

The Pervasiveness of Culture:
Significance for Art Education

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Abstract

Much of what we learn, we are not aware of--it is at a taken-for-granted level. This learning is so embedded in our thinking and behavior that even as educators we are often unable to work with or examine these cultural beliefs and assumptions in our teaching and social interactions. In this paper, it is proposed that art educators identify the pervasiveness of culture particularly within educational settings and how cultural attitudes related to art are internalized within society and affect the teaching/learning process.

Culture can be defined as the shared attitudes, values, and beliefs of a group of people. Culture forms a system of references or standards for what will be accepted as aesthetic--what role the artist will play, the social setting for the aesthetic experience, and what position the perceiver or audience may occupy.

Dark (1978) notes:

It is the activation of the system of reference by the personnel, performing their roles, which produces art...It follows that the preferences which a people have, and the choices which they make, operate within and are circumscribed by the system of taste, of appropriateness, of aptness, to which the society subscribes. (p. 49)

The culture which a society establishes does not merely provide a set of rules by which members live. The process of socialization internalizes procedures for being able to interpret and incorporate these sets of rules into experiences that are at a taken-for-granted level of consciousness. Cook (1976) referred to this process as "interpretive procedures" and "taken-for-granted assumptions that enables the member to see the rules in the first place." (p. 350)

Cultural Pervasiveness in Schools

Understanding the pervasiveness of culture in determining ways of talking, perceiving, social interacting, and thinking has a tremendous implication within the context of education. The school transmits the dominant culture's reality and pre-established set of references for behavior that becomes internalized by its members. Without opportunities to examine and be knowledgeable about this socialization process, teachers and students are unable to act upon or become co-producers of their own cultural assumptions. Bowers (1974) proposed the development of cultural literacy in the curriculum which would provide experiences for students to become consciously aware of their own culture as well as to translate their understanding to other cultural settings.

Research into the concept and process of culture is significant for understanding modes of communication and attitudes affecting learning. Leacock (1976) illustrated the importance of culture's role in classroom interaction:

Learning and exchanging knowledge are conceived differently in different cultures. So, too, are traditional styles of behavior between adults and children. Teachers working with Puerto Rican students often find that a child being reprimanded does not look at them or respond to their statements. They may think the child sullen, rebellious, or rude. In the cultural terms of the child, however, he is expressing acquiescence and respect. Understandably, this culture difference enables a teacher to see behind socially patterned behavior to a child's actual feelings, and to relate to him as an individual. (p. 419)

Cohen (1976) conducted a study in which it was found that low-income groups differed from middle-income groups in their modes of cognitive organization. The middle-class group demonstrated a range of analytic modes of cognition, whereas, the low-economic group used what Cohen termed relational skills in conceptual styles. Three distinct areas of incompatibility between the groups included (1) perception of time (low-economic group perceived discrete moments, rather than a continuum),

(2) concept of self in social space (low-economic perceived the self in a central position rather than in a position relative to others), and (3) causality (low-economic group perceived specific rather than multiple causality).

Without the assumption of linearity, such notions as social mobility, the value of money, improving one's performance, getting ahead, infinity, or hierarchies of any type, all of which presume the linear extension of vertical elements, do not have meaning for the relational child. In essence, the requirements for formal abstraction and extraction of components to produce linear continua are not logically possible within the relational rule-set. (Cohen, p. 303)

Cohen found that the schools rewarded and reinforced analytic modes of thinking and social interaction which placed the low-economic cultural group in conflict producing settings.

Such educational findings indicate that art educators attempting to understand the processes involved in aesthetic experience and learning in art need to be aware of and examine the contributions to be derived from such fields as anthropology, sociology, and philosophy. Feldman (1980) has argued for the use of anthropological and historical methods and concepts in art education. He noted that anthropology is useful in understanding art within actual cultural settings because the emphasis is placed on real life experiences and artifacts rather than devised experimental conditions (p. 7).

Sociocultural Research in Art Education

Unfortunately, social-cultural research has not been highly utilized in art education literature, and the nature of aesthetic responses and cross-cultural research has been dominated by psychological and experimental orientations (Boyer, 1983). However, there has appeared an increasing number of art educators advocating sociocultural research in aesthetic learning. Johnson (1983) urges art educators to provide students with knowledge and "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 relationships will be to concepts and objects comprising the visual arts" (p. 47). Johnson further

proposes that the theoretical perspective of art educators be more socially relevant and that concepts be drawn from theories in symbolic interaction, symbolic anthropology, and the sociology of knowledge.

McFee (1980) suggests that art educators develop an awareness of cultural factors that affect aesthetic behavior and understand how experiences in a culture influence what people will learn to see and how they will see it. Hamblen (1982) posites that artistic perceptions are determined by learned behaviors, values, and attitudes of both the artist and the perceiver of art. Such perspectives have placed more significance on cultural transmission and established cultural attitudes affecting aesthetic response.

Significant factors identified in sociocultural research for developing an ability to understand taken-for-granted values in art include (1) a concentration on cultural experiences or expectations of the perceiver, (2) affect or influence of the cultural environment, and (3) the cultural or social content in a work of art.

Art educators writing in sociocultural areas suggest that differences in aesthetic values exist not only in large cultural groups but also within smaller subcultures. Mann (1979) found research evidence to support the claim that "reference for and a valuation of artistic fare is primarily a function of social class, education, and income" (p.16). Leacock (1976) identified variations within subcultures or microcultures:

Any definable group has what can be called a "culture." One can speak of the "culture: of different institutions--hospitals have different "cultures: on the whole from schools, and both from business houses. Within certain general patterns of "school culture," each school develops its own traditions. One can even speak of certain "classroom culture" developed during the short lifetime of a common experience shared by a teacher and a group of children. (p. 421)

When studying groups outside of specific institutions, one must recognize that nationality, religion, regional areas and/or income are major factors in identifying variations in values, attitudes, and beliefs.

Jagodzinski (1982) referred to complex societies where students did not always share the same cultural knowledge. Factors such as age, sex, and status were possible determinants in cognitive nonsharing. Schools

have been called arenas of cultural conflict (Wilcox, 1982) where incorporated skills and conceptual styles do not include those learned and employed by the students. Wilcox, an educational anthropologist stated:

Children may have to attempt to function in an alien environment that requires behavior which is in striking contradiction to that which they have been taught to value. (p. 467)

Aesthetic Learning Experiences

A society's particular construct of reality creates a pervasive quality for the experiences of both the teacher and the learner. An aesthetic learning experience is a complex and multi-dimensional phenomenon influenced on every level by the attitudes and values subscribed to it by society. The artist, the work of art, the social setting, and the perceiver exist and operate within a unique system of references that determine the appropriateness of roles and expectations.

Variations in communication modes, both verbal and nonverbal, act upon and affect the transmission of cultural references or standards in aesthetic learning. Philips (1983), in a study of Indian Reservation children, found that behavioral means for transmitting linguistic messages were culturally determined. He observed that the Indian children's attention structure and linguistic interaction differs in both selectivity and in interpretation from that of persons with white, middle-class backgrounds. Such attention structures and linguistic interactions are integral processes within aesthetic response and learning experience. The school represents the dominant culture which provides the standards for deciding what is, what can be done, and what operational procedures are to be used for dealing with people and things. Since teachers come from the culture of reference and are seen as bearers of the standards for the more dominant segment of society, it is unlikely they will be effective communicators with students from other cultures unless they become aware of the dynamics at work (Wilcox, 1982).

The qualitative descriptive research that art educators and other researchers are doing in sociocultural studies has major implications for understanding individual and group differences toward responding and acquiring knowledge in art in both formal and informal educational

settings. Both the type of questions asked and the methodologies employed by anthropologists and other sociocultural researchers need to be understood and utilized to a greater extent by art educators. Further research needs to be conducted which describes relationships between culture and aesthetics and assesses the possible implications for structuring curriculum strategies and teaching practices. In particular, the taken-for-granted cultural learning that exists in the schools as hidden curriculum needs to be critically identified and examined by both teachers and students. If, as art educators, we are unaware of our own cultural biases and the pervasiveness of culture in the educational setting, we will be unable to improve upon developing theories or practice in art education.

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