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The Misplaced Burden

Art Education as Social Healer

Carol Cruickshanks

Social transformation is one of the potential benefits of art education, but not its sole responsibility. Why, then, in an effort to ensure adequate funding, are many art educators forced to emphasize this aspect of art education above its intrinsic power to help shape individuals? An art educator examines the historical roots of the imbalance between current educational policy and the practice of public art education.

A colorful slogan on a T-shirt I spotted on a street corner in my town brought to mind our overly-high expectations for the benefit of public investment in art education. This shirt proclaimed loudly:

Art and Music are the **drugs of choice**
for thousands of kids.
If we expect them to **just say no**
to a chemical high
we **must** recognize the healing alternative —
their own **creativity**.
Demand and support the **real** anti-drug program:
ARTS IN EDUCATION

In more than twenty years as an art educator I have learned firsthand what it is to create and what it means to struggle — to facilitate the experience of making art in a wide variety of educational settings. Yet in spite of the rewards of that struggle, I have some reservations about what art education can — or even should, for that matter — do.

Swearing under oath on one occasion that I was not a member of the Communist Party, I've practiced my skills as a visual-art specialist in the first to twelfth grades of schools urban and rural, those publicly funded and privately endowed institutions with so-called ordinary children and those with special needs.

And while I still have more than a little faith in the idea that an experience with, and practice in, the arts can move individual mountains, I find it hard to believe that art education will solve our country's current drug problem — or any other

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social ill for that matter — as well meaning as art advocacy by way of T-shirt manifestos may be.

I am somewhat disturbed by the supposed social mission art education is often expected to fill, a mission not realized by exponentially larger, and more deeply pocketed, programs such as the “war on drugs.”

Alleviating addiction — or crime, or poverty — among school-age children is most certainly well beyond the scope of art educators. However, in recent years we seem to have an obsessive need to make cultural heroes of those whose talent has lifted them from unfortunate social conditions — and, in the process, desperately point to the role of art education in fostering up-from-the-ghetto achievement.

Contradictory Values

Our collective vision of art as social healer is curiously contradictory to the value placed on art curricula by state and local governments, especially where school budgets are concerned. Education in the arts is still consistently undervalued when it comes to grassroots educational planning, funding, and implementation, yet ironically overburdened with expectations of miraculous curative properties when showcasing its usefulness.

This disparity can be confusing even to long-term art educators. In my current position at a New Jersey state college, supervising undergraduate student art teachers placed in schools throughout the state, I am consistently reminded that many of the policy issues and public expectations a new generation of art educators must face remain virtually the same as when art education first began in America.

In truth, however, coming to grips with what art education should be is often confusing to teachers themselves, since the very position of art education in school curricula remains tenuous at best. For example, the apprentice student teachers I’ve supervised during the past few years have been linked with professional teachers who, with widely varying resources, are obliged to meet the requirements of established curricula.

One student worked with a teacher who traveled from room to room once a week with a cart of supplies, individually serving more than 250 pupils from kindergarten through third grade. Another, more fortunate, was based in a resource room replete with running water, storage racks, electric ceramics kiln, and an attractive display space.

In short, the resources committed to art education differ dramatically between educational settings within the same geographic and policy areas. Interestingly, both programs were well run and enthusiastically endorsed by their respective principals. But the quality of the programs in each of these radically different settings is more a tribute to the skill and commitment of individual teachers than a by-product of funding provided by their school districts.

Extraordinary flexibility is now required of art educators, and their success often rests with their ability to cope with situational demands, which can change from year to year within the same district, and in some cases within the same school.

These days, it seems that understanding the art teacher’s role within the context of public funding and local or district school boards is as important for the young teaching professional as is subject knowledge, talent, or didactic skill.

With all this in mind, I ask my students to review the historical literature of arts education in an effort to identify the origin of many of the attitudes that persist to this day. This is especially important because personal misconception can negatively guide an art educator's fate in public education just as much as society's false perception of the nature of their role.

The Practical and the Aesthetic

Art education is a relative newcomer to the public academic scene when compared with the three R's, which, in some colonies, were established well before the American Revolution. During the early years of this nation the purpose of schooling was to develop "informed free choice" as preparation for participation in a democracy and, at the same time, to teach the skills required in an agrarian economy. From there, public education's agenda gradually shifted during the mid- to late-nineteenth century toward serving the needs of a growing industrial economy.

As a result, it was little more than a hundred years ago that art was first included in public school curricula. Drawing was introduced in the schools of Massachusetts in the mid-1880s. The curriculum, however, was not based on the development of aesthetic skill and judgment but on the need to develop draftsmen for a burgeoning New England textile industry.

Thus the "applied arts" marked the beginning of a curriculum in arts education that was closely connected to, and paralleled, the approach and practice of the arts and crafts movement. This American movement influenced arts educators philosophically as well, since the manual arts, believed to have socially redeeming value, were good for their own sake.

It was here, too, that the notion of the twin expectations of art education — practical purpose and social value — first gained currency, concepts that art educators still live with today.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, U.S. arts educators had developed a uniquely American application of practical arts and aesthetics based on a curriculum developed at Columbia Teachers College. It was here that Columbia professor John Dewey's landmark article "Imagination and Expression" supported the link between cognitive development and visual art, and Arthur Wesley Dow, whose chairmanship of that institution's Department of Fine Art from 1904 to 1922 influenced an entire generation of art educators, formulated a new aesthetic and course of instruction.

In *Art Education in the United States*, first published in 1908, editor James Parton Haney noted some of the hallmarks of American educational culture. He also announced the following in his preface to a collection of scholarly papers on art education, which accompanied an exhibition of children's art work presented at the Third International Congress for the Advancement of Drawing and Art Teaching, in London:

To understand American schools and American school work one must understand Americans. They believe themselves to be a people intensely practical; they are, in fact, a nation of idealists, who in all their institutions "cling to faith beyond the forms of faith" striving to translate into practice ideas of freedom and democracy, whether condition permit or no. Grown of just such mixed motives — ideal and practical — there has gradually come into being what may be termed an American system of teaching the arts.¹

In the early part of this century there were, in fact, two concurrent curricula in art education, the practical and the aesthetic. This innovative system of early childhood art education, based on creative and expressive exercises, was an outgrowth of the new science of teaching at Columbia, where it was believed that exercises should cultivate "art expression in its relation to child nature and the laws of development."²

This extraordinarily modern developmental approach, which also recognized the positive role the artistic process could have on the mental and physical development of children, was particularly valuable in energizing teaching in the elementary grades through the use of age-appropriate exercises as opposed to rote copy work, until then the predominant teaching technique.

As a result, the educational emphasis changed from product focus to process orientation. In spite of the support of this new "scientific" respectability, however, art education still had to be defended and required champions.

In his 1908 overview *The Philosophy of Elementary Art Education*, educator Colin A. Scott wrote:

Even more than the rest of our educational arrangements, instruction in art is supposed to be scrappy and inconsequent. The need for art is not felt profoundly by the adult community, and it is often looked upon as a luxury or a fad when it appears within the school.³

A New, Yet Old Dichotomy

A large component of art education in the early decades of this century involved the practical application of skills. Haney justified this practice with some apology, claiming that "the teaching of applied design has so grown in importance as to warrant more than ordinary attention."

The applied arts were akin to the technical or vocational training that first appeared in the late nineteenth century. While by the twentieth century such training had become more aesthetical minded, it still remained essentially utilitarian in focus. The older elementary grades were taught bookbinding, woodworking, fabric printing, and crafts of all kinds, and the high school curriculum also emphasized the practical arts.

For example, in the first decade of this century, East Orange, New Jersey, High School, with a total enrollment of 595, had 228 students enrolled in the Art Craft Department. This popular curriculum consisted of wood carving, modeling, metalwork, leatherwork, sewing, stenciling, block printing, embroidery, weaving, bookbinding, pottery, basketry — a panoply of media that developed practical, employable skills. In contrast to the general third of the school's population who were crafts majors, a scant 67 students enrolled in the Mechanical and Architectural Department, another vocational track, and a mere 56 were in the Free-hand Drawing Department.

When we compare this curriculum with those of today, it is apparent that the arts were generally based in those practical skills most suitable to a society where handmade objects were still the norm. In our current postindustrial economy, however, even manual fabrication techniques — now classified as the "vocational" curriculum — are for the most part obsolete where job access is concerned. In just the few years since the advent of desktop computer technology, the manual component of many skills that were taught in applied-art curricula have vanished. As a

consequence, art education in our time has been stripped of its most popular justification: practical application.

Historically, however, the shift away from art education as a subset of vocational training began as early as the 1920s with a focus on a new set of utilitarian rationales. Art education became bound to its developmental purpose with emphasis on serving the general objective of schooling. By the 1940s and 1950s this policy had become somewhat entrenched.

“Art in the service of perceptual and motor development, mental health, and leisure time, and psychological and social maturation was promoted primarily by the psychologists who dominated the professional field,” notes Stephen Mark Dobbs in his introduction to *Arts Education and Back to Basics*.⁴ During the 1960s and 1970s, the emphasis on reform enhanced art education’s role as a nonverbal antidote to the excessively discursive character of American schooling, particularly in the wake of the Sputnik era, when heavy emphasis on catching up to the Soviet Union in science and math infused our educational system.

Dobbs further notes,

Art education through the years has often been organized philosophically around targets of opportunity, those rationales and trends which at the time had substantial social and political support in public education. This led to a manifestly utilitarian and instrumental quality in the justification of art-education programming.⁵

The Pitfalls of Overstatement and Sloganeering

Another spokesman for basics in education, Jacques Barzun, stated that “American education has pursued a policy of overstatement about its role and substance [and] has lived by continual exaggeration of what it is and what it can do.”⁶ It is precisely this inflation of purpose — and subsequent educational ineffectiveness — which helped germinate the back-to-basics movement of the late 1970s.

The report of the National Art Education Association (NAEA) Commission of Art Education, in its 1977 review of policy, observed,

Art educators for the most part take a dim view of how the public values the arts and supports education programs generally. Most art educators consider the public’s taste and its priorities for the arts education of their children as being far too low.⁷

While the traditional skills of cognitive learning are valued as the skills of primary importance in education, this report says that “those values which tend to support notions of the arts as intellectually suspect and closer to the category of ‘play’ appear to remain paramount in the American school system.”⁸

The persistence of these two schools of thought — camps, really — has resulted in the now familiar, and senseless, war of attrition that swings from decade to decade on the momentum of public opinion for and against art education. Professional idealism is seasonally confronted by the realities of the complex and uniquely American interdependency of local, state, and federal endorsement and funding.

The 1977 NAEA commission report assessed the situation this way: “Education is now in a public relations phase, and art teachers as well as other subject specialists,

administrators, and school boards are finding themselves competing for time, attention, and funds.”⁹ Today, many professionals are still in the image-conscious position of needing to generate interest in, and attention to, the inherent value of art education. For the art educator it is no longer sufficient to be accomplished in one’s subject and teach well, but to understand the “value” perceptions of parents, school administrators, and the tax-paying public.

The prevailing view among students themselves about what that value might be is often as misconceived as the general public’s. The perception of students is often based on the false notion that art teachers should be providing fun instead of work.

In his article “Creation and Re-Creation in Art Education,” Ron Sylva noted the hazards of institutionalizing this “soft” form of an undervalued art curriculum:

Art has been synonymous with recreation, a time for students to rest from the rigors of academic education. That travesty of art education has been reinforced by an all too prevalent two-headed popular impression of art as a hobby, a leisure hour, non-challenging, kit-based, fool-proof time passer that is also a con-game, an incomprehensible, pretentious, and outrageously over-priced waste of money.¹⁰

The pitfalls of propagandizing for program popularity without encouraging meaningful, developmental, and creative content are numerous. Beyond encouraging false expectations and, thus, counterproductive public scrutiny, real educational value — the imaginative venture into the creative process — is circumvented.

In “Dumbing Down Art in America,” David Swanger also warns of programs that become standardized and stereotypical: “Too often in schools the act of making art is replicative rather than original, and vision is reduced to standardized images rather than celebrating individual perception.”¹¹

He further analyzes this breakdown by noting that America manifests a “passion for popular rather than fine art,” which is “unabashedly dependent on a standardized, simplified, and romanticized acceptance of conventional views.”¹²

While dedicated art educators go about the hard work of nurturing original and creative vision, they are simultaneously hard pressed by administrators to define the “competencies” by which to measure the accomplishments of their students.

With the serious intention of addressing this shortcoming, the concept of discipline-based art education (DBA) was first defined in 1984. Stephen Dobbs, editor of an NAEA publication on this subject says,

The discipline-based art education paradigm approaches art as a subject of study in general education and requires a more balanced curriculum that includes content from four art disciplines: art criticism, art history, aesthetics, in addition to art production.¹³

The impact of this approach is still being felt. DBA has brought substance and clarity as well as academic respectability to art education. Skills are presented in sequences that lead to a developed understanding of art. Ideally, lessons are planned in cooperation with units of study in other disciplines such as history, language, and science.

As a structure for teaching that melds the study of art with the general curriculum, DBA has provided a much stronger justification for art’s inclusion in the public educational system than social relevance.

While even the NAEA admits that “there is no single, adequate, and comprehensive and perennial purpose for the teaching of art,” we must participate actively in the search for such purpose and meaning, with a level of critical thought, creativity, and dedication that should properly characterize any professional work.

Both individually and collectively, our future, and the future of our programs, is in our own hands. In this regard, Rita L. Irwin, in an impressive 1993 article for the journal *Arts Education*, maintained that art advocacy is a “fact of life.”¹⁴

And so it is. But the history of art education in America teaches us that this has always been the case, since the very beginnings of an organized art curriculum.

As far as pleading that case is concerned, nearly a hundred years ago Arthur Wesley Dow argued well, clearly, and best for the value of art education in our school systems.

A better understanding of the true usefulness of art recognizes creative power as a divine gift, the natural endowment of every human soul, showing itself at first in the form that we call appreciation. This appreciation leads a certain number to produce actual works of art, greater or lesser, perhaps a temple, perhaps only a cup, but it leads the majority to desire finer form and more harmony of tone and color in surroundings and in things for daily use. It is the individual’s right to have full control of these powers.¹⁵

Notes

1. James Parton Haney, ed., *Art Education in the Public Schools of the United States* (New York: American Art Archival, 1908), 15.
2. *Ibid.*, 24.
3. Colin A. Scott, “The Philosophy of Elementary Art Education,” in Haney, *Art Education in the Public Schools*, 231.
4. Stephen Mark Dobbs, ed., *Arts Education and Back to Basics* (Alexandria, Va.: National Art Education Association, 1979), 5.
5. *Ibid.*, 7.
6. Jacques Barzun, “Art and American Schooling,” in Dobbs, *Arts Education and Back to Basics*, 153.
7. National Art Education Association, *Report of the NAEA Commission of Art Education in the Public Schools* (Alexandria, Va., 1977), 123.
8. *Ibid.*, 163.
9. *Ibid.*, 174.
10. Ron Sylva, “Creation and Re-Creation in Art Education,” *Art Education*, January 1993, 9.
11. David Swanger, “Dumbing Down Art in America,” *Art Education*, May 1993, 53.
12. *Ibid.*, 52.
13. NAEA, Stephen Dobbs, ed., *Research Reading for Discipline Based Art Education* (Alexandria, Va., 1988), 147.
14. Rita L. Irwin, “The Four Principles of Art Advocacy,” *Art Education*, January 1993, 71.
15. Arthur Wesley Dow, *Notes on Creative Expression* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1921), 10.

“Often the problems of higher education are laid at the door of precollegiate education. All the problems and proposals are not going anywhere until we look at the way we prepare our teachers. Should higher education institutions be education mills looking for tuition dollars [or set high standards for prospective teachers]?”

— Ted Sharpe