



# AN INVITATION TO SOCIAL CHANGE:

## Fifteen Principles for Teaching Art

By: Carrie Nordlund, Peg Speirs & Marilyn Stewart

Thirty years after its completion, *The Dinner Party* found a permanent home at the Brooklyn Museum in the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art (see Figure 1). At the request of artist Judy Chicago, we—Kutztown University colleagues Carrie Nordlund, Peg Speirs, and Marilyn Stewart—developed a curriculum guide for educators to include this significant artwork in K-12 programs.

Chicago's hope was that by engaging in serious investigation of the artwork, students would develop a consciousness about gender, along with a deep understanding of women's

history, including the obstacles women faced as they struggled to participate fully in society. After the artist approached Marilyn Stewart to write a curriculum and she, in turn, put together our team, we decided that we would invite others to join the project. Focusing especially on K-12 teachers, we hosted an Invitation to *The Dinner Party* Summer Institute at Kutztown University in 2007. Our invitation to the participants was to investigate *The Dinner Party* and, in the spirit of its creation, assist afterwards in the development of curricular strategies for exploring the artwork in K-12 classrooms.

Given our own backgrounds and orientations, we knew that our one-week institute would need to exemplify feminist pedagogy while modeling exemplary methods for interpreting complex artworks such as *The Dinner Party*. Our planning process drew upon our deeply embedded orientations to feminism and social justice, as well as our beliefs regarding the importance of

figure 1  
*The Dinner Party*, 1975-79  
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from *Through the Flower*.

understanding artworks as situated within multiple and overlapping contexts. In this article we introduce these orientations and beliefs in the form of 15 principles that guided the planning and implementation of our summer institute program.

Within feminist pedagogy, what we choose to learn about and how we engage with course content bring awareness to the issues and oppressions surrounding women and other underrepresented groups. The ultimate goal is for social change. Toward that end, we felt strongly that future generations of women and men needed to know about *The Dinner Party* and women's historical contributions to Western civilization. Social change, however, depends further upon an understanding of *The Dinner Party* within its own social, political, ideological, historical and art historical contexts. A deep investigation of the contexts surrounding the artwork reveals how its creation was necessary in order to address the erasure of the achievements of women from history. *The Dinner Party* is a catalyst for questions about social equity then as well as now. Understanding this potential of *The Dinner Party* was paramount in the selection of the enduring idea that would anchor our institute planning: knowing our history helps us understand our present and plan for our future.

Completed in 1979, *The Dinner Party* is an icon of feminist art and honors 1,038 women in history. Thirty-nine women are represented by place settings on a triangular table, a symbol of equality. These women are commemorated with intricately embroidered table runners and china-painted plates with central motifs symbolic of the woman honored. Another 999 names of mythical and historical women of achievement are inscribed on the tiles in the floor on which the table rests. These women also are portrayed symbolically in the hand-colored photo-and-text collages comprising the Heritage Panels. The installation also includes six woven banners incorporating triangular, floral, and abstracted butterfly motifs. These hang in procession and greet visitors to *The Dinner Party*. The installation took more than 5 years to complete and required the help of over 400 women and men, mostly volunteers.<sup>1</sup>

### 15 Principles for Teaching About Complex Artworks

Our 15 principles guided the Invitation to *The Dinner Party* Summer Institute and played a central role in the later development of *The Dinner Party* Curriculum. The principles provided us with a theoretical framework for developing the curriculum, now published at [throughtheflower.org](http://throughtheflower.org).

Like many complex works of art, *The Dinner Party* often is considered for K-12 curriculum one of two ways, either simplistically where meaning is ignored or misunderstood, or

worse, dismissed altogether as unteachable. Guided by the 15 principles, our approach to *The Dinner Party* involved a deep investigation of the artwork so that its many layers of meaning would be revealed and understood as too significant to ignore. Essentially, these principles reflect feminist pedagogy as well as model the time and commitment it takes to really study or engage with one or more artworks. We believe that our 15 principles, based on our ideas about art, curriculum, and pedagogy, represent solid teaching practice and remind us to strive for equity within classroom practices. Feminist pedagogical practice makes room for all voices and honors inclusion so that issues of difference emerge for all to recognize. Within such practice, classroom participants gain awareness of diversity and even experience tension concerning differences.

The principles are applicable for addressing any artwork, but especially artworks that are conceptually and physically complex, as is much contemporary art. Participants in our Institute employed these principles as they took what they learned into their own classroom situations. They contextualized learning by applying these principles in unique ways so as to develop curricula that met the students' interests and needs in their distinctive school settings.

In what follows, we explain each principle, describe how we employed it in the Institute, and highlight how teachers integrated or might integrate it into their own elementary, middle, or high school art curriculum. At any given time, while planning and implementing curriculum, a teacher might be guided by more than one principle.

**Start with Students.** It is important to begin a teaching assignment by assessing and getting to know the individuals within a group in order to decide how to proceed. Preliminary communications and introductory learning encounters might address the following: Who are our students? What do they know? What are their personal experiences? Our group of Institute participants came from regions across the country as well as outside the United States. Before meeting them in person, we sent questionnaires and collected data to guide us as we finalized our Institute planning. We learned, for example, the extent to which the participants were familiar with *The Dinner Party*, feminism, and feminist pedagogy. We were able to begin the week with a sense of which participants might be willing to share their experiences in teaching about women's history, gender issues, or *The Dinner Party*. When employing this principle, teachers might create ways for their students to share what they know about a topic, what they would like to know about it, and their personal experiences associated with it. Having an understanding of their students—who they are, what they know and what they care about—allows teachers to better plan for and facilitate meaningful student experiences.

**Create Community.** Believing that people learn best in a supportive, communal environment, we planned many of our early Institute activities so that participants would come to know and understand each other within professional and personal contexts. For example, we designed a pre-assignment that required participants to arrive at the Institute with a visual representation of a woman of their own choosing, selected with the same criteria employed by Judy Chicago and others when making decisions about the women featured in *The Dinner Party*. The sharing of these assignments featured prominently in the development of community as our Institute participants revealed their decision-making process and, in many cases, their personal approaches to artmaking. As the week progressed, we engaged participants in activities designed to build trust, find common goals, and learn through the exploration of differences. Seeking to emphasize that everyone has something to contribute, we dedicated much learning time to large and small group discussions with all members of the group seated in a circle. We modeled

how to facilitate discussion and learning activities that created opportunities for co-constructed involvement. Teachers interested in creating community within their teaching settings might begin with circle discussions, emphasizing the importance of all voices being heard. As students become accustomed to listening and responding to their peers in large circle discussions, they can move into smaller circle groups, with the goal of all students knowing that their ideas and experiences have value within a caring community of learners.

Teachers will find additional strategies for building community throughout the encounters and lesson suggestions at [throughtheflower.org](http://throughtheflower.org). Likewise, this website has an open forum for continuing the dialogue about the Curriculum as well as issues of feminism, gender, and diversity.

**Find Ideas.** It was paramount for the participants at the Institute to discover and construct ideas about *The Dinner Party* by spending enough time with the artwork and its various contexts. Participants reflected on, responded to, and honored ideas emerging

from investigating the art and sharing personal stories. Through sustained and focused critical inquiry about the art and its contexts that speak to the human condition, we extracted enduring ideas. These led participants to essential questions such as: Who are our predecessors? What is history? Who decides what is included and excluded from history? Why is history symbolized in art? How do we mark our place in history? How are differences transcended? What traditions do we pass on and what traditions do we disrupt? After our Institute, art teacher Tammy Taylor<sup>2</sup> returned to her K-12 classroom with curricula objectives regarding how her students could consider who writes history. In considering how one decides who is included and excluded from history, her students created persuasive letters addressed to museums and galleries urging curators to exhibit more women artists.

**Look for Metaphors.** The purpose of looking at complex works such as *The Dinner Party* “is to develop metaphors that help us understand difficult issues, not to use the works as starting points for imitation” (Gaudelius & Speirs, 2002, p. 400). Understanding metaphor as a way of seeing one thing as something else, implying a comparison, our list of relevant metaphors associated with *The Dinner Party* included the body, butterfly, altar, shrine, and table. We focused on the metaphor of table to exemplify this principle. The table figures prominently in *The Dinner Party* and can be seen as an altar, a gathering place, a ceremonial structure, and so on. We designed an activity for the Institute participants that resulted in rich discussion as they shared personal stories and memories of family interactions around tables in their homes when growing up and today. When studying a work of art, we encourage teachers to select a metaphor that can ignite discussion and help animate the ideas of the artwork in an approachable way. After our Institute, art teachers Dayna McNichol and Stephanie Spencer used the table metaphor in a matching activity to introduce *The Dinner Party* to elementary art students (see Figure 2).

**Extend the Community.** We suggest teachers consider local, regional and artworld communities for resources to enliven exploration and deepen understanding. In some cases this might mean inviting experts into the classroom, in other cases it might mean visiting experts in their own settings. For example, in our Institute we invited feminist art historian and art educator Martin

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**figure 2**  
Matching Metaphor Activity.  
Elementary students match metaphors  
with images of tables.



Rosenberg who lives and teaches in our region to present on women artists in history. Dr. Rosenberg, the author of *Gender Matters in Art Education* (2007), presented a compelling case for the inclusion of women artists in the K-12 curriculum. We also arranged a field trip to our local Allentown Art Museum where Dr. Jacqueline Atkins, Curator of Textiles, showed images and actual examples of historical textiles referenced in the runner designs at *The Dinner Party* table. As we learned the history of textiles, we became increasingly more appreciative of the extensive research Judy Chicago and her team of experts performed in order to make decisions while creating *The Dinner Party*. When teachers reach out beyond the classroom community to include local experts, they then provide opportunities for increased connections with works of art.

**Encourage Dialogue.** Dialogue does not happen automatically when studying works of art. It requires preparation in many forms and should make available multiple ways to respond to prompts and questions. We routinely gathered participants in situations with questions, activities, and prompts that would encourage dialogue among them. We required that participants keep a journal/sketchbook to record, respond, and reflect on

the day's activity or assigned readings. The pages of our custom-made spiral bound journals contained questions printed across the top of paper strong enough for artmaking, with the hopes that this would further encourage reflection and dialogue. Evening reflections in the journals prepared the participants for the next day's discussions and helped them make links between their own lives and the course material. We also reserved time throughout the day for participants to reflect and respond in their journals after activities or group discussions. After our Institute, middle school art teacher Kris Tuerk opened dialogue by having her students share artwork made by women in their families.

**Establish a Safe Place.** We established a protocol for large group discussions modeled after feminist pedagogy that cultivated a climate of respect for differences as they emerged throughout the Institute (Speirs, 1998). Following the protocol, participants developed a sense of community and trust with each other. During discussions they made links between the subject matter and their own lives or experiences. Participants refrained from making negative comments or judgments about what people said, they spoke one at a time, listened attentively, asked questions for



clarification, kept information confidential when asked to, repeated important points and added to them, and when appropriate, thanked each other for what they offered to the discussion. When teachers want to establish a safe space, they can keep a queue of names so that opportunities to speak go in order of the hand raised first. If someone tries to dominate the discussion or wishes to speak again teachers can ask the person to wait until others respond before calling on them again. When necessary, teachers should correct misunderstandings or misinformation, and ask new questions prompted by responses. Educators construct a safe space by their actions and attitudes.

**Make Room for Multiple Voices.** Learning that diverse positions co-exist around an issue may be unsettling for some people and eye-opening for others. Listening to what others have to say, even when it may be different from what we know or believe, allows us to weigh our ideas against others, compare, build better arguments, or let go of ideas with which we disagree or that we no longer need. This type of learning is vital to the survival of a truly democratic society. We designed activities to recognize issues of difference, challenge assumptions, promote decision-making, expand perceptions, and practice negotiation within groups. One activity asked participants to identify with statements about race, class, gender, and ethnicity. Participants learned that gender intersects with different social factors, thus

expanding their understandings of identity. After our Institute, Addy McKerns asked her high school students to consider the following prompt, "*If I did not let gender stereotypes play a role in my life I would definitely learn how to \_\_\_\_\_.*" After collecting and reviewing students' responses, she created experiences in which all of her students were given the opportunity to take on these other-gender tasks.

**Make Comparisons.** Students better understand the content and context of an artwork when that work is connected through subject matter, time, metaphors, themes or message to other artworks. We suggest collecting images for students to compare with the artwork being studied. Teachers can design comparison activities with additional artworks created by the artist or with artworks by other artists. Rich juxtapositions can ignite discussions and encourage deeper investigations. We encourage teachers to consider a multitude of sources on the subject of the artwork to facilitate and promote different forms of evidence for meaning making. For example, collecting critical reviews of the artwork being studied and gathering information on a particular issue addressed by the artwork. Studying an historical artwork over time can provide rich context and a range of perspectives. After our Institute, elementary art teacher Maureen Yoder taught a lesson where her students compared and contrasted *The Dinner Party* to other monumental works



figure 3  
Guide Practice. Institute participants working  
in small groups to interpret the meanings in  
specific place settings of *The Dinner Party*.

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such as The AIDS Memorial Quilt, Mount Rushmore, and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, highlighting the commemorative nature of *The Dinner Party*.

**Explore Contexts.** As we come to know an artwork through investigation of its social, political, historical, and ideological contexts, we develop deeper understanding and appreciation of its meaning and significance (Barrett, 1999). *The Dinner Party* was created at a time when dominant historical accounts of Western civilization consistently failed to recognize achievements of women, when second wave feminism sought to address this absence and other inequalities, and when feminist artists challenged established artworld history, concepts, and practices. Because we were committed to encouraging a deep, rich exploration of *The Dinner Party*, we designed activities through which participants increasingly considered the artwork in the context of feminism, feminist art, and gender roles in art history. We showed the film, *Right Out of History: The Making of Judy Chicago's The Dinner Party* (Tyson & Demetrakas, 1980), featuring the day-to-day circumstances through which the artwork was made. After our Institute, art teacher Danielle Dente helped her middle school students inform themselves through an exercise during which students separated "girl" toys from "boy" toys. Part of this learning encounter involved a discussion about how the students came to those decisions. Elementary art teacher

Andrea Horn provided her students with images of males and females who made great contributions to society. She then challenged her students to identify the people in the images. Each time the exercise was carried out, her 5th-grade students knew the males but not the females.

**Encourage Inquiry.** We took seriously the adage that the more we know, the more we want to know. As participants explored specific place settings, the history of women at the table and other components and ideas associated with *The Dinner Party*, they had many questions. As facilitators, we recognized that since investigation is the path to deep understandings, we had a crucial role in establishing situations in which questions and subsequent investigation likely would arise (Stewart & Walker, 2005). In addition to emphasizing the importance of questions, we also provided resources for continued research. As the week progressed, the number of resources placed around the room increased. Participants were given the opportunity to probe further into areas of feminism, feminist art, global feminist issues, gender issues in art and education, women's issues and achievements, and so on. Teachers should know that even though their students are highly motivated to learn, they can ask provocative questions and encourage research.

**Guide Practice.** Interpretation is the process through which we come to understand the many layers of meaning in an artwork. Because these understandings have the potential to provide insights into our own lives and the lives of others, and because these kinds of insights are what we aim for and anticipate for all who encounter artworks, it is important to become facile in constructing and communicating interpretations. Teachers sometimes falsely assume that their students automatically or intuitively know how to interpret artworks. We recognize the importance of purposefully teaching students how to gather information provided in artworks and their contexts and to imaginatively combine these data to offer answers to the question: What is this artwork *about*? (Danto, 1981). We modeled strategies for guiding practice in investigating meaning, sequencing the activities so that first, we led the whole group in an interpretive discussion about a familiar (and nonthreatening) artwork, while providing prompts on 3" x 5" cards to assist in describing the artwork, sharing contextual information, and constructing interpretations. Next, we unpacked the experience and named its various components so as to make explicit what was implicit in the process. As we moved into the second planned activity, we provided packets of materials and instructions for participants to work in small groups to interpret the meanings in specific place settings at *The Dinner Party* (see Figure 3). We reminded participants that through practice, they would become increasingly proficient in offering interpretations (Stewart & Walker, 2005). When teaching young people how to interpret artworks, teachers can articulate the process, offer guidance, and provide opportunities for students to practice their developing skills.

**Be Flexible.** When teaching, there should always be room for a change in plans. Teachers should be open to possibilities that emerge from unplanned or unanticipated events, experiences, and responses if they support the artwork being studied and the goals of the lesson. In our planning, we scheduled activities tightly because of a limited time frame and a desire to keep participants engaged and interested. We learned from our participants that they wanted time just to be with the artwork, to look and internalize, without external engagement. Suggestions such as these can enhance curricular activities and in this case, replace original plans with something better.

**Reflect.** Ongoing participant journaling both in and outside of classes was central to our reflective practice during the Institute. We cultivated an ethic of taking stock by asking ourselves: Where have we been? Where are we? Where are we going? Recurrent thoughtfulness about place, feelings, insights, ideas, and contexts allowed us to mediate sensitively through the many layers of meaning in *The Dinner Party*. We concluded that purposeful, careful contemplation is necessary when unpacking any dense work of art. Given that *The Dinner Party* poses a multitude of enduring ideas and that the Institute participants were ceaseless with their emerging discoveries and curriculum connections, we created an archive for spontaneous insights. In a private, quiet area, we provided a video camera so that participants could record emerging thoughts and happenings. This provided another medium for participants to debrief and speak to what they were thinking at the moment. Likewise, as facilitators of the Institute, we continually assessed, debriefed, and discussed daily activities in order to feel, sense, and (re) consider how the learning might go. Student reflection processes can be part of a lesson culmination when an art teacher asks reflective questions such as: "How did your research help you to better understand the woman you chose? How did your research help you to create the banner in honor of her?" (Weber, 2010, p. 14). At the end of *The Dinner Party* Institute we emphasized the importance of closure and reflection for a unit of study by celebrating dinner as tradition, reflective dialogue, and sense of community. Much like Judy Chicago and her team of helpers would meet for potluck dinners during the making of *The Dinner Party*, we shared a meal as a venue for voices to be heard and epiphanies to be performed within the dinner talk.

**Find Support.** When deciding whether or not to bring certain artworks into the curriculum, it is imperative for teachers to discuss curriculum plans with appropriate administrators and colleagues. Even if there is only one art teacher in the school, s/he should cultivate professional relationships with other teachers and a building administrator if possible, people whose opinions are valued and trusted. Educators should take the time to articulate reasons and build a case for why the artwork is important to include in the curriculum and how it can be done, and invite participation by members of the school community. Participating can help others see the work in new ways. If teachers cannot convince trusted colleagues of their plans, they should rethink them.

## Conclusion

When taking the time to unpack complex works of contemporary art, using relevant principles from the 15 described in this article, teachers and students give attention to issues raised by the work. Feminist art and feminist pedagogy both serve the ideals of social justice by giving attention to the issues and oppressions surrounding women and under-represented groups and prompting us to take action. As an icon of feminist art, *The Dinner Party* carries historical significance because it addresses the erasure of women's lives and achievements from the history of the Western world. The sustained presence of feminist art in the dialogue for social justice in art education has roots in the women's movement, which supports social and political issues as content for teaching. Feminist pedagogy offers art teachers strategies through which to facilitate learning within their own classrooms with a goal of social transformation.

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We, along with Judy Chicago, intended for the Institute participants to find their own voice through deep engagement with the content and contexts of *The Dinner Party*. As investigations about the art deepened, our Institute participants became impassioned about becoming part of the legacy of *The Dinner Party* and the re-telling of history. They have applied their understandings in diverse classroom settings and we invite you to consider their curricular models and the classroom connections available at [throughtheflower.org](http://throughtheflower.org).

Through the process of writing curriculum for *The Dinner Party* we experienced self-discovery, personal and professional growth, and an increased commitment to women's issues in contemporary society. This strengthened our role as teachers because we changed along with our students. Social change begins with oneself before it can become a collective effort.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> For more information about *The Dinner Party*, visit [throughtheflower.org](http://throughtheflower.org).
- <sup>2</sup> Permissions from Institute participants were sought and granted through informed consents. Real names of participant art teachers are used in the article to acknowledge the teachers' perspectives and contributions.

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