

A Position Essay on *Art and Culture* in Emerging Art Education

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This essay reflects on many years of studying art and culture to try to comprehend their functions in giving form to society as a basis for justifying art in education. I make some attempt to relate this inquiry to classroom teaching-learning of multicultural children at this period of history.

Human culture is an invention and a design. It develops over time among a group of people to structure their interactions with each other and the natural environment. It arises from the needs of people to anticipate others' behavior in order to know how to direct their own. It defines the value of activities, responsibilities, ages and genders, of places and things, qualities and conditions. The emerging sense of reality of a group of people and the hierarchy of their values becomes established as cultural norms and are passed down from one generation to another. Sometimes powerful ideas about cultural organization are developed by a single individual and have profound influence on the development of cultural systems, but these are often diffused and modified by the inventions of the cultural groups that adopt them. Outsiders who wish to be accepted into a culture have to learn that particular group's cultural inventions and adaptations.

The structure of culture is expressed through verbal, written and body language. It is also very dependent on the multiple forms of the languages of art; how people dress for status and role, how they enhance and decorate objects for themselves and for barter; how they design their habitations, organize communities, enhance their sense of reality and worship, and celebrate shared events. A people's art is a constant communicator of information about the design and meaning of its culture.

Each cultural and subcultural group invents and changes its culture and its art over time. Art often heralds and reinforces these changes. Art also preserves cultural meaning against forces of change. At the same time that great effort is made to preserve and maintain culture, there are many forces such as invention and emergent ideas that change it.

The degree of contact and interaction between cultures is a force for change. Television and the internet and their art forms are profound inventions that change and increase intercultural influence. At the same time, each individual is a culture carrier, but learns his or her culture and its art somewhat differently. Some people are normative adhering to the center of their culture over time. Others are pushing the limits of cultural norms, but still remaining within the culture. As this millennium begins, the world has strong examples of cultural differences from extreme efforts to preserve and enforce cultural norms, compared to more multicultural national societies which strive to maintain basic human rights and yet allow for cultural diversity that does not infringe on these basic rights.

In education in the United States, there is considerable effort to recognize and respect the cultural diversity among students while at the same time preparing them to live, learn, work, and have individual freedom in the context of this democracy. This can be viewed as an overarching cultural system of values that provides order while allowing for considerable variation among individuals and subcultures. Thus, this country is a multicultural society.

But this complexity puts strong demands on educators. One of the first is to be aware of the diversity represented in classrooms and respect for it, without becoming so relativistic that one ignores the limitations of any one culture. Respect for a culture does not have to include acceptance of all its values, practices and art.

Teachers also need to be aware of their own cultural biases, that they are not trying to enculturate students solely into their own culture's patterns. A teacher, recognizing a student's preferences for design styles, amount or kind of complexity and content, for example, can help them extend their options by exposure to other forms of art without degrading their own preferences.

A key problem for an overloaded teacher is to keep from stereotyping students by ethnicity and supposed cultural background. If a teacher is teaching from stereotypes their expectations of a student will be limited by those stereotypes and the range of options a teacher could provide. Cultural stereotyping also limits teacher awareness of individual differences students may have in the way they learned their culture and developed cognitive styles, creativity, perceptual skills, and learning aptitudes, as identified in psychology.

Helping students see how forms of art are communications of their adaptation to culture can enable them to evaluate their own work in terms of what they want to express to others. Experimenting with differing ways of organizing their ideas and comparing these with others modes of expression can extend their ways of working and responding. This knowledge can be used in evaluating the art around them. *What are its messages?* How does the structure of the content influence the message? What are the ideas and values expressed that relate to the artist's background? This can enable students to become aware that everyone is a culture carrier, and that their culture and their ways of communicating through art and critiquing art have value but that they can be extended and developed through the cross cultural study of art. In some classes where cultural respect is found, students could be asked to create art to communicate to other students whose subject matter and way of organizing and creating art messages are quite different from their own.

The two penetrating communication systems, television and the internet, are exposing students to design systems in time/space that are specific to their developing technologies. The cross cultural impact of these media and their effect of diluting cultures is just beginning to be comprehended. Their effects on students' culturally and personally derived art preferences and abilities have yet to be analyzed.

There are also subcultures of the visual arts—fine arts and museum art, architecture and landscape arts, popular fine arts, graphic arts, crafts, folk arts, designer arts, computer graphics, popular arts, television and internet art, advertising and display arts, and adornment and environmental arts. All these affect intercom-

munication through art and thus are part of the subject matter of art education. Different students will have been exposed to various combinations of these arts. Some cultures include all of these subcultures of art—some—only a few.

Teacher Education

Because art and culture are so intertwined, it is difficult to teach about one without the other. Art communicates culture and culture contributes to what is created as art. For these reasons art teachers need to be aware of:

1. The cultural values and attitudes and beliefs represented among their students.
2. The subcultures of art that students and teachers have identified with.
3. Cultural history of world art.
4. Culture itself as a phenomenon and its impact on human social organization and education—learning.
5. The teacher's awareness of their own unicultural or multicultural background and their position in it in relation to culture change.
6. The relationships between art and culture. The effects of culture on perception, cognitive style, and art processes and values.

Certainly for elementary teachers one course in education on the socio-cultural-psychological composition of classrooms and one course in methods and materials will not begin to address art education. Secondary teachers who have only a studio based study of art and a small exposure to education theory research and practice are ill prepared to teach this broad subject of art as cultural communication to the cultural diversity of our present school populations.

What can we do to begin to meet this need? *Can* the whole context of teacher education itself increase its concern for cultural diversity and culture change? Art education has particular needs to help students relate the socio-cultural-psychological foundations of education to art because the role of art as a major communication system is often neglected or not recognized in education courses. A second question is, *Do studio art classes, focused on media, prepare students to comprehend art in its larger communication role in society?* Still another important question is, *Can teachers in training who have never been immersed in a culture besides their own—or never reflected on themselves as culture carriers—learn what they need to know to comprehend the impact culture has on students' ability to learn?* For art to be recognized as a basic in education in this visual information age, it must be recognized for what it is and what it is doing. Multicultural and cross cultural art education is necessary to meet this need.

These questions point to three areas on content for art teacher education that need development.

1. Include in art education theory classes this larger sense of both art and culture. Help teachers in training see that they and their students are culture carriers through their preferences and practices in art. This affects how teachers teach and evaluate, and how students learn.
2. Teachers of teachers need strong foundations in the social sciences in cultural anthropology, cross cultural psychology, and cultural art history as

well as art and educational foundations, such as psychologies of cognition, perception, creativity, and learning. This requires continuing literature review of these fields for implications for art teacher education. Students need to have been immersed in at least one culture not their own and understand what was happening to them.

3. Art history departments need to include culture as part of their analysis of art through history and include more ethnic and non-fine arts in their analysis.

Research

The areas needed for continuing research and review of foundational literature include:

1. Utilization of all the work that has been done in art and culture in art education. Systematic analysis of this content needs to be made to identify its limitations and need for further research.
2. Continuing review of cultural anthropology, cross cultural psychology on cultural diversity related to art, and population studies in sociology to identify school populations.
3. A cross cultural study of design is needed to understand what is common and what is diverse in world art. What common trends are found? How do they vary from traditional Western theories of design? What are the time/space uses of design in film, television and on the internet? How is this impacting students? How has culture change affected product and popular design?

Much of this work has implications for teaching art as well as art education classes. The foundation implications help us understand people's interaction with and creation of the visual environment, much of which is art in its broad definition. This pervasive language of art leads, maintains, and sustains our socio-cultural, national and international life. This also shows how important the study of art and culture is for living.

Bibliography

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Recommended Reading

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