The Art Educator as Disenfranchised Intellectual: A Problem of Social Legitimation

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Abstract

In this paper the occupational role and options of art educators are examined with the discussion generally limited to those art educators that have doctorates or prospects of university employment. On the basis of a theory that artistic knowledge comprises a form of cultural capital, it is proposed that the art educator is able to exercise power to the degree aesthetic capital is legitimated in modern society. It is further proposed that the art educator is particularly vulnerable to the Western world view wherein conditional legitimation is given to affective knowledge modalities and nonquantifiable learning. As a result, art educators often have been disenfranchised from exercising the full range of their educational expertise and have experienced varying degrees of professional alienation.

Art educators' sense of place within the educational field, their level of job satisfaction, their available options, and the future they envision are tempered and circumscribed by their socio-educational status. Within the larger scope of society, art educators are one particular group within the New Class which consists of the intellectual and technological elite of modern society (Galbraith, 1965). The New Class is essentially the foundation of our Information Society.

Unlike the Old Class of the nineteenth century whose capital and power proceeded from the accumulation of tangible goods, the New Class possesses abstract knowledge skills and educational credentials that allow it to offer services in the manipulation of theories, ideas, and information. The New Class is comprised of members as diverse as social workers, teachers, film critics, medical doctors, lawyers, and engineers, who have in common the ability to articulate specialized knowledge and to examine the rules and premises of their operating procedures. As such, the New Class encompasses a variety of speech communities that Gouldner (1979) has collectively called the Culture of Critical Discourse (CCD). The Culture of Aesthetic Discourse (CAD), of which art educators are members, is a specific community within the more

broadly based CCD (Hamblen, 1984). The CAD not only entails the articulation of written and verbal descriptions and analyses of art, but such knowledge about art that is ultimately based on an elaborated repertoire of visual imagery and its foundations in psychology, sociology, and education.

A Theory of Cultural Capital

To explain the twentieth century phenomenon of the New Class, Gouldner has proposed a multiple theory of language and of cultural capital which runs as follows: the New Class possesses specialized knowledge articulated in an elaborated, rule-bound speech code that affords its members jobs, opportunities, and incomes inaccessible to those without these intellectual skills. Cultural capital should not be considered merely an economic metaphor. Human abilities and potentials may be capitalized when they are formalized into coherent patterns of behavior; cultural capital is knowledge, skills, and information used to gain incomes and advantages. Education is the economic base of the New Class. It is through education that the New Class acquires "control of special cultures, languages, techniques, and of skills resulting from these" (Gouldner, p. 19). Cultural capital is income-producing by virtue of the power it wields and the respect it evokes.

Although the character of aesthetic knowledge and its articulation in discourse and art products comprises the capital base for the art educator, it is the knowledge-as-capital aspect of Gouldner's multiple theory that is the focus of this paper. In other words, it is not the purpose of this paper to examine the aesthetic capital possessed by the art educator, but rather to discuss the options, practices, and opportunities--or lack of them--that result from having aesthetic capital.

Through a costly and lengthy investment in educational training, the art educator acquires knowledge about art in relationship to educational methodologies for imparting such knowledge. In possessing this particular type of cultural capital, the art educator is able to exercise power to the degree aesthetic capital is legitimated in modern society. Herein lies the problem and the primary source of the art educator's disenfranchisement. Capital is socially defined. A skill, a commodity, or even a tangible good is only as valuable as society says it is. Capital's "income claims (must be socially

enforceable and culturally recognized" (Gouldner, p. 23). In some cultures a ceremonial dance to assuage illness may be a more highly prized form of cultural capital than knowledge of a computer language. Knowledge to navigate by the stars and to shoe horses were at one time highly necessary and valued forms of cultural capital. Cultural capital represents what is valued in a given society; it represents socially defined needs.

The literature of art education is replete with laments on the precarious position of art programs (Hamblen, 1983; Hobbs, 1983). It is fairly well-established that despite increased museum attendance and a high monetary value placed on the arts (Silverman, 1984), the general public still believes that education in the three Rs is more important than visual arts education. In other words, the art educator possesses a form of cultural capital that has ambivalent social legitimacy as well as lesser value than other types of educational capital. This is not to imply that all art educators experience a limited exercise of capital, but rather that disenfranchisement is a modal characteristic of the field.

The conditional legitimation of aesthetic capital may be linked to various characteristics of the field that have been discussed in the literature. These may be summarized as follows: the almost total focus on studio production to the exclusion of socio-historical and art critical content; the vested interest art supply companies have in maintaining studio pedagogy; the propagation of a formalistic ethic that distances students from their everyday aesthetic experiences; an emphasis on nonquantifiable educational outcomes; and, perhaps most importantly, the Western tendency to fallaciously separate nonverbal knowledge modalities from cognition (Beyer, 1985; Hamblen, 1983a, 1983b, 1983c; Hobbs, 1983; Lanier, 1981).

The extent to which any type of capital has legitimacy is measured by its enforceable claims when there is a threat to withhold its services; capital is legitimated to the extent its absence would create a social void. This economic law of cultural capital has potent implications for art education. All too well aware of their marginal position, art educators have wisely not tempted the social fates by threatening to withdraw their aesthetic capital services. Rather, the field of art education has often been characterized by

adjustments and accommodations to fickle social validations of worth. The remainder of this paper will be devoted to examining how art educators have attempted to compensate for an often unappreciative public, an oversupply of art professionals, an undersupply of job openings, and limited upward mobility.

Sources of Alienation

Assumptions of Moral Superiority

According to Gouldner (pp. 227-229), the New Class believes that its culture represents the highest achievements of humankind and that those possessing such capital should provide intellectual, social, and political leadership. Correspondingly, the New Class believes it should receive the greatest respect and rewards. "Intellectuals, like others, seek to equilibrate power and goodness. They want power commensurate with what they think to be their value" (Gouldner, p. 81).

No differently than other groups within the New Class, art educators have tended to believe that they provide knowledge and skills essential to the betterment of humanity. Yet, art classes continue to be eliminated from the general curriculum and society appears to increasingly depend upon and laud the accomplishments of the technocrat. The disparity between perceived value and actualized power is, perhaps, one of the reasons for the extravagant and diverse claims that have been made for the benefits of art study (Lanier, 1981).

Trapped within the painful conundrum of having a moral obligation to disseminate aesthetic knowledge, yet not receiving social validation, the art educator may refer to assumptions of professionalism and claims of moral superiority over the Old Class and other segments of the New Class. In contrast to the moneyed Old Class, the New Class is intent upon controlling the work conditions and content of their work, rather than advocating for wages per se. In contrast to the technocrat who indiscriminately applies technological skills to produce innovations, the New Class humanist focuses on the production of "worthy objects and services" and ways of avoiding alienating labor (Gouldner, p. 20). Conflict among New Class humanists and technocrats dates to the nineteenth century when the technocrats' skills were put to use by the middle class in the mass production of goods. The New Class humanist claims to rise above the exigencies of profit motivations, acquisition of material possessions, and implementation of technical control. However, as it will be noted later, when

necessary, the art educator is not adverse to forming alliances with technocrats--or the Old Class.

Meta-Discourse

Gouldner has proposed that the very nature of the capital base of the intellectual fosters disenfranchisement and alienation. The Culture of Critical Discourse (CCD), or, in this case, the Culture of Aesthetic Discourse (CAD), is based on a reflexive, problematizing stance toward itself which disallows for psychological stability and a sense of certitude. The New Class is in the business of improving, enhancing, and developing that which is. Thoroughly immersed in the values of modernity wherein change is equated with progress, the New Class cannot allow the status quo to remain as such. The New Class is in permanent revolution against itself as well as with competing factions. The proliferation of proposed programs in art education, the continual need to probe and examine the historical and psychological foundations of the field, and the finite points of argumentation that receive extensive coverage in the literature are aspects that establish the professionalism of art education and at the same time undermine intellectual security and the presentation to society of an integrated, united discipline.

Blockage of Upward Mobility

It is in the interests of any class to control their capital's supply and demand--and for demand to outweigh supply. A major source of intellectual disenfranchisement and professional alienation for the art educator has been the blockage of upward mobility and, in many cases, severe limitations on even entering the job market. The Winter, 1975, edition of Occupational Outlook (cited in Gouldner, 1979, p. 69) predicted that in the 1980s three doctoral degrees would be awarded for each available job in the arts. This dire outlook has actually turned out to be an extremely optimistic, but erroneous, prediction. In 1983, the Placement Service of the National Art Education Association listed six art education positions at the university level. In 1984, the situation improved slightly. The Placement Service of NAEA listed seven positions (Roberta Rice, personal communication, July 4, 1984). The College Art Association Bulletin advertised 11 art education positions from October 1983 through May 1984, and the Chronicle of Higher Education advertised

12 openings in issues September 7, 1983 through July 25, 1984. For 1984 employment, there were 16 separate openings in the above-cited sources.[1]

Data are not available on the number of doctoral degrees awarded during 1983 and 1984, however, Visual Arts Research, Spring 1983 and Fall 1983, listed 105 art education related dissertations cited in Dissertation Abstracts International, Vol. 42, 4-12; Vol. 43, 1-5, 7-12; and Vol. 44, 1. Perhaps an even more telling indicator of the extent to which a doctorate in art education disaffords entry into the profession is the job-applicant ratio. It is not uncommon for an entry-level, tenure-track art education position to elicit 50 to 70 applications. Nontenure, lecturer positions may receive this number or even more, since applications are received from those with masters as well as doctoral degrees. Since not all applicants for a job are currently unemployed, this number may, in addition to indicating the scarcity of jobs, also reveal the degree to which job dissatisfaction permeates the field and the degree to which there is a perceived need to better one's situation.[2]

In addition to the social devaluation of aesthetic capital and the corresponding limited job potential in the field, a more subtle source of disenfranchisement is operative. Namely, many art educators are underemployed, not only in having to accept jobs outside the field, but actually in terms of positions they hold within the field. Considering the time, effort, and extent of the education required for a doctoral degree, many art education positions do not provide a viable avenue for the exercise of professional skills. Being overly educated, even when employed in a position for which one was specifically trained, has become common throughout the New Class and is responsible for a high level of job dissatisfaction. New Class professionals, who in the past tended to remain throughout their working lives in the disciplines in which they were trained, are now changing careers several times within their working life span (Bowles, 1982; Gouldner, 1979; Shores, 1984).

Employment statistics and tales of underemployment are part of the folklore of art education, providing an oral tradition that has a powerful influence on how art educators perceive and exercise their professional options. When underemployment becomes the only option to unemployment, there are strong pressures to conform, to maintain the status quo, and to be grateful for a minimal exercise of cultural capital. Beyond the intricate network of implicit

threats and promises surrounding the granting of tenure--which is "about as easy to come by these days as the Holy Grail" (Shores, 1984, p. 33)--academia itself exercises controls on and withdraws favors from subject areas with dubious cultural capital. For example, art educators have rarely brought grant monies into the university coffers of the magnitude commanded by professionals in the sciences. The art educator has, in fact, often been put in a humiliating, defensive position, spending valuable time and energy justifying the very presence of an art education program within the university curriculum.

As others in the New Class, art educators pride themselves on being independent, on being able to judge their own performances, and being able to extend their cultural capital for the public good. Paradoxically, the privileges and advantages accrued through higher education can become a source of social and professional alienation. The possession of more cultural capital should mean more power, whereas in art education it often means having fewer viable career options in which to exercise that expansion of power potential. This discrepancy between the promises of art education professionalism and the extent to which aesthetic cultural capital can actually be exercised shapes not only the individual art educator but also the character of the field.

Controlling the Production of Cultural Capital

Although New Class humanists, in contrast to New Class technocrats, have had a relatively more tenuous place in the hierarchy of social value, Gouldner suggests that all of the New Class is inherently negative toward the status quo in "attempts to better its position" (p. 12). Capital is inherently an advantage; the negativity of the New Class is a disguised form of power in that it is used to promote its own case, to aggrandize its influence, and to expand its sphere of influence. Many of the actions of the New Class can be interpreted as means to secure professional guild advantages. Capital must be actively protected, implemented, and aggrandized, or it will be devalued.

Dedicated to the improvement of society and operating with professional skill and integrity, the New Class rejects any attempt at outside control. The object of its capital power is to judge its own performances and to repro-

produce its culture--and, at the same time, exert professional standards to limit its membership. "The object of capital is not consumption but instrumental mastery" (Gouldner, p. 23). To provide more opportunities for upward mobility within any profession, legitimation of capital must be expanded; at the same time, access must be limited to those who control the capital, that is, the credentialed and degreed expert. In many countries there has been the realization that the number of New Class members must approximate the number of job openings available or severe social and political dislocation will result (Kidder, 1984; Owen, 1984). Gouldner notes that at the vanguard of all revolutions there has been a group of intellectuals whose upward mobility was blocked; this has been the case in regard to the American Revolution as well as communist revolutions and terrorist-backed actions in this century. The New Class believes that it has the moral right to cash in on its education and to exercise its cultural capital. A society that does not allow for direct opportunities or some form of sublimation is creating a subclass of dissidents.

Similar to other New Class groups, art educators have maintained the right to set their own professional standards and to maintain control of their own programs. For example, the Rockefeller Commission Report, Coming to our Senses, which was subjected to severe criticism, was actually highly similar in basic premises to many then-current art education programs (Arts Education and Americans Panel, 1977). Perhaps for that reason alone it deserved the criticism it received. It was, however, the Commission's proposal that artists might replace the art teacher in the classroom that art educators found particularly objectionable. Rejecting the Rockefeller Commission Report was a matter of professional survival; asking art educators to accept this report in its totality would have been tantamount to expecting unemployed steel workers to enthusiastically endorse a report proposing that all steel be manufactured abroad. Any foundation or philanthropy that intends to influence the character of art study would be wise both to consult and to utilize art education personnel in their programs.

Alliance for Legitimation

The field of art education is littered with programs that possessed strong philosophical and psychological rationales, yet were unable to command socio-

educational validity. It is within this push and pull between the integrity of art education programs and the general lack of social credibility that the art educator exists. This conflict constitutes the proverbial Achilles heel of art education; it provides an awareness that spurs art educators to action, formulating elaborate plans, making fantastic claims for the benefits of art study, and seeking various and sundry allies in order to legitimate aesthetic capital and to provide a professional market for its products.

Traditionally, the New Class has been in competition with the moneyed capital of the Old Class. The antagonism between the Old Class and the New Class, which can be traced to the nationalistic and democratic upheavals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, is not, however, complete. The Old Class needs the New Class to increase the productivity and efficiency of its moneyed capital. The New Class, in turn, can maintain an uneasy peace with the Old Class if allowed to exercise its professional prerogatives (Gouldner, 1979).

This author notes that although initially the artistic vanguard was allied with the middle class against the aristocracy, the vanguard has come to rely on the Old Class' support of the arts. In turn, contributions to the arts have been an avenue of legitimacy for the Old Class. A similar tenuous network of alliances and antagonisms exists within the New Class itself. The humanist intellectuals have claimed a moral superiority over technocratic intelligentsia, who are imputed to be without moral scruples in their application of mechanistic solutions to human problems. Yet, alliances have been formed for mutual benefit. In the 1960s, television was going to revolutionize the art classroom; today it is the technology of the computer chip.

Alliances for the expansion of aesthetic capital cut across all cultural classes. Alliances with Old Class philanthropic organizations and business enterprises provide access to moneyed capital and legitimation through the study of fine art and established artistic exemplars. Through scope, sequence, and testing of behavioral objectives in art curricula, New Class technocratic alliances provide pedagogical structure, efficiency, and predictability that bodes well with a public that wants quantifiable and tangible results.

In contrast to the jaded sophistication and parsimony of the Old Class and as an alternative to the dry rationality of technicism, the working class has been an attractive ally for art educators inasmuch as New Class humanists have often seen themselves as champions of popular causes. The study of popular, folk, and commercial art broadens the aesthetic capital base of art education and links the study of art to populist principles of democracy. The working class has often formed the legitimating power base of intellectuals who can then claim widespread support for their programs and expansion of cultural capital.

Integrated and correlated art education programs reveal other possible attempts to form alliances with outside sources of cultural capital for purposes of mutual legitimation. Arts education, right-brain left-brain drawing programs, museum arts education, and so on, provide interdisciplinary and hence more broadly based rationales for art study.

It is not the intent of this paper to imply that all the above-cited alliances and their correlates in art education theories and practices are without pedagogical merit. However, neither are these alliances apolitical and without consequences in the quest for legitimation and expansion of aesthetic cultural capital. It may be even suggested that the measure of aesthetic capital's delegitimation is directly proportionate to the number of alliances sought with competing status classes.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This paper has presented a theory of the art educator as the possessor of conditionally legitimated cultural capital. It has been proposed that the art educator's professional role can be examined in regard to the issues of supply and demand, sources of alienation, job security, and the types of art education programs that are proposed and accepted. For many art educators, a limited exercise of cultural capital forms the reality of their professional career and may be cause for passivity and an acceptance of the status quo. More optimistically, however, a theory of disenfranchisement and alienation due to a limited exercise of cultural capital also bodes possibilities for professional radicalism.

Aesthetic delegitimation is a very logical outcome of the Western world view. Ultimately, the problem is not art education itself, but rather social

attitudes toward the visual arts. Professional disenfranchisement is, at its most basic, a problem of social legitimation. Changing society's perceptions of art education is not merely a labor of educational readjustments nor of more professional conferences, great debates, and inhouse publications. To change social definitions requires nothing less than direct political advocacy within the bureaucracy of school districts, legislatures, and private foundations (Hatfield, 1984; Milbrandt, 1984). Furthermore, in the classroom this means making explicit the "moral force of aesthetic objects" (Beyer, 1984, p. 9) in their social context and the role art has played throughout time and space in revealing and shaping social consciousness (Brooks, 1984).

It bears repeating that capital is socially defined. In practice, art education is only as valuable as society says it is. Knowledge systems, however, such as art education, can be instrumental in shaping social outcomes. Rather than seeing aesthetic knowledge as a disembodied eternal truth, it needs to be seen as a potent ideological instrument of a special social class possessing cultural capital. The blockage of upward mobility and the marginal existence of art educators can provide a cause d'etre for increased political action and a concomitant consciousness of professional destiny denied more secure New Class professionals.

Footnotes

[1]Art education positions are herein defined as full-time employment at the university or college level requiring a PhD or EdD degree and the teaching of at least one art education class. Positions for lecturers, art therapists, arts managers, or department chairs were not tabulated.

[2]Other fields within the humanities have likewise reported similar job-applicant ratios. For example, an opening in an English department will commonly bring in 300-600 applications (Kidder, 1984; Perry, 1983).

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