

SOCIALLY RELEVANT PRACTICE AND ART, CULTURE, AND ENVIRONMENT

Nancy R. Johnson

Marshall University

What is socially relevant practice? From my perspective, socially relevant practice has to do with making knowledge available to students that enables them to know about social institutions and contexts associated with the visual arts. In other words, the students are provided with experiences that lead them to an understanding of the phenomenon of art in culture and society so that they can assess and decide what their own relationship will be to concepts and objects comprising the visual arts.

Review

In Art, Culture, and Environment, June King McFee and Rogena Degge (1977) present a means for beginning to accomplish this kind of understanding. Sensitive to the power of culture and society upon the environment, their approach involves learning to "read" the meaning of objects created as forms of art. My focus is on the part of their book that deals with the cultural meaning of art. This part "analyze(s) the diverse meanings of art and explore(s) the ways these meanings function in the lives of people from different cultural groups" (p. 272).

McFee and Degge hold that the arts transmit and maintain the values of a culture. Art is thus a means of communication. The conceptual framework they use for theorizing about art is drawn from information theory and systems theory. From this perspective, the visual arts are perceived to carry messages. An example of this kind of conceptualizing can be found in McFee and Degge's analysis of clothing and dress. Clothes and body ornaments provide information about a person's role, status, and identity through symbolic meaning. To illustrate, long hair or short hair, T-shirts or suits, and earrings or watches can show others what sort of person one might be as well as what are one's interests. Wearing apparel for marriage, mourning, a football game, or other ceremonial events gives information about the importance of these events to a person and to our society. McFee and Degge also note that as cultural change occurs, the symbols and meanings associated with dress likewise change over time.

In Art, Culture, and Environment, activities are suggested for use in art classes that are designed to help children understand the nature of art in society. They involve the following concepts and sub-concepts:

1. Discovering the cultural meaning of objects
 - a. comparing the meaning of objects. Example: Pots from other countries.
 - b. reading the messages in objects. Example: Clocks. What does the design, material, or style say about the object? What is the message?

- c. studying the meaning of placement and arrangement.
Example: Playgrounds. What does the design tell?
Where are the open and closed areas; spaces for adults,
etc.?
 - d. designing meaning through organization and placement.
Example: Drawing and planning spaces for others to use
2. The art of costume and cultural roles
 - a. dressing up and playing roles
 - b. comparing apparel cross-culturally
 - c. studying values and roles in costume design
 - d. studying taste, images, and values in dress
 3. Understanding cultural influences on art
 - a. comparing art from different cultures. Example: Masks.
Look at the design. How do you feel about it?
 - b. studying the values and beliefs of artists. Example:
Look at the phenomena in the art world such as galleries,
professional artists, Sunday painters, or quilt-makers.

Another aspect of understanding art in society is the difference in cultural backgrounds of the students. One of McFee and Degge's goals is to relate art to these differences and encourage the students to understand the visual forms of other cultures.

Critique

McFee and Degge are to be commended for presenting art in society as an important part of art education. Their perspective is in contrast to the psychologically-based individualistic view of art that is so often encountered in the literature of art education. There are, however, several problems with their approach.

One of these is the lack of discussion about how objects come to have meanings that are socially understood. This absence may in part be due to the inadequacies of information theory and systems theory. Neither theory addresses the importance of human action and interaction in the creation of social knowledge and culture. Had the authors perhaps drawn upon symbolic interactionism as a theory (Blumer, 1969), the perspective of Victor Turner in symbolic anthropology (1967, 1974), or the sociology of knowledge developed by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966), their presentation might have been more complete. In a sense, one could say that McFee and Degge's theoretical perspective is not entirely socially relevant because it does not fully consider human agency in the formation of meanings and concepts in the visual arts. An appropriate question for the authors to address in some way is: How do cultural values come about through visual arts?

A second problem is that McFee and Degge do not provide teachers and children with sufficient conceptual tools for changing the visual environment. It is certainly useful to be able to design spaces and create art objects, but there is also a need to know that one can engage in forming the visual environment through one's own action or a group's action upon the thinking and planning of others. One can write letters to editors

and officials, form and join groups to speak for or against visual issues and policies, and create images such as films, posters, or art shows for the purpose of engaging in culture change. Students should know that there are ways to participate in changing and creating the visual environment and that they can indeed engage in social action if they wish to do so. Meanings about art are human products to be fashioned and refashioned as we see fit. The arts do not exist as entities, either physically or conceptually, beyond our individual and collective creation. Learning to manipulate meanings through design is an important skill, but to understand the social processes by which cultural values come to be reflected in the arts, and how they act upon the self, is a far more significant act in education.

References

- Berger, P., & Luckmann, T. The social construction of reality. New York: Doubleday, 1966.
- Blumer, H. Symbolic interactionism. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1969.
- McFee, J., and Degge, R. Art, culture and environment. Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1977.
- Turner, V. The forest of symbols: aspects of Ndembu ritual. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967.
- Turner, V. Dramas, fields, and metaphors. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974.