicated in her written statement that peace means a lot to her. “Peace is helping people at school and also being kind to all my friends and people in the school and visitors to our school...because if no one was kind, our country would be a place where no one would want to live.” The nine-year-old has drawn what may be a double self-portrait – a boy and girl on the right extend their arms to clasp hands while a smaller, distant figure stands alone on the left (figure 7). This insert bears the words, “What peace means to me.” Appearing above is likely the girl prior to stepping forward to make a new friend. Children often show more than one moment in time within a single drawing. The banner overhead reads “Peace.” All available space surrounding the figures is filled with flowers and with a decorative spiral motif – decoration that celebrates friendship.
Friendship around the World
Standing side-by-side and facing the world together suggests a common purpose. Asha Juma Ramadha Abdalla provides a fitting conclusion to the collection. The fourteen-year-old from Zanzibar has provided an international view of peace. Against the backdrop of a world map, seven people, perhaps children, clasp hands in a row that extends the full width of the drawing (figure 8). Each child has a heart drawn on his or her chest and within that is the name of a continent – even Antarctica is included. The banner declares, “We need peace and solidarity in the world.” The artwork calls for likeminded people to unite for the cause of peace. Though our planet seems vast, in this drawing the task of joining together to achieve that happy outcome would appear to be well within the realm of possibility.

Figure 8. We need peace and solidarity in the world artwork by Asha Juma Ramadha Abdalla
Engaging Young People in Thinking about Peace

While reading the written statements supplied by students to accompany their drawings, I was struck by the insights these young people have on the topic of peace. The phrase “Think globally; act locally” seems to capture the essence of one child’s statement. Ten-year-old Roison O’Neil from Northern Ireland writes,

*Peace begins in the home. Sometimes it’s hard to cooperate with your brothers and sisters (I should know, I’ve got three brothers and two sisters). Talking things over can make a big difference. Peace in school, peace in our community, peace in our country, peace in our world, is very important. Talking can solve most of our problems.*

Conclusions

When we ask young people to think about peace and to express their ideas about it, we are guiding them to believe they can make a contribution – bettering their relationships with others, helping to resolve disputes within their community, and even influencing world events in a positive way. Education has failed in its purpose if it leads to passive acceptance of a status quo in need of change. And to identify problems without considering constructive actions is no better; this leads to defeatism and even cynicism. Education must lead students to hope – not a false sense of hope but one that is grounded in awareness of their potential and their responsibility to others. There are many shining examples of individuals that have worked tirelessly to the betterment of humankind. Children should aspire to be those kinds of people. Asking them to imagine peace – where it is needed and how it is achieved – is a positive and rewarding step. It is in this spirit that the Commonwealth Association of Museums undertook this initiative; sharing that vision were a great many teachers and students more than happy to get on board. For all who participated, thank you for sharing your ideas and your hopes for peace.

References


