

## Response to Chalmers' Article

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Graeme Chalmers' *Why focus on the Common Ground?* is an entreaty for expanding perspectives in art education for the millennium to come. At the heart of this entreaty is a recommendation to return to the very core of art, namely issues in aesthetics. In Chalmers' view, "curriculum has not kept pace with changes in theory." In day-to-day arts instruction, for a variety of reasons, those overarching questions that guide inquiry into the nature of art are often neglected and in this neglect lies a detrimental irony. In focusing on the many layered curricular particulars, teachers and students slight the universals, the wholeness in arts learning. They miss what Chalmers calls the "common ground," the idea that across cultures art serves mutual functions, acting as a "powerful pervasive force helping to shape human attitudes, beliefs, values, and behaviors." In Chalmers' perspective, as well as my own, in failing to explore the ways in which art shapes human life, students miss the common humanity that is embedded within the arts.

In supporting his concept of common ground, Chalmers defines three functions that the arts have in common across cultures: perpetuating cultural values, questioning cultural values, and contributing to the general embellishment of life and environment. However, in working to understand these common functions, Chalmers warns, we must be ever aware of the culturally constructed lenses through which the functions of art are understood within a given society. In embracing cultural similarities, in focusing on common ground, we must be acutely careful to avoid spurious generalizations and oversimplifications that lead to a malconceived idea of a pervasive westernized homogeneity in the role that art plays across cultures. Moreover, Chalmers maintains, the potential for developing an awareness of the delicate line between embracing commonalities and understanding and respecting differences resides within the art curriculum, and responsibility for nurturing such awareness rests ultimately with the teacher.

Through references to the works of Dissanayake (1984), McFee (1986), Giroux (in Cornier, 1998), and his own *Celebrating Pluralism* (1996), Chalmers constructs a convincing argument for art curriculum built around the bedrock of aesthetic inquiry. In Chalmers' words, "I want teachers and students to ask *Why do we make art? How do we use art? and What is art for?*" These are the kinds of critical questions that can launch teachers and students onto a search into the nature of art, and in doing so, they may discover that despite the idiosyncratic or culture-bound differences, there exists a common core of cross-cultural functions that art manifests and serves. In encapsulating these commonalities, Chalmers draws from Dissanayake's identification of eight general and cross-cultural functions. The last of which is what both Dissanayake and Chalmers see as *mutuality*. It is the idea that art is not only a powerful means of communication, but equally, of communion. In my perspective, this is the most expansive and encompassing common ground. It is

also the most fertile, raising the seeds of weighty questions for future consideration in the field of art education. In conceiving of art as a means of attaining a deep feeling of receptivity, unity, and ultimately of human understanding, can we as art educators grasp the complexities inherent in teaching toward this conception? Do we ourselves understand and practice multilogical reasoning? (See Paul, 1990; Stout, 1997) Can we deal rationally and fairly with conflicting points of view? Can we think in terms of the relative, accepting contexts of all kinds as frameworks for reason and fairness? Do we have the willingness and the ability to enter sympathetically into the thoughts and feelings of others? Do we strive toward empathic awareness? Is there within us the desire to revise, rethink, and change? Above all, do we have the capacity to teach these traits to a future of students?

## References

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