

Art education in New Zealand: A question of criticality

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ABSTRACT

This essay seeks to illuminate a problem which appears to be embedded in the very foundation of thinking about art education in New Zealand. It can be found in the consistent failure of art educators to reflect critically on their enterprise, in particular, in their failure to systematically and critically engage with the theory on which their enterprise is founded. This failure is attributed to a form of teacher education which, in its focus on essentially practical matters, fails to provide beginning teachers with either the means, opportunity or incentive, to critically examine the conceptual foundations of the art education they are required to provide young people. Evidence of this failure is said to exist in the muddled conceptual ground on which 'The Arts in the New Zealand Curriculum' (Ministry of Education, 2000), and the draft curriculum statement (1999) which preceded it, uneasily rests.

The curriculum for the arts: Its conceptual structure

At sometime during their teacher education, art teachers will be presented with "The Arts in the New Zealand Curriculum" (Ministry of Education, 2000), as the basis on which their teaching in art will be founded. And their encounter with its substance will begin with a set of claims about the nature and purpose of the arts. This consists of a number of assertions to do with the arts, ranging from the apparently obvious, such as "the arts develop the ... artistic dimensions of human experience" to the all encompassing "They [the arts] are an essential element in our daily living and life long learning" (2000: 9).

These claims are made with breathtaking confidence and with the apparent force of indisputable truths. There is no equivocation here, none of the circumspection with which such claims are normally advanced and they are unaccompanied by any explanation or illumination.

Such claims are not new to art education. Indeed, most of them were common currency among art teachers more than thirty years ago. At the time art was not a well established subject in the school curriculum and the claims served a useful purpose as rallying cries which unified art teachers around the common cause of advancing the interests of their subject. They were also thought to provide a justification for the inclusion of art in the core curriculum in asserting that art is an important feature of social life and no less deserving of a place in the curriculum of general education than any other subject. Moreover, these claims were made with such fervour and certainty that art teachers were made to feel that any attempt to call them into question would be regarded as an act of professional disloyalty, even of betrayal.

Little seems to have changed over time. The claims remain essentially the same, they still serve the same purpose and they are still made with the same uncritical fervour. And, given the force with which they are made and the fact that they are now enshrined in an official curriculum for the arts, why should art teachers hold any doubts that they are true?

Sadly, many art teachers have no such doubts. More importantly, they have no doubts despite the fact that these claims assert answers to fundamental questions about the very nature of art education - questions which New Zealand art teachers have never been encouraged to ask. Until they do and until art teachers are required to think about the nature of their enterprise in a way which leads them to identify and seek answers to those fundamental questions for themselves, these claims will remain unchallenged, and so long as they do they stand as evidence of the failure of art teachers to reflect critically on their enterprise.

The unanswered questions underlying the curriculum

What, then, are the questions to which the claims made in the draft curriculum, purport to provide answers? To get at them we must first acknowledge that, in substance, an art curriculum provides an answer to the question of what knowledge pertaining to art is relevant for our young people as part of their general education. But we must also see that any such determination rests on the answer to a logically prior question, namely, what does knowledge to do with art consist of? In other words before we can make any determination about the knowledge which should be passed on as part of an art education we must first determine what will count as an epistemology of art.

But, we cannot make sense of any claims about the epistemology of art until we have found the answer to the even more fundamental question about its ontology. We cannot be clear how art can be known until we are clear about the kind of existence it has.

In its draft form (Ministry of Education, 1999) the curriculum offered unequivocal and outrageously simplistic answers to both questions. It told us, for example, that the arts have an existence as languages (8-11) and that the arts can be known in the same way that we can know languages. Both answers were neatly consistent with the subsequently stated aim of the draft curriculum (10), which is to "learn the languages of the arts".

In its final form, however (and following vigorous criticism of its reference to the arts as languages),¹ all such references have been removed. However, in speaking of "developing literacies in the arts" as a "central and unifying idea" of the curriculum (10), there is no question that the final curriculum statement holds no less firmly to the belief that the arts are, indeed, languages, than was evident in the draft.

But any consistency which might exist between the notion of the arts as languages and the curriculum aim of enabling students to become literate in those languages, amounts to nothing if its answer to the ontological question is wrong and if the claim that art has an existence as languages simply does not stand up.

The idea has had a long history in art education discourse but to speak of art in this way is to speak analogously about its ontology. Unfortunately, it appears that the analogy has become a reality in the minds of those who drafted the curriculum statement. This amounts to nothing less than lazy theory.

This is not to say that it is uninteresting to think about the relationship between particular forms of art practice and languages. It may be, for example, that in certain circumstances, certain practices in the arts might function *like* languages, even as meta languages and perhaps this is what is meant. But it is at best misleading and at worst quite wrong to say that the arts *are* languages. And if it makes no sense to speak of the arts *as* languages it would seem to follow that it makes no sense to speak of an art education which aims at enabling students to become literate in them.

The idea that the arts are languages also appears to be the basis for the claim in the draft version of the curriculum, that "art works ... use particular sign and symbols systems" (1999: 8). This section has also been expunged from the final version of the curriculum, which suggests that its writers have recognised that while some visual art works - those which lend themselves to iconographic analysis - do, apparently, employ well defined sign and symbol systems, upon closer analysis we find that most art works simply do not. Moreover, in contemporary art practice, where art works are regarded as no more than mute entities onto which viewers layer their individual "texts" it is surely irrelevant to speak of artists using signs and symbols in any systematic way or with a view to communicating meanings. Indeed, much contemporary art practice reveals no evidence that art works have anything to do with communication much less language, and to refer to them, as some do, as "sites of meaning" must be wrong since both their meanings and their values have their origins elsewhere and are assigned to them as part of our engagements with them.

Further if the arts could legitimately be construed as languages it is difficult to see how they can, at the same time - as claimed in the final curriculum statement - be construed as distinctive "ways of knowing" (9) or as "disciplines". with distinctive "bodies of knowledge" and "means of enquiry" (10). One could possibly make such a conceptual leap if one subscribed to the Wittgensteinian belief that the means we use to account for the world effectively shape the world in which we live (Wittgenstein, 1961). There is no evidence, however, that the curriculum embodies such a view. Moreover if we take a Rylean approach to the concept of "knowing" we would say that what can be known *about* the arts is embodied in conventional form of "Knowing That", within such recognised disciplines as philosophy, sociology, history and so on, while knowledge of how to make art works could not be called a discipline since it is a practical activity and a form of "Knowing How" (Ryle, 1963).

Speaking in similar vein the final curriculum statement also tells us that the Arts contribute to our "intellectual [and emotional] growth" (10). And this is said in such a way as to suggest that it is art practise which makes this contribution. Setting aside the obvious assumption that it is necessary to think intelligently in order to make art works intelligently (as opposed to stupidly) one would have to say that there is no reason to assume that the arts contribute to our intellectual ability any more than any other practical activity. Indeed, if we accept Ryle's view that there is no necessary connection between "Knowing How" and "Knowing That" (31), we would have to say that the intellectual requirements of being able to make art works have no necessary connection with intellectual requirements of any other kind.

If the claims made in the curriculum about the ontological and epistemological nature of art are vulnerable to criticism, the same is no less true of its claims about the function of art and its axiology: the way values arise within it.

One wonders, for example, at the point of saying that the arts are of value because they "develop the artistic and aesthetic dimensions of human experience (9). It hardly seems worth saying that there is an artistic dimension to human experience and that the arts are instrumental in its development. But we are left to wonder what is involved in the aesthetic dimension to human experience and the role the arts play in it. The juxtaposition of these two claims seems to suggest that there is some sort of relationship between the two dimensions: a relationship which is not explained and which is contentious to say the least.

And what are we to make of the claim that the arts function as "an essential element of daily living"? (9) Without some explanation of what is meant by such a claim it is meaningless beyond the fact that the larger curriculum framework claims they constitute an essential learning area.

If the arts are an essential element in daily living we should ask why it is that there are only four arts incorporated into the essential learning area called by that name. Does it mean that only these four arts constitute an essential element in everyday living and that the other arts do not? If that is not the case is it not simply misleading to call the so named "essential learning area" "The Arts"?

Would it not be more accurate to call it "Four Arts" or, perhaps more accurately, "Some Randomly Selected Arts"?

If there is some doubt about which of the arts are essential to our daily living, a second difficulty arises from questions about what the four arts in question actually involve. In speaking of "art works", for example, the curriculum offers us examples of objects and events which are conventionally called "crafts" and, even, forms of popular entertainment (11). This entirely begs the contentious question of whether or not there is any distinction to be made between art and craft. Moreover, if crafts are to be included within the purview of the arts it raises the question of whether or not we should also include other forms of visual culture and, if so, should we include all of them or only some? If the former, why are some mentioned and not others, in particular, why is specific mention made of such practices and products as rock videos, soap operas and tapa while no mention is made of such enterprises as embroidery, knitting, sewing and other features of what we conventionally call "homecraft"? And if all the products of "visual culture" come under the purview of the arts, are there any such products which are more worthy of our attention than others? Is a painting by Piero della Francesca, for example, more worthy of our attention as a cultural product than a used tooth brush, and if so, on what grounds?

If the unremarkable questions I have raised so far are justifiable it is clear that the alleged conceptual structure of the new arts curriculum has hold of little which can stand as either an ontology, axiology, function or an epistemology of art and, to the extent that its claims represent the beliefs of art educators, then one would have to say that art teaching practice in New Zealand is flying theoretically blind with no means of justifying what it is doing and no means of showing that its practices are consistent with the nature of art.

I concur with Pariser's (1988: 15) suggestion that the problem with art education is that it constantly "finds itself trying to endorse worthwhile practices and uncover worthwhile problems without ever having recourse to definitive descriptions of the fundamentals which underlie such endeavours". I suspect this problem is exacerbated in New Zealand because of an art teacher training which is almost exclusively devoted to classroom practice and in which there is alleged to be no time for what is generally regarded as the luxury of theory.

This is not to say that all New Zealand art teachers are incapable of reflecting critically on their enterprise. Indeed, after hearing arguments on the matter, a large audience of art teachers attending the 1999 Aotearoa New Zealand Art Educators Association Conference voted unanimously to inform the then Minister of Education that they were implacably opposed to the very idea that four arbitrarily selected art forms can constitute an essential learning area within a national curriculum. Unfortunately, such criticism carries little weight when the Ministry of Education is able to secure the services of a number of prominent art educators to help draft a curriculum for precisely such a learning area.

Clearly the art teaching profession in New Zealand is divided in its view of the arts curriculum, for whatever reason. And this division will remain for as long as the profession has no agreed nor unified theoretical foundation on which to argue the matter through and apparently no effective forum in which such argument can effectively take place.

For this reason, if for no other, it would seem that responsibility for the problem lies squarely with art teacher education which, as a matter of priority, should provide such a foundation in the form of a coherent and comprehensive theory of art education: one which systematically accounts for the concepts of 'art' and 'education' together with all those notions which have become associated with these two central concepts over time.

There will be those who on hearing such an idea, will suppose that the intention is to coerce all beginning art teachers to hold to one theory of art education. This is not the case. What is being proposed is no more than what has, hopefully, been implicit in this critique of "The Arts in the New Zealand Curriculum" so far: namely the provision for beginning art teachers of the means necessary

to construct their own epistemologies of art which are well founded in defensible art and education theory; the means necessary to translate that epistemology into a prescriptive theory of art education which is consistent with the demands of the context in which it is to be applied; and, formally, and most importantly, the means for reflecting critically on that enterprise and the practices which follow from it.

If something like this were to become the foundation for art teacher education we might genuinely call it by that name instead of the mere training one suspects most beginning art teachers currently receive.

Art education and the notion of visual culture

If art teachers have difficulty reflecting critically on their enterprise they have received little help in pursuing that end from the literature of art education which, in offering a critical alternative to modernist practice proposes what is claimed to be an education in "visual culture". This alternative is implicit in the New Zealand curriculum for the arts.

This view is best expressed by Duncum (2000: 15) who claims that: If we conceive of visual art as comprising primarily, or at least significantly, visual objects, places and events that are about meaning making, then the sites of art are everywhere about us. Shopping malls, theme parks, television, the internet, virtual reality and tourist attractions are some of the more obvious sites. These, together with on-the-horizon technologies that combine television, the Internet and virtual reality, and where computers may be worn or actually implanted, means that visual culture is now part of the basic fabric of everyday experience and set to become more so. There exist powerful forces - technological innovations, economic imperatives and social developments - that combine to ensure that within the foreseeable future visual culture become even more crucial to social life. They ensure that social life will be colonised by visual culture well into the twenty first century.

An alternative view

I applaud the socially critical approach which has led Duncum and others to this view but I take issue with the way it is construed and propose that it is misguided in at least two significant and related ways.

The first is that it has slipped its conceptual moorings on the concept "art" itself and lost touch with the way we actually use the term in its haste to predict the way it will be used in the future. In this, as in much of the literature in art education, it attempts to commit art education theory to a future without a present, an approach which has ensured that there will always be a gap between what are already regarded as outdated art teaching practices and those which are claimed to be appropriate in the future.

The history of prescriptive art education theory is replete with proposals for art education which claim to prepare young people for "the future". In all such cases, these futurist proposals, in their efforts to offer something which clearly transcends the present, contrive a notion of "art education" which is itself transcendent. Thus, instead of an art education, we have been offered educations in creativity, in the related arts, in aesthetic education, in an art education which is disciplined based and, now, an education in visual culture; anything, that is, except an art education for now.

I take the view that before we can usefully speak of the kind of art education we might need in any future we must first get clear what it means to have an art education which is consistent with what we understand about the present. Only then is a persuasive theory of art education possible, a precondition for which is a coherent and persuasive theory of art in which its epistemology is consistent with its function, axiology and ontology and in which all are consistent with what we know to be the case about the art of the past and present.

The second failure of those who propose an education in visual culture is related to the first and is also a product of their failure to properly grasp the way the concepts "art" and "art work" function in language.

What we have learned from the products of contemporary art practice is that there are no perceivable features which all art works and only art works share in common. Simply, art works are perceptually indistinguishable from other things in the world.

This has led to the apparently plausible view that since there are no perceivable features which distinguish art works from other things in the world, that the linguistic category, "art works" is no longer relevant, and that we should, instead, create a new one which incorporates all those objects and events which we can take to be sites of meaning and value: any bits, that is, of our material visual culture to which particular meanings or values have been, or can be assigned. On this view the idea of "an art education" is said to be irrelevant and, as we have seen, art educators have been exhorted to develop an education in visual culture, one which seeks to make sense of the way such meanings and values are assigned.

The difficulty with this notion, however, is that it does not, in any general sense, allow for any features among that vast array of objects and events we might construe as "visual culture" to be regarded as more interesting, more illuminating, more worthy of our attention than any other. Indeed, we are told that all such matters are a product of the particular individual or group interests anyone might invest in them.

But the notion that all works of material visual culture can be the subject of our epistemological interest is meaningless if we also say that such meaning and value is the product of our interest in them. Moreover, such a notion offers tacit encouragement to teachers to create their own hierarchy of material visual culture which reflects the values, aspirations and beliefs of their own teacher class, despite claims that this is precisely what they should not do.

This approach wrongly assumes that because there are no exhibited properties which all art works, and only art works, share in common that there are no nonexhibited properties either. I would argue that this is not the case, that the category of "art work" still holds good and that it will continue to hold good well into the postmodern future.

According to Dickie's (1971) institutional theory of art, objects and events do not acquire the classification of "art works" because of any feature they share in common but because they have been subjected to a particular social process in which their classification as art works has been worked onto them. It is precisely this process which all art works and only art works share in common and which distinguishes them from other things in the world.

That being the case we can see that to get to grips with the nature of art we need to shift our attention from the concept of "art work" to the concept "art" and when we do that we can see that art works are little more than the material by-products of art. Furthermore, if we want to make sense of the concept "art" itself we need to examine those social practices which classify art works as art works and which assign to them their meaning, value and purpose.

In other words, we can come to know little more about art by attending to art works than we can come to know about religion from attending to priestly raiments, churches and religious texts. If, however, we regard both art and religion as parts of social life: parts, that is, of what Marx referred to as the "superstructure" of society in which we reflect on our human condition and, hopefully, use those reflections to guide our actions, we can see that what is of importance in knowing art and religion is knowing how they are embodied in those social practices which distinguish them as parts of life from each other and from all its other parts.

Conclusion

Art is no more or less than the sum of all the things people do when they engage in the artistic part of social life and it is an essential requirement of an art curriculum to distinguish that part of life from all others. It is also essential to identify, and hand on to young people, knowledge of how that part of life works so that they are empowered to take an active and productive part in it when they reach adulthood.

By reducing knowledge to do with art to the business of making and attending to art works, "The Arts in the New Zealand Curriculum" (Ministry of Education, 2000) has eviscerated the very idea of art as a part of social life and, by conflating four ill matched forms of art into a single "essential learning area", the Ministry of Education has launched an attack on the very infrastructure of art in New Zealand social life.

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Notes

Attacks were made on the references in the draft curriculum to the notion of the arts as languages at a forum for art teachers "The Draft Arts Curriculum and Teacher Education in the Postmodern Context", held at the University of Auckland in September 1999. Professor Michael Peters questioned the use of a literacy model for an arts curriculum and an earlier version of this paper attacked the idea that art forms could be construed as languages.

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