Visual arts as leverage for educational innovation in formal and lifelong learning

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Abstract

Interpretation can act as a crucial component of visual arts in mainstream education and indirectly provide an important contribution to educational innovation processes. Current learning approaches fostering self-regulated learning among learners are a good example in this matter. Indeed, strong similarities can be identified between the principles of art and learning theories regarding interpretation processes. Arts education as an integral part of the schools’ curricula fostering self-regulated learning can therefore contribute to educational change and innovation. An extensive focus on interpretation and self-regulation leads to the development of lifelong learning skills and prepares learners for continual learning throughout their lifetime.

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1. Introduction

Although images already fulfill an important role within formal learning processes, mainly as pictorial aid, the possibilities of visual arts are still insufficiently applied in and for education. The dominant ‘productive arts’-approach in classrooms prevails on interpretation as a crucial component of visual arts in mainstream education programs. An important cause of this limited use of the interpretative potential of visual arts for education remains teachers’ lack of experience and confidence with such practices. Besides the added value of (visual) arts in education, it can also indirectly provide an important contribution to educational innovation processes. Current learning approaches fostering self-regulated learning among learners are a good example in this matter. Obviously, similarities can be identified between the principles of art and learning theories regarding interpretation processes and giving meaning. Emphasizing the own contribution of the spectator within art theories is also an important principle in current theories and policy visions on learning and instruction. Arts education (including visual arts) as an integral part of the schools’ curricula in combination with innovation projects fostering self-regulated learning can therefore contribute to educational change and innovation on different levels (teacher, school and policy level).

Based on an extensive literature study and research results, the present paper will investigate the role of visual arts for and within formal education. In particular, this paper will present an approach to optimal integration of arts
education within mainstream education as a means to initiate educational innovation and connect formal and lifelong learning.

2. Visual education in educational practice

2.1. Image as pictorial aid

In education learning processes, images are clearly present in the concrete form of pictorial aids, such as blackboards with diagrams, didactic drawings, posters, textbook illustrations, photos, educational films, slides, television broadcasts, videos, DVDs, computer applications and the internet (Depaepe & Henkens, 2000). In this sense image plays a supportive role. Examples of mainstream education practices in which (visual) arts are vital are scarce (Bamford, 2007; Eckhoff, 2011). The power of the artistic image in and for education is still underdeveloped. So-called method schools, which adopt particular educational methods, have long succeeded in integrating art and image in their daily practice of learning and education. Freinet education, for example, pays a lot of attention to can express themselves freely in any possible way. Other contemporaries such as Steiner also felt that creativity and imagination are important in addition to more traditional learning domains such as literacy and numeracy (Childs, 2005). These method schools are still way ahead of their time. Although over time many of these reformed education views have found their way into mainstream education, in many cases – including visual education - this is restricted to a more limited or adjusted variant of the original vision.

In line with international trends, arts and visual education have gained their own place in the curriculum over the past decades. Five merging factors have contributed to this effort for the visual arts: holistic frameworks of national goals and standards, discipline-based art education (DBAE), post-modern thinking, constructivist teaching principles, and the educational use of new technology (Wallin, 2001). However, structurally embedding arts and visual education as a fully-fledged learning field does not automatically mean that the impact and importance of this learning domain is supported and used to its full potential in educational practice. Although government-defined learning goals in this area can play an important role, the implementation of arts education can be complicated for various reasons, such as a lack of the required competencies in teachers, which is detrimental to the quality of arts education implementation (Bamford, 2007). Teachers can only have the necessary competencies if they learn them during their initial teacher training. Other practical concerns are the absence of a clear vision on school level and limited resources and support, which are important in the development and implementation of the abovementioned arts education learning goals. The alignment of the involved levels (teacher, school and policy level) is also essential when possible solutions are suggested (Fullan, 2007).

2.2. Art interpretation

Although the arts have at present a much more prominent place in the curriculum (Wallin, 2001), research shows that full integration is still minimal in the educational practice mainly due to teachers’ limited experience and confidence with such practices (Bamford, 2007; Eckhoff, 2011). Also, when teachers do see opportunities to incorporate art in their class practice, this is dominated by a productive art approach and very little attention is paid to interpretation as a fundamental component of pupils’ visual education. However, teaching practical skills needs to be combined with interpretation, exploration and expression of ideas (Charman & Ross, 2006). The creative use of a variety of possible interpretations depending on both the viewer and the work’s context (Parsons, 1987) offers interesting perspectives on the learning processes of children and adolescents. Eco (1989) asserted that an artwork has become a sign without any fixed meaning. Through this open-ended character spectators complete an artwork by interpreting it. A lot of contemporary art cannot be understood based on aesthetic description alone and without an understanding of the artwork’s socio-cultural context. This shows the importance of learning how to interpret art, learning how to construct the meaning of a work of art by connecting the purely aesthetic properties to a historic, political, cultural and of course artistic context, for example. The learner’s choices – based on interest, attention and
expectations – determine which interpretation is formed. However, this process can be guided and therefore taught to a certain extent through instruction, training and practice. The acquisition of this skill becomes a way to negotiate our visually complex and rich world (Charman & Ross, 2006; Elias, 1997, 2005). Interpretation therefore becomes a skill in order to question things (MacIntyre, 1981).

If there is a lack of understanding and experience in this field, teachers may find it difficult to guide such a process of art interpretation. Schools still have a clear need for support in this area. The education sector is therefore increasingly requesting cooperation with several stakeholders. For example, partnerships between museums and schools are seen as an innovative, effective cooperation to enrich classroom curriculum and support student success (Eckhoff, 2011). Some museum educational services develop specific education programs and provide successful tools to teach pupils how to look at art. When guiding this process, it is important to guarantee the freedom of your own interpretation. The work of art comes into being through the interaction with the spectator/learner, who receives guidance and encouragement from the instructor, rather than an interpretation. Visual arts are often regarded and interpreted through discussion (Barrett, 2004; Charman & Ross, 2006; Elias, 1997). Instead of simply offering a personal context, we also enter social and cultural contexts giving the interpretation of art objects a clearly social character (Pierroux, 2003). Through dialogue we can come to a better understanding of the shown image. In addition to understanding the art object itself, the viewer also gets to know himself, others and society (better) during the interpretation process (Barrett, 2002; Bruder & Ucok, 2000; Räsänen, 1999; Silverman, 1995). Experiential methods and assignments are also important to gain access to the language of the visual arts. The more background knowledge we have in this regard, the richer and more nuanced our interpretation will be of both the work of art itself and the world around it (Hooper-Greenhill, 1991).

3. Image and innovation in education

The above clearly shows that arts and visual education can also make an important indirect contribution to education. The central processes of interpretation and meaning show strong similarities with the principles of an accepted constructivist learning model to describe learning and learning processes in general. A constructivist vision of learning and education focuses on learners who construct knowledge themselves from a need to understand the world around them and interact with it in a meaningful way (Schunk, 2011). Information offered from outside is interpreted, processed and adopted by learners in interaction with already present knowledge, skills, expectations and needs. This creates a new view of the relationship between the knowing individual and reality, and considerable attention is paid to the complexity of areas of knowledge and higher cognitive activities. This is reflected in the emphasis on an integrated curriculum in which learners study a topic from different perspectives (and therefore also learning fields). Such a vision of learning also implies an adjusted instructional and educational approach: learners are actively involved in the learning content through their own manipulation of learning materials and through social interaction with fellow-learners and the environment (Schunk, 2011). The principles of learning theory presented here show striking similarities to the previously described interpretation principles of art theory.

As far as learners’ active input is concerned, learning and art theories show similarities, which is why a concept such as self-regulated learning can be taken as an example to emphasize the indirect influence of arts education on teaching processes. The term self-regulated learning refers to a practice in which pupils define their own learning goals, set up and implement a plan, set the work pace, decide which help they need and when they need it, adjust where necessary and evaluate their own learning process based on the defined goals (Butler & Winne, 1995; Lombaerts, De Backer, Engels, van Braak & Athanasou, 2009; Zimmerman, 2002). The increasing attention paid to self-regulation is a direct consequence of various educational developments, including the abovementioned impact of recent learning theories – in this case a constructivist learning model. This implies a shift from the instruction by the teacher to construction by the pupil. Besides these educational developments, the importance attached to self-regulation during learning also has to do with the definition of a response to various social developments: the exponential increase of information, the fast changes in organizations and the strong individualization of our society (Schunk, 2011). Self-regulated learning is not readily embraced in educational practice, however. At various educational levels, there is often a reluctance to hand over learning activities traditionally provided by teachers to
pupils. Working on self-regulated learning implies adjusted learning environments where opportunities are created for pupils to be responsible for their own learning processes, to execute tasks independently, to reflect on the learning processes and to respond more to their own capacities and interests.

Despite the difficult introduction of self-regulated learning in a school learning context, the nature of arts education is characterized by an approach that encourages independence during learning. Some teachers urge their pupils to independently define, execute and evaluate assignments in arts and visual education (De Backer, Lombaerts, De Mette, Buffel & Elias, in press). During arts and visual education lessons, the transfer of responsibility for one’s own learning process from teacher to learner becomes obvious and is therefore rarely questioned. The fact that arts and visual education in schools can be used as an example has also become apparent at other education levels, such as secondary and higher education. Specific education forms such as art programs are characterized by approaches and methods based on the notion of self-regulated learning, such as an integrated test that brings together all learning fields, open workshops and annual assignments promoting and expecting self-regulation. The learning track is followed up and evaluated in a portfolio, a tool that mainstream education copied from the art world. All these methods/tools encourage learners to take responsibility for their own learning process and expect a high degree of independence during execution. Arts education is also characterized by more variation in method and assessment types. Particularly practical subjects in workshops can therefore be considered high-level good practices with regard to increased learning process independence.

However, the possibilities of arts and visual education in schools and so-called harmonious development of learners are not yet used to their full potential at all. Teachers in a school context are still finding it difficult to allow a high degree of independence in learners and the integration of arts and visual education in educational and school policy planning may be just what is needed in this respect to offer a fresh approach and initiate the same encouragement in other learning fields. There are some current practical examples showing that the (visual) arts do have an important role in day-to-day class and school practice. Such projects result in considerable expertise both in an educational context and in the professional field.

4. Conclusion

This contribution was an exploration of the place and purpose visual education can have within mainstream education. Although image already has an important role in educational learning processes from a mere observational point of view, the possibilities of artistic images are still greatly underutilized. Nevertheless, contemporary visual art is an important and special part of visual culture and offers many educational opportunities through both the content and structure of the medium itself. On content level the artistic image does not fundamentally differ from other visual materials or even the written or spoken word. Like all other educational resources, art is also used to explain what our culture feels its members should know. The formal structure of the medium contains the particular educational value of contemporary art. This aesthetic information is untranslatable and refers to the common contexts of the transmitter and receiver. It should be noted that art could only be a useful educational resource if the educators are familiar with it (Elias, 1997). However, this condition transcends the level of the individual teacher and implies a fundamental reconfiguration of education at all levels (teacher, school and policy level). The full use of art and culture as a catalyst for innovation in and deepening of learning processes implies a broad base of education stakeholders and policymakers. Art and culture as fully-fledged learning fields in education inevitably lead to a higher quality of arts education in general and may initiate future cultural participation by (adult) learners. An educational innovation can only penetrate completely when there is a whole-system, sustainable reform (Fullan, 2007).

In this paper we also noticed that the principles of art and learning theories on spectators’ and learners’ interpretation and understanding show some striking similarities. The emphasis art theories place on the spectator’s own input is also an important principle in current learning and instruction theories and policy approaches. The potentially strong link between arts and visual education and a concept such as self-regulated learning are illustrative in this regard.

Since the mid-nineteenth century, artists have understood that beauty as an ideal does not exist as such, but that it is plural (Elias, 2005). This is most certainly also the case with learning processes. The aesthetic criterion is not
compliance with common community values, but the originality of the work as the artists presents his or own message and style. Originality became the core value of the art product, which requires a learning process to understand the language and rules of art. In order to look at art, you need curiosity, a desire to know and a common interest in the form and stories of objects from the past and present (Elias, 1997, 2005). Museums are considered remarkable sites of learning and are obviously an ideal place to expose adolescents and adults to original great artworks. There is no genuine substitution for a rich, meaningful museum visit (Eckhoff, 2011). Such principles tie in perfectly with constructivist principles of learning (Schunk, 2011). Learning processes in museums can therefore act as a lever for educational innovation in a much wider sense than arts and visual education alone. Not enough expertise and project experience are currently being shared even though such examples can be a source of inspiration. Discussions that transcend individual project visions in both sectors can be an important spark activating a more extensive spread of initiatives that integrate art and image in a broader vision of education and development.

Visual education is a cultural necessity. It is therefore important that learning experiences encouraging independence in arts and visual education learning processes in schools and museums are extrapolated to other learning fields. As a result, good artistic practices and an innovative educational approach (i.e. a high degree of independence) can make a major contribution to how we meet to the learning needs of young people. Pupils are allowed to develop a real sense of ownership within visual arts education. It is obvious that such ownership results in high degrees of self-regulation in learning and acts as a key competence to initiate and to enable pupils for lifelong learning in later life (Zimmerman, 2002).

References


