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## The Orbis Pictus we all live in: coding the World with differently-abled visitors in the Gallery of Contemporary Art

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### Abstract

This discussion paper is based on research findings from a programme of gallery education for visitors with special needs. Contemporary fine art is self-reflective, critical, participatory, often revealing hidden structures of signifying systems. We, as art educators and cultural researchers, are convinced about its great cognitive potentials and its power in psychic-socio construction. Living in the symbolic order of today's society and participating in processes of communication requires multiple competencies and literacies. Production of globalised cultural industry and the manner of their dissemination by film, photography, TV, and the internet create a specific cultural interface that blurs distinctions between the "natural" and the "artificial". Do we still live in Comenius' visible world-in-pictures or rather in the image-world? Social systems are under constant flux in general, including education. A serious stagnation in the educational approach towards students with special needs and their neglect still persist in the Czech society.

*Key words: gallery education, visual art, differently-abled visitors, learning, education*

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### 1. Introduction

Contemporary western culture is flooding us with visual information and visual industry products. The shape of the world over the past 200 years that we consider to be natural, (the "lived world" in phenomenological terms) (Patočka, 1998) has been created with the aid of technical images (photography, film) and distributed by specific apparatuses and media (television, internet). This world is increasingly virtual, often too distant to be experienced through the physical, bodily perception due to its ephemerality. The famous Czech pedagogue, philosopher and theologian, Jan Amos Komenský, called John Amos Comenius, in the 17th century had already created a concept of the world represented by learning and knowledge that followed a trajectory from sensate ways of knowing towards that of symbols, from embodiment toward visual perception. I am referring to his seminal language textbook *Orbis sensualium pictus* (in English, *The Visible World in Pictures*) (Comenius, 1685). Production of the globalised cultural industry and the way of its distribution through media creates a new interface, where it is impossible to distinguish between the fields of the "natural" and the "artificial". This complex world of information becomes an image of its own – part of the spectacle of "total ideology and dissociation" as introduced by Guy Debord in his work, *La Société du Spectacle* (Debord, 1992); and a society that wants to "amuse us to death" by aestheticised politics, religion, TV entertainment, as described by Neil Postman (Postman, 1985). Instead of a world that is describable, represented through speech, writing and images, do we not live now directly in the image

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(Comenius'/Komensky's picture) of the visible world? It is very difficult to find new methods of education and teaching when social systems and lived worlds are in constant movement and they in-form themselves auto-poetically mimetic of living organisms (Luhmann, 1999). In this environment, linear models of education are obsolete and ineffective ways of understanding the lived world.

If the educational systems of normative school populations are not aligned to the dynamics of social practices and are stagnating on all levels, certainly the situation is even more serious in the education of and communication with students with special needs as is reflected in issues of social exclusion and inclusion. Despite the important work being done by dedicated individuals and in alternative schools, change must take place within systemically, within pedagogy itself. The aim of our research was to determine whether the field of contemporary art that communicates through specific, non-linguistic codes and non-verbal languages (Goodman, 1976), offers a possibility of specific cognition that is neglected by ordinary education systems. We ask the following: What are the possibilities of learning specifically through imagery and languages of contemporary art; what are the implications for education of differently-abled audiences and students? What kind of perceptual and learning disposition is needed to facilitate the design of new, specific models of education through art? Answers to these and other questions are possible, but neither simple nor linear responses will suffice. It is our aim with this work that all answers generated further questions that point to the necessity of change to the educational paradigm and commonly held assumptions in general.

## 2. Visual Art Today

From an anthropological and cultural-visual perspective, educators and pedagogists need to focus on the function and social practices in which the process of semiotic meaning-making in visual – and all fine arts -- takes place. We live in a symbolic order in which we create shared values and beliefs that are communicated through systems of signification and cultural codes (Eco, 1976). In what ways does visual art inform everyday life and people? On the streets, classical art works abound in advertisements and the languages of art proliferate in popular culture. Meanings are created solely in perceptual and pragmatic contexts. As we point out, "works of art have lost their status as independent objects to be understood according to predetermined criteria and to be seen as given -- and therefore objective -- representations" (Fulkova, Straker and Jaros, 2004, p.5). Division into high and low culture, as defined by the aesthetics of the 19th century and still commonly accepted, is no longer valid and must, therefore, be reformulated and reconceptualised for cultural and educational purposes. As art theoretician Suzi Gablik said at the beginning of the 1990s,

Suddenly it became apparent to everyone that the old cultural paradigms were under heavy siege, and that all the provocative, uncomfortable issues about inclusiveness, race, gender and merit – especially issues of the supplanting of the aesthetic by the political – are here to be dealt with, not just intellectually or theoretically, but in-your-face (Gablik, 1995, p. 29).

Contemporary art undermines and complicates truisms, cultural truths and social stereotypes. It uses self-reflexive languages; it critically recycles the forms of conventional perception; it is participatory, socially critical; and, it uncovers the hidden structures of marking systems. In this manner, a "social turn" takes place in art (Bishop, 2007).

### 2.1. Temples of Art?

Gallery education as a specific model of cultural education and teaching appeared in the Czech Republic in the 1990s. After the political revolution in 1989, the museums and galleries discovered that they cannot remain mausoleum collections of the 19th century, a sacred temple for untouchable art or a scientific vault. Their new task was to become a part of the open society, to get rid of the rigid ideology and return to their tradition that, apart from the scientific examination of cultural artefacts, was a cultural and educational function. In the middle of the 1990s, the *Open Society Fund, Praha* became the catalyst of these events. The fund launched a dialogue between the galleries, museums and educational institutions and research projects through the *Museum Gates Open* programme.

Methodology and methods of pedagogical constructivism that continued in the line of Czech structuralist tradition got into the lead in the field of cultural education (Štech, 2003). We could also notice a significant influence of re-concepts in philosophy in the works of philosophers Goodman, Merleau-Ponty, Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, Didi-Huberman; in psychology in the works of Gardner, Kosslyn; in sociology of art and culture in the works of Bourdieu, Geertz, Kriteva, for example.

The influence of semiotics in connection to the 1930's structuralism of the Prague, specifically in connection with the structural aesthetics of Jan Mukařovský, as well as the influence of the original re-concept of Husserl's phenomenology by the Czech philosopher Jan Patočka, plays a significant role, (Fulkova & Fulka, 2010). The first original research into perception of cultural artefacts in primary school children took place in the 1990s in the Czech Republic (Slavík; Fulková, 1999). Subsequently, we initiated developments in the tradition of researching the participants-spectators and methods of dialogues in art pedagogy (Slavík, 1997); in the perception and meaning-making of contemporary art with teenagers (Fulkova, Tipton & Ishikawa, 2009); and, methods of cultural identity construction (Hajdušková, 2010). This is the background in which we organise educational events in galleries at Charles University in the teacher preparation programme, named *Orbis Pictus*.

### 3. Research Test

#### 3.1. *Premises and Questions of the Research*

Although programmes for school audiences became the norm, regular and systemic programmes for differently-abled visitors are woefully missing in the Czech Republic. In the past, there have been occasional special exhibition or additional programming for the visually-impaired, but there is nothing at all for the physically (wheelchair accessible) or mentally-challenged visitors. What educational models can be designed to meet the ideals of the context, critical and object based learning that we are suggesting above? How can we provide visual arts learning possibilities to both those working with special-needs clients as well as the clientele when they have no exposure to date to contemporary art?

As art educators and cultural researchers, we are convinced that our research over all of the cognitive potential of the visual arts and its formative capacity in the field of auto-socio-construction, critical thinking, creativity, multiple literacy and inclusion of *all* students, especially for the differently-abled persons in the Czech Republic (Fulkova & Tipton, 2008).

#### 3.2. *Methodology and Description of the Research File*

In collaboration with the Galerie Rudolfinum, an educational programme for visitors with physical, mental or combined disability took place during the exhibition of the Czech artist František Skála, entitled *Skála in Rudolfinum, (14. 10. 2004 – 2. 1.2005)*. A team consisting of the special pedagogy and art education students at Charles University in Prague participated in the project enabling repeat visits and targeted activities for special-needs clients of a number of Prague institutions during the course of the exhibition including Škola Modrý klíč, a private non-profit social-service organization, Workshop Eliáš Praha, Centrum Paprsek, and several schools for the visually-impaired.

#### 3.3. *Education Model Parameters*

This programming ran during the whole course of the exhibition. Clients visited the gallery on repeated occasions and also responded to the exhibition's content in art workshops. Each client had a personal assistant. Conceptualisations of the exhibition were mediated through the use of the following paradigms: the discursive model of gallery education (Fulková, 2008), the perception model of multimodal integration, the notion of object learning, the notion of art as experience, the notion of creative transformation of experience into a new artefact and the creation of its functions and meanings.

Due to limited space, we will only touch upon the first two of these, first the discursive model and secondly the multimodal model: The discursive model presupposes that the generation of a reading or the meaning-making of the

cultural artefact takes place in direct connection to a specific discourse. The term *discourse* is understood as an unstable and changing field of *testimonies*, not in the sense of a *statement*, but in the sense of Foucault's *énoncé*, which are not only verbal but mainly visual, gestural, musical, etc. and thus enter into the semiotic domain, which is performative. The artefact of teaching, itself, falls into this domain. In such a model of education, creative processes and processes of knowledge take place as social, dialogical and performative acts that rehabilitate and support non-verbal types of the *énoncé* (Fulkova, 2008, p. 20). These are usually undervalued in classical types of education. This corresponds to the rehabilitation of different types of intelligence found in works of H. Gardner (Gardner, 1993). Multimodal integration can be characterised, according to Gerhard Dauer as the linkage of visual and auditory stimuli:

Multimodal integration means that perception in the realm of one sense is influenced by perception in another, so once the two components are integrated into an interpretation that is as consistent as possible. The linkage of visual and auditory stimuli do not reset solely -- as was long assumed -- from mental construction; it has been shown that various sensory stimuli already converge on the neuronal level in so-called multimodal neurons ((Dauer, 2010, p. 331).

Multimodal perception thus occurs on the lowest level of perception, sometimes even before the object is recognized. Since we know that genuine synaesthesia is very rare (Galajdova, 2008) and that multimodal integration depends on the context, we enriched it by haptic and physical/spatial, gustatory and olfactory perceptions both at the exhibition and in the follow-up artistic and dance workshops. Dauer says that

if one sense provides too little or unclear information, other senses enter in as a corrective (...) Factor in evaluating reliability naturally include attentiveness, experience, motivation, and previous knowledge, which makes it clear that multimodal integration cannot be reduced to processes taking place in multimodal neurons (Dauer, 2010, p. 331).

### 3.4. Education process

Each visit had a standardised course that could be flexibly changed according to the needs and at the request of the special-needs clients. Preparation in familiar surroundings took place ahead of each visit included discussions coverings thematisation, the art works and their poetics, the author, and generally setting the mood for the journey. The clients had enough time to familiarise themselves with the space of the Neo-Renaissance building of the gallery, which they expressed astounded them as they had had no such opportunity in the past. They came to know the space and the displayed artefacts in an unusual way – they were allowed to use a number of artefacts and handle them. They were encouraged to interact with the artefacts as well as the space itself -- the fountain, staircase, and floors. They had a workshop for material arts and dance activities available to them and so they could literally dance inside the exhibition halls. They studied the contents of several mysterious baskets with their hands in order to familiarize themselves for a haptic experiencing of the artefacts. All these activities were accompanied by active reflective dialogue on all levels (speech, physical, movement).

Directly after the exhibition, the participants returned their institution or workshop and spent time with their assistants engaging in artistic activities through which they paraphrased the contemporary art works they encountered, reconstructed the experience, created new variants of the artistic concepts, as well as wrote short stories and poetry.

Newly created artefacts were imaginatively rich, complex and process they documented the course of experiential education and often created semantic complexes of unusual character in the sense of fictional worlds (Slavík, 2001).

### 3. 5. Criteria for Education Evaluation

Feedback was received from the dialogue and reactions of the clients and their assistants during the visit of the gallery in discussing the works and their use and in the study and discovery of their new functions. Other feedback

came from the artistic and dance sessions after the visit to the gallery. These were created as spontaneous reactions to the components of the artefacts. In regard to the complexity of the educational domain and its subsequent manifestations, we used five levels that characterise the “receptive profile” of the art museum visitors in primary school pupils that was developed for cultural institutions by Slavík and Fulková (Slavík & Fulková, 1999). The levels are: 1. Acceptance, 2. Finishing, 3. Elaboration, 4. Paraphrase, 5. Inspiration. We also used a working version of evaluation criteria developed by Slavík et al. in the context of so-called concept analysis of creative tasks. These criteria cover the epistemic structure of cultural contents that compose a common basis in creative tasks (Slavík, Dyrťová & Fulková, 2010). The criteria are as follows: 1. Content, 2. Integrity, 3. Innovation, 4. Appropriateness, 5. Curricular normativity. Evaluation results are discussed in more detail in our conclusion.

### 3. 6. Research Methodology and Methods

Methodologically we relate to a number of basic lines that inspire the hybrid character of research in art education. We used the following approaches:

Table 1. Key Junctures Between Hermeneutic Approaches and Research Constructs

Construct	Phenomenology	Critical theory	Interpretive Analysis
Role of the Researcher	Observer: lived world of researchers is bracketed; documentor of other's worlds	Facilitator: uncovers possible voices, bias, layers of perception	
Research Questions	How do people make sense of the world? Questions emanate from subjects	What are the possible true voices? Questions emanate from discourse	Why are some voices empowered and others are silenced? Questions emanate from the silenced
Underlying Assumptions	Truth and reality are located in lived world of subjects`they know what is happening	Truth and reality are consensual and corroborative constructions	Truth and reality are coerced constructions resulting from „effect and exercise of power“
Operative Definition of Text	Behavior, words, material culture	Behavior, words, material culture, „histories, myths, ideologies, values, everyday understandings“	Behavior, words, material culture, „histories, myths, ideologies, values, everyday understandings/ metaphors, analogies, artefacts, visual art works
Function of Context	The world of subjects, not the researcher sets context	Ideologies, social political structures	
Operative Interpretive Convention	Meanings emerge from data`not generaliyable		Meanings emerge from disclosure
Variations in Method	Ethnography	Critical Evaluation	Meta/Analysis

This table is according to Key Junctures Between Hermeneutic Approaches and Research Constructs, modified according to Maitland-Gholson and Ettinger (Maitland-Gholson & Ettinger, 1994).

In summary, we used empirical, participatory action research and its methods: Interpretive analysis, conceptual analysis of expressive- creative tasks, psycho-didactic analysis of aesthetic and learning encounters, using the concept of "empirical spectator" and qualitative analysis/coding participants' responses oral, gestural and artistic (partly supported by Atlas/ti software), which is reflected in the table above.

### 4. Case study

I include a case study from one of the organizations central to research. This information draws from the clientele of the Eliáš workshop in Prague that offers help to people with combined special-needs. Also important to this case study, were the students from the gallery education course called *Orbis Pictus*, and from the special art education course, all from the Department of Special Pedagogy, Charles University as personal assistants, teachers and

researchers. Clients and their legal guardians, including the management of the Eliáš workshop were given information about the research and we collected their informed agreement. All students participated in data collection, monitoring, research journal and field notes keeping. Educational encounters with art and follow-up workshops were videoed and photo-documented. After the gallery visit and follow-up workshop, the students put together written reflective records. Clients provided their art works for analysis. Several research sessions to discuss and analyse primary research documents were organised and a public presentation at a seminar in the gallery was prepared.

The basis of the education strategy was a personal, intimate communication – each client had a personal assistant. Another type of communication took place between the client, space and material – at first with the environment, architecture of the building including the lift journey to the first floor, physically moving through the large hall of Rudolfinum, sound-making with the metal. Then there followed an orientation to the facilities, including the toilet and café, and a return to the exhibition. Another activity with the material took place through the tactile baskets full of various natural content (nuts, shells, soft feathers, stones, wood, beans, leaves, dry grass, thorny fruit, large pumpkin). Clients were learning to forget the concrete, utilitarian recognition of the objects, which was novel. Those who were able to converse continually referred to practicalities and were slower to utilize the imaginative and association approach to perception; they did not originally consider if useful. In contradistinction, non-verbal clients enjoyed touching the material and expressed great patience during the study of it. They were not interested in pragmatics -- they expressed joy from an unusual activity through gestures and facial expressions. As one of the assistants commented, "I have experienced greater engagement, greater experiencing and relaxation, [in this context] they are more emotional" (Fulkova, 2004a).

The participants were then invited to use almost all artefacts on display: they could sit in the tree chair, knock on the hollow tree, touch some of the fragile artefacts, drive the wooden cars on the floor and play the wooden guitars. The author of the exhibition, František Skála, gave specific instructions for access as: "They can use those things brutally. The artefacts are used to that. Me and my friends often drive the cars in the mud on a field" (Fulkova, 2004b). However, a student noted that is common in galleries about the assignment of privileges "Us, healthy were handicapped for this moment since we were the ordinary visitors who were not allowed to touch those things (Fulkova, 2004c).

At another meeting in the small hall, clients sat in a circle; assistants stood behind them and began exercises with sounds created on the body with their hands, palms, and nail each as they felt to create a natural sound such as rain, rustling of the leaves, etc. Clients were given tactile baskets in order to notice the sounds of their contents. Finally, all the assistants received one sound-making instrument to create a sound in any rhythm, tempo and volume – which created a type of harmony. We noted that the usual inequities were erased and the roles of teacher-students-participants became redundant. This effect, as a communication and symbolic structure, remained potent with all the participants for the duration of the exhibition and the follow-up workshops.

The participants remained open to perceiving unfamiliar artefacts composed of natural materials, sometimes confusing, undermining their *reality* and requiring focused attention, the study and use of imaginative processes and divergent thinking. The whole journey was accompanied by discussions about the works, whether in verbal or non-verbal – body language terms.

Multimodal way of perception was used during a number of other stops and audio creations. The last stop in the exhibition was placed a large disc that made repetitive, strange sombre noise and a set of wooden guitars, entitled *Gramophone*. Here, the clients had an opportunity to actually take one of the artefacts, a guitar, and use it in any way they desired. This created quite an impact among the custodial staff as well. A previously strict custodian, who did not agree to the use of the artefacts, eventually joined the group and participated in the dancing confiding that she was a former dancer. (Fulkova, 2004d).





Fig. 1. (a) František Skála: Guitars 2004, mixed media; (b) Client playing Skála's guitar and enjoying party in the gallery.

Upon return to the Eliáš workshop, the experience continued in the form of further artistic activities, reactions to the exhibition, reconstruction of memories, evocations and reflections of the creation of an original art work, artistic statement of the *énoncé* kind that are equal to verbal reflections. From our field notes, we made these observations about the atmosphere in an activity room in the facility where an old gramophone played, clients were

Drawing or painting the "experience from the exhibition". But there is a surprise awaiting them:

"Katka announces that they will be dancing... dancing with a piece of chalk on the paper...everyone will become the piece of chalk...dance to the music...eyes closed. After two songs a change comes...everyone can choose a concrete dance partner who then joins in...the visualisation of the dance with a partner – employment of both hands at once, which is difficult. Another change - they can decide whether to dance alone or with a partner, surprisingly they all remain dancing in couples even though it is more difficult. In a dance couple – greater relaxation, greater outreach and movement across all of the paper. We perceive whether we dance faster or slower, joyfully or sadly." (Fulkova, 2004e).

In the end, everyone painted their own LP on a circular format and colored it in pastel.

Everyone has their own approach to the LP. Some draw following the circular pattern, some create individual "nests" representing certain songs and their moods by the colours, some cover the whole space by intertwining lines and some colour in individual parts of the circle. At the end we make a hole in the middle and the created LPs are "played" (spinned) on the real gramophone. All that there is to do is to close the eyes and imagine the music they play.

(Fulkova, 2004f).



Fig. 2. (a), (b) Dancing on paper (clients are drawing with closed eyes and with both hands)



Fig.3. (a), (b) Images of music

## 5. Conclusion

*"What did I like – a lit up book from plastic that was all bright orange and I kept thinking how the book could be even better so that people could enjoy it even more (...) And the book could change colours according to who is looking at it and how it would change the colour every time. And so it would be changing colours if it was day or night."* (Gallery visitor, in Fulkova, 2004g)

Previous text could not, by far, describe the width of the modalities of perceptions of contemporary art and their cognitive and educational potential for special-needs persons. There is no space for further case studies looking into the questions of the research from a different perspective and through different educational methodologies. Participants in the research were concerned with extraordinary and deep conceptualisations, for example, the study of an onto-epistemological status of objects on the level of reality and fiction that ordinary pedagogy fails to even imagine with secondary school students let alone with special-needs clients of the same age, who are erroneously considered in most circumstances to be children. Here, the usual developmental perspective as an explanatory paradigm of their expressions fails. We now need a socio-cultural and anthropological perspective that will allow for the evaluation of the originality and specificity of unique expressions and tacit knowledge (Dreyfus&Dreyfus; Flyvbjerg, 1993). This new perspective will enable recognition of the honourable "significant others" that have social value as the partners and friends to everyone in a civil society.

We answer the research questions as follows: It is not the digital copies but the original art in its physical form and context (artwork-thing and semantic gesture, semiotically said) and the follow-up artistic activities that present the specific field of knowledge that no other type of activity or school education can provide. Artistic creative activity is a social, communicative domain that enables expression, statements of the *énoncé* kind that rehabilitate other kinds of symbolic systems than the usual linguistic-mathematical language. Through their use, we enable school success comparable to regular population – standardization. When comparing the results of the creative activity following the evaluation criteria with the "normal" pupils that we have monitored during other researches and parallel test group (Jiroušková, 2004), we found, above all doubt, that these special-needs research subjects achieve comparable results in almost all of the parameters. Some levels of the perception profile are missing, but they are attenuated towards the next, more difficult levels: if an ordinary recording of level 1. *Acceptance* or level 2. *Finishing* is missing, we directly find a level 4. *Paraphrase* or level 5. *Inspiration*. It is only the coding that is different as these pupils are basically differently-abled. We have not found any differences in the criteria, touching upon the epistemic structure of the cultural contents that form a common basis of creative tasks. There is an easy explanation for this – these criteria count on the participation of a creative pedagogue. Not expecting the pedagogue to create for the pupil but counting on a pre-set creative atmosphere for pupils and him and entering the common



semiotic domain, in which the meaning is created. This is the correct dialogue in the allocentric context, in collateral space of culture (Smith-Shank, 1995; Deleuze, 2003), by semiotics and constructive pedagogy. This is the only basis on which we can then actually accomplish viable discourses between pedagogy and politics – social inclusion and society of knowledge. Literacy can be of a different kind than reading and writing. It is not the linear and instant models of education on the level of a company seminar using six Power Point screens but real, complicated and deep search and negotiation of the meaning and creation of the sense, participation in the space, meeting of people and other creatures and acknowledgment of the differences of each other.

In the conclusion I will avoid noble words about the development of a harmonic personality, spreading of cultural knowledge and love of art because these are suspiciously simple advertisement slogans inside a complicated and ambiguous social reality. Personally, and I hope that my gallery education students too, I am currently more interested in connections with critical thinking about visuality, contemporary art, creative processes, emotional elements of knowledge. We are interested in various dimensions of the visual, media and cultural literacy and the ways in which art is integrated into society, what is its place and function in the so-called cultural operation or cultural industry. Art, as semiotics, cultural anthropology and contemporary pedagogy tell us, does not exist on its own, outside the society, without any influence from political, economic and ideological connections. All this then, naturally, influences the content of gallery education, which should teach that the gallery, just like the entire cultural space, do not represent a collection of finished and admirable artistic artefacts but are a space for negotiations and creation of meanings of all that happens to be inside it. This offers the opportunity of knowledge; knowledge leads to thinking and later to rejection of the forced or shallow meanings and search for one's own approaches and, of course, attempts at creation. Emotions function as a starter of creative processes and there is no thinking and knowledge without emotional and imaginative elements. All this can only be realised through a somewhat difficult

recognition process that requires the participant to invest significant amount of effort and lifelong activity. And if we say that behaviour is also governed by meaning...

We did not reach the ideal of active research -- The ideal being the change of the institutions that participated. In spite of an undisputable success, a number of papers, one PhD dissertation and public seminar attended by a large audience from schools and organisations for handicapped, this event remain isolated. Clients have not returned to Rudolfinum for regular visits, although they wanted to. Without those who initiated these activities in their institutions, there were no further visits. Our students attempted to contact the above-mentioned institutions the following year with no success. The closing question could ask: Who is the one culturally and pedagogically handicapped?

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