

Cultural Knowledge: The Unrecognized  
Responsibility of Art Education

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Abstract

Art educators are a subgroup within the larger culture whose role it is to communicate information and skills in the visual arts for guiding individuals to find greater personal satisfaction in the visual arts, to gain knowledge of the visual arts as areas of specialized interest, and to become aware of the contribution the visual arts make to their cultural heritage. This paper proposes that the kinds of information that future art teachers gain while training in their specialized area fails to prepare them adequately for their role. A parallelism discovered in the work of cultural geographer, Yi-Fu Tuan (1974) and the recent work of cognitive psychologist, David Feldman (1980, 1984) suggests that different forces or domains of knowledge interact in ways that guide and direct the formation of ideas. In the following paper, the work of Tuan and Feldman are used as a basis for a greater understanding of the contradictory elements in the education and role expectancy of the art educator.

Cultural geographer, Yi-Fu Tuan (1974), states that an individual's ideas are influenced by cultural forces, personal interests, and by idiosyncratic qualities of personality. To demonstrate the influences on an individual's ideas, Tuan used landscape descriptions of the southwest written during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by travellers from Europe and the Atlantic seaboard. These descriptions expressed rejection for the sickening colors and the universal sameness of plains and mountains, plants and living things. For these individuals the southwest was desolate, offensive and without aesthetic merit. Descriptions of the southwest available from the folklore of the native Americans whose people had lived for centuries on the southwest plains show a totally different perception of the beauty, richness, and vitality of the majestic mountains and plains.

Art educators like other groups of people can be identified by their values and beliefs. Their behavioral patterns are distinct within cultures. They own dual identities, one within their special province of art education and one with a respective cultural alliance. Though rooted in a culture, an

art educator's worldview becomes discipline oriented. Discipline knowledge becomes the tool and the criteria to address all sorts of issues whether within the province of the discipline or not.

Feldman (1980) has developed a theory that all knowledge can be divided into five cognitive domains. Though he is not specifically theorizing about the visual arts, Feldman's work makes the inevitability of the art educator's dual position more apparent. Aesthetic behavior is a form of valuing. It may be a personal value, a culture value, or both. On a personal level, aesthetic behavior is a means of projecting back to one's self and to others an image that can be matched or contrasted with an accepted cultural model. This model may be perceived subconsciously rather than self-consciously. Shared aesthetic values result from shared cultural experiences. Even when cross cultural similarities in aesthetic behaviour are found these are the result of special training, such as formal artistic study, or the result of cultural conditions which trigger the spontaneous development of similar responses to a particular circumstance.

Feldman's basic argument is for an extension of the field of developmental psychology into areas of cognition that address non-universal behavior. He believes that the energy spent by most of the people in the world most of the time is not in trying to reach universal goals (1980). For example, swimming does not meet developmental criteria and is not universal because it requires training and a special environment. Nevertheless, there is a sequential progression from lower to higher skills in swimming. Olympian level swimmers share similar knowledge regardless of their cultural background.

#### Traditional theory of cognitive development

Traditional theory defines four characteristics of developmental behavior. It is universal and spontaneous, requiring no special environment or intervention. All normal human environments have sufficient redundancy for universal goals to be achieved. Universal goals are achieved in an invariant sequence, a series of stages which cannot be missed, skipped, or retraced, and universal developmental behavior has hierarchical integration of lower

level cognition into the later systems of cognition.

#### Proposed theory of cognitive development

Feldman has proposed that many non-universal realms of human activity deserve the attention of cognitive psychologists because they have two of the four characteristics of universal learning. They are learned in invariant sequential order and the later levels of learning incorporate learning from earlier levels. He refers to these realms of activity as non-universal bodies of knowledge. Non-universal learning is not spontaneous and it does require special environments. At the most advanced levels, non-universal learning is achieved by progressively fewer individuals. Chess, more than swimming, displays the structure Feldman has set as the metaphor for non-universal learning. The levels of mastery for chess are so articulated that computers have been programmed to allow the selection of the appropriate skill level up to seven.

#### Knowledge domains in proposed theory

Feldman states bodies of knowledge can be classified into five groups. He refers to these as domains and has labeled them as unique knowledge, discipline-based knowledge, idiosyncratic knowledge, cultural knowledge and universal knowledge. Figure 1 illustrates the non-hierarchical structural relationship Feldman perceives between and among these groupings.

Figure 1. Feldman's Continuum of Knowledge Domains

UNIVERSAL KNOWLEDGE	CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE	DISCIPLINE-BASED KNOWLEDGE	IDIOSYNCRATIC KNOWLEDGE	UNIQUE KNOWLEDGE
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Feldman also believes that through a process of evolution, knowledge which is presently perceived as universal may have originated with cases of unique knowledge which moved through the continuum of various domains to the point where the knowledge is spontaneously developed without special intervention. It is not possible to demonstrate the movement of cultural knowledge to universal knowledge, but in order to give a suggestion of the movement of an idea from unique knowledge to cultural knowledge, Le Corbusier's

purist's aesthetic might be taken as an example.

As history shows, a simplicity of form with uncluttered lines and flat planes is the kind of aesthetic Le Corbusier promoted for architecture. His idealized Ville Radieuse is the exemplar from which multitudes of buildings have taken their form. His ideas were both unique and idiosyncratic for he shared beliefs with other early modernists. The theory generated by the ideas of these few individuals resulted in the International Style which has become the vernacular design of corporate architecture all over the world.

P. V. Turner writing about the education of Le Corbusier (1977) suggests that the monk's quarters for which Le Corbusier had a personal affinity could be described in terms similar to those used to describe the aesthetic of pure form that Corbusier and others pushed to represent the ideal machine aesthetic. At the ideological level, the machine aesthetic was meant to be revolutionary. In Russia (Ginsburg, 1970), the new aesthetic was promoted for palaces of the workers under the assumption that the peasants would want to totally reject the architecture and other trappings of the bourgeoisie. The forms of the new aesthetic were specifically determined by their ability to break with conventionalized architectural imagery as much as to represent the technology of the future.

Many influences set a favorable environment for the generation of the new architecture. Reconstruction and new construction were needed throughout Europe after World War I. Factories were needed for production. Factory workers needed housing. The war had made a world marketplace for the goods of technology. Technological knowledge was already available to meet construction needs in an efficient way. What was needed was an ideology to make these non-traditional forms acceptable in the culture. Ideas come from individuals and Corbusier and the other modernists had a unique concept of a pure architecture for a modern classless world. The need, the ability, and the concept all three worked together to incubate and gestate the idea of International Style. Of course, Corbusier did not do it alone. The environmental situation was right for the development of this ideology.

The idea of International Style rapidly moved through the layers of the architectural profession although it was never the exclusive architectural ideology that some think. It has since also passed through cultural levels to its present place as a symbol of international corporate identity. Some individuals choose it for reasons of personal taste; for the most part it has become an image of corporate architecture. Just as individuals can symbolize conventional church architecture across cultures, they can now identify an international image of corporate architecture.

#### Other applications of Feldman's model of knowledge domains

Feldman's phylogenetic model is helpful in seeing the relative positions of other art styles and movements. Some individual artists such as Norman Rockwell and Andrew Wyeth have received a wide cultural acceptance. They are understandable by most people at some level without special art discipline knowledge. The Impressionists also painted images that have become part of general cultural knowledge. The Impressionists represent an instance in which the idiosyncratic interests shared by a few artists resulted in a style that people have come to recognize and value for reasons many of which are unrelated to the intent of the creators. People do not necessarily see the same painting Monet saw, only the same canvas. On the other hand, Abstract Expressionism is understood by almost no one. Familiarity alone would not make it understandable. Many who value it have been taught misinformation by individuals within the discipline of art who have based their interpretations on the visual forms of the style. Even fewer would value it if the true information were known (Quick, 1977). A knowledge of Abstract Expressionism needs particular instruction not readily available to many individuals within a culture.

At the unique end of the continuum, the artistic expressions of most individuals are not intended for wide acceptance. Most people are not concerned with the creation or collection of objects which will be valued by a wide audience. Art for these individuals is not necessarily produced at a self-conscious level. Like folk and popular art, it is produced and used in the environment of values related to social and personal identity. However, because of the social value of this art, it may be taken up by individuals who

do have a self-conscious need to develop their art expression. For a very small number of individuals within the total culture, personal and social identity is integrated with artistic expression. They strive self-consciously to reach higher and higher levels of mastery. These individuals may ultimately contribute to art discipline knowledge. A case which might be taken as an example of this situation is Roy Lichtenstein's self-conscious use of popular images translated into "Pop" art.

#### The relationship of environment to knowledge domains

Unlike universal knowledge wherein it is the invariant characteristics of environment that are essential, cultural knowledge, discipline-based knowledge, idiosyncratic knowledge and unique knowledge all vary in the degree and kind of environmental intervention required for their development. No one may choose whether or not to have universal knowledge. Neither does one have an option not to have cultural knowledge though the variety and level of cultural knowledge attained may vary. An argument could be made that cultural knowledge particularizes universal knowledge or that universal knowledge is manifested in cultural knowledge. For example, potentiality for language is considered universal by cognitive psychologists but language development is particularized by the culture. The same case can be made for culturally divergent systems of spatial perspective taking.

Since cultural knowledge is embedded in various symbol systems, artifacts, technology and cultural institutions, it is necessary that the cultural environment provide instruction in media skills such as reading, writing, computation, and drawing, in order to disembed information from its symbol source. Since some kinds of information are more easily acquired or expressed through one media rather than another, the attainment of media skills is more important than any specific content. Nevertheless, skill and content are generally integrated in the learning process. Uninstructed observation and imitation provide only a minimal amount of cultural understanding. A prolonged and systematic exposure is necessary for achieving the higher levels of cultural knowledge; therefore, most cultures provide a formal system of education.

The environment for discipline-based knowledge includes a cultural display of the opportunity and resources for specialized knowledge, although only a small - or even tiny - subset of the members of a culture will specialize in any one discipline. These are usually adults who have advanced to higher levels of knowledge in a special area through an intense period of instruction. This period of instruction compacts the acquisition of several levels of knowledge into a relatively short period of time. The skills and capabilities shared by the members of a discipline in one culture may overlap with those of the members of the same discipline in another culture. Specialization in any discipline is normally optional within a culture.

Although membership in a discipline is by choice, once chosen, it has an organizing effect on an individual's way of thinking; its distinctive mode of thinking is not restricted to problems which fall within the discipline itself. The discipline thus becomes an integrated part of a person's psychological environment. A behaviorial psychologist's world view or the world view of a symbolist artist will be affected by study in their respective disciplines.

Environmental conditions which are favorable for the development of idiosyncratic knowledge complement an individual's own intrinsic qualities. A prodigy is a special case of idiosyncratic achievement which takes place when the child's personal interest and abilities are ideally suited for achievement in some particular field of knowledge and the environment provides the necessary opportunity and instruction. This is why prodigies occur in families where a high level of discipline knowledge is available. Musical prodigies most often occur in families of musicians.

Contrary to opinion, prodigies spend long periods of time intensely studying their special discipline. The difference between them and an ordinary learner is the rate at which they master information in their particular area of interest. This allows them to reach the higher levels of attainment within a discipline at a time when others may still be diffuse in their goals.

Prodigies can be compared to those individuals at the advanced levels of a discipline who have developed a singular pre-eminence in a field. These experts represent the leadership in a field of knowledge. The environment

has made the opportunity available and provided the resources for them to develop their particular interests and abilities to a level not attained by most members of the discipline.

The environmental conditions for unique knowledge are set by the specific requirements of a problem. The development of a unique achievement can be paralleled with children advancing through the various stages of universal knowledge as they acquire knowledge already known by others. At the outer limits of knowledge in a particular field, an individual faced with the inability to resolve a problem with present knowledge creates new knowledge. It is not only new for him or her, as in the case of the child or the person who has not mastered all the already known levels, but it is new for everyone. This new knowledge then becomes part of the environment required to extend knowledge still further.

#### Cultural knowledge, discipline knowledge and art education

Art educators, like others who are discipline trained, have gained advanced levels of knowledge in a compressed period of time. Their specialized skills and capabilities place them in a tiny subgroup of any main stream culture. From the vantage point of their new knowledge, they recognize a distinction between what they have come to know and value because of their intense period of training and what most individuals within the culture perceive as art or value aesthetically. The educators perceive the chasm to be evidence of a compelling need to raise the level of knowledge within the main stream culture. They share an assumption that an individual's life and the general existence of society will be enhanced by visual knowledge as they have come to know it.

Wishing to raise the general level of art experience within the culture, art educators strive to develop students' ability to perceive images as they are seen by art experts - artists, historians, and critics. This goal is usually couched in more subtle terms such as nurturing aesthetic sensitivity, developing creative skills, and drawing from the field of art for curriculum content. The push to achieve recognition of art as a discipline and as a distinct body of knowledge is a reflection of the value art educators place

on the knowledge they have gained through discipline training. The content of their lessons, emphasizing elements and principles of design, art processes and media, and selected exemplars of aesthetic form, indicate the degree with which they are imbued with their own discipline knowledge as criteria for cultural knowledge.

Cultural knowledge is more diverse than discipline knowledge and because it is embedded in all manner of symbols, artifacts, and technologies, it requires the development of media skills for its continuous decoding and transmission. Reading verbal symbols is a media skill that allows access to diverse cultural knowledge embedded in inventories, novels, plays, company reports, local newspapers, and other written materials. What most members of a culture develop in the way of visual skills comes from untutored observation and imitation of people like themselves or those they aspire to be like. This is true of the homemaker shopping at Sears or the teenager wearing a single white glove in imitation of pop star Michael Jackson.

The use of cultural resources for the development of media skills can be expected to reinforce or reflect values already held by members of the culture. The computer has been accepted into the educational system because it enables the rapid collection, manipulation, communication, and storage of large amounts of information vital to cultural maintenance. Although visual decoding is a major means to access information including some computer output, study of the visual arts is not perceived as a broad based information processing skill. What is taught formally in the arts is content information. Attention to visual understanding is limited to decoding forms perceived to have significant aesthetic value.

Those who study to be art educators and other art professionals share a personal interest in and creative ability for art knowledge that is not characteristic of the respective cultural groups, although general cultural support for the visual arts may vary from place to place or time to time. For art educators, who as a group are distinctly more socially oriented than other art professionals (Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi, 1976), this personal interest and ability in art and its value for personal development

is projected on other members of the larger cultural group. Characteristic of this stance is the development of slogans like "art for self expression" and "art in the mainstream" to inform and to focus the arts in the direction perceived to be consistent with currently expressed cultural values. It may be said the urge to proselytize art knowledge for social good is idiosyncratic to the art educator.

The slogans change but what is actually taught in the schools under the aegis of art instruction has changed imperceptibly. Several reasons related to the preparation of art teachers make this inevitable. The model for the art teacher is primarily the studio artist. Because of their own inclination to work with art media and processes, future art teachers easily identify with this model. Narrowly educated themselves, studio teachers reinforce the separateness of art from other life experiences. Art is their life. They believe that the making of art is morally elevating. Generally committed to Modernism and its philosophy of social engineering, they believe art makes better people. It is only those who are less sensitive, more commercial, materialistic or generally inferior who are incapable of being transformed by art. These individuals in the eyes of the professional studio artist, do not deserve the attention of the studio teacher. The limited attention to art historical information provided for all art educators generally results in emphasis on the fine arts, realism, the Renaissance tradition, and the Avant' Garde of the twentieth century. What most future art teachers learn is a narrow and prescriptive kind of discipline-based knowledge.

In an effort to assure that these prescribed attitudes are enculturated through art experiences, art educators have not recognized the interrelational aspects of all cultural knowledge. Art teachers have tried to teach cultural knowledge of art with the discipline models to which they have been exposed. Children and future adults need experience in decoding cultural knowledge of art. The study of their own art and the art most familiar to them, whatever its cultural level, is important for children if they are to develop an understanding that art has meaning and value which is reflected in the attention and care it receives by the person who produced it or by others who have

similar interests, ideas, or beliefs. By asking questions, teachers of art can help students think about the purposes of art and the role of the artist in various cultural and subcultural groups. Their questions would include who is an artist? Is it hard to be an artist? What kinds of things are art? Why do some things have more value than others? Who decides what is valuable? Where do artists get their ideas? What role does the audience play? Who is the intended audience? Teaching art as a cultural knowledge allows children to learn about themselves through the medium of art and guides their ability to read cultural artifacts for an understanding of the values, beliefs, and behaviors of a cultural group. To help children and future adults understand how cultural knowledge is related to everyday activities and interests, teachers of art would need to have knowledge of the visual arts familiar to those they teach such as the movies, comics, and television. They also need to understand the literature, sports and other forms of play and work in which the student participates. Most importantly, they need to understand the cultural environment - the homes, streets, and neighborhoods in which the students' activities take place.

It is not the primary function of public education to make better people in the sense of social strata or morality. Rather, its function is to better equip them to deal with the world in a useful and pleasurable manner. Art teaching does allow people some enjoyment in the manipulation of art media for whatever purpose. The study of art also makes some people aware of their own interests, abilities, and appreciation of art regardless of how narrowly art forms are interpreted. For art knowledge to serve as a decoding system for cultural knowledge, art teaching must be directed toward the understanding of visual forms as carriers of cultural knowledge. Individuals need to be better able to organize information visually.

The various forces or knowledge domains as suggested by Tuan and Feldman provide an interpretive basis for the contradiction that seems to function between the education and the role expectancy of the art educator. Art educators come from a tiny sub-group of the total culture by virtue of their particular idiosyncratic aptitude and skill with art media. They are taught

to become even more estranged from any cultural context by the kinds of knowledge they gain from discipline training. The limited exposure to art in a context other than studio does little to eliminate the narrowness of their interests.

Often, art educators were children who discovered that they liked making art so they went to college to study making art. Somewhere along the way the issue of making a living caused them to make the decision to become art teachers. Many really know little about art in a broad sense. They mostly know some things about particular media. When they begin to teach, they find that what they have learned to value as art knowledge is poorly related to what children learn in the contexts of their various cultural and sub-cultural groups. Most art educators take this discrepancy as evidence of a need for greater cultural resources to bring cultural art knowledge to a level consistent with that of the discipline rather than as an indication of the narrowness of their own background. Another interpretation, the one proposed by this paper, is that the discipline education of art educators is a disservice for the future art educator for as it exists, it is ineffectual for decoding cultural knowledge. A culturally contextual, culturally cognizant approach to art education would recognize the significance of learning to disembed cultural knowledge from visual forms at all levels. Learning to use visual skills makes cultural knowledge more accessible. Acquiring a particular point of view about art that is shared by a relatively few members of a culture does not make one cultured.

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