Hold the Pickles, Hold the Lettuce
Special Orders Do Upset Us:
The Franchise System in American Art Education

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Abstract

I have a history of advocating locally specific art content as very impor-
tant to the construction of art curricula. This position arises from my
readings in the area of socially contextual aesthetics (Berger, 1972; Dewey,
1958; Hauser, 1959, 1951; Munro, 1941; Wolff, 1983). By art content I mean
not only thematic content but also formal qualities, media, and technical
execution, all of which contribute to an artwork's style. By locally spe-
cific art content I mean the style of the work as it arises from a specific
place at a specific time, and which in some way reflects the collective
consciousness of the culture or subculture of the work's genesis. If one
believes with Dewey (1958) that aesthetic expression arises in the context
of interaction with the environment, and with Langer (1958) that the sub-
conscious/unconscious style of an age is given form by the artist through
transformation of this subliminal feeling into concrete form, and if one
further believes that the transformation of subjective experience into
concrete aesthetic form is an ultimate value of making art, then it follows
that artists (and student artists) must be allowed to express how it feels
to be who they are, and what it is like to live their lives. This mandates
locally specific art content. If artists are allowed to focus on locally
specific content, art becomes the reflection, manifestation, clarification,
transformation and continuation of culture. If content comes from the out-
side, it has no vital connection to an individual's life processes and be-
comes mere decoration.

As an advocate of this position I was naturally pleased when asked to con-
tribute to a Caucus panel discussion, in Miami, on the subject of how the
content of my art curriculum has changed as I have changed geophysical and
cultural environments in my teaching career. The initial guiding assump-
tion, then, is that with each change in the geophysical, social, and cul-
tural context comes a corresponding change in my curricular content.

Teaching Locally Specific Art Content

I am convinced that I have, indeed, changed the content of my teaching
to reflect local conditions, as I have moved from place to place in my
teaching career. Secure in the feeling that I have been aware of and sen-
sitive to the need to adapt the content of my teaching to my local condi-

tions I examine my teaching history. What examples of content reflecting local values, mores, customs, and geophysical factors can I bring forth?

There has been opportunity in my past to experience quite a variety of American subcultures as neighbors and as students. First, was eastern Oregon's cowboy country, "I'm-a-roper-not-a-doper-and-don't-you-by-God-fergit-it" country. A very rural area, set on the edge of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, 200 miles from Portland in one direction, 200 miles from Spokane in another, and twenty-five miles from the next art teacher, Athena and Weston together have a population of 1500. From my teaching experience there, a wonderful drawing comes back to me depicting two of Nez Perce Chief Joseph's warriors, by Cecil Shippentower, one of my students from the reservation.

I also remember my move to the Rogue Valley, close to the Oregon coast. Loggers, fruitpickers, and truck farmers exist alongside white collar professionals, actors, and attendants of the Shakespearean Festival, as well as functionaries of the tourism industry. One project was studying Northwest coast Indian forms and carving a totem pole. My sculpture class, after carving the totem, decided to do another that projected more up-to-date values: a twenty-five foot tall pencil, painted yellow with a pink eraser, for the high school courtyard.

Later, in Georgia, I came into contact with black culture. I directed college students in developing a black heroes mural which depicted great black scientists and told their stories on the walls of the East Athens Community Center.

Since moving to Florida State University, I have heavily emphasized, within almost all of my art education classes, art as it reflects cultural values. My students can relate how architecture, personal adornment, tools and implements, and the fine arts reflect the cultural context of their making.

Looking back on these examples of culturally contextual, locally specific teaching, I realize with some chagrin that the vast bulk of what I have taught in my career has not changed much in relation to changing physical and social contexts. I still do many of the same projects and have many of the same concerns as when I was a student teacher at South Eugene High School in 1976. Why, I ask myself?

In terms of expressive content, there exists only a very finite number of human themes - love, hate, war, technology, greed, and so on - and a limited number of ways to express these themes visually. Was this the reason the content of my teaching had stabilized around a finite and stationary set of ideas? On further reflection it appeared that I had not exhausted all the major themes of all times in my teaching. This, then, was not the reason for my failure, overall, to match content to local context.

Examining certain underlying assumptions which must all contribute if the guiding assumption that content changes according to context is to hold true, I found a possible answer. These assumptions are: a) that the teacher must be receptive and sensitive to changing perspectives of the clientele, arising from changing conditions, b) that the teacher be willing to analyze the components of a locally specific, socially defined reality and synthesize the results in a practically useful curriculum, and c) that the teacher have a certain amount of autonomy in the implementation of a locally specific curriculum. There seems to be no problem with the first assumption. I do, indeed, try to be reasonably receptive to the local context in which I find myself. Likewise, the second assumption seems to fit my propensities in that I have sincerely tried to understand and incorporate local social values into my curriculum. Did I say my curriculum? Maybe therein lies a major problem in implementing a locally specific curriculum. It really is not my curriculum. Rather, it is culturally determined to a large extent - but not by local forces. The curriculum I use is largely propelled by the educational system and specifically the art education system into which the local forces have only a very small input. A stumbling block which has tripped me up many times when I have tried to teach locally specific content is my lack of autonomy within the system to do so. I simply am not allowed to teach exactly what I want to teach! It was during my tenure at the Oregon school where my students built the totem poles that this first became very clear to me. As the result of a mural executed by my students in which the thematic content was admittedly of questionable social taste, I was called to the principal's office where after some discussion, that principal made it very clear

what was his agenda for art by stating: "Look, I don't give a damn about its artistic merits. I don't care what you teach them as long as you keep them in line."

The Franchise System

This, then, is the franchise system of American education. Individual outlets have only very limited power to change the nature of the structure. They may change the theme - we have all been to the cowboy McDonald's versus the 1890's McDonald's versus the local football team McDonald's - but they may not change the substance. McDonald's does not sell hot dogs in Tallahassee, or Miami, or Lake Tahoe. The franchise system does not allow for that deviation. The franchisee who does not capitulate to that require- ment quite simply loses his franchise. He is ousted from the system. So it is with education.

There seems to be at least three factors at work in support of this centralized system of values, thus power, in the educational structure. One factor seems to be the adoption of competency-based education in terms of observable behavioral and project-related indicators. The Handbook of the Florida Performance Measurement System (draft version, no date available), states: "State Board Rule 64-5.75 requires the verification of demonstration of generic teaching competencies through a formative and summative evaluation process. This requirement precipitated a concern for the development of standardized procedures for conducting systematic observation and performance evaluation to ensure consistency from teacher to teacher, school to school, and district to district within the State" (pp. 14-15).

In addition to pressure for standardized teaching practices which em- anate from a central source, there is also pressure to conform to a stand- ardized content. Once again, the State of Florida has published guidelines which suggest what students in art should learn. Art: Pre-Objectives and Performance Objectives, K-8 (1978) states in addition that, "there is a necessity to relate goals in art education to the larger goals of general education" (p. 6). Seven goals are then spelled out for the rank-and-file teacher. Nowhere does the document tell us how these goals were agreed upon. However, there is a list of seventeen writers of the document, and another group of expert consultants. The goals are not unreasonable, but

neither are they completely definitive. Yet, if I am to teach art in the state of Florida, I must base my curriculum on the objectives established by this group. If I fail to do this, I lose my franchise to teach art. This certainly is centralized value structuring, with very real consequences for failure to comply. Florida certainly is not alone in competency-based education. Indeed, from my experiences in Oregon and Georgia and based on other sources, it seems to be the dominant structure in curricular design today.

A second factor selecting for educational centralization seems to be a very complex form of social Darwinism - that is, the tendency of the most adaptable and efficient systems/phenomena/organisms to dominate. Some ideas, modes of being, and courses of action tend to dominate others. We can see this in the fact that some ideas are incorporated into the cluster of controlling thoughts and institutions, and some are not. An 850 on the SAT, two years of a foreign language, one half year of art (if any at all), probably does not sound unfamiliar to those of you from Montana, or Texas, or New York. There may not be one single standard throughout the country, but wherever we teach, we are all at least in the same "idea bank." Could this be accidental? Not likely. Given random change it would never happen. There must be some process of natural selection at work in which some modes and ideas dominate.

A specific, and largely unexamined structural mode which seems to dominate in American schools and which selects against locally specific content is that the primary agenda is not education in terms of content areas; rather it is the socialization process.

According to C. A. Bowers (1974):

> school routines which make up the covert curriculum,
> are regarded by teachers and school administrators as
> serving a more pedagogically important function than
> the academic curriculum. The strongest evidence sup-
> porting this generalization is that students are of-
> ten dropped from school for exhibiting behavior that
> challenges the routines of the school; they are sel-
> dom dropped, on the other hand, because they lack the
> intellectual ability to deal with academic curriculum.

When viewed from this perspective, it becomes apparent
that one of the chief functions of the academic cur-
riculum is to serve as a vehicle for conditioning
students to adopt the values of the school's covert
curriculum. More importantly, when it is understood
that the traditional school subjects are used to teach
values quite different from their officially stated
purpose, there is no longer any reason to be mystified
about why the school curriculum continues to be so un-
interesting to students and irrelevant to what they
need to learn. The irrelevance of the subject matter
curriculum is necessary if the student is to learn the
values and traits of docility upon which his academic
survival and later his career as a worker depend. (62-
63)

As the principal in Oregon said, "I don't give a damn what you teach them as
long as you hold them in line."

"Holding them in line" is one major aspect of education's function in the
central activity of all cultures. Jules Henry (1965) believes that "central
activity of all cultures is always a self-maximizing machine" (p. 191). To
the extent that the art teacher contributes to this self-maximizing through
adherence to the centralized curriculum and thus to the subliminal function of
directing students toward the learning of predetermined social routines, he is
a valuable part of the machine. To the extent that he teaches locally specific
content which calls upon divergent behavior and creativity in students, he is
a monkey wrench in the transmission of the machine. The socially specific art
teacher as monkey wrench certainly has a place, but in the transmission of the
machine he keeps the whole machine from going and must be replaced.

As cold and mechanically abhorent as this sounds to the individual who
would develop a locally specific and personally meaningful art curriculum,
there is, in fact, a pragmatically sound base for such inflexibility. Henry
states, "Throughout history the cultural pattern has been a device for binding
the intellect. Today, when we think we wish to free the mind so it will soar,
we are still, nevertheless, bound by the ancient paradox, for we must hold our
culture together through clinging to old ideas lest, in adopting new ones, we

literally cease to exist" (pp. 284-285). For the art educator who would teach locally specific content, this puts the monumentality of his sin in a better perspective. Locally specific content, in its essence, differs from the content of popular mass culture. That is what makes it locally specific. In teaching locally specific content the art educator is incorporating the values of that content into the processes and products of which arise from that curriculum. These, because they are at odds with or at least in variance with the mass popular culture values imbedded in the centralized curriculum, are threatening to the very foundations of the system in which they arise. Locally specific content throws a monkey wrench into the transmission of the dominant culture machine, stopping - or at least delaying - its forward progress. Henry finally states "School has no choice; it must train the children to fit the culture as it is" (p. 237).

The thought that comes immediately to my mind is, whose culture? Is the dominant culture the only one which exists, the only one whose values, mores, principles, and systems have proven to be worthwhile through time? Has culture not advanced enough at this juncture to accept a pluralistic reality? Like the mature individual who can tolerate the opinions of others, even if he does not agree, I hope this society is about to enter an age of maturity, in which the dominant institutions are comfortable enough in their power to accept some of the values, meanings, and wisdom of others. It seems, in fact, that preservation of the dominant system is much more likely when it affects an accepting rather than an isolationist stance toward new ideas. Generally those ideas which seem most dangerous and troublesome are only dangerous and troublesome because they have validity. In accepting rather than fighting such ideas a culture will usually incorporate new and vitally sustaining elements. Systems must continue to evolve with changing circumstances if they wish to continue to be sustained.

Another incident comes to mind. In Montana, where I grew up, we all wore blue jeans, day in and day out. Anyone wearing corduroy pants was most likely from somewhere else. Khakis were something we only saw on TV in movies about Ivy League schools. Blue jeans were the standard local norm. One day Mr. Clark, my favorite art teacher, came wearing blue jeans. By third period he was gone and by fourth period he was back in khakis. Obviously, the power of some centralized socializing structure was stronger

than the local social norm.

This incident illustrates a third factor which seems to work against a locally specific curriculum and which may also be defined in terms of the socialization process, this time of the teacher. It seems from my experiences, that as one rises in the system, one becomes increasingly reticent to tamper with that system in any significant way. The development, in my case, from dissenter to somewhat of a guardian of the system happened gradually, almost without my knowing it. First, had to come a measure of compliance on my part to the status quo which I found when I first became aware of my values conflicting with those of the system. Then with increasing personal investment in that system in terms of my life's energies and resources, I found myself securely locked into a structure I had first dissented against. As an itinerant art teacher in Athena and Weston, Oregon, with no other art teachers anywhere around, I was the resident expert. No one knew anything about art but me. Yet I existed on the very periphery of the art education universe. I could rock the boat as much as I wanted because I was the only one in it. With the move to the more cosmopolitan coast of Oregon came greater restriction on what I could teach and how. With each successive change as I moved up the hierarchical ladder and closer to the center of the system, I was required to accept more and more of the values of that system - indeed, to support and defend those values because of the positions in which I found myself.

It seems that systems can tolerate considerable deviation from peripheral figures. But as one becomes more central to the system less deviation is acceptable because it has a more profound impact on the system as a whole. The very structure, nature, and philosophy of a system can be affected by those at its center. Rather than a puppy nipping ineffectually at the hand which feeds it, the dissenter on the inside becomes a full-grown Norweigian Elkhound, who can do the owner unalterable harm unless it is well trained. Of course, changes from the inside of a system are not always negative, but they almost always are rather cautious and rather small. That is the institution's safeguard. It does not select for those who will potentially do it harm by making sweeping changes. As with biological species, in social systems small changes are developed, tested for a generation or so, and if they work, are incorporated into the body of that system through its institutions. It

is a survival technique of the social institution not to allow for huge changes. Huge changes could destroy the institution. Small changes will not. Dissenters then, are kept out of the institution to the extent they dissent. Interestingly, however, and referring back to the previous argument, it seems that the strongest institutions accept dissenters into peripheral positions, giving these dissenters a chance to accept parts of the system, thus developing a stake in that system. Dissent is thereby dealt with through a co-opting rather than confrontational technique.

So, it is obvious, if one accepts this thesis, that such a large change as transferral from a subliminal, yet real, curriculum of socialization of students to one of a content-based locally specific curriculum is very un-likely to come from the central power structure of the educational system. There is simply too much invested in the system as it now stands to allow for such a change. Change of this nature is also unlikely to come from outside the central power structure because of the accepting-of-small-changes (co-opting), rejecting-of-large-changes nature of the educational franchise system. Radical deviation by peripheral figures leads to the loss of fran-chise. Radical deviation by insiders is almost unknown, having been bred out by their advance through the system.

So where does that leave us? Beginning with the assumption that teach-ing content would change according to the social and geophysical context, it has been conceded that there is some change, but to a greater extent content remains the same, in spite of local circumstances. It seems that this con-dition stems from what I have called the educational franchise system. This is a centralized system which gives the individual and even individual school districts a franchise based on certain preconditions and the local system's or individual's willingness to meet those conditions. Three factors have been analyzed which contribute to the franchise system as it exists. First, there exists a powerful and centralized ordering of curriculum based on ob-servable behavioral and project-oriented competencies. This centralized sub-ject matter curriculum is essential to help students to develop a docile attitude toward what they are learning. Specifically experimental curriculae would, in their vitality, run counter to the second factor analyzed. This second point sees the true, if subliminal, curriculum in the schools as socialization, not content-specific education. Socialization requires com-

pliance, not experimentation. Third, the system perpetrates itself marvelously through devices which co-opt individuals and small groups into the whole by accepting dissenters only into its outer fringes. Then in a positively Pavlovian system of rewards for proper behavior it advances the increasingly compliant former dissenter to the middle of the organism. Only when one reaches the top of the pyramid does one have considerable flexibility once again. By the time one reaches that position, however, caution and a greater knowledge of the subtleties of the system and possible consequences of meddling have replaced the impetuous urges for changes of the outsider.

Many social activists feel that students' locally defined experiental realities should serve as a stimulus and foundation for teaching art content. The concerns of locally meaningful content, however, and those of socialization as determined by the mass culture run counter to each other. Students who are allowed to explore their own concerns to wherever they may lead are not learning the lesson of socialization which apparently dominates the educational structure. In terms of the larger society, as it is currently structured, this socialization process must be pre-iminent because students must be trained to accept the authority of the social institutions which serve them, and which, more to the point, they will serve throughout their lives. These students' survival depends not so much on learning to wield a paint brush effectively or to understand the nature of Indian totem art as it does to interact properly within the social institution in which they find themselves. Doctorates are not necessarily given to the most creative people, but more often to those who have learned to conduct themselves in such a way as to successfully make it through all the required rites of passage. A certain kind of acceptance of the status quo is required of those who would advance through the educational system - either acceptance or phenomenal cunning and patience.

The educational system those of us in positions of some power now serve is the same system that began to mold us at the tender age of five or even younger. Some of us who have moved up and into a more central position are probably the better, or more willing learners. Others of us - and I suspect the Bulletin is mainly read by this second kind - are less willing to accept the socialization process without at least an occasional question about its meaning and validity. We understand the words of Paulo Freire when he says

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"Choice is illusory to the degree it represents the expectations of others"
(p. 7). We are the ones always on the verge of losing our franchise. Yet,
as evidenced by the fact that most of us are Caucus/NAEA members, we know -
either consciously or instinctively - not to push too hard at the limits.
We can exchange the pickles for the lettuce, or the mustard for the mayo-
naise, but we all know that if we try to slip a hot dog or a soy burger
between those buns, we are going to lose our franchise.

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