

Reconceptualising the arts in education: Questioning some answers?

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Introduction

Over the last decade we have witnessed a number of changes in the ways in which schooling and education are conceptualised in Australia. For example the nexus between education, training, and the world of work has been more clearly defined, with a concomitant focus on the development of competencies that are seen to be key to the promotion of a productive Australian workforce. The identification of eight key learning areas, and the development of Curriculum Frameworks within these learning areas has sparked considerable debate within the education community concerning the ways in which we define areas of learning and the ways in which these are to be addressed.

Eisner argues that our conceptual life is made public in a range of ways (1994). In his view we employ multiple forms of representation, forms that he sees as deriving from and appealing to the senses, those of sight, touch, sound, smell, and taste. All forms of representation, whether they are discursive or non-discursive, may both reveal and conceal meaning. For Eisner literacy may be defined as '...the ability to encode and decode meaning in any of the forms of representation used in the culture to convey or express meaning' (199', x). In such a view, education may be seen as a transformative enterprise in which multiple literacies are recognised and valued. It is therefore imperative that education provides a means to developing children's capacities to 'read' the forms of representation common to their culture, to 'think in' and through a range of symbolic forms.

The arts have traditionally formed a group of domains or systems through which meaning is encoded and decoded in both discursive and non-discursive forms. The arts lend themselves particularly to the formation of non-discursive knowledge as they provide an alternative means to shaping, encapsulating, and conveying meaning. Indeed, the arts are celebrated for their capacity to accommodate ambiguity and multiple interpretations, an ambiguity that fosters the intellectual values of critique and interpretation. Ironically, it is this very ambiguity that has at times served the arts ill. Many writers have commented on the peculiar

capacity of the arts to question, to critique, to interrogate assumptions, to pose alternative ways of thinking, perceiving and viewing: a capacity that is not always treasured by institutional structures.

Given this interpretive view of the arts, how should we conceptualise the arts in education? In this paper, rather than provide a vision, I shall instead raise a number of questions that may focus our thinking in developing an arts curriculum that is responsive to the needs of Australian society, educational systems, schools, teachers, and importantly, students.

Defining the Arts in Education

In the late twentieth century, curriculum developers in Australia have identified the art forms that should be addressed in educational contexts as those of Dance, Drama, Media, Music and the Visual Arts (Curriculum Corporation, 1994A). Whilst these are useful ways of conceiving of the arts at this time, it should be recognised that these classifications are not fixed, that they may be contested. For example, a time when the notion of Media as an art form was inconceivable is not that far removed from us. When we examine cultural history it is possible to identify periods when particular art forms did not exist or were of little importance in the general scheme of things. We should remember that instrumental music, canvas painting, and photography, are respectively, comparatively recent developments. Similarly, there are art forms such as book; illumination and landscape gardening, that have been considered of major importance at one time and are now far less significant. It is also salutary to remember that the Australia Council in recent times has included another category in its classification of art forms to encompass 'Hybrid Arts', those arts works and events that are developed through a cross-fertilisation between what have been regarded as discrete arts forms, and new technologies.

Consequently, it is important that any conceptualisation of the arts in the curriculum is both responsive to developments within and across discrete arts forms, and provides students with the insights, skills and knowledge to construct their own views of the ways in which the arts may be conceived. Importantly, an education in and through the arts should provide students with the habits of mind necessary to make explicit, interpret, and critique their world-view, and the role the arts play in constructing that view.

The implications for curriculum here are three-fold. Firstly, arts curricula should provide a rigorous context in which students may develop understandings of the particular structures and ways of knowing as they occur in each of the art forms identified in the nationally developed documents, *The Arts - statement on the arts for Australian Schools* (Curriculum Corporation, 1994A), and *The Arts - a curriculum profile for Australian Schools* (Curriculum Corporation, 1994B). Secondly, such curriculum structures should foster connections between arts forms that are both mutually reinforcing and progressive. Thirdly, any conception of curricula in general should seek to acknowledge the multiplicity of ways in which meaning is constructed and conveyed, and provide ways in which the modes of discourse that constitute the arts, be they dance, drama, media, music, the visual arts, or other emerging forms, may be employed to develop students' understandings in fields of study beyond the arts. Each of these factors identified above raises a range of questions that must be considered by curriculum developers, and I shall address each of these in turn.

Discipline-Specific Arts Education

The recommendation that arts curricula should provide a rigorous context for students to develop understandings and skills in the particular structures and ways of knowing as they occur in specific arts forms, focuses on the issue of specialised knowledge within arts forms. Clearly this has implications for the ways in which the discrete arts forms are addressed in school settings, and the discipline-specific knowledge and skills that are required of teachers. I use the term discipline-specific here consciously to distinguish between my use, that is, referring to the range of knowledge and skills evident within the arts forms as defined by the nationally developed documents, and that of exponents of DBAE, or Discipline-Based Art Education (1).

Do current trends in teacher education, particularly those evidenced in the education of the primary generalist classroom teacher equip such teachers with sufficient skills and knowledge to provide children with sufficient discipline-specific skills and understandings? Many would argue that the all-encompassing expert in the arts is an expedient educational myth (Senate Enquiry, 51 -52). Csikszentmihalyi reminds us that 'As culture evolves, it becomes increasingly difficult to master more than one domain of knowledge. Nobody knows who the last Renaissance man really was, but sometime after Leonardo da Vinci it

became impossible to learn enough about all of the arts and sciences to be an expert in more than a small fraction of them' (1996, 9).

However, is what we ask of the primary generalist as arts educator 'expertise' in terms of high proficiency in discipline-specific knowledge and skills? Rather, should we be promoting in these teachers sufficient working knowledge of each of the arts forms to facilitate children's early experiences within these disciplines, and to identify and access resources (human and material) that will build upon these initial experiences? In a conception of arts education that encompasses the latter, the teaching of the arts in primary settings may be seen as a collaborative enterprise between generalist, specialist and the wider arts community, in which the balance of this relationship is determined by the needs of the children and the materials and ideas with which they are working. For example, in earlier years the generalist may undertake the primary responsibility for planning, implementing and evaluating arts experiences, drawing on the expertise and knowledge of the specialist-as-adviser, and practitioner, as needs arise. In the latter years of the primary sector, the balance of this relationship may change to place the specialist as the central figure in determining the scope and content of arts curricula, and drawing on resources in the wider community with the generalist teacher providing expert knowledge concerning individual student development, the broader educational environment of the generalist classroom, and collaborating in the implementation of arts experiences in both discipline-specific and cross-discipline settings.

Generally, at the secondary and senior secondary level in Australian schools, the arts' are taught as discrete disciplines by specialists in each of the arts forms. The amount of time that must be dedicated to each of the arts areas differs between the various states and territories, with some states mandating numbers of hours to be spent in compulsory, arts experiences within or across disciplines whilst others choose not to prescribe the nature or duration of arts education.

For curriculum developers in this area the notion of discipline-specific curricula takes on a different dimension. At what level of schooling should the responsibility for choosing participation across and within arts forms be placed with students? Should students be

required to participate in compulsory arts education in all arts forms up to the end of year seven for example? Should we expect participation in arts education in all disciplines beyond this level of schooling? What are the purposes of arts education at this level of schooling? How should the arts disciplines 'speak' with each other within a discipline-specific curriculum framework?

Studies of adult artists indicate that, given the demands of the various artistic domains, the decision to work within a particular domain tends to be made relatively early in the artist's life (Gardner, 1993). At one level this would seem to suggest that students should be encouraged to select an art form for intensive study at a relatively early stage in their schooling. However, let us examine the beliefs about the nature and purpose of arts education embedded in such a view.

Whilst one purpose of arts education is certainly that of identifying and fostering the next generation of experts within and across the arts domains, a singular focus on this purpose ignores one of the major functions of arts education. The writers of the report of the 1995 Senate Enquiry into Arts Education in Australian schools highlight the importance of the arts to the lives of ordinary people, maintaining that 'An imaginative and creative life is a fundamental part of what defines us as human beings. We suppress it to our detriment for failure to give expression to this intrinsic characteristic diminishes our humanity' (1995, 6). For the Committee, 'The purpose of the arts is to do with the human spirit...' (1995, 12), and is not just the province of a chosen few. The Committee draws a parallel between amateur participation in sports and that in the arts, and bemoans the perceived lack of participation by the general public in arts activity. The committee comments that

Many mentioned the wider good of people 'participating' in the arts or 'appreciating' the arts...few tried to define these terms or discussed their implications. Few discussed the place of a widespread amateur creative life in adult happiness. The situation contrasts interestingly with the position of physical education, where it is widely accepted that being physically active is a fundamental good and something that everyone should do *throughout* life (Senate Enquiry, 1995, 14).

Clearly the above views hold implications for the ways in which we present arts experiences to students in schools settings. Do we view arts education as initiation into a form of life that values the imaginative and creative, and encourages students to actively apply these developing understandings and skills in contexts within and beyond the school setting? Are curricula structured in such a way that students are able to exercise choice concerning the nature, as well as the extent of their participation in arts education? Are there opportunities for students to both specialise within arts forms and develop understandings of other arts forms in ways that may inform both their chosen specialisation/s and their broader understanding of the role of the arts in society? This latter question brings us to the second of the issues highlighted above, that of fostering connections between arts forms that are both mutually reinforcing and progressive.

Integrated arts curricula

The writers of the Arts Statement and Profile (Curriculum Corporation, 1994) recommend that arts education should encompass learning experiences in all of the strand-organisers of 'Making, Creating, and Presenting', 'Past and Present Contexts' and 'Arts Criticism and Aesthetics', with an emphasis on making connections across these strand organisers within and between specific arts disciplines. I have suggested above, that the arts disciplines as defined in the national documents constitute a convenient means of conceptualising the arts in education *at this time*, and that this definition may well be subject to debate. The exponential growth of technology has seen the emergence of media that draw upon the traditionally conceived arts disciplines in a range of ways to create new and challenging artistic forms of representation. These circumstances suggest that arts educators can no longer afford to remain sequestered within particular disciplines ignoring, the advances that are occurring in the world beyond their classroom.

It is imperative that arts educators actively seek; connections between the arts disciplines in order to advance their own and their students' capacities to grapple with the multiple ways in which artistic meanings are constructed and reconstructed in a range of settings. Multimedia technology has appropriated the distinctive features of the arts forms and uses these in a range of ways which may not be easily, or instantly recognisable as 'artistic expression'. This implies that the arts educator in the secondary and senior secondary sectors

in particular must work within a collaborative framework with other arts practitioners, including arts educators, practising artists, and those working in the cultural industries in order to advance understandings of multi-disciplinary arts forms. To work; effectively in this culture, students and teachers need to develop both a deep understanding of the forms of thinking and practice that operate within a specific arts discipline, and sufficient understanding of the forms of thinking and practice of other arts disciplines to foster purposeful connections between disciplines.

Arts-centred curricula

The notion of promoting integration between fields of study in the school program rather than segregating the curriculum into an increasingly diverse collection of separate disciplines has received increasing attention in recent years (Bresler, 1995). Opponents of discipline-specific views of curricula maintain that an emphasis on teaching within discrete discipline boundaries encourages an intellectual fragmentation that students find confusing and unrelated to their experience of the world beyond school. Furthermore, it is argued that such intellectual fragmentation does not reflect the ways in which meanings are coded and encoded, nor the ways in which problems are addressed in the life beyond schools (Boston, 1997). Arguments for integration across fields of study have focussed on the need to foster connections between fields of study rather than emphasising differences, in order to promote more meaningful learning in the school context. It is suggested that curriculum structures that seek to establish connections between fields of study provide students with a more connected, contextualised, and 'authentic' learning experience.

Any conception of curricula that seeks to reflect the ways in which meanings are constructed in the culture should acknowledge the role the arts play in the construction of meaning at this level. To return to Eisner, we may view the arts, both as distinct disciplines and as hybrid forms, as 'forms of representation' that exist in culture. In a view such as Eisner's where we talk of arts literacies as several amongst multiple forms of literacy, it is recognised that the arts are not just discrete entities that can only be addressed within specific domains labelled dance, drama, media, music and the visual arts. Rather they are forms of literacy that have impact across all domains of the curriculum, they constitute tools that we employ in order to "read" our worlds and those of others.

As multiple forms of representing and communicating meaning, the arts constitute a powerful means by which connections may be established within and across fields of study. One reading of Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences (1985) suggests that individuals differ in the ways in which they conceptualise the world, with the identified intelligences forming a means by which individuals construct meaning. Such a reading suggests that the arts, as forms of representation comprise important and distinctive ways by which individuals may construct meanings in fields of study beyond the arts. Whilst such a view focuses on the arts as instrumental, as a means to an end external to the interests of the construction of artistic meaning, such a view is not necessarily at 'cross-purposes' with the development of students' artistic understandings, indeed, this view may be complementary to the development of such understandings. However, it is important to note that an approach to arts education that *only* viewed arts practice as instrumental to educational outcomes beyond the arts would be inadequate in developing sufficient skills and understandings within the art forms to develop artistic as well as non-artistic ways of thinking.

Values

The arts are employed in the construction of social and cultural identities both overtly and covertly and function as a means of constructing, reinforcing, reflecting, challenging, and transforming the value systems that operate within specific cultures. It is clear from the above that the arts are not value-neutral. Nor indeed are schools value neutral. As Eisner reminds us, 'Schools are cultures. They are cultures for creating minds' (1994, x). In recognising this, we should also recognise that the construction of arts curricula inevitably reflects the values and beliefs of a range of agents, including curriculum designers, writers of educational texts, arts educators, and the school community, including senior staff, colleagues in fields of study other than the arts, and the student body. These values may be made explicit or remain implicit in the ways in which curricula are designed, implemented and evaluated. In formulating an arts curriculum at any level, be it at the class, school, or system level, it is vital that arts educators articulate and interrogate their beliefs and values concerning the function of the arts in the curriculum, and the role the arts play in cultures other than those of the school.

Principles of pedagogy

Within a number of arts disciplines specific pedagogical practices have evolved as a means to developing children's skills and knowledge within that domain. Within music education the pedagogical practices of Emile-Jaques Dalcroze, Zoltan Kodaly, Carl Orff and Shinichi Suzuki, have been highly influential in the development of music curricula during this century. Each of these approaches to music education has reflected a particular philosophical position on what is valued in music, and a particular view of education. For example, for Kodaly, literacy, that is the capacity to read, write and create music, was the key to developing musicianship. Consequently, a substantial component of the pedagogical practice within this methodology is focused on developing skills in reading and writing music.

More recent approaches to music education, and indeed, a number of the arts forms, have emphasised the role of the arts in promoting critical and flexible thinking skills, creative problem-solving, an informed awareness of the qualities of particular materials and processes, inter- and intra-personal relationships, and the capacity to interrogate the meanings embedded in arts presentations as they occur in society. It may be argued that, by virtue of the multiple forms of representation through which the arts operate, they are particularly well-suited to providing contexts in which students may develop these skills and forms of thinking.

Cross-curricular perspectives

In the nationally developed curriculum documents, a number of cross-curricular perspectives have been identified. These include;

- forming connections with all other curriculum areas
- incorporating teaching and learning strategies that provide for the cultural and spiritual experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island students
- incorporating teaching and learning experiences that acknowledge the cultural diversity of the Australian population
- promoting equality of opportunity
- promoting verbal language and literacy skills

- promoting understanding of environmental issues
- incorporating technology
- promoting economic awareness
- addressing issues of health and safety
- promoting self-esteem and well-being
- addressing moral, ethical, and social justice issues
- promoting a deeper understanding of Australian experience and Australian society (Curriculum Corporation 1994A, 8 - 11).

Some writers suggest that the expanded focus of curricula indicated through the identification of these perspectives is a concern, as '...the depth of study possible, within the limited time available, of the actual subject of music (and presumably other arts forms) must inevitably diminish' (Stevens, 1993, 60). However, within an interpretive view of arts curricula, the identification of these perspectives may be viewed as a means to enriching and contextualising the educational experiences we offer students, as arts experiences are used to illuminate issues in a more broad cultural, political, and social context.

Conclusion

Through this paper I have raised a number of issues that need to be taken into consideration when constructing arts curricula. Central to these is the articulation of our beliefs and values concerning the role of the arts in society, and, consequently in education and schooling. Arts educators, as with all educators are philosophers as well as practitioners. Teaching practices arise from beliefs concerning what is valuable in the practice of the art and education, and are informed by our theories of teaching and learning, regardless of whether these are openly acknowledged, or concealed. The conscious articulation of these beliefs can only benefit the development of arts curricula.

Notes

(1) The *rationale* for DBAE rests in the development of '...students' abilities to understand and appreciate art. This involves a knowledge of the theories and contexts of art and abilities to respond to as well as to create art' (Clark, Day & Greer 1989, 135).

Consequently, exponents of DBAE recommend the development of art curricula from the four disciplines of art production, art history, art criticism and aesthetics.

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