

Values Examination in Art Curricula Construction from Owatonna to Today

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In developing curricula and educational policy, arts educators must participate with students, parents and other members of the community in dialectic processes of values examination. Failure to do so can often result in the development of curricula and policies which send unintended and unacceptable signals about the purposes and importance of the arts in our society. A critical analysis of the Owatonna Art Education Project (1933-38), together with a review of current curricula and educational policies, indicate a need for the use of these processes, arts educators may be unaware of the signals that they are sending through curricula and policy.

Past and present educators have developed arts curricula and policies with the best of intentions out of the belief that the arts belong in the schools and in the hope of improving the aesthetic quality of life. Good intentions and high hopes are not enough basis on which to develop arts curricula and policies. Just as the good intentions of Melvin Haggerty, Dean of the School of Education, University of Minnesota were not enough to guide the Owatonna Art Education Project to the goal of making art a way of life some fifty years ago, the good intentions of today's educators are not enough to guide their efforts toward developing curricula which meet the new fine arts requirements for high school graduation.

Educators intending to improve the quality and depth of arts programs are charged with the responsibility of understanding what they are communicating, indirectly or by implication, through various curricular emphases and legislative policies. In addition to addressing issues of how and why the arts should be incorporated into the school curriculum, arts educators must understand above all the aesthetic, educational, and social values which are being promoted.

Participating with students, parents, community leaders and others

in dialectic processes of values examination, arts educators can address these how and why issues. Without provision for and participation in these processes, arts educators may continue to send unintended and conflicting signals about the nature, purpose, and importance of the arts in the schools.

Owatonna: What Values?

The Owatonna Art Education Project, a unique five-year study which was designed "to raise the aesthetic standards of a small community" (Eisner, 1965, p.80) some fifty years ago, did not provide for a much-needed values examination process. In attempting to address the issues of how and why art should be incorporated into the community and into the curriculum, Haggerty and local project director, Edwin Ziegfeld failed to consider whose aesthetic values were being promoted. Consequently, they more or less used art as an instrument for the inculcation of their own aesthetic values.

Guided by his belief that art could be made a way of life and by his desire to improve what he considered to be "the meager aesthetic quality of life on the Midwestern Plains," (Logan, 1955, p.186), Haggerty conceived of the Owatonna Project as an educational study. According to Haggerty (1935), the

study "[sought] to discover how the art needs of current American life could be picked up and made the basis of a school curriculum" (p.1). Through school and community art programs, the project "dealt with human beings' efforts to enrich their lives, particularly to improve the environment" (Plummer, 1976).

Without an explicit values examination process to guide them, Ziegfeld and his staff proceeded to develop some techniques for the purposes of conducting a community analysis and for gathering evidence "on the status of art in Owatonna, a typical American community" (Ziegfeld and Smith, 1944, p.21). Using various surveys, questionnaires, and recorded observations consisting of subjective reports and five-point rating scale checklists, the staff evaluated the Owatonna homes, gardens, and places of business. Among the recorded observations were some rather disturbing judgments about the moral character, personality traits, and personal preferences of the Owatonna homeowners. For example, from the recorded observation of House No. 45:

"The owner and his wife are interested in art, but they are hampered, like so many people, by the idea that a thing must be revered and preserved because it is old, or because of certain sentimental associations it holds, rather than because of its quality. Perhaps this is why they have been unable to make changes and improvements, except in a superficial way" (Ziegfeld and Smith, 1944, p.17).

The observer, who was to evaluate the proportions, woodwork, textures and colors of the house - "the color schemes of tans, taupes, browns, and dull reds are in good taste, but innocuous" (p.17) - instead negatively characterized the owners, due to their alleged conservative lifestyle. This observation is both judgmental and elitist, and

raises questions about the actual mission of the project.

Gardens were similarly evaluated. Garden No. 40, described as a "yard of flowers," was nevertheless, rated as ineffective because of the "distracting background and improper setting that failed to show off the flowers" (p.19). In the final paragraph of the report, the focus of the evaluation shifts from the garden to the gardener. Garden No. 40: "Dimly aware of some of the shortcomings in her garden, the owner, nevertheless, felt she has fulfilled her duties as a gardener by raising excellent perennials and annuals" (p.19).

These are just some examples of the many house and garden reports which clearly indicate aesthetic and social value biases. These biased reports can serve to remind contemporary arts educators that provisions for values examination processes must be made. As arts educators in many states are currently seeking to establish or upgrade fine arts requirements for high school graduation and to develop goals for new comprehensive K-12 art programs, the need for values examination is particularly acute. Important lessons to be learned from Owatonna are that the process by which these new program goals are developed is of paramount importance and that special attention must be given to understanding which aesthetic, educational, and social values are promoted.

Current
Approaches:
Values
Clarification
Through Wide
Participation

As reported in The NAEA News (1985a), a plan for comprehensive arts in education was written by a "panel of twenty-one individual experts" (p.24) in Kentucky. The use of task forces, made up of arts coordinators, specialists, and university consultants, has been

typical of approaches taken by several other states as well. In some cases, the work of the task force was considered by an independent review panel. In other cases, state legislatures held hearings. The NAEA News (Irvine, 1985), reported on the wide participation which was achieved in New York when 15,000 parents, educators, members of professional associations and unions and "other concerned individuals" (p.3) attended thirty regional conferences throughout the state.

These examples indicate a variability among approaches used to develop curricula, as well as a range in both number and type of persons participating in development processes. Regardless of the size or composition of the group involved in the process, a dialectic approach to aesthetic and educational values examination must be included. Dialectic approaches can lead to the inclusion of entirely new areas in arts curricula. For example, in North Carolina, the State Superintendent of Public Instruction appointed a committee of parents, teachers, administrators, and university personnel "to study the arts education program and to make suggestions for needed improvements" (Irvine, 1985, p.3). The committee recommended that folk arts be added to the existing areas of visual arts, theatre arts, dance and music.

Such dialectic process has the potential for enriching curricula with different, explicitly-stated value orientations. When such an approach is taken, it is far less likely that the arts will become instrumentalized for the purpose of inculcating unstated and unexamined values.

Mixed Messages in Curricular and Legislative Policies

Those arts educators willing to participate in values examination processes must be willing to examine

tacit or hidden messages conveyed by curricular and legislative policies. In their zeal to improve the balance and quality of arts education through the development of new goals and the institution of new graduation requirements, some educators may be unaware that they are sending mixed messages about the purpose and importance of the arts. These messages, however unintended or subtle, can be quite powerful in terms of their impact on the schools and society.

In Rhode Island, the fine arts requirement for high school graduation applies only to college-bound students, in Texas to students in an advanced high school program, and to those students receiving an academic diploma in Tennessee (NAEA News, 1985b, p.2). Required in this way, the fine arts serve to further differentiate those students who are going on to college from those who are not. Drawing this artificial and arbitrary distinction between college-bound and noncollege-bound students sends a message about the type of person who will or will not find the arts useful or meaningful.

In spite of its policy requiring fine arts only of those students in an advanced high school program, the Texas State Legislature has designated the arts as "one of the twelve basic subject areas of the curriculum" (NAEA News, 1985b, p.2). The rationale for including the arts in the curriculum appears in the following resolution passed by the Texas Art Education Association, which reads in part:

"... The study of the visual arts develops children's higher level thinking skills and enhances confidence and self-discipline... provides the opportunity for developing perceptual awareness, creative self-expression ... promotes the development of non-verbal communication that can be greater than the spoken language" (NAEA News, 1985b, p.2).

This rationale, which is typical of those used by many states, does not differentiate between college-bound and noncollege-bound students. Instead, it is concerned with all students and their preparation for life. The obvious inconsistency between the Texas graduation requirement and the rationale on which it is based makes for an unsound policy. In human terms, it appears that noncollege-bound students will not have the opportunity to develop higher level thinking and nonverbal communication skills, nor will they be able to express themselves creatively or confidently. A hidden and elitist message conveyed by this policy is that a certain type of person needs to develop the skills associated with the arts and that only this certain type of person can benefit from studying the arts.

In several other states now requiring fine arts for graduation, legislative policies convey similarly confusing messages about the nature of the arts. For example, students in California, Illinois, Oregon and West Virginia must earn one credit in the fine / applied arts or in a foreign / second language. Students in Georgia must earn one credit in fine/vocational arts or in computer technology (NAEA News, 1985b, p.2). By placing the fine arts on an even keel with foreign languages or computer technology, these graduation requirements suggest that the skills, activities, and processes associated with the arts can be equated with those of the other areas.

It is also quite clear that the arts, foreign languages and computer technology are treated as special subjects within the school curriculum. Their designation as special subjects affects their status and perceived importance within the curriculum and society. Because of what Eisner (1985) calls a "dubious status hierarchy among the subjects," the arts, "especially those subjects in which students work with their

hands,' are assigned a lower intellectual status" (p.202).

Consequently, schools have traditionally allocated fewer resources (time, staff, budget) to the study of the arts. It is ironic that because of low intellectual status assigned to the arts, less time is allocated for the development of the higher level thinking skills attributed to the arts.

The status of the arts conveys the message to students and parents that the skills associated with the arts are less important than the skills associated with other subjects. For example, at a center for highly gifted and talented children housed in a regular elementary school in Maryland, gifted and talented (GT) students in the fourth, fifth, and sixth grades receive instruction in many subjects from GT teachers in self-contained classrooms. However, instruction in art, music, and physical education is handled quite differently. For instruction in these subjects, the GT students are mainstreamed into the regular programs of the regular school.

There are still other educational policies, which through their inconsistencies, serve to subvert the status and importance of the arts. For example, The University of California and The University of Maryland systems will confer credit in the fine arts for courses taken on their campuses, but deny credit to applicants who have taken such courses in high school. As Eisner (1985) says, this practice is "an anomaly of the first order" (p.212).

This and the other anomalies cited in this paper illustrate how powerful, mixed messages are conveyed by curricular and legislative policies. Because these messages are themselves value-laden, they require close scrutiny. Educators, parents, and students are compelled to unearth and to examine the underlying messages and values embedded within past and present curricular policies.

Curricular and legislative policies will reflect the values of the community and the larger society if and when these values are consciously examined and clearly stated.

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