

# Culture Change: The Work of C.A. Bowers in Educational Policy

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C.A. Bowers has proposed a perspective on educational theory and practice involving cultural literacy and communicative competence. Bowers' proposal addresses culture change through a critical examination of activities in the school curriculum. An overview of this perspective and its possible use in art education is presented.

This paper will sketch out C.A. Bowers' views on educational policy, and discuss some implications for art education. Bowers is challenging the foundations of Cartesian thinking which holds individualism and rational thinking to be superior forms of acting and knowing in the world. Cartesian thinking is a deeply embedded feature of twentieth century American culture. Are art teachers sensitive to the embedded features of culture and the intellectual schemata given by language? Bowers' views are particularly relevant in revealing the intellectual schemata imbedded in art teachers' transmission of conceptual frameworks for understanding the visual arts to children in schools.

## The Concept of Culture

Central to an understanding of Bowers' perspective is a concept of culture. Most of us have grown up with the idea that reality is objective, but it is also subjective, and in part, the manufacture of human beings. Distinguishing between those objects and phenomena that are given in the world by nature and those that are created by human beings is problematic. In our conception of reality as objective, the artifacts of human action such as houses, cars, and printed words on paper are most often perceived with the same status as natural phenomena. Human beings make interpretations of nature and create symbolic systems about reality and

material objects that are as real as objects in nature.

Some concise ways to comprehend culture have been provided by the anthropologists Robert Barrett (1984) and Alan Beals (1979). Barrett notes that human beings live with symbolic and conventional understandings which they acquire through observation, imitation, and instruction. From the moment of birth, babies are given family and historical human practices that have been developed over many generations. These practices become habitual and taken-for-granted guides for behaving appropriately in society. This process of acquiring and assimilating the cultural messages or patterns of action and thought handed on by parents and adults is called enculturation. Each individual, however, interprets and acts upon the generalized program of thought and action provided by culture in different ways.

Beals states that humans live in cultural systems. These are plans for living made up of traditions, an environment, members, material culture, and a set of maintenance processes. The system operates through cultural transmission wherein ways of proper behavior and the expectations of others are taught and learned. The transmission of culture is life-long and is different in each culture. Within each cultural system, the messages transmitted to members may not be

the same for each one. Varied messages can occur among families of different socioeconomic status, differences in the birth order of siblings, and differences between daughters and sons. Also, a culture usually provides and transmits alternative patterns of action from which one may choose personal preferences for acting in the world. A consequence of the transmission process is that the child as adult will transmit the cultural message to the next generation.

Bowers has utilized the sociology of knowledge perspective of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966) and Alfred Schutz (1970) to deal with the phenomenon of culture, social patterns of thought, and the socialization process by which the young learn the conceptual patterns and maps provided by their culture. This perspective is compatible with Barrett's and Beals'. Berger and Luckmann and Schutz provide insights about the ways by which socially constructed realities come to structure our action in the world and the ways by which we come to participate in them. An important point that they make is that humans are not finished or completed at birth as are animals. Through social interaction with others, the child acquires and internalizes socially accepted patterns of action, a language bearing culturally laden and thus political meanings, and structures for thinking about experience derived from the collective distillation of others' past experiences.

### **Relationship of Culture and Society to the Individual**

A concept needed for understanding Bowers' perspective is that of the individual. This concept can be easily confused with individualism. As the recipients of Judeo-Christian, Enlightenment, and Frontier traditions, Americans place great

value on being your own person and carving out a unique niche in the social fabric of society. Consequently, we tend to forget, or not recognize at all, that our knowledge and actions have not come about solely through our own individual efforts.

None of us founded NAEA, formulated formalist theories of design, or were part of the community of the Barbizon painters. However, without these actions of our predecessors, we might all be teaching art in different ways. The past actions of other persons have given us a language to communicate our ideas about art, exemplars of imagery, and institutions that bring us together as a community. Upon birth, each of us received or had access to these events as part of the cultural tradition. What is important is what each of us does about these events. Do we accept the consequences of our predecessor's actions as irreversible and take them for granted as inevitable or the "correct" solution to our problems? Can we become aware of those aspects of our communal traditions and cultural patterns that are incongruent and dysfunctional in our existential experience when we use the traditions and patterns of thinking and action in the conduct of our daily lives? The concept of individualism as the lone, independent person confronting raw reality does not adequately account for the place of society and culture in our lives. Culture and tradition link individuals together. These patterns and traditions, however, need not be deterministic. We are not puppets jerked about by the strings of culture and community; we can act back upon them. The relationship between individual, society, and culture is dialectical and each works upon the other.

### **Culture Change**

A third concept necessary for grasping Bowers' perspective is that

of culture change. Cultures change through natural and human initiated events. A famine or drought or earthquake can have catastrophic impact on a culture. Likewise, a symbolic interpretation of these events can be a major factor in change. The gods may have deserted us because our dwelling-place is full of evil, hence the famine or earthquake. Wars, economic depressions, and political repressions may lead to other kinds of cultural change. For example, in Western European thought the artist's unique vision is highly valued, whereas in contemporary China it is the artist's ability to visualize the glory of the state that is valued. Change may also come about more positively by a good harvest, a new coral reef that forms a harbor, or the budgeting of state monies to support the arts. Some cultures are more responsive to change and adapt to new conditions whereas others may disintegrate and disappear as on-going features of human life.

In the context of Bowers' perspective, the focus here is on culture change taking place through the informed participation of citizens. If a catastrophe happens, the Soviets outstrip us technologically in the space race, or art teachers and art programs are eliminated from the schools, how will these events be interpreted, who has the power to interpret and understand them, and how will all of this impact upon us as a society and as individuals? Will special interest groups such as the Council for Policy Studies in Art Education (membership by invitation only) or the Rockefeller Foundation define these events for us and prescribe our course of action? Will each of us take responsibility for acting upon these events and negotiating them into the course of our collective lives? Is the responsibility for culture change to be the province of others who are experts and

know what to do or can a citizen take the power to significantly act upon these phenomena, too?

### **Implications for Education**

Bowers advocates a populace empowered through education for negotiating cultural change and changes in our basic belief system. Bowers' concern about this problem is triggered by the impact of rapid technological change and modernization upon twentieth century cultures. Life in the twentieth century United States has been characterized by an acceleration of change - exemplified by the rapid appearance and disappearance of styles and "isms" in the visual arts - that has left little time to adequately resolve or negotiate events that require considered thought and action by citizens of a democracy before the onset of others. The rapid change has resulted in the tearing of the cultural canopy covering our individual lives. Before we have adequately "digested" the images of Abstract Expression, Color Field Painting, or Minimalism, we are exposed to the images of New Realism. What is important is the nature of the patches that we put on the cultural canopy and whether or not we can patch faster than the appearance of the holes. For example, is realism to be in or out? Is imagery to express the artist's mood or to show reality from an analytical perspective? Or, maybe, both? Issues requiring attention in the culture at large, may be the following: Is the concept of progress a viable one in light of limited physical resources? Is acid rain controllable or must the need to work in factories diminish our enjoyment of natural forests and preserves? Can we solve all our problems through the authority claims of Cartesian style rational thinking, the scientific method, and technical know-how? Can citizens

feel empowered to act back on these issues and find ways to do so?

In art education, we might examine the following issues: In the elitist-populist controversy, what would be the impact of losing the elitist traditions? Would eliminating looking at and thinking about art commissioned by the Church, royalty, and work endorsed by New York galleries and museums contribute to a better understanding of art in our lives? Does a populist viewpoint that focuses on popular imagery in the media endorsed by business and marketing interests, as well as folk art and art made by untutored persons, serve as an adequate basis for understanding our relationship to visual images? What do each of these perspectives contribute to our understanding of art that is important, and, why is it important? Is Marxist aesthetic theory liberating, and insightful or is it grounded in taken-for-granted assumptions about art that were useful in the nineteenth century and are, perhaps, not so useful in the late twentieth century? Can DBAE adequately address the problem of whether an understanding of the formal structures of each discipline of artistic knowledge provide empowerment to negotiate art-based cultural traditions and community patterns?

### **Communicative Competence**

In view of the issues of rapid social change, the prevalence of only technological or technical solutions to our problems, and the alteration of basic cultural beliefs, Bowers proposes the formulation of a new theory of education. He states that the primary and appropriate goal of American education is communicative competence. By this, Bowers means an:

individual's ability to negotiate meanings and purposes instead of passively accepting the social realities

defined by others....The unique contributions that public education can make to the student's communicative competence include: (1) providing an understanding of the cultural forces that foster change; (2) providing knowledge of cultural traditions that will enable students to exercise a judgment about those elements of the culture that are worth preserving; and (3) providing a method of thinking that enables students to see decisions in social life in terms of relationships, continuities, disjunctions, and trade-offs (1984, p.2).

In sum, students need to be communicatively competent and culturally literate. They need to be able "to read or decode the taken-for-granted assumptions and conceptual categories that underlie the individual's world of experience" (1984, p.2).

The means by which communicative competence is to be brought about is the curriculum. The curriculum is a major force in the transmission of cultural messages and the enculturation or socialization of students. Bowers has proposed that three principles to be considered for the development of a curriculum which will achieve some distance from the students' taken-for-granted conceptions acquired during socialization and provide some psychologically safe place for examining them.

#### **First Principle: Utilizing Students' Phenomenological Culture**

Bowers states that a first step in examining cultural patterns is to study the students' own personal or phenomenological experience. One approach would be to keep a diary of one's encounters with the theme or topic to be studied such as the role of artist, art historian, or art critic. Another is to interview persons who have had experience with

the topic and find out what their personal phenomenological experience has been and comparing it with one's own.

### **Second Principle: Use of Historical Perspective to De-objectify Knowledge**

A next step in the examination of cultural patterns is to study the social origins of a topic and find out how the topic began and has been transformed over time. One might engage in some library research or cross-generational inquiry. For example, how do one's grandparents, parents, and siblings view the concept of work or art?

### **Third Principle: Incorporating A Cross-Cultural Perspective**

A third step in examining cultural knowledge is to study how other cultures define and interpret the topic at hand. How do Native Americans and the Amish view the concept of work and art? Do the Chinese or the Nigerians view these concepts in the same way as Americans?

Investigations along these lines problemize a person's internalized cultural categories, thus throwing them into relief. At that point, the cultural and social knowledge one has acquired can be recognized, talked about, and consciously negotiated in terms of finding where it might be dysfunctional, and deciding to continue to carry this knowledge as is, to forget it, or to alter it through active social intervention in some way.

An important figure in the transmission of cultural and social knowledge via the curriculum is the teacher. To implement Bowers' proposal, teachers as gatekeepers or knowledge brokers, who control both the frameworks and the content one learns about social knowledge, will need to become familiar with the sociology of knowledge themselves. They will need to exercise communicative competence in terms of sensitivity to the preservation of

meaningful traditions and patterns, the embeddedness of concepts internalized during their own socialization, and the ability to illuminate taken-for-granted beliefs and practices.

### **Communicative Competence and Art Education**

The visual arts can contribute to the students' communicative competence. Cultural traditions and forces can be examined through art forms using Bowers' three principles. The social realities created by human beings and aspects of them are visible in the images found in art works. Art works are part of the material culture of a society and reflect the interests and thinking of their makers as culture carriers and cultural participants. Comparing and contrasting the imagery, style, and media of the visual arts found in students' phenomenological experience, in history, and in other cultures is an excellent way to illuminate our assumptions and conceptual categories.

Bowers' proposal also has implications for teaching about art. For example, at the elementary level, children could investigate their conceptions of art and artists. They could ask parents about their concepts. Artists could be invited to class to share their views on what they do. Information about how images are made in other societies, and for what purposes, might be gathered through some library work or looking at and discussing actual images. Through discussion, the cultural categories referring to artists and their work would be illuminated and open to discussion. Points to ponder might be: What do artists do? Why do they make art? What kinds of art and images do they make? What stereotypes exist about artists? Is making art easy and can anyone claim to be an artist?

At the secondary level, students could investigate how art functions in their lives and the society at large. Phenomenological, historical, and cross-cultural investigations that examine how art functions in society would all yield points for discussion and further inquiry. The richness of art history, art criticism, art theories, and the development of art forms and media could become both the topics of inquiry and the sources for knowledge. Points to ponder could become more complex. Students might consider why rational or scientific knowledge is valued more highly than the kinds of knowledge that artists

use in making images and also the knowledge found in the images that artists make. They might inquire about why certain imagery is valued and others are not at a given time or over time, and examine the implications of a relativistic point of view which holds that art is anything you want it to be.

Using Bowers' proposal, art teachers and their students would be able to examine in a thorough manner, the foundational concepts underlying theory and practice in the visual arts. One might even tackle the concept that one should not talk about art but just look at it!

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