

## Cleansing the Palette / NAEA News December 2009

**It's a rainy Sunday on a late October day in our nation's Capitol. I'm collecting my thoughts to share with you in the December *News* mindful that by the time you receive this issue, the holiday season will be in full swing and we will be only weeks away from the end of the year! And while we all tend to gear up for the fall season and the start of a new school year, I am often somewhat reflective as the calendar year draws to a close.**

**This year I've been thinking a lot about each one of you.** By and large, as a whole, we have a pretty high opinion of our profession. Many of us think of the work we do each day as more than a profession—in fact, as a calling. It's the essence of who we are as individuals ... the best part of ourselves ... a noble cause. We clearly see art as fundamental to our cause and, in fact, to what makes us human.

There are some days when I think of our work in numbers. Consider these numbers, for instance: 5,112...  
1,832 ... 4,781 ... 1,108 ... 516 ... 388 ... 34,482.

**Total abstractions, you say?** Numeric patterns? Number gibberish? Perhaps. Even if you knew this was a snapshot of our membership by category on this particular day, it might not seem to *mean* anything beyond a quantitative representation of our membership makeup: 5,112 elementary school art teachers; 1,832 middle/junior high art teachers; 4,781 secondary art teachers; 1,108 higher ed professors/researchers; 516 museum educators; and 388 administrators/supervisors. And, maybe the 34,482 NAHS and university student member number says something about the power of a student discount, coupled with the relative freedom from mortgages, car payments, and income taxes.

**But for what we want to accomplish—doubling our membership and ensuring all students have access to a full and balanced education that includes the sciences, the arts, and the humanities—** these numbers are flush with promise. One of the reasons numbers matter—and these numbers in particular—can be found graphically illustrated on p. 27 of a book by Clay Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations* (2008). Shirky's diagrams look like those nail-and-string mosaics that were once so popular at craft fairs. However, they illustrate the connections between individuals and the exponential growth that occurs every time just a few individuals are added to a group. With 5 members of a group, there are 10 connections. Add another 5 members and the connections don't double; they more than quadruple to 45. With 15 members, there are 105 connections—Shirky has only tripled the group's membership from the original 5, but the connections have increased more than tenfold.

This is the famed “network effect,” first introduced by a Bell Telephone executive more than a century ago: the addition of each new member to a network increases the value of the network by more than one. That, in a nutshell, is why you and I should care about numbers:

**the value of our network.**

In the October Palette, I mulled over the power of *authenticity* to advance our cause in this “Year of Acting Assertively.” And this holiday season, I’m thinking about and grateful for our many *assets*. Not assets as we traditionally think of them—e.g., budgets, organizational resources, a database of best practices—while important, they often come with limitations or constraints; they’re concrete.

But today I’m thinking about *assets* from a 21st-century, power-of-social-networking perspective. These *assets* are much more elastic than budgets and headcounts, and thus offer NAEA and each of us a far more potential benefit.

I often describe our NAEA professional community to others as dynamic and rich in intellect, scholarship, knowledge, and experience; and I continue to think about each of us being part of a larger “professional community of practice” that extends far beyond our community, state, division, region, or job title. And I continue to look for ways to leverage the power of our NAEA community to build new bridges, to expand our personal networks, and to be ever more productive in our efforts to influence educational policy on the local, state, and federal levels.

**This year, we must look at ourselves from a very practical perspective.** In the course of taking a hard, pragmatic look at “the value of the network,” I’ve challenged myself—and I challenge each of you—to further expand the way we think about NAEA *assets*.

In a recent *Washington Post* Web feature that explored vision and motivation, Howard Gardner was asked how he would define a Nobel Prize for Leadership: “... I would focus on individuals who have brought about changes for the wider good of humanity. In our current era, such changes are less likely to be brought about by political leaders than by social entrepreneurs: individuals who can marshal human and material resources to tackle large and seemingly intractable problems.”

There is no question the charge before us as visual arts educators is quite “large” and perhaps can be described as a “seemingly intractable” problem! How do we “work the big room” of the NAEA community to ensure we leverage the full range of our *assets* that include the rich classroom and school-based teaching experiences of our visual arts teachers; that include the scholarship of rigorous research and knowledge about teaching and learning in the visual arts that our higher ed colleagues contribute to our community; that include the important community-based resources and instructional experiences offered up by our museum educator colleagues; that include the systemic connection to both learning in the arts across a district or an entire learning community; that our administrator/supervisor colleagues bring to our community; that tap into the rich work of community-based artists and, in fact, the artist part of each of us; and finally, how do we leverage the full range of *assets* that NAHS middle and high school students, who have demonstrated scholarship in their study of art, and our college and university students, who have made a commitment to our profession through their chosen field of study, contribute to our community?

Yes—the NAEA community brings many distinctive perspectives to bear—that is the strength and the vitality of our community! I’m certain each one of you knows others who aren’t members, but who may be doing work in art education or a related field that could contribute to our *assets*. That’s the exponential power of connections at work and of social entrepreneurship.



NaeA

*Advancing Art Education*

**At NAEA, we are spending considerable time and energy in creating greater access to our many *assets*.** If you've spent any time exploring NAEA's award-winning website, you'll find listservs, Facebook pages, nings, and Wikispaces that promote community and social interaction around topics and issues you have defined.

As the next phase of the website is launched, our ever-growing member-only resources will continue to expand and we will have the capability to pose a question to members and get an immediate response—truly a finger on the pulse at any given moment. And we will continue to ask you how you might like to leverage the power of our community and make it work more productively for you.

But what's most immediately important here is not the mechanism for tapping into the community, but the mindset. I urge you to take ownership of this *asset* bank our membership represents. Our network is, quite literally, an empowering *asset*.

In fact, the value of our network is that each of us has the ability to project the authenticity of teaching and learning in the visual arts and tackle the large and seemingly intractable problems exponentially!

Warm wishes for the holidays and a Happy New Year!

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