ENCULTURATION AND THE VISUAL ARTS CURRICULUM

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An overview of some theoretical viewpoints on enculturation is presented. These viewpoints are relevant to the development of the visual arts curriculum. The perspective presented is a critical one that calls for an examination of the cultural constructs in which art education is embedded.

Teaching and learning about art in schools is a social act. It involves taxpayers, legislators, administrators in state departments of education, and school boards whose decisions legitimate the presence of school buildings, teachers, and curriculum materials. It also involves the creation and organization of art knowledge by artists, art historians, art critics, aestheticians, art educators, art teachers, and gallery owners. Further, it involves the handiwork and thought of countless individuals throughout time who helped to fashion the concept of public art education and the language by which it can be talked about. In the arena of the art room, children formally encounter the collective mind and actions of society regarding art through interaction with the art teacher.

In view of this, teaching and learning about art and even making art are not as personal or as subjective as we might think. They are very much a part of the on-going social drama known as enculturation.

What is Enculturation?

To fully understand the term enculturation, it is useful to first examine the concept of culture. Anthropologists often view culture as a mental template or blueprint by which life is to be conducted. Human beings need culture because their genetic endowment does not provide a complete program for coping with the totality of experience that can be had in the world. Whereas animals operate almost exclusively on their instincts, this is not the case for humans. Humans rely heavily on the accumulated learnings of others encoded as culture.

In other words, as Barrett (1984) states, the degree of dependence that human beings have on learned traditions is enormous when compared to the relative lack of dependence on learned or shared traditions by animals. A kitten or puppy taken away from others of its kind will grow up into a cat or dog who behaves typically like most other cats and dogs. This is not the case with human beings. Barrett (1984) notes that there are a few well-documented cases of children who were deprived of interaction with peers and other adults, and neglected by their parents. This is a small amount of evidence, but it does show that these children did not grow up behaving like typical adult human beings. Culture, then, appears to be very necessary to human beings.

For the anthropologist, Clifford Geertz (1973), culture:

> denotes an historically transmited pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men comperpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life (p. 89).

Barrett (1984) defines culture "as the body of learned beliefs, traditions, and guides for behavior that are shared among members of any human society" (p. 54). Returning to the meaning of enculturation, we can now say that it is the process of

learning the meanings, symbols, and traditions that enable one to appear as a typical adult in a given society.

How Does Enculturation Take Place?

Barrett (1984), Beals (1979), and Berger Luckman (1966) all provide thorough accounts of how enculturation occurs. They each use different terms, however. Barrett speaks of enculturation, Beals of cultural transmission, and Berger and Luckman of socialization. Nevertheless, the three accounts permit a broad understanding of how the young become participants of the society and culture into which they are born.

Barrett on Enculturation

According to Barrett (1984) "humans live in a world of symbols and conventional understandings" (p. 54) that are acquired by observation, imitation, and instruction. At birth babies are the recipients of cultural and familial practices developed over many generations. As children grow, they become habituated to these practices, and assimilate them as a part of their own behavior. An enculturated individual knows the general cultural program for appropriate behavior in society. This program is interpreted and acted upon in different ways by individuals. There may be a great deal of leeway or a variety of alternatives available in the application of the program to specific events. Thus, within a culture, there is room for manipulation and some degree of freedom.

Beals on Cultural Transmission

Beals (1979) states that human social systems differ from animal social systems in that they possess cultural traditions or plans for living. Cultural traditions, an environment, members, material culture, and a set of processes form a cultural system. The operation of a cultural system is dependent upon cultural transmission which "involves teaching and learning ways of behaving properly and according to expectation" (p. 29). Cultural transmission takes place throughout life and varies according to different cultures who develop unique plans for living. The cultural message, however, may not be transmitted in the same way to all cultural members. Differences can occur in how the message is sent and received in rich or poor families, among the first--born or last-born, and among sons and daughters. Beals also allows for differences in people through the exercise of preferences amidst selected alternatives. The end result of the transmission process on the growing child is recruitment into the cultural system maintained by adults. The child as adult in turn transmits the cultural message to the next generation.

Berger and Luckman on Socialization

For Berger and Luckman (1966), the process of becoming a knowledgeable participant in the on-going activities of society requires socialization. Socialization involves the internalization of meanings expressed by significant others during shared events. An important part of this process is language. Language categorizes and anonymizes experience. It contains recipes for action built up by others which Berger and Luckman call the social stock of knowledge. As individuals learn to speak, they also acquire preconceived ways of thinking about experience that are encoded in language. Berger and Luckman view the social world as a constructed edifice collectively manufactured by human beings. This world appears as an objective reality to each individual. In a dialectical fashion, individuals can act back upon the social world as well as having it act upon them. Individuals are not passive recipients of social

and cultural directives. They can disobey them, negotiate them, and half-heartedly carry them out. The directives can also be reformulated. Thus, the process of socialization is not totally deterministic.

Enculturation and the Curriculum

From the summaries of how enculturation, cultural transmission, and socialization take place, it is possible to view schooling as a major agency for shaping the young into adequate performers of the cultural traditions. Of consequence, within the school, are the teacher and the curriculum. Teachers are certified professional informers. They are sanctioned by society to explain aspects of the social world to children and they are required to undergo professional socialization wherein they pass through the ritual of student teaching and receive their certification. As official representatives of society, their major task is to ensure that students have internalized selected parts of the social stock of knowledge that have been approved by school boards, state departments of education, and textbook companies. This selected knowledge is then presented, interpreted, and mediated by the teacher. The documentation of the knowledge and the instructional process for sharing it make up the curriculum.

Beauchamp (1983), a curriculum specialist, supports this view. He states that: "A curriculum is an expression of the choice of content selected from our total cultural content....curriculum planning is a process of selecting and organizing culture content for transmission to students by the school" (p. 92).

Connelly and Dienes (1982), who are also curriculum specialists, likewise note that: "The actions teachers perform before, during, and following instruction are undertaken in the interests of students and, as such, are appropriately seen as curricular. Curriculum, in this sense, is a process continually under development, since the course of any sequence of teacher actions is inevitably varied and only partially charted in advance" (p. 183).

The Visual Arts Curriculum

Art education is very much a part of the process of enculturation. Through art teachers, curriculum guides, art textbooks, and art materials, many historically rooted ideas about art come to be known by the young. They most likely will come to know about the elements and principles of design, that art is creative, and that the best way to know about art is by making something. These concepts are part of the cultural traditions and stock of knowledge espoused by art teachers. They are familiar taken-for-granted ideas that we have examined very little. if at all. Because we have been in a crisis situation for some time regarding our presence in the schools, it seems to me that it is appropriate to examine and reflect upon the concepts that we transmit through our lessons and classroom activities at the elementary and secondary levels, and in teacher education. Let us examine our practice and engage in cultural analysis to see if we have a need to rethink and revise the messages that we share about art in the classroom. Questions that might be raised during a cultural analysis are: What is actually taught in art and art education classes? Where have these concepts come from? Why do we transmit them? Are they of value? Do they enhance student understanding in the visual arts? How are they understood?

Cultural analysis of our art ideas and practices in art education can contribute to the development of theory and practice in the study of culture. Wuthnow, Hunter, Bergesen, and Kurzwell (1984) note that many contemporary thinkers "perceive significant problems in modern

culture which require critical reflection" (p.18). In a recent book, they reviewed work in cultural analysis by sociologist Peter Berger, anthropologist Mary Douglas, historian Michel Foucault, and critical theorist Juergen Habermas. These scholars have attempted to examine the phenomenon of contemporary life and to reflect upon what it is, how it came to be, and the structure of our present web of cultural meanings, and to suggest how our culture might be reformulated. To be considered in a critical reflection of our culture and its problems is an examination of the role of the visual arts in modern society and their place in the lives of educated persons. Art educators are in an excellent position to reflect on these problems and others about art, society, and culture and to contribute answers to them. From this kind of analysis and reflection, we might be able to better understand what it is that we do and how we might improve our practice and position in the schools.

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