

ARTICLES

Research for Existential Choice

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Chet Bowers (1984) has developed a theory of how a critical consciousness of our cultural typifications can be developed through an in-depth and elaborated understanding of aspects of a given situation or problem. In this paper, his theory is applied to the role research plays in art education. It is proposed that our existential choices in art education are directly proportionate to the amount and complexity of the research we have available and the extent to which we understand and can apply this research for specific purposes. The lack of research in essential instructional areas as well as the lack of formalized debate regarding major changes in the field of art education suggest that, rather than critical consciousness, art education is currently subject to limited perspectives that are controlled by a select few.

Major changes are occurring in art education at this time involving a shift from child-centered studio instruction to a more discipline-based focus involving those aspects considered intrinsic to the study of art. One might expect that diverse interpretations of discipline-based instruction would appear throughout the literature and that research efforts would be attempting to keep pace to provide theoretical and empirical rationales for proposed curriculum changes. Such, however, is not the case. Despite a flurry of activity in art education, surprisingly little formalized debate, conjecture, and examination of premises appear in the literature and little research has been conducted specific to discipline-based art education (Hamblen, 1987a). In this paper, the role research plays in extending or curtailing choices within the field of art education will be examined in relationship to Bowers' (1974; 1984) theory of critical consciousness in education.

Chet Bowers (1974; 1984) presents a theory of education in relationship to the sociology of knowledge that focuses on how, through socialization processes, a

repertoire of knowledge is developed that constitutes one's cognitive structure. The human authorship of this cognitive structure is more or less obscured inasmuch as we are often unaware of the relativity and sources of our own cultural values, attitudes, and beliefs. Bowers' contribution to education lies in his discussion of how consciousness of our cultural typifications can be developed through an elaborated language code, i.e., we can become conscious and active participants in the construction of our personal and social realities when we examine our taken-for-granted stock of knowledge.

In this paper, the discussion will focus on the application of Bowers' theory to the role that research plays in art education. It will be proposed that research constitutes much of our professional stock of knowledge.¹ Basic assumptions embodied in theory and research constitute art education's foundational knowledge and operational procedures in the history and philosophy of art education, the psychology of art, art curriculum development, and so on.² It will also be proposed that research can

be used to reveal its own problematic nature and thereby empower us to participate in the creation as well as correction and refinement of our profession.

Overview

Most of the focus in art education writing, whether in the form of research or curricula, has been on elementary and secondary art instruction. Little attention has been given to university professionals' life worlds and the effect their decision-making processes have on the field of art education (Hamblen, 1986; Hamblen, 1987c). In relationship to Bowers' theory of existential choice, it is important that art educators understand the scope of their choices and the content and implications of those choices. Research in art education constitutes much of the substance of our professional concepts and actions inasmuch as research is often used to initiate practice and is itself a product of our educational priorities. When research choices are available and when we understand them to be choices and understand the implications of their applications, research can provide a way for us to examine, negotiate, and change major portions of our professional reality.

According to Bowers (1984), one's existential choice is expanded in direct "proportion to the complexity of the symbolic code the individual acquires" (p.47), i.e., an elaborated language code enables the individual to examine assumptions, premises, and biases. In this paper, it is proposed that our existential choices in art education are directly proportionate to the range and types of research we have available and the extent to which we understand and can manipulate our research. Our existential choices are limited to the extent our conceptual frameworks are restricted by, for instance, limited research, research that is not understood, or

research presented without debate and acknowledgement of its biases.

In this paper I will discuss two ways research can be used as an active reality-constructing component of art education: (1) as providing choices and (2) as creating an area of heightened critical consciousness. Research, when done from a variety of perspectives and from a range of methodologies, provides choices for interpretation and action and empowers the art education professional to engage in the ongoing creation of the field. Also, when a range of research is available on particular issues in art education, the field itself can enter a period of heightened critical consciousness wherein previous conceptions are called into question and the human authorship of any one particular viewpoint is thrown into sharp relief. By providing choices and creating areas of heightened critical consciousness, research can provide an avenue wherein decisions are based on examined and debated participation rather than through the unilateral actions of a select few.

Research Choices

Bowers' (1974; 1984) discussion of how our repertoire of information is built up through socialization processes is consistent with major anthropological, sociological, and psychological theory. For example, Bruner (1958) discusses how we use hypotheses in problem solving. When confronted with a given problem, similar experiences are recalled for information on how to proceed. Hypotheses are then said to be formed and tested against the realities of the situation. The entire process of hypothesis formation, tentative testing, and evaluation, followed by the taking of some form of action, is often accomplished very quickly and subconsciously in the ongoing tasks of life. For example, hypothesis

testing is applied to the quickly resolved task of deciding whether it is safe to cross the street. Hypothesis testing can also be applied to the ongoing, lengthy, and conscious process of deciding which instructional content and methodologies are appropriate for a given student population. Those individuals having recourse to a range of hypotheses, either through past experiences or through formal education, can be expected to be more successful in their actions than those without such recourse. Accordingly, education can be described as a process whereby students acquire a repertoire of working hypotheses that have application in their culture or more specifically in their particular field of study.

Through graduate study, ongoing professional development, and instructional practices, prevailing research and theory become part of the art educator's working stock of knowledge, i.e., hypothesis testing repertoire. Research acts to build the art educator's repertoire of ongoing typifications, and one might suggest that those art educators who are most successful in a variety of educational situations have recourse to the broadest, most well-accepted theories and research findings. Within Bruner's (1958) theory, such art educators have recourse to a range of possible hypotheses. Within Bowers' (1984) theory, they are able to act successfully within the acceptable norms of their profession's expectations. Those art educators thoroughly conversant with the field have, to paraphrase Bowers, an elaborated research code and hence more choices for any given problem or situation.

The sheer amount of information possessed by an art educator is not, however, sufficient by itself for an ability to participate in the construction of art education realities. It is the consciousness

of choice, the weighing of alternatives, and the explicit acknowledgement that one has engaged in a process of selection and interpretation that are the decisive factors which distinguish acting existentially from merely acting. Educators who merely have recourse to what currently exists in art education without consciousness of its implications and limitations are still operating within the natural attitude of taken-for-granted knowledge. For example, although much has been written about creativity, individualism, and self-expression in art education, these concepts are still often utilized primarily on an uncritical, taken-for-granted level. More recently, information on discipline-based art education (DBAE) has been likewise presented with little published discussion and debate on its more problematic aspects (Hamblen, 1987a). In this sense, a thorough knowledge of current DBAE literature would not necessarily result in an ability to exercise critical existential choice regarding the implementation of DBAE programs. One's operating hypotheses, though large in number, may be merely part of the corpus of mainstream ideas that have been presented programmatically. When acting within this stock of knowledge, the art educator is in effect being created by, rather than creating, the professional character of art education.

Jean Rush (1985) had described research as providing a form of "consumer protection" (p.195). Research can:

lay out the relative merits of different approaches and reveal a range of curriculum options. Lacking this base of reference, teachers have to rely on choices that are made for them. [Rush calls for credible research] conducted from a variety of perspectives and a variety of

academic and foundational affiliations...[to] reveal the problematic nature of a given issue and present a range of choices (Hamblen, 1987a, p.73).

The critical stance of existential choice is contingent upon an ability to recognize art education theory and practice as humanly created choices with different types of applications and implications. An informed, existential access to research and theory is contingent upon an ability to examine historical origins and philosophical biases, to have recourse to alternative perspectives, to imagine other possibilities, and to develop conceptual distance.³ Bowers suggests that curricula need to be devised which will increase the options and hence competence of students in understanding and acting upon their assumptions. In a similar vein, Shulman (1986) describes educational professionals as those who not only act, but also know how and why they act as they do. Taking responsibility for the consequences of one's choice is integral to the existential, critical stance discussed by Bowers (1974; 1984).

In this paper, criteria for research choices are not specified either in regard to conducting or applying research. Within existential choice, criteria for selection and application are themselves variable and humanly constructed. I do, however, believe that research should be both conducted and selected according to criteria which foster choice and broad-based participation. Bowers (1984), for example, discusses curricula that tap students' phenomenological worlds, that offer alternative modes of problem solving, and that provide information reflective of our pluralistic society. In a similar manner, it is proposed that research from diverse points of

view provide instances for existential choice by providing a more complex professional repertoire of meaning as well as by providing consciousness of that repertoire and its implications in terms of limitations and capabilities. Choice, as Apple (1979) notes, cannot be avoided. The exercising of choice is not synonymous with consciousness of choice nor does choice necessarily entail active participation in the construction of knowledge. Choices among art education research findings and theories are continually being made, but choices are more often than not exercised on a taken-for-granted level.

Research for Liminal States of Critical Consciousness

When research is available from a variety of perspectives and is subject to an ongoing debate that probes its complexities and philosophical biases, the problematic nature of research - and hence practice - is thrown into sharp relief. When these conditions are present, a liminal state of heightened critical consciousness is achieved. According to Bowers (1984), this is a time when meanings are renegotiated, and no single answer holds sway by virtue of tradition or authority. The human authorship of ideas and the sociopolitical implications of their possible application are revealed. "Existential choice is not grounded in the individual's accumulated recipe knowledge, but in those areas of liminality not already stabilized and deproblemized by the natural attitude" (Bowers, 1984, p.40).

Anthropologists, such as Turner (1974), have described how certain cultural rituals and practices can be used to gain a state of consciousness that reveals the under-

lying meanings of taken-for-granted behaviors. For the sciences, Kuhn (1970) has termed the liminal state as constituting revolutionary science. It is at such times that past and current scientific practices are questioned, the complexity and relativity of current theory are revealed, and a new framework of scientific investigation may be developed.

In art education there are liminal areas of varying intensity. Neither taken-for-grantedness or liminality are exclusive states of being. Some events in art education create heightened consciousness, such as the Pennsylvania State Conference of 1965 which fostered multiple lines of theory and research. For many years Lowenfeld's ideas on children's graphic expression were part of the taken-for-granted knowledge of many art educators. Although Lowenfeld's ideas continue to influence art education theory and practice, research by Pariser (1983) and Wilson and Wilson (1982), to name a few, have called many Lowenfeld's tenets into question. Controversy will, undoubtedly, continue in this area. In Kuhnian terms, a major paradigm shift has not yet occurred in our interpretations of children's graphic expressions. Within Bowers' (1984) theory, the meanings of children's graphic expressions continue to be negotiated.

Research from multiple perspectives that is open to a free flowing debate can be the impetus for a liminal state in art education. This is especially true when researchers themselves acknowledge the reality-shaping implications of their research in its presentation of particular selections and interpretations.

It is my contention that informed, democratic participation and responsibility for one's choices occur when there is a mix of information from a variety of

perspectives that allows one to probe the merits of various lines of action. A liminal state does not provide clear cut answers, nor does it involve especially expedient or efficient processes. A liminal state is dependent on debate, criticism, and supposition, all of which are absent from much of education (Apple, 1979, Bowers, 1984). In general education, priorities placed on expediency, efficiency, and the consensus of selected experts has resulted in simplification, predictability, and severe distortions of the knowledge base. Murray L. Bob (1986) makes the important point that educators, and in particular administrators, need to accept the idea that educational decisions are often complex, multi-tiered, and time-consuming. There are no easy or final answers if education is to be responsive to our changing, pluralistic society.

Audible Silences in Art Education

Current developments in art education suggest that, rather than entering or being in a state of liminality, there is instead silence on many key issues. This is despite the fact that a major shift is probably in the offing, from a child and studio-centered instructional focus to one in which instruction focuses on the disciplinary content of art in the areas of art production, art history, art criticism, and aesthetics, i.e., discipline-based art education (DBAE). While one might find this development to be highly desirable, the manner in which it is occurring may be cause for concern. Singular perspectives are being presented, and a pragmatic concern with how a particular DBAE perspective can be efficiently and expediently implemented seems to predominate (Hambelen, 1987a). It has been suggested that there is a general lessening

of basic research in art education and that this can be attributed to the current focus on the standardization of content and procedures and the emphasis put on finding practical, expedient, and singular solutions (Hamblen, 1987b). Not only current, but also future options, could be effected by this trend toward highly programmatic and prescriptive approaches and away from basic and applied research.

Bowers (1984) refers to key issues that are not included in most school curricula as areas of audible silence. They are audible in the sense that we know that they are not being addressed, and we allow them to remain silent. He also discusses the limited cognitive structure of children who are "socialized to a 'culture of silence' where existence will be defined by external sources they will not understand or be able to challenge" (p.58). We are not like children who are fairly dependent on the information and skills presented to them. If there is a conspiracy of audible silences in art education, it is of our own

making. Bowers (1974; 1984) has stressed throughout his work that we both create and are created by our social milieu. Art educators, as a group, create the field of art education and are limited or empowered by their creation. As researchers and instructors, we are in the position of creating elaborated research approaches or of limiting the options for both ourselves and future professionals. If our research and scope of ideas are limited to School Arts fare or the glossy promotional materials of the J. Paul Getty Trust, then it is of our doing.

We create our own liminal states and, in effect, chose whether or not to exercise consciousness. Liminality can apply to an individual's personal experiences, portions of disciplinary investigation, or even the consciousness of an entire culture. I am suggesting that a critical stance toward art education theory, research, and practice could enhance the reality constructing power of individual art educators as well as vitalize the entire field.

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Footnotes

- 1 As presented in this paper, research refers to formal and informal investigations using qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Research also encompasses theoretical constructions and models that appear in published materials, are discussed at conferences, and are presented in instructional settings.
- 2 It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the schism between theory/research and practice and to distinguish between such concepts as basic and applied research. Antipathy on the part of some classroom teachers toward research generated by university professors is also a factor that impacts on the thesis of this paper.
- 3 Opportunities to participate in the construction of art education reality are also influenced by personal and professional networking affiliations, access to consultancies, publication of research papers, opportunities universities provide for professional development, etc. (Hamblen, 1986). In addition, it needs to be noted that art education is comprised of many areas of taken-for-granted knowledge that may be specific to particular universities, graduate programs, and/or professors (Hamblen, 1987c).

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