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Original Paper

Broadening the Understanding of Art Education

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the possibilities of approaching art education teaching methods with pragmatism. In the traditional sense, the role of the art educator has been to develop technical and visual skills of students. Today, the art educator is capable of developing teaching methods to enrich minds. Through thoughtful educational experiences, art educators may teach their students that works of art hold within them various social, cultural, personal meanings, and interpretations, which are an extension of the limitless possibilities explored by those who practice art making. Art educators must take into consideration students' capacity in artistic learning. The understanding of art will differ as a result of students' exposure to art, in addition to their understanding of everyday life. To arrive at new and renewed approaches, educators may pose questions, such as, how may art educators continue to teach traditional art, which is valuable when it comes to understanding the artistic styles that form diverse cultural and social fabrics, while also introducing contemporary art practices? In what ways may art educators engage with their students, share their experiences and knowledge, while simultaneously presenting them with new challenges?

Keywords

art education, artistic development, contemporary art practices

1. Introduction

There are a variety of experiences that shape the way people the world over perceive the arts and art education. As a visual arts educator, and a researcher who has studied various modes of visual communication produced in African, Arab, and Western countries, I have also experienced first hand the different contexts in which visual art can be created. The experiences that have shaped the way art educators approach education differs greatly depending on a number of factors including social and

cultural perceptions. Arnheim (1991), summarized how art can be understood from not only one part of the world to another, but from one individual to another,

> Various experiences move men and women to give thought to the principles underlying art education. There are the artists, who are impelled by their craft to demand the necessary skills be taught in a particular manner. They say that if you want to become a good painter or a good ceramicist, you have to acquire certain techniques and you have to go about using them in certain ways. Then there are the teachers, who see the artwork in the context of total development of the young person. There are others. I myself have spent forty years telling college students about the arts by trying to make suitable works come alive on the lecture screen and by explaining as best I could how these works manage to exert their magical influence (p. 9).

In the traditional sense, the role of the art educator was mainly to develop the technical and visual skills of the students who were taught to draw what they observe accurately and correctly. However, their role has expanded to encompass the stimulation of the young mind, to encourage exploration of techniques and materials. Pedagogy, according to Arnheim (1991), has switched in the 20th century, and the focus has become less on standards of correctness, and more on the impulse to create. He described this as being of great value for art education; a new freedom that "changed learning from a mechanical drill to the development of the finest strivings of the young mind" (Arnheim, 1991, p. 32). Various studies in art education (Carey, 1985; Fischer, 1980; Karmiloff-Smith, 1986) have discussed the benefits of a good art education and suggest that the teaching of art should consider students' artistic development, diverse backgrounds, and expose them to different concepts, materials, and explorations. Through thoughtful experiences, art educators may teach their students that works of art hold within them different social, cultural, aesthetics, personal meanings, and interpretations, which are an extension of the limitless possibilities explored by artists.

My mentor and advisor throughout my Doctoral education at Teachers College, Columbia University, Dr. Judith Burton, taught me that learning new forms of art and art making leads students and educators alike to explore new areas, rather than abandoning who they are; it expands their understanding about art and directs them to the critical study of self, society, and history. Additionally, liberating art from limited ways of viewing encourages students to freely express themselves. Young people should not be taught passiveness when it comes to receiving knowledge, but should be encouraged to be independent thinkers and challenge mainstream ideas (Burton, 2013). Setting inflexible limitations in the art classroom can be detrimental to the learning process and may lead to students losing interest in art making. If each class is structured in a similar fashion, and students do not have a say in how they approach art, they will not understand the possibilities of art, and, consequently, begin to undervalue it. Such restrictions have a ripple effect, damage students' current perspectives in the art classroom, their respective societies, and ultimately their future perceptions (Burton, 2013).

Art as a discipline, and a field of practice is dynamic and continuously evolving. What is needed is a paradigm that embraces different outcomes; to arrive at new and renewed approaches to art education, educators may pose the questions, such as, how may art educators continue to teach traditional art, which is valuable when it comes to understanding the artistic styles that form diverse cultural and social fabrics, while also introducing contemporary art practices? In what ways may art educators engage with their students, share their experiences and knowledge, while simultaneously presenting them with new challenges (Burton, 2013)?

According to Erikson (1968), high school students, who are in the developmental phase of adolescence, are completely capable of understanding themselves and determining their own sources of influences, self-success, and a sense of individuality and identity. Important concepts, such as an understanding of one's self and critical thinking, take shape during adolescence. Offering students the room to develop their abilities, and reflect on their art making is important to their intellectual development as well. According to Whitmire (1996), rather than telling students how they should make art, lesson plans that include critical thinking skills, self-observation, and analysis are important in taking art education a step further. Greene (2000) echoes this sentiment through the argument that teaching methods which encourage students to confront social norms and beliefs require critical thinking skills that encourage students to identify challenging issues, become more analytical, and produce solutions through their art making. It is this type of critical thinking which is needed to move art forward in their communities; teachers "must become critical thinkers themselves" before they can teach their students to do so (Sternberg, 1987, p. 456).

2. Artistic and Human Development

The acquirement of techniques, and the insistence on acceptable results are necessary in the arts as they are in other subjects, but as in any of these fields, factual knowledge has to be introduced with much sensitivity (Arnheim, 1991). If a student is taught something new at the wrong time, it may be useless and meaningless because it may not fit with what they can understand at a specific time in their development. Arnheim (1991), also poses an important question, "Where does art education stand in relation to the task of forming a fully developed person?" (p. 55). His response to this question is that art education should operate as one of the three central areas of learning intended to equip the young mind with the basic abilities needed for coping successfully with every branch of the curriculum. The first of these three central areas is philosophy, instructing the student in logic, which is the skill of reasoning correctly, epistemology; the ability to understand the relation of the human mind to the world of reality, and ethics; to distinguish between right and wrong. The second central idea he discusses is visual training, where the student learns to use visual phenomena as the principal way of organizing their thought processes. The third area is language training, which enables students to communicate their thoughts verbally. These three areas, according to Arnheim (1990), would be beneficial to apply in art education because they provide the basic preparation, and would entail a beneficial interrelation

between the arts and other fields. However, without careful study of the current state of art education, and setting newer goals rather than referring to ones that have been set long ago, the situation will remain the same (McCarthy, 2005). Without the teaching of skills combined with artistic knowledge, students may find it difficult to locate their individual areas of competence that cultivate particular skills and achievements (Lowenfeld, 1957).

Art educators must also consider that not all students develop and grow at the same pace; their development differs based on their individual personalities and their art making experiences inside and outside of educational institutions (Burton, 2013). Additionally, students' level of understanding of art as a result of their exposure to art and art making, in addition to their understanding of everyday life (Kohlberg, 1969; Piaget, 1970; Turiel, 1969). It is essential that art educators pay attention to the development of students' personal repertoires (Burton, 2013). From an early age, artistic development begins when children make their first marks on a surface, which are frequently made during infancy. These repertoires become more complex and expressive as individuals move through the phases of their childhood and late adolescence (Burton, 2013). Artistic development may be considered "linear" in a general sense; however, young people "make choices within their repertoires and move back-and-forth from earlier to later phases in response to particular experiences and challenges" (Burton, 2013, p. 16). Therefore, rather than imposing art making lessons with a disregard for artistic development, it is important that art educators better understand and research artistic development in children, adolescents, and adults. It is also important that art educators are aware of the abilities of their students, "this means being knowledgeable about the circumstances of their lives and the skills, strengths, interests, and abilities they bring with them into the art classroom for these may be very different from those exhibited elsewhere" (Burton, 2013, p. 16). In addition to art educators and the art classroom, there are also social and cultural influences outside of educational institutions, such as families, the media, and friends (Kisida & Bowen, 2019). Thus the external influences must not be separated from what takes place within the art classroom, and art education should be centered on weaving connections through students' individual and collective experiences and artistic repertoires; "a knowledgeable respect for materials and their possibilities, and of development and its potential, are essential guides to good pedagogical practice" (Burton, 2013, p. 17). Connecting artistic undertakings to personal and collective experiences will increase the likelihood that students will appreciate artistic knowledge and the assimilation of artistic skills (Eisner, 1985; Gardner, 1973; Polanyi, 1958).

3. Rethinking Art Education Approaches

A common way of approaching education is usually through associating the process of education with knowledge. In the book, *Contemporary Art from the Middle East* (Keshmirshekan, 2015), James Allan, a professor of Eastern art, commented on knowledge and education in relation to Middle Eastern art specifically, however, his arguments apply to art education in a broader sense, "All too often, education is seen as synonymous with knowledge. But the acquisition of knowledge is only a part of education.

For education is about training a student's mind: it is the opportunity a student has to examine and assess a particular body of information, and then draw from it valid and worthwhile conclusions" (p. 105). He also encouraged art educators to be selective with what they teach students since there is an existing plethora of contemporary art,

> And the staff available at any one institution will inevitably impose their own selectivity, so that their own interests and enthusiasms can flourish to their own benefit and that of their students. This is surely both possible and appropriate, for we can still use that limited body of material to train students to assess evidence, to make judgments, and to come to conclusions. That is education (p. 105).

When subjects such as art history, criticism, and aesthetics are combined with studio practices, education becomes active rather than passive. Also, art making in the art classroom normally leads to informal discussions taking place; if the dialogue inspires students to make connections between their art making, and reflections, they may learn more about their own artistic processes, and reinforce what they are learning in their history, criticism, and aesthetic classes. Through their own art making students may be able to draw connections between their own art and contemporary art that is being made in their respective societies.

Burton (2013) explains that there are guiding principles that good art educators put to use when designing art lessons, teaching those lessons, and the ongoing assessment of students' art making. They are not fixed principles, but rather possibilities that can be explored within the realm of art education, even in the most complex teaching circumstances. Fostering collaboration between art educators, and their students is a crucial step in creating curriculums that are flexible, and as dynamic as students' artistic development (Burton, 2013; Carpenter & Gandara, 2018). Art educators must understand that some students may possess special talents that can be developed, while others may need encouragement in order to overcome obstacles, however, all students must be challenged according to their individual art making abilities. Art educators are responsible for guiding and molding their students' learning processes, and simultaneously learning from them, and with them. It is the good art educators who pay attention to individual students, while also paying attention to how collective students' perspectives, and visual voices weave into the fabric that is the art classroom, and beyond. Burton (2013), also suggests that good art educators know how to move away from their plans when circumstances demand, and accommodate the "unexpected and untried" (p. 15). Art educators have the valuable opportunity of becoming researchers within their art classrooms, and studios; there is much to be learned from observing students and their progress that may assist educators in "artistic-aesthetic learning" (p. 15). It is every art educator's responsibility to remain open to unpredictable occurrences in their classroom, to be curious and critical, and develop their own theories based on what they hear and see. This approach to continuous reflection will encourage educators to delve deeper into their own teaching experiences rather than limiting themselves to fixed conventions and theories suggested by

others. An educator developing their own theories helps them approach education from a point of continuous flexibility and revival rather than stagnancy.

4. Conclusion

Art education is vital to the human experience through all stages of development. It is not always a simple task to ascertain which approaches work best when developing an art education curriculum at the K-12, colleges, and beyond. Howard Gardner (1990) has stated, "even if we were far more knowledgeable about artistic learning than we actually are, it is unlikely that we could arrive at a foolproof formula in arts education; values differ too greatly, across and even within, cultures" (p. 38). However, what remains significant in art education is that educators understand artistic and human development. Additionally, it is imperative that art educators construct classes that are flexible, engaging, and encouraging when it comes to classroom dialogues and student art making. Students may be encouraged to incorporate their cultural and social experiences within the classroom individually and collectively. There are many possibilities that art educators and students can explore collaboratively within educational settings that transform the learning experience from a one-way transmission of knowledge to a mutual learning experience.

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