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PERSPECTIVES IN LEARNING

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Evolving Practices in Art Education

*By Todd Applegate
and Kristen Evans*

More than 100 years ago, university-dominated educational commissions began ascribing a priority to school subjects in primary and secondary education. In defining the roles and purposes of the modern secondary school, educators struggled with how best to determine the relative importance of individual school subjects. In 1894, Harvard president Charles Eliot led the Committee of Ten on Secondary School Studies, established by the National Education Association (NEA), to recommend that all secondary school students study a common curriculum focusing on the sciences, history, reading, writing and arithmetic (Clark, 1996, p.14). Only one year later another NEA commission, the Committee of Fifteen, similarly recommended a curriculum for elementary school students that focused on history, geography, grammar, literature and arithmetic. Influenced by the characteristics of industrial modernism— including the quest to have the newest and best—these two university-based committees ushered in a curricular era characterized by scientific-rationalism. Under the recommendations of both the Committee of Ten and the Committee of Fifteen, art and music were placed in positions of curricular inferiority (Clark, 1996, p. 15). The launch of Sputnik I in 1957, coupled with Cold War rivalries in the 1950s, gave science and mathematics an additional boost due to their ability to prove their timely worth (Eisner, 2002, p.27). In consequence, the arts were further relegated to the status of “electives.”

Three Approaches to Teaching Art

Discipline-Based Art Education

After several decades of decreasing emphasis on art education, remarkable changes began in the early 1980s. Art education received an inspired new direction and vigorous promotion when the Getty Center for Education in the Arts unveiled a new approach to art education pedagogy called Discipline-Based Art Education (DBAE).

DBAE presented a shift away from the sole creation of studio projects in favor of the study of art as a subject matter discipline with four main parts: studio production, art history, art criticism, and aesthetics. This approach to teaching provided a foundation and structure for presenting art as a discipline worthy of study in its own right. However, it received criticism on various fronts including lack of emphasis on cultural or personal meaning; heavy reliance upon Western fine art, formalism, and visual exemplars; and inattention to individuality and holistic learning (Clark, 1996, p.76).

Overemphasizing Western fine art can give students a tunnel-vision view of the art world that disenfranchises women and minorities, places little value on

non-Western art, and does not reflect the diversity of our nation. Using only the visual exemplars provided by the Western art world subtly suggests to students that white males have always been the best artists.

Formalism in art education focuses on the notion that there are fundamental elements and principles of design—line, shape, value, color, texture, rhythm, unity, and balance—that underlie all works of art. Because a formalist emphasis concentrates heavily on the study of these basic elements, students often do not have adequate freedom to explore their imaginations and reflect on the world around them.

After several years of positive change with DBAE, the rising influence of postmodernism in the art world encouraged new directions in the field of art education. Postmodernism suggests philosophical approaches that are grounded in issues of meaning and are relevant to each individual's experiences and understanding of the world around them. Two approaches affecting art education namely, reformism and reconstructionism, are influenced by postmodernism.

Reformist Art Education

Reformist pedagogical practices tend to follow the formalistic structure laid out by DBAE. However, reformers acknowledge the importance of postmodernism and encourage teachers to provide instructional activities that include social or cultural components along with formalistic considerations. For example, 5th grade students in a reformist classroom might learn about the importance of clean water in their science class and use this information to create a narrative self-portrait incorporating water-related symbols and subject matter to illustrate how they feel about their own relationship to the environment. In a reformist project, individual creativity and personal meaning would be equally emphasized with formal issues such as color theory and realistic rendering.

Reconstructive Art Education

Reconstructionist pedagogical practices further underscore the importance of content and construction of meaning by placing them at the heart of art education. These practices are closely tied to the characteristics of postmodernism and seem to fit harmoniously with constructivist practices of teaching and learning. In a reconstructionist classroom, students are challenged to inquire, question, compare, relate and express things concerning social and cultural issues. When students produce artwork that is based on real world events and issues, they are afforded the valuable experience of mirroring reality in their work. Reconstructionist teachers interact with students as mentors and facilitators rather than as lecturers and didactic dispensers of wisdom. Art education, in this view, becomes “a means for understanding and improving the culture” (Eisner, 2002, p.29). Art activities taught in a reconstructionist environment are more closely aligned with “those of the contemporary art world” (Clark, 1996, p.65).

Whether today's students are receiving their art education from a traditional DBAE, reformist, or reconstructionist approach, the pedagogy, credibility, and value of art education is evolving. These evolving practices are gaining

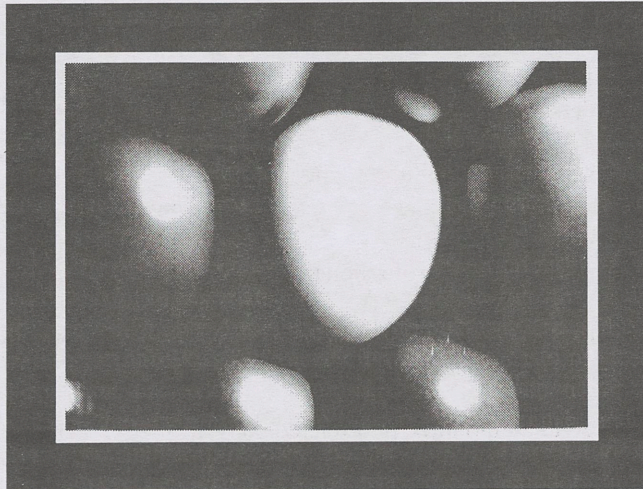
recognition as both a valuable part of the curriculum and a way of developing the vital thinking and problem-solving skills necessary for student success in all disciplines.

References

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photograph