

Art As a Social Study: Theory Into Practice

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Abstract

The concept of dialogue is one that is rarely applied in art education. The attitude prevails that teachers of art know what is best, that students are ignorant of "real" art, that student aesthetic experiences are trivial or worthless, and so they, the teachers, settle for a curriculum and teaching approach that reaches less than 5% of the students. The remaining 95% plus are regimented in activities less meaningful than Trivia Pursuit or are ignored altogether. Dialogue is not one sided. For knowledge to take place, the learner must have access to meaning and meaning can not be handed down like so much information. Knowledge results from dialogue; it is not a possession to be bestowed on others.

In a dialogue, the sender must receive feedback affirming that the message received was the message sent. The receiver is responsible for this feedback at whatever level and in whatever context the message was received. The receiver then becomes the sender for the feedback is now the new message. Unless the original message has meaning in context to the receiver, the feedback is without meaning. A parroted response does not indicate that the receiver has translated information into knowledge.

In the following paper, the problem of dialogue in elementary and secondary art programs is addressed. The position argued is that changes can be made. Ritualistic, rule-governed "School Art" at the elementary level and fine art oriented studio processes and dogmatic aesthetic exemplars at the secondary level will yield to teachers who care about children, their world, their art, and their learning.

Let me give an example of a different approach in the art room. One that approximates dialogue. In British Columbia a teacher is working with a group of eighth graders. She has been looking at the provincial curriculum guide and plans some image development lessons around such strategies such as juxtaposition, distortion, viewpoint, magnification, imagination, and visualization. Among other things, the guide suggests that the teacher might use Claes Oldenburg to show that grouping or placing unlikely images creates a feeling of humour and surprise. The guide suggests that students might split and rearrange photographic images; observe and record images seen in

reflective surfaces such as kettles, bumpers, and doorknobs; study the work of Salvador Dali or M. C. Escher; use a worm's eye view; discuss surrealism; view Walt Disney's Fantasia; or imagine and record dream landscapes. Certainly there are some good things in the guide, but they represent things that the teacher is supposed to know about in order to teach kids. What about things that the kids know about? We pay lip service to, and research (Rump and Southgate, 1978) supports the notion that, in order to be a successful teacher, one needs to understand and probably use the means of communication current in the culture in which the teacher is operating. Usually this has meant spoken language, and sometimes, but not often, we have felt a need to understand the non-verbal communication of special and not-so-special learners. In the 1960's we began to realize that first grade urban North American and other children who reads words such as "Dick," "Jane," "Spot," "Mother," "Father," at school could also read and spell words such as "Buick," "Thunderbird," Colgate's," "Pepsi-Cola," "Marlboro," "Pall Mall," "Chicklets," "Yankees," "Giants," "Mohammad Ali," "parking," "trespassing," "smoking," "love," "kill," "shit," and other four letter words (Kohl, 1972). Surely the same is true with visual images. Can there be dialogue? I think that there can. Rock videos, for example, contain outstanding visual material illustrating the use of juxtaposition, distortion, viewpoint, magnification, and other visual devices and image development strategies that our B. C. teacher wanted her students to employ. My own opinion of videos has been influenced by the research of one of my graduate students who worked the switchboard when teenagers and others called a local T.V. station to give their rock video preferences. The student's research indicated that in terms of the final evaluation, the image seen by teenagers is more important than the music. Our students can teach us, they can enter into a dialogue about the imagery of their own world and and can tell us how it is done. We should explore their world, they should explore ours.

In a 1969 article titled "Adolescence and the Apocalypse" the following was written:

What fascinates me is that our public schools, designed for adolescents....educate and "socialize" their students

by depriving them of everything the rites bestow. They manipulate them through the repression of energies; they isolate them and close off most parts of the community; they categorically refuse to make use of the individual's private (and social) experience. The direction of all these tendencies is toward a cultural "schizophrenia" in which the student is forced to choose between his own relation to reality or the one demanded by the institution. The schools are organized to weaken the student so that he is forced, in the absence of his own energies, to accept the values and demands of the institution. To this end we deprive the student of mobility and experience; through law and custom we make the only legal place for him - the school - and then, to make sure he remains dependent, manipulable, we empty the school of all vivid life (Marin pp. 47-49).

It is important that art teachers acknowledge popular culture. It is regrettable that the last three issues of the Journal of Popular Culture were probably ignored not just by those teaching art in the schools, but also by the majority of university art educators. In its recent concern with architecture, rock music, political themes in contemporary comic books, video games, Japanese popular culture, van art, television, perspectives for understanding material culture, and greeting cards, this publication deserves more, much more, of our collective attention.

This summer I taught in Saskatoon, where there is a wonderful art gallery, "The Mendel." But despite this it seemed to me that the art that really mattered to most residents of Saskatoon could be found in the record stores on Third Avenue, Bourassa's Religious Supplies, in the shopping malls, and various "gift" shops. If we are going to use the art that matters to the kids we teach when we deal with "imagery" or "the elements and principles of design," then we need to enter into a dialogue to find out what this art is. I have the students in

my secondary art education methods class and in my graduate seminar in the social and cultural foundations of art education read a paper "The Uses of Art," by a British art educator, Colin Painter (Aspects 18, Spring, 1982). Mr. Painter is the head of the School of Creative and Performing Arts at Newcastle-upon-Tyne Polytechnic. He sent his paper to me after discovering my paper "Art education as ethnology," (Chalmers, 1981). Painter did what my paper talked about doing, he conducted a survey to classify the objects and visual images that people in different socio-economic groups hung on the walls of their homes. He also looked at the meanings that these objects had for their owners in relation to their values and ways of life. He was interested in how objects were introduced into the house, why they are liked, how long ago they were acquired, and at what cost. Painter cautions against drawing large generalizations and conclusions from his study, but his survey does provide some observations.

The survey indicated a plurality of audiences apparently corresponding to differences in socio-economic circumstances. The audiences also divided along lines of what plurality of images and objects were to be classified as visual art. Substantial differences were found in people's relationship to the art world concept of art. Working class subjects (while acknowledging the existence and authority of art) tended not to put their own possessions in that category, whereas middle class subjects tended to do so. Perhaps, to designate objects as art is not only to confer status and value, but also indicates a willingness to participate in the culture. In this context, the preponderance of a functional (more significantly, a pseudo-functional) dimension in objects performing a largely visual role in the working class homes is particularly interesting. It would seem likely that this attitude originated in earlier traditions of working class life and domestic circumstances. It is possible to speculate that the reference to practical utility is unconsciously valued precisely because it actually disqualifies an object from being seen as fine art. In this manner possible accusations of pretentiousness are averted and perhaps denial of collaboration with an alien and hostile culture are reinforced.

Painter goes on to speculate that if such conjectures are valid, there are still many objects in working class homes of Newcastle which clearly allude to the high culture of fine art such as signatures, gold frames, swords and shields. He did find, however, that even in the middle class homes, works from the contemporary fine arts world were rare. He felt that this showed a considerable disjunction between the concepts of art held in the middle class homes and those prevalent in the specialist art world. The survey also indicated that, for working class people in particular, visual images are an integral part of their family and community life. These images are largely valued for their associational contexts (particularly personal, family, and community relationships) as distinct from being valued for their intrinsic qualities alone. Painter concludes his paper by stating that this would seem to be in stark contrast to many dominant attitudes in the contemporary art world.

As the result of reading Painter's paper, an elementary teacher in my class decided to do a survey of her own students. She developed the following format:

Pick one thing in your house that you think is art,
and answer all the questions using just that one thing.

What is the art object you picked?

In what country was it made? (Look on the back or the
bottom, guess if you aren't sure.)

How did it come to be in your house?

How long has it been in your family?

Who in your house likes it best?

Why does that person like it? If you aren't the
person who likes it best, do you like it? Yes?
No? Why?

If you had to move into a smaller place and couldn't
take everything with you, would you take this object
with you?

Give me your reasons why you think its art?

Without putting an actual price on the object, would you say that the object is not worth much money at all?
not very expensive?
reasonably expensive?
worth a lot of money?

Does the object have any special significance of worth to your family?

Describe the object for me. Make a drawing if you can.

Another student did a similar study with twenty members of the teaching staff at her school, another with eighth and ninth grade students, another made a survey of things on the walls in principals' offices, and another surveyed school hallway art in elementary schools in the east and west sides of the city in which she taught. In this last study, the student found that the culture of school art was so strong that differences were minimal despite very significant economic and ethnic differences in the student populations. The point is that we art educators need to attend to the values prevalent in the environments from which students come. Some may see this approach as merely a strategy to engage the interests of students enroute to the achievement of so-called more worthy aims. There will also be those who are content to perpetuate school art for a variety of reasons. But surely there will be those who want to engage in genuine dialogue and to include the study of all art, and particularly the study of the why aspects of art.

Artistic understanding takes place within a cultural context. In a pluralist culture we need to be concerned with the meaning of art for a variety of viewers and cultural participators. In more and more places people seem to be living their lives without the need to be exposed to honored aesthetic exemplars. They have become what we might call "artistically secularized." The study of art as a social study must address such questions as: How does society influence what individuals and groups perceive as art? Do people find different meanings in the same visual art objects? How do members of different groups determine their standards for judging art forms? We in art education need to do more to recognize the significance of the role of art

as a social phenomena and we need to learn to ask questions such as these proposed for a social studies class: What can be learned from the work about the level of economic and technological development of the artist's society? Judging from the materials and craftsmanship, what economic resources and technological expertise did the society place at the disposition of the artist? If, as a piece of art, the work appears primarily decorative, what additional uses might it have had in the lives of its original users? Was it functional, like furniture and architecture, or a status symbol, or both? Did it preserve the memory of some important event or person? Do its decorative aspects make it less functional? Was the work produced with some specific public in mind? What clues does the work give about the identity of its audience? Can this audience be identified as a social class, institution (e.g., the Church), or some other segment of society? Why was the subject important enough to be portrayed in art? What does the work tell us about the interests, pre-occupations, and values of its sponsors? How might its style and subject appeal to them? Have other artists used this theme or subject for different purposes? Would a member of this original audience likely feel that the work reinforced or criticized accepted social values? Does the work communicate the personal viewpoint of the artist or the viewpoint of the society? Was the work first received well? Did various segments of the public have different reactions? How have later periods reacted to this work? Has it ever fallen into disfavour or neglect? What feeling does the work produce in viewers today? (Carr, 1983).

Moffat (1969), an art historian, devised a similar checklist for looking at works of art. His questions could be used to examine spray painted panel vans, Billy Idol, or Duran Duran posters. They apply equally to paintings in shopping malls, hallway decoration, motel art, rock videos, and clothing.

Moffat's checklist has two major categories, content and environment. Content includes the idea expressed, the form, and the image as the vehicle to express the idea. The sub-categories are:

- (a) The aesthetic response
(Why do you like or dislike it?)
- (b) Characterization
(How does the artist achieve this quality?)

- (c) Materials
- (d) Specific form
(Use of space, texture, and mass)
- (e) Color
- (f) Composition

Environment includes historical background and comprehension, sense of period. The sub-categories are:

- (a) The artist's art historical placement
- (b) Cultural background
(National or ethnic characteristics; philosophic or religious currents; and physical, social, political, and economic contexts)
- (c) Interpretive keys
(Contemporary documents as collaboration with consideration given to the "distorting mirror" of history.)

We need to make it abundantly clear that the art of a culture (including its popular forms) not only expresses the available tools, materials, and technology, it also shows the values of that culture. Art derives from the environmental, psychological, and historical components of human existence. By isolating art from social factors, we isolate it from life. We need to discuss with students the role and function of the arts in society, and we might start with dialogue about the visual forms found in the student's own bedroom. For example, among a tenth grade class we found the following:

- a pottery bunny,
- Teddy bears,
- Doodle art,
- Animals from rocks,
- a drawing of a bunny rabbit,
- a 1920 Vanity cover,
- Pictures of dogs, cats, and a monkey,
- Pictures of hockey teams,

Bike posters,
Posters of John Stamos, Matt Dillon, Tom Cruise, Rob Lowe,
Posters of Billy Idol, Duran Duran, Clash, Sexpistols, Cindy Lauper,
String pictures,
Photographs,
a charging bull poster,
a landscape painting,
Small figurines,
an Oil painting of a mountain, stream, and trees,
Model cars and planes,
Drawings done by the student of a fawn and a cat's face,
Print from Hong Kong,
Beer and girl posters,
a woodcarving of a polar bear,
Posters of Madness, seagulls,
a brass sculpture of a horse,
a black velvet painting of a dog and a cat,
a pictures of Paris,
Hoffman's "Image of Christ,"
a Cross on the wall,
a Statue of the Virgin Mary,
Student paintings and drawings,
an Artex moonlight scene
Hummel gifts,
a Photo of Ezra Pound
a Black light poster,
Trophies and pennants,
a black velvet painting of a unicorn,
Sculptures of Arabians and Clydesdales,
a watercolor of flowers done by student's sister.

When kids were asked why they had these things, we find in their answers the starting points for tremendous and rich dialogue on the function and role of

art in society. The following give an indication of their answers:

Just for decoration.

Some are up so people who gave them won't be hurt.

I like my self-portrait best -- I'm really proud of how good it is.

Everything is tied up with my family and religion.

My parents like them.

My parents loved my nephew and he died, they feel close with the picture.

Pictures of our homeland remind us of the people we left behind.

I love animals.

I don't know.

Right now I just value my stereo.

I just love all the posters in my room, I'd never give any away.

Everything has been passed down from generation to generation.

My friends are jealous of my posters.

In summary, let's listen more. Let's use exemplars that kids can understand -- not just to illustrate points that have to do with them developing images and learning about the elements and principles of design, but also to help us all learn about the function and role of art in society.

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