

Why focus on the Common Ground?

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Across cultures the arts have some *common functions*. I have defined these functions (the common ground) as perpetuating cultural values, questioning cultural values, and as contributing to the general embellishing of our lives and environments. In the future, I will continue to argue that in searching for art's common ground we need to make more use of perspectives or lenses from the great variety of individuals and groups across cultures who make art, preserve it, sell it, collect it, steal it, study it, use it, perform it, and enjoy it. We have to help students see that across cultures (and I don't just mean cultures based on ethnicity and race) the arts encode values and ideologies and that how art (any type of art) is discussed and interpreted "is never innocent of the political and ideological processes in which the discourse has been constituted" (Wolff, 1981, p. 143).

That artists produce and perform their works within a matrix of shared understandings and understood purposes now has considerable support. But *curriculum* has not kept pace with changes in *theory*. We need to help students realize those understandings and purposes and to see that as they move across cultures, the purposes are not particularly different. In universities, we have embraced the so-called *new art history*. Courses in aesthetics and art theory are becoming increasingly interdisciplinary. We need to bring these perspectives to the schools.

Despite the fact that emphasizing the common ground can be misleading, it is, I think, where we must start. I have never meant to imply that everyone should have the same goals, share the same view of the world, or act in the same way. Rather, I believe that we should seek to maintain diversity and individuality while enabling and focusing upon shared views and vocabularies. To live together successfully we must accept alternative communities while searching for a dynamic core of common concepts and views.

I don't deny that differences are important and should be respected, but, as I said in *Celebrating Pluralism* (Chalmers, 1996), I like what Caribbean-Canadian author Neil Bissoondath (1993) says in his novel *The Innocence of Age*. Lorraine, one of the principal characters opines,

"Differences are easy to find. It's the similarities you really have to dig for." After a moment Pasco said, "Sometimes the differences overwhelm the similarities." "But only if you let them," Lorraine replied. (p. 274)

I am certainly aware that this sort of advocacy can be problematic. Not long after the appearance of *Celebrating Pluralism* (Chalmers, 1996), I served as an outside examiner for Airini Caddick's (1997) Ph.D. thesis *Dreams of woken souls: The relationship between culture and curriculum*. Her beautifully written dissertation, part powhiri, part prayer book, part love letter to her (and my) Aotearoa New Zealand, left an indelible stamp upon my soul. In one of the less poetic parts of the

thesis Airini quotes Imogen, a teacher at a middle school who said,

We need more understanding of different cultures, every culture that comes within our classroom or our school. We need more time to understand and really to listen to them . . . But we've got to get to the young generation and it's now a global community; [we have to] accept that just because someone's from a different country or that their skin's a different color, that we're the same; that they have different ways, sometimes better ways of doing things than what we do. (p. 196)

Airini responds cautiously, and we need to take her caution to heart. She states,

Community may be that imagined space in which nations and people share common interests and the ability to communicate cross-culturally. Viewed positively this is a call for unity and harmony, affirming deeply held beliefs of goodness in all people and a shared desire for peace. This may also be interpreted as protecting the heart of colonizing forces; rendering invisible an assimilationist effect that will ensure the dominance of Western capitalist systems. Educators, in working with the young, must achieve a balance between inspiring hope and challenging ideologies, which facilitate the continued dance of imperialism. (p. 196)

In *Celebrating Pluralism*, I explored and used the work of several people who are among those who provide an important pedagogical foundation for teaching and learning about all types of art. Each has implications for ways in which the arts can be taught as both social and aesthetic studies. Each presents a view of art as a powerful pervasive force helping to shape our attitudes, beliefs, values, and behaviors. Their work is still important. I want to briefly refer to the work of just one of these.

Ellen Dissanayake (1984) identified eight general and cross-cultural functions that art is said to serve or manifest. She claimed that art reflects or echoes, in some way, the natural world of which it is a part. Art is therapeutic, she wrote, because "it integrates . . . powerful contradictory and disturbing feelings, . . . allows for escape from tedium or permits temporary participation in a more desirable alternative world, . . . [art] provides consoling illusions; promotes catharsis of disturbing emotions" (p. 37). Art can allow direct unselfconscious experience. Dissanayake writes that it "can temporarily restore the significance, value and integrity of sensuality and the emotional power of things, in contrast to the usual indifference of our habitual and obstructed routine of practical living" (p. 37). Art has been called *essential* because it exercises and trains our perception of reality. Art, in many cultures, may have "the unique faculty of preparing us for the onslaughts of life" (Jenkins, 1958, p. 295) by turning our attention to things that should concern us, as members of that culture, by recommending particular subject matter to our attention. Art assists in giving order to the world. Although it contributes to order, Dissanayake also called attention to the *dishabituation* function of art, i.e., the fact that we may respond to art in unusual non-habitual ways. Art provides a sense of meaning or significance or intensity to human life that cannot be gained in any

other way. Dissanayake also sees art as a means of reaching out to others for mutuality, a means of communion as well as communication. It may be too easy to dismiss what she says as applying only to the *art* of so-called traditional ethnological cultures. But if we do this we make a big mistake. Ellen is talking about the art, the material culture, of all.

As I look again at Dissanayake's functions, and think about the art made in schools, I find myself thinking about the ways in which the art that is learned and made in school both does and does not reflect or echo aspects of the small worlds to which children belong. Certainly the curriculum can allow *escape from tedium* but I'm not convinced that *it permits temporary participation in a more desirable alternative world*. Are kids shown various perceptions of reality? Did they have any real sense of the interaction of art and society? A certain order may be given to the world, but it may be a sanitized uncritical order rather than a strange and wonderful dishabituating order. And is there a nonEuropean view of the world? In a few classrooms, and in the hands of a few sensitive teachers, art sometimes seems for communion as well as communication, but perhaps it is more personal rather than socio-cultural communion. Many children may miss the common ground.

I've used work of McFee (1986) and Dissanayake to develop possible themes for art education curricula. In addition to those things that we have always valued—creativity, personal expression, sustained projects that empowered individual students and groups of students, I want teachers and students to ask *Why do we make art? How do we use art?* and *What is art for?* If the arts are understood in these ways, in terms of their functions, in terms of what art's for, in terms of why it's made, displayed and performed, we have a solid and rich foundation upon which to build meaningful curriculum. The arts need to be, and to be seen as, a potent aspect of all cultural life. We need to profile programs that do this.

I am now a grandfather. Jan Wai-Ming inherits both Asian and European genes and names. Like my granddaughter, many people will increasingly lead complex multicultural lives. Giroux states,

Whether we're talking about television, the Internet, Hollywood films, video games, or mall culture, . . . kids are being educated now far more powerfully in places outside the schools than they are in schools, and any educator who is concerned about critical literacy or critical consciousness has to address what it means for kids to be able to mediate those multiple sites in which they are now being educated. Put another way, educators have to provide the conditions for kids to be educated in multiple literacies. They have to learn the codes of high and popular culture[s]. . . . They have to learn to mediate a world in which knowledge is produced in multiple sites often with unequal relations of power. . . . They need to be able to move across a whole range of boundaries in order to be able to negotiate spaces . . . in which they are shaping their desires and identities. (Cornier, 1998, p. 17)

What are the roles of the arts in people's lives? Although we certainly need to respect difference, students in art classes also need to understand (and to cel-

ebate) that which they have in common. We need to continue to explore the *common ground* among art's roles and functions across diverse cultures, and develop curriculum implications. I believe that we need curricular approaches that are incompatible with self-sufficiency, isolation, and exclusiveness. We need curriculum that acknowledges that we exist in relation, not isolation.

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