

Derailing Dewey: Art Education and Social Reconstruction

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Abstract: In this paper, a case is made for a critical re-examination of current trends in art education which support the adoption of inherently politically motivated curricula. The author examines the historical influence of Postmodernism upon both the fields of art and education, and argues that the potential for art to serve as a vehicle for ideology has caused many art educators to mistakenly conflate their moral role as teachers with their drive to disseminate their personally-held political beliefs.

Key words: Arts; Education; Ideology; Morality; Dewey; Activism

A few years ago, I attended an art education conference where a colleague was presenting a research paper on the pedagogical use of digital video in primary school classrooms. As he reached the half-way point of the presentation, he jovially commented that though he hoped his research might be of use to others, he certainly wasn't expecting it to rock the foundations of art education or change the world. This self-deprecating aside elicited a few smiles and some quiet chuckling.

Suddenly, a voice blurted out with a palpable mix of condescension and self-righteousness: "Well *some* of us *do* want to change the world!"

An uncomfortable silence descended upon the room, followed by a murmur of approval from some, and embarrassment from others. My colleague was left to finish his paper, a general feeling of combativeness and unease hanging heavy in the air.

In a similar vein, I know of another instance where a respected member of a Canadian department of art education managed to so incense his audience of fellow educators that several of them stood up in the middle of his presentation and walked out of the hall in protest. Nor are the above two anecdotes exceptional; whether experienced in person or recounted by second-hand sources, I have come across a number of instances in recent years where outrage and indignation have publicly flared amongst my colleagues.

Yet this should come as no surprise, and one need only examine a list of current topics associated with art education to understand why. Art education for social justice and social change; art education for community activism, art education for democratic citizenship; visual culture art education... Time and again, our publications, periodicals, conferences and symposia bring up such themes, all of which reveal how art education and politics have become entwined. Furthermore, there is a general impression that this is as it should be: a logical progression as if the teaching of art were tailor-made for such pursuits.

But why should this be the case? From where comes this assumption that the arts, and more specifically art education, *can* and *should* be used for the purpose of furthering such goals as those enumerated above? In this paper, I argue that the current trend in art education towards the teaching of issues that I refer to as social reconstruction is an extremely troubling and problematic one. I will demonstrate that art's inherent potential as a vehicle for ideology has caused many in our field to conflate their moral role as teachers with their drive to disseminate their personally

held political beliefs, resulting in a situation where it is not so much the practice of art, but rather its potential as an embodiment of personal ideology that has become for many the core of art education pedagogy. I further argue that, if one of our goals is to teach students to think critically and self reflexively regarding their personal social and cultural values, in addition to those of the world around them, it is imperative that we should first do the same ourselves and start including the current values of art education amongst the subjects of our reflections.

Before getting mired into the debate over the politicization of our field, however, it is worth first briefly sketching a broad picture. How exactly it is that we have come to be having such a debate?

Morality and Art

A great deal has been written about the role of morality in the arts, whether art itself has a moral basis, a moral heart, if you will. For example, David Swanger (1993) makes a strong case that there is a causal link that can be made between the creation and appreciation of art, and the growth of positive moral characteristics within an individual. Swanger's principal argument, shared by Eisner (1995), is that since art necessitates imagination and imagination is a key element for empathy, art can therefore allow us a greater aptitude for understanding and caring for others. Successful art, he argues, “creates a connection between the percipient's sensibility [and] the sensibility of the artist” (p. 43). In so doing, “the 'morality' of art . . . inheres in its capacity to foster empathetic knowledge, the kind of knowledge that counters our tendency to create the 'other' of our fellow humans” (p. 48).

However, an essential caveat that must be added to Swanger's (1993) thesis, is that empathy is only one possible outcome of art, not an absolute one. This is because art is something that is *used* by the artist (Eisner, 1995). It is a vehicle for the communication of a message, an emotion, a belief, a memory. The moral quality, if any, of what is being communicated is dependent upon the artist's intentions. Saunders (1962) gets to the heart of the matter when he convincingly argues that *imagination*, the cornerstone of both empathy and of art itself, is essentially amoral. It is how we choose to use imagination, to what ends we choose to apply it, which falls within the subject of morality. Imagination, in this sense, is no different from any other tool used in art making, and one can no more attribute concepts of ethics or morality to imagination than one can to a paintbrush.

Furthermore, there is no apparent reason to believe that there might be anything particular about the moral character of artists that would make them different from the rest of society. After all, history is full of artists who worked for the glorification of despots and tyrants; think of the many painters and sculptors who worked in the style of Socialist Realism under the Stalinist regime, or court painters such as Jacques-Louis David and Diego Velasquez. David serves as a particularly dramatic example, as in the course of his career he excelled at putting his talents to work for whomever was in power at any given time; he painted portraits for the French nobility under Louis XVI, turned his skills to propaganda for the new republic after the revolution, and later became court painter for Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte.

As for their personal lives, no research exists that I know of that demonstrates that artists conduct themselves any more truthfully, ethically or kindly towards strangers, friends or family, then other members of society. On the contrary, one need only read a handful of artist's biographies to quickly come to the conclusion that artists are individuals with all the vices, flaws, and foibles that are part and parcel of being human.

Some may counter the preceding argument by pointing out that any moral character

attributed to an artwork is just as much a product of the *viewer*, if not more so, than of the artist. However, this rebuttal merely shifts the source of the attribution of morality from one individual to another, neither of whom there is any reason to believe is more or less moral than their neighbour.

Morality and (Art) Education: Dewey's "Moral Principles in Education"

What, then, of *art educators*? Is there something specifically that denotes within them a greater sense of inherent morality than can be found within other segments of the population? To answer this, let us examine the general before going into the specific, and speak first of educators by and large.

The moral role of teachers is one that has long been recognized. Indeed, next to students' parents, it is their teachers that often serve as major role models. When looking at literature on educational theory, few names recur with such unerring frequency as that of John Dewey, whose life was spent thinking about just such issues and whose influence cannot be understated. I now turn specifically to his *Moral Principles in Education*, first published in 1909, in order to better understand his ideas regarding the topic at hand.

In his preface to the book's 1975 edition, Sidney Hook explains that Dewey's belief, which was original for the time, was that moral education belonged to all subjects taught in schools. He believed that it was part of every teacher's role, "...to teach all subjects in such a way as to bring out and make vocal their social and personal aspects, stressing how human beings are affected by them, pointing up the responsibilities that follow from their interrelatedness" (p. xi).

Dewey's claim was that, as social institutions, the primary role of schools was to prepare students to become active, effective and thoughtful participants in the society around them. Moral education was essential to such a preparation. This could be achieved by ensuring that all subjects were taught with an understanding of their effects upon, and relevance to, the social world (p. 40). It was essential, therefore, that moral education not be presented as a curriculum separated from other subjects, as to do so would lead to its teaching as an abstract set of ideas rather than as a critical part of everyday life (p. 2).

It is also clear that Dewey believed that educators should help their students strive towards the betterment of society; however, rather than advocating a particular political doctrine, he called on the teaching of what he referred to as *judgement*. "Mere knowledge of what right is, in the abstract, mere intentions of following the right in general, however praiseworthy in themselves, are never a substitute for [the] power of trained judgement" (p. 52).

Knowledge, Dewey argued, was itself not enough to form moral principles; without judgement to help guide in its use, it was just a useless abstraction. However, if one considers the above and examines the current trends in art education, two perplexing questions arise. Firstly, if moral education is part of all educational subjects, why is it that art education seems to have embraced this role so enthusiastically? And secondly, why is it that art education chooses to defend and promote the particular ideologies that it does? The answers to these questions, I believe, can be found in the field of art itself.

The Politics of Postmodernism: From Art to Art Education

One of, if not the most important events in the history of art has undoubtedly been the rise of the postmodern paradigm. Beginning roughly in the middle of the last century, monumental shifts in the cultural and intellectual landscape of western society brought about a greater awareness of social and political issues to a greater number of people than ever before (Tarnas,

1991). The various factors involved, technological, philosophical, economic, political etc., are generally known to readers. I will therefore avoid going into an involved history lesson, and simply state that one of the results of this ground-shaking paradigm was that politics became an essential, some might say unavoidable, subject for artists to explore in their work (Fehr, 1997; Stinespring, 2001).

It is important to note, however, that when one examines the vast majority of influential political art of the last decades, one cannot but notice that these are weighted heavily, if not to say almost entirely, towards one end of the political spectrum. Put another way: can it be said that politics in general, by which I mean the *entire* range of possible ideologies that cover the political spectrum, is represented by postmodern art? A quick perusal of art galleries, publications, and exhibition catalogues indicates that this is most resoundingly not the case.

Let me illustrate what I mean by examining the negative space of this particular picture, that is what one *does not find* in much of contemporary art. When, as an example, was the last time that you saw a piece of art defending free-market capitalism? How about a performance piece enacting the virtues of the Catholic Church? A video installation presenting the value of military interventionism? A dance piece expressing an anti-abortion message?

Indeed, one can say that postmodern art is not only often overtly political, but specifically embraces what most would describe as a left-wing, liberal school of political thought. Witness how often cases of censorship in the arts are instigated by groups that are described, often both by their champions as well as their detractors, as “conservative” or “right-wing.” The preceding observation may seem to be a truism, but the point bears emphasis because as with art so with art education.

Kerry Freedman (2000) explains how, through the influence of postmodern discourse being felt throughout various spheres of society, European neo-Marxism was integrated into American educational theory in the 1960s and 70s. Other related modes of thought followed suit over the decades, including feminism and post-colonialism, and this eventually led to a situation where, as Freedman explains, “critical reflection in education in general took on a decidedly social perspective” (p. 320). Not surprisingly, as these new paradigms were integrated into education in general, art education experienced a similar shift. The influence upon art education may well have even been stronger than that upon other educational fields precisely due to its inherent relationship to the world of art, which itself had been so massively transformed by postmodern ideas. The result was that the overarching critiques of past beliefs and institutions coupled with the calls for revolutionary change which were the bread and butter of postmodern discourse quickly found voice within art education theory. For example, Fehr (1994) voiced an early and strident call to arms that the field should adopt the critical attitudes and perspectives that typified postmodern rhetoric.

As the disquieting messages of today's politicized art enter everyday life, they jolt our comfortable prejudices. Such art, unlike the art of modernism, prods a complacent society's fat belly . . . Art educators can be among the leaders of this resistance against the *status quo*. [italics in text]” (p. 213).

Fehr (1994) then continues, “Art education's latent power is greater than we realize, and its moment is now. Art education can sweep away much of the detritus of prejudice that has encrusted Western civilization since its inception” (p. 216).

Themes of critical pedagogy and social justice quickly became common currency amongst art education theorists and spawned both pedagogical movements as well as research methodologies. One of the most influential examples of the former is visual culture art education

(V.C.A.E.), which has garnered much attention in the last two decades. Directly linked to the concept of critical pedagogy, V.C.A.E. champions the importance of content over form, with a strong if not outright singular emphasis on the socio/cultural context of the visual objects being examined (Knight, 2010). To some, this might sound like the teaching of art history. However, articles discussing the merits of this approach often reveal its clear political underpinnings. The basic premise of V.C.A.E. is that all imagery, both historical and contemporary, is inherently laden with ideological content that serves to maintain a particular hegemonic status-quo that is allegedly elitist, repressive, and anti-democratic. One of its principal goals is therefore to teach students to defend themselves against the capitalist/corporatist powers that control the majority of the visual production of the Western world (Darts, 2004; Duncum, 2008; Efland, 2002; Freedman, 2003; Smith 2003; Tavin & Hausman, 2004). Admittedly, though this purpose is not shared by all of its advocates, it is one that seems implicitly associated with V.C.A.E. and is often singled out by those who have been its critics, including some who would otherwise be its supporters such as Eisner (2001) and Steers (2007).

Teaching students to view images critically, that is to say with an understanding of how they function as purveyors of information or ideology, seems a sensible and laudable goal. Putting aside practical arguments that art educators may not have the proper training to teach such analyses effectively (Silvers, 2004) or arguments that the pursuit courts redundancy and the obsolescence of the field (Eisner, 2001), it would seem this would be a logical subject to include within a well-rounded art education curriculum given that the use of imagery to convey ideological messages has a long and sordid history. Indeed, Silvers (2004) explains that the ubiquitous way in which images can be manipulated, “troubled Plato from his early writing [and] have continued to trouble theorists and policy makers to this day” (p. 22).

Duncum (2010), one of the champions of this form of art education, demonstrates that “all images involve an assertion of ideas, values, and beliefs that serve the interests of those for whom they are made” (p.6) and even gives some ground to his critics when he further admits that ideologies can be progressive, as well as conservative. However, he does not address the underlying assumption of his fellow social reconstructionists that some ideologies are morally “good” and others “bad,” nor the belief that the art classroom is the place where such distinctions should be made.

The inherent problem with V.C.A.E.’s approach to the analysis of images is its essentially instrumentalist nature. A useful distinction is that between the notion of *analysis* and that of *critique*. If V.C.A.E. pedagogy was to aim its deconstructing gaze in an indiscriminate fashion, examining all visual culture, no matter its source, then one could argue that students were being taught analysis – an essential part of every students’ intellectual education. However, I argue that the emphasis of V.C.A.E. is on critique, as opposed to analysis, because the former requires, by definition, something to be critical of. As I have previously argued, V.C.A.E. is firmly rooted in a particular worldview which subscribes to very specific ideas of what constitutes “good” and “bad” in terms of culture, economics, and politics. Just as postmodern political art almost invariably embraces a particular set of socio-political beliefs, so V.C.A.E. advocates are frequently selective in the targets they choose. The result is that what is being advocated is not so much analytical skills, but rather the use of these skills in service to a particular doctrine.

A further issue stems from the fact that the critiquing of images in V.C.A.E.-influenced curricula is usually followed by the creation of new images, counter-images if you will, that are meant to be responses illustrative of the critiques in question. As Tavin (2003) explains, what is required is both the “understanding *and producing* [of] visual representations as social and political

texts” (p. 208). Unfortunately, the fact that the resultant images could in turn be critiqued in precisely the same ways as those they were made in response to is an irony that seems lost.

Had the influence of postmodernism stayed within the confines of academe, the situation might be less problematic; but its influence on classroom education can be clearly seen in the practical curricula found in influential publications such as *Art Education*. Here one finds a collection of projects covering such issues as anti-globalization and consumerism (Green, 2000; Lee, 2008; Tavin & Hausman, 2004; Tavin & Anderson, 2003), institutional critique and social change (Albers, 1999; Buffington, Cramer, Agnelli & Norris, 2015; Chung 2009; Darts, 2006; Ulbricht, 2003; Watson, 2012), environmentalism (Ballengee Morris and Stuhr, 2001; Kothe, Maute, & Brewer, 2015; Ulbricht 1998), anti-racism (Denmead & Brown, 2014; Lee, 2012; Parks, 2004) and anti-militarism (Pistolesi, 2007). Other, vaguer, notions are also advocated, including the fostering of “empathy” (Hasio, 2016) and “peace” (Anderson, 2002; Bae, 2012; Marshall, 2014).

In this rush towards making art education supposedly more relevant by adopting subject matter similar to that of contemporary art, however, it seems that we have lost sight of several important facts. The first is that art and morality are not intrinsically linked, so this should not be used as an argument for sublimating the teaching of art to that of morality. The second, as discussed by Dewey (1975/1909), is that all teachers have a responsibility to teach their students the basic tenets of moral and responsible behaviour. This does not mean, however, that it should be their principal subject, but rather something they should instill within the specific subject in which they specialize. Finally, there is an important difference between the teaching of moral behaviour and teaching politics and current affairs, let alone teaching politically biased points-of-view. Yet this seems to be what proponents of social justice art education and its various iterations insist on doing.

Derailing Dewey

Leshnoff's (2002) “Teaching Art, Moral Conduct and John Dewey for Today” serves to demonstrate how personal political beliefs can insinuate themselves into the classroom, not despite but rather because of, the best of intentions. The author begins with a detailed overview of the role of teachers in the moral education of their students, including such practical matters as class discipline, teacher modeling of behaviour, and the importance of instilling positive character traits which include: respect for self and others, responsibility, cleanliness, development of interpersonal relationships, tolerance, honesty and compassion (p. 34). Dewey, whose previously discussed *Moral Principles in Education* Leshnoff refers to several times, similarly considered that moral education required that such traits be encouraged amongst students (Dewey, 1909/1975, p. x).¹

Leshnoff (2002) then continues with a discussion concerning how student artworks can initiate dialogue concerning matters of personal responsibility and general character education, explaining, “art can play a valuable role in helping students discuss conduct that is good or evil, for the process of building character requires that students be aware of their own viewpoints” (p. 37). However, there is a potential problem which must be addressed:

As students discuss personal values related to their artwork, what they perceive as worthwhile behaviour personally might not be perceived as virtuous by the teacher and the community. How do art teachers use their skills to bring students closer to the actual practice of moral integrity and social responsibility rather than stopping at self reflection and value clarification? (p. 38)

Clearly, according to the author, it is not enough to teach students to recognize and be aware of the moral values that they hold to be important. Nor is it enough for them to learn to use

knowledge and judgment so as to reconsider those moral values, because these may not agree with “what is perceived as virtuous by the teacher and the community” (p. 38). It is important to note the assumption made that the teacher's own beliefs concerning what is “virtuous” are the same as that of the community – an assumption that itself should not be made without serious self-reflection, knowledge and judgment. Which community, or communities, is a teacher meant to represent? Is it the school community? The community of their fellow teachers? Perhaps the community of their classroom? Is it society at large? And with which of these communities should a teacher's principal allegiances lie? One also wonders what exactly constitutes “moral integrity” and “social responsibility”, and according to whom? Furthermore, how specifically does one put these things into “practice”?

Leshnoff's (2002) answer to these questions takes the form of a discussion concerning how to introduce into the art class themes of environmental and social activism, and issues related to the plight of minority and oppressed groups. What began as a discussion about moral education and Dewey's advice that we teach students how to think, finishes with a shopping list of what needs to be done in order to make the world a better place according to the author's own political beliefs. The author concludes with another quote from Dewey (1909), “It is not enough for moral education to instill good intentions. [The] kind of character we hope to build up through our education is one that not only has good intentions, but that insists upon carrying them out (Dewey, as cited in Leshnoff, 2002, p.49). This would seem like a perfect quote for activists everywhere; a call to arms. But if one examines Dewey's text, it is clear it is a call to common sense. He is simply saying: what worth are good intentions if they never reach the stage of action? After all, one of the central tenets on which Dewey built not only his educational theory but his entire philosophy was that one could not disassociate value judgements from practice (Feldman, 1968).

But to take Dewey's writings and apply them to contemporary issues without taking into account their historical context is highly problematic. As Peters (1977) explains, “a failure to understand properly the problems with which people in the past have been concerned often leads to absurdities in attempts to use them” (p. 114). For one thing, at the time in which Dewey was formulating his ideas, the day-to-day reality of schooling was a very different one from our own; rote learning from textbooks was the norm, corporal punishment was rampant, and little attempt was made to connect school to the society around it, let alone to understand school as a particular culture unto itself. No matter how one might decry today's classroom as authoritarian and regimented, to compare the situation with that of the second half of the nineteenth century is to be willfully naive. Similarly, when Dewey wrote about “social action” in 1909, one should not think that this is interchangeable with our contemporary terms of “social activism” or “social reconstruction,” which have specific sociocultural histories and are associated with particular political agendas.

When Dewey wrote about the importance of “social action” in students' education, he was not calling for the teaching of political activism, but rather for the teaching of what is necessary for students to be capable of effective and thoughtful action within and upon the social realm using the knowledge that has been imparted to them through their education. He called for students to gain both knowledge and judgement; only once they had these could they decide for themselves why and how they might take action.

Conclusion

In recent years, countless arguments have been made for and against the politicizing of art education, with many voices on both sides of the debate presenting rationales that are at times

strident and dogmatic, but for the most part reasonable and measured.

Art education and the world of art are by definition closely entwined; it is no surprise that the former should look to the latter for exemplars of the form. Clearly, art educators need to look towards actual practitioners of their subject, that is to say, artists, as educational models for such essential qualities as the understanding of material practice and the tacit knowledge which comes with it. However, when dealing with art that seeks to tackle subjects political in nature, there are serious issues that need to be addressed for the sake of students and teachers alike.

The ideas and goals of social awareness and activism should not be dismissed out of hand. To do so would be to indulge in precisely the sort of simplistic and dogmatic polemicizing which I argued against. Nevertheless, social reconstruction through art education is built upon a basic misunderstanding of what it means to be a moral educator. The ideology at work in postmodernism has, through the interstice of postmodern art, been transferred to art education. Art educators, in turn, have conflated the moral role of teachers within society with their drive to share their personally-held political beliefs, all in the name of their particular definition of what constitutes the greater good.

The question is whether such a blinkered view of art and art education, one where there is only one goal for making art in the name of one particular set of beliefs, can possibly be a good thing? Does this really fit into Dewey's statement that moral education should be based on the teaching of self-reflection and judgment? Before we tell students what they should believe, we need to consider what it is we believe, and how we ourselves have reached those beliefs. The self-reflexivity that we try to teach to our students, we should apply to ourselves as well.

If there is the possibility that our beliefs may even be only partially mistaken, then we have no choice than to accept that the best we can hope to do is teach students critical, self-reflexive thinking – teach them *how* to think. Once they've reached that point, then they will be in a position where they can make informed decisions concerning *what* to think.

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ⁱ There is a great deal of difference however between teaching the basic forms of everyday social conduct listed above, and the teaching of such politically motivated themes as environmentalism, social activism or anti-globalization, to name but a few.