

BOOK REVIEW

**Dennis Fehr, Kris King Fehr &
Karen Keifer-Boyd, (Eds.), (2000);**

*Real-World Readings in Art
Education: Things Your Professors
Never Told You*

New York: Falmer Press. 176 pages.

ISBN 0-8153-3541-5 (hardcover) approx. \$65.00

Dennis E. Fehr

Teaching as Transgression: The Story of Real-world Readings in Art Education: Things Your Professors Never Told You

In this paper a theoretically critical approach to art education (as described in a recently published book, *Real-World Readings in Art Education: Things Your Professors Never Told You*) challenges teacher-as-artist and discipline-based art education models. I use informal language in places to distance myself politically from higher-ed jargon users whose work is often ignored by classroom art teachers (the book's audience).

The question is this: What's missing from all that preening, posturing, and horn-tooting by the teachers-as-artists and the discipline-based art eddies? Kristen Fehr, Karen Keifer-Boyd and I have edited a

book in which prominent critical art educators give some in-your-face answers, but before I describe them, let's look at the horn-blowing. The teacher-as-artist model-arted as a series of studio activities with minimal linkage to art viewing or societal issues—dominated art education in the post-war 1940s and 50s, boosted by Viktor Lowenfeld's *Creative and Mental Growth* (1947).

Criticism of this model—in fact the sprout that would grow into DBAE—emerged in 1960 when Jerome Bruner suggested that art ed be defined as a series of disciplines. Elliot Eisner (1972) and others, driven by a blend of noble intent and Getty Center money, tinkered with Bruner's suggestion. Their tinkering crystallized into DBAE in the 1980s.

DBAE, popular though it be, has not replaced the artist-as-teacher model, however. Its staying power is suggested in the fall 1998 issue of *Studies in Art Education*, where we read that domination of Canadian and U.S. graduate art ed programs is shared by both approaches (Anderson, Eisner, and McRorie). And *Creative and Mental Growth* still sells so well that no one can keep track of which edition is current.

The irony of the teacher-as-artist model is that its proclaimed strength, studio production with little in-depth exposure to art exemplars or life outside the school, is its greatest weakness. First, this approach perpetuates the cocoon-like isolation from society that has served the art world so poorly in the 20th century. By ignoring much of the content of visual art, this approach assures the subject's frill status in schools and undermines art's potential as an agent of social reconstruction.

Second, requiring children to make one artwork after another over the course of a school year without comprehensive study of strong work done by others is unfair. Why are our own studio walls covered with postcards of artists' openings and pages torn from *ArtFORUM*? Because we choose not to work in a vacuum. Because we are inspired by the work of others. Because we cannot individually generate many of the universal symbols found in our world's art heritage. How can we place studio demands on our students while denying them access to the symbology we provide ourselves? Such matters are part of what art educator Ed Check (1998) referred to when he said art education can be a silly field.

Even cynical postmodernists like me will allow that in one way DBAE has benefited art education—it has made art viewing important. Its problem is how it does this: DBAE is tainted with one of humanity's most enduring traditions—racism.

DBAE's roots reach back to ancient Greek philosophy (aesthetics), 19th-century U. S. academe (art history), and capitalist economics (criticism). Aesthetic philosophy is an ancient Western discipline, traceable at least to Plato. Greece was the cradle of Western civilization, and our students almost always study only Western aestheticians.

What do Asian, African, Native American, and other cultures say about the nature of visual imagery? What have women, Western or Nonwestern, said? We don't know. And if we seek to answer these questions using DBAE, we must assume that DBAE's disciplines are applicable to these groups. This assumption is academically reckless and culturally arrogant. The answers are more honestly found by skipping DBAE and approaching our research with an open mind and a cautious awareness of our Western biases (Fehr, 1995a).

A second DBAE discipline, art history, emerged in U. S. universities in the late 19th century. One of its goals was to create cultural parity with Europe's educated class. One of its results was to create a European canon. This in turn created a European standard by which to judge all other art.

The same urge, but couched in economic terms, drove the creation of the quintessentially Western field of art criticism. Art criticism has always been more an economic than an academic endeavor. Its primary purpose is to serve the collectigentsia's practice of investing in art they don't understand. Twin ironies undermine DBAE's insistent justification of this Eurocentric, capitalistic approach to art viewing—the Western art community is beginning to accept world art on equal footing, and American schools are filling with children of all ethnicities.

At the 1996 annual conference of the National Art Education Association, I encountered a typically pinched perspective of a prominent DBAE apologist on the faculty of one of the Getty's six national centers. I asked her how Getty footsoldiers justify DBAE's bastardizing of Nonwestern imagery. She responded that the Getty is increasing its

Nonwestern curricular materials.

I kindly and gently suggested that increasing a bad thing won't make it better. The conversation ended there—I think she said Barbara Walters was waiting to interview her or something.

At a state art ed conference in 1997, a faculty member from another Getty center gave this answer to the same query: "That's not a problem because DBAE can be anything you want." This argument denies that DBAE is a model with four specified disciplines. If DBAE supporters do realize the racial bias of these disciplines and consequently step outside them, they are no longer practicing DBAE.

So where do we go? Critical theory's emphasis on challenging authority seems to be one signpost of tomorrow's art education. Postmodernism's dismissal of grand narratives seems to be another. Add feminist consciousness-raising and the political activism of a host of marginalized groups, and a picture begins to emerge. The roots of this approach are not new—an early progressive call for art education to link itself with the rest of the world came from John Dewey in 1916. Manuel Barkan, a Deweyan art educator, wrote in 1955 that the social environment is the best place for children to grow into responsible adults. In 1961 June King McFee, one of the few prominent female voices in art education at the time, revived progressive populism by calling for art education for oppressed groups.

Such visionaries may emerge as the most influential shapers of art education in the 21st century. Today, however, their observations are largely un-addressed in the professional literature, pushed aside by DBAE discussions of postimpressionism and teacher-as-artist tips on how to paint on aluminum foil—in other words, what many of us were taught in college.

This state of affairs is driving growing numbers of scholars to create a new place for art ed to go. In 1980 art educator Vincent Lanier called for making our youth literate about visual documents that explore their social oppression. Andreas Huyssen (1990) advises abandoning the dead end created when modernists separated politics from aesthetics. Elizabeth Garber (1992) calls for curriculum building blocks about issues, themes, and cultural phenomena rather than formal art vocabulary, art

styles, and canonical exemplars stripped of their cultural contexts.

Building on these ideas, Kristen, Karen, and I, along with our panel of authors, describe a version of this new place with a book of transgressive essays titled *Real-world readings in art education: Things your professors never told you*. Our version is primarily for classroom art teachers, the people we feel are—along with their students—the most important members of our field.

Real-world readings is divided into four sections: *Real-world classroom voices: Protesting the rules*; *Real-world aesthetics: Breaking the rules*; *Real-world art lessons: Teaching outside the rules*; and *Real-world structural change: Writing new rules*.

Section I, *Real-world Classroom Voices: Protesting the Rules*, grapples with the daily experience of teaching art in today's public schools. In Chapter 1, Kathleen Connors presents classroom teachers' stories in their words, and those words vibrate to anyone who has been there. In Chapter 2, Paul Duncum challenges sentimental and manipulative adult views of childhood created by the corporate world. He proposes art curricula that make children aware of these media fictions. Daily artroom experience is a topic studiously avoided by many art education writers, and in Chapter 3 Elizabeth Manley Delacruz explores why. In Chapter 4, Yvonne Gaudelius combines scholarly and personal prose to explore differences between critical and feminist theories. She offers a feminist definition of art on which contemporary curricula can be based.

The authors in Section II, *Real-world aesthetics: Breaking the rules*, challenge mainstream assumptions about what art is, what good art is, and what the tradition of honoring only the European patriarchal canon has done to children in schools. I describe a lowrider art curriculum I developed with an inner-city middle school teacher to enable her Latin students to honor their artistic heritage and yet become aware of the sexism in lowrider culture. Harriet Walker discusses how art teachers can use interviewing to teach artforms unique to their geographic regions. She demonstrates this by interviewing two Southern African-American photographers. By examining the artforms and teaching practices of Appalachian mountain cultures, Christine Ballengee Morris measures the cultural loss that results from teaching only mainstream art. Grace

Deniston critiques the myth of high art imposed on art majors by university art faculty. Deborah Smith-Shank suggests that art curricula address issues such as aging, reproductive rights, motherhood, and standards of beauty.

Section III, Real-world art lessons: Teaching outside the rules, gets at the heart of the matter—incorporating radical art educational theory into daily classroom practice. Each of these chapters offers alternative content in practical terms. Olivia Gude describes two radical art lessons on how women are trained to see themselves. Mary Wyrick deconstructs the media's one-dimensional portrayals of women. Laurel Lampela provides ways of discussing artists' sexual orientations in public school classrooms. Future Akins suggests that art teachers bring the sacred into their classroom practice. Lisette Ewing goes beyond arguing for the inclusion of visually impaired students in studio activities; she convincingly explains how to include them in viewing as well. Frank Pio describes a mural project he developed for an at-risk school on Manhattan's Lower East Side. Drawing on the religious myths of the Ojibwe people, Pio created a program in which members of ethnic gangs studied each others' cultures and created murals honoring their diverse heritages.

The authors in Section IV, Real-world structural change: Writing new rules, outline ways to radicalize school policy, curricula, and teaching. Marianne Stevens Suggs and Gayle Weitz present a burlesque field guide of guerrilla tactics for art educators who seek change. Karen Keifer-Boyd describes how she promoted democratic art education by including voices from the community in developing a local art curriculum. Ed Check describes how sharing his authority with his sixth graders caused them to take responsibility for their educations. Michael Emme calls for art educators to become comfortable with electronic technology in preparation for a future in which art education's format is nonlinear and electronic rather than linear and text-based.

Emme's article reminds me of a comment I recently heard from an art educator, a comment that further clarified the need for this book. She suggested that making art with a computer diminishes the immediacy of the aesthetic moment by placing a technological intercessory between artists and their work. I responded that I could imagine the same criticism befalling the first human artisan to make a line with a charred stick instead of a soot-covered finger: "Hey, Org—you diminish

immediacy of aesthetic moment by placing technological intercessory between you and work. Stop it!"

To summarize, we are living through an important moment on the West's millennial clock, a moment rich with symbolic opportunity. Today, countless marginalized groups are finding their voices and creating new artforms that hybridize components of their heritages with the heritages of the mainstream West. These artforms often represent a third culture-their experiences in the cultural borderlands (Fehr, 1995b). These cultures and their artforms cannot be understood within teacher-as-artist programs that disdain viewing and ignore social issues. And they cannot be depicted fairly within the strictures of DBAE. Real-world readings offers teachers a democratic alternative.

Real-world readings in art education: Things your professors never told you was published by Falmer Publishing, New York in January 2000. Phone: 1.800.627.6273.

References

- Barkan, M. (1955). *A foundation for art education*. New York: Ronald Press.
- Bruner, J. (1960). *The process of education*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
- Check, E. (1998). Conversation with the author.
- Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy in education*. New York: Macmillan.
- Eisner, E. (1972). *Educating artistic vision*. New York: Macmillan.
- Fehr, D. (1995a). *Context-based art education: A new model for a new era*. Keynote address. Michigan Art Education Association Annual Conference. Dearborn MI.
- Fehr, D. (1995b). *Interview on Libri: The Radio Book Review*. WPSU Radio, State College PA (an affiliate of National Public Radio).
- Garber, E. (1992). Feminism, aesthetics, and art education. *Studies in Art Education*, 33, 2, 210-225.
- Huyssen, A. (1990). Mapping the postmodern. In L. J. Nicholson [Ed.], *Feminism/postmodernism* (234-277). New York:

Routledge.

Lanier, V. (1980). Six items on the agenda for the eighties. *Art Education*, 33, 1, 16-23.

Lowenfeld, V. (1947). *Creative and mental growth*. New York: Macmillan.

McFee, J. (1961). *Preparation for art*. Belmont CA: Wadsworth Press.

