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ABSTRACT

A proposed model for adult art education focuses on helping adults learn and practice art throughout their lives. Emphasis is on enhancing self-direction or learner control of the learning process and continued learning. This new construct encourages art educators to recreate their classrooms based upon an appreciation of the varied and unpredictable domain of artistic creativity. In doing so, art educators can encourage adults to embrace a more flexible and personal approach to their own art education that is based less on mastering aspects of a "discipline" or "disciplines" and more on achieving meaning and satisfaction from their endeavors. (Author/YLB)

SELF-DIRECTION IN ADULT ART EDUCATION

Paul J. Edelson, Ph.D.

Paper presented at the 4th International Conference on Adult Education and the Arts, University of St. Andrews, Scotland, July 10-14, 1995

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Abstract

This paper was presented at the 4th International Conference on Adult Education and the Arts, University of St. Andrews, Scotland, July 10-14, 1995. The author develops a model for adult art education based upon self-direction that recognizes the incompleteness of traditional art instruction for most adults. This new construct encourages art educators to recreate their classrooms based upon an appreciation of the varied and unpredictable domain of artistic creativity. In doing so they can encourage students to embrace a more flexible and personal approach to their own art education that is based less on mastering aspects of a "discipline" or disciplines and more on achieving meaning and satisfaction from their endeavors.

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Introduction

The focus of this paper is on helping adults to learn and practice art throughout their lives. The target student audience is composed of those who do not wish to become professional artists, which is the vast majority of adults who study art. Emphasis is on enhancing *self-direction* which is defined for the purposes of this paper as student control of the learning process. A key element in self-direction is informed management by students of their own learning which can include periods of independent study as well as more traditional classroom learning situations such as structured credit or noncredit courses (Candy, 1993). Students may in fact decide to surrender control in some situations to instructors (who they may "fire" and "hire" at will) as they continue their lifelong learning.

The author's concern is with helping students to navigate freely between a broader range of art learning situations, including college credit and extramural noncredit, community art center, art club, and independent study options and in short actively and wisely charting and taking responsibility for their own development as artists. The application setting principally in mind is the traditional college classroom in which adult students are mainstreamed with younger students. Due to the influences of prestige and credentialism, higher education furnishes both the model of instruction as well as the instructor class for other environments. Hence the higher education model becomes normative in other instructional settings, including, ironically the most informal such as the peer directed student sketch group. In this latter situation the absence of an instructor can become a barrier to any coordinated activity; students function within the same shared space, but largely in isolation. There is at present no effective counterweight to the model of teacher direction with the exception of extreme cases of self-direction pursued by

students working, for the most part, on their own apart from other adults. But this, like the case of students working in the same space but in isolation of each other, is in reality a default position, since it does not readily address the need some students have for "instruction" conveyed by other live persons.

The thesis of the paper is that traditional art instruction must take greater cognizance of the fact that most art learning for adult students, and for younger students too who will continue making art as adults, will take place outside of formal courses. Instructors, regardless of setting -but especially those in formal courses- need to prepare students for the days when they are no longer in class subject to direct instructor intervention. This would include fostering an awareness of divergent approaches to pedagogy including group and independent learning, source materials for lifelong learning, and ways of becoming effective self-teachers and learners. The goal is to identify an approach or methodology for the traditional collegiate course that is midway between teacher-centric and student-centric models. It is maintained that this hybrid construct will be more serviceable in meeting the needs of most art learners.

The College Art Classroom

The teacher-centered model operates from the perspective of a set curriculum achieved through some pre-planning and also an amalgam of approaches derived from prior courses that the instructor may have taught. The course generally follows pre-established models that are normative for that field or discipline, often replicating the learning experiences encountered by teachers when they themselves were in school. The course emphasizes achieving teacher determined objectives in a prescribed order. The class is viewed as a group moving together through a curriculum that is segmented in stages. Usually the instructor will demonstrate techniques at various points in the semester. Students are assigned projects to complete in class or at home which apply the techniques or principles introduced in class. The instructor "supervises" or is "available to help." Often this is only in response to student requests for assistance.

The principal justification for this teacher-centric approach is that the instructor is the expert or master and knows what content is to be imparted. Other perceived advantages include one

set of procedures, curriculum and program activities. Standardization assists in grading because it is easier to establish student performance norms.

Numerous problems abound with the traditional college art classroom. I will not dwell here on adults as a supplementary add-on population amidst a sea of younger learners, nor on the lack of attention to pedagogy that is rampant in higher education and which encourages a generally non-reflective attitude towards teaching. I will also omit a discussion of creeping credentialism in the arts- how valid are degrees in signifying (or assuring) the quality of artistic accomplishment? Instead I wish to address more fundamental issues and assumptions which are intrinsic to art education and upon which the question of self-direction pivots.

Self-Direction and Art Education

Self-direction, defined again as learner control, as both a process and goal is at the heart of making art. Individually made and arrived at decisions about means (medium, technique) and goals (outcome- the artwork) are in Western culture at the core of the artistic identity which is all about making inspired choices that enable viewers of the work to see and feel differently about observed phenomena.

The sub-culture of art is such that artists operate within an unpredictable and fickle star system that tends to reward personal traits of ambition and motivation as much as skill. It is a field which places a premium upon creativity and individuality; there is no assurance that simply doing the right things (such as continued practice and technical mastery) will result in success. Gardner (1993), in his study of artistic creativity, notes that "sheer novelty" can be a "significant factor" in the public's selection of what it considers as masterworks (p.39), especially in the arts which have "more fickle" standards than other domains such as mathematics (p.40).

This chance factor of fame and the consequent elusiveness of permanent greatness (with the notable exception of Old Masters) must be seen as seriously undercutting the presumed validity of disciplined art instruction which posits the existence of "objective standards" or fixed points from which to instruct and

judge. The often unacknowledged conflict between subjectivity/creativity on the one hand, and formalized/rationalized instruction on the other make evaluation and judgment of art problematic and highly circumscribed. The premium in art on "newness" -breaking through to novel ways of seeing and visually describing experiences- reinforces the view of the artist as an "original" to be discovered, not simply an aspiring stylist or technician to be trained.

Instructors must somehow reconcile the dual objectives of helping students make "acceptable" art proficiently (the discipline of technique) and at the same time encourage creativity and convey the appreciation that creative visual artists are "standard breakers" or foes of established discipline. Thus a palpable tension exists between the student/learner and the teacher/master- *each contesting with the other's creative subjectivity*. In the case of teachers, it may also be *subjectivity masquerading as objectivity* through the vehicle of a course curriculum.

Several important questions arise: "How does the master as learner acknowledge kinship with the student as learner?" And related to this, "How does the teacher modify instruction so that the needs of lifelong learning are addressed?" By embracing the problematic nature of artistic creativity both teacher and student are placed on a similar footing. Both are grappling with inner needs for self expression through visual media. Differences in depth of experience and sophistication seem less important when a fundamental equivalency of goals are acknowledged. Moreover, instructors themselves learn through self-direction and the use of means that are alternative or in addition to following classroom curricula. The activity of classroom teaching itself is recognized as a form of learning and self-education. A case can therefore be made for reforming the traditional classroom/studio model to one both broader and more nuanced, and grounded in the realities of how professionals continue to learn (Schon, 1990).

A New Model for Adult Art Education

In art education the period of formal instruction is merely a beginning, a preparation for when students are no longer in school and in relationships of dependency with instructors and can subsequently determine the trajectories of their own

development. Artists must continue to learn, especially in those areas in which they find themselves deficient (Staff, 1994).

One would expect that in traditional art instruction students are gradually weaned away from exclusive reliance upon teachers who help them to both internalize and develop artistic standards that harmonize established canons and rigor with the students' own needs for self-expression and creativity. The reality is that within a fragmented and episodic curriculum, students acquire a diversity of experiences, and move through coursework in haphazard personal ways. (I am not speaking here of specialized art schools with more formalized structures, but of collegiate programs erected upon an elective system within university settings). The situation is even more complicated for adult students who may only sample a course or two from a more extensive curriculum and would then completely miss the "logic" of a coherent course-of-study (if in fact one actually existed). Growth is theoretically in technical mastery as one takes progressively more difficult courses for which there are prerequisites, albeit the prerequisites themselves symbolically substitute for acquired mastery.

The case for self-direction in art education (and even more broadly in all education, especially lifelong learning when the stream of teacher assignments and formal classroom projects have virtually run dry) recognizes and takes as its point of departure the fact that all key decisions are already being made by the learner: choices on what to take and when, and more significantly if and what to learn. And what takes place within the course, its "borders" if you will, can never come close to encompassing the larger territory of that subject (printmaking, painting, etc.) except in the theoretical and impossible case of course of study of infinite dimension. Even in lifelong learning this would be impossible since it would be limited to what a single person could learn in their own lifetime!

All good courses acknowledge their incompleteness but they rarely address and prepare students to competently resolve this difficulty with perhaps the suggestion that they take other courses! There is little acknowledgement (except perhaps at graduation) of the eventual point where there is not necessarily any school in the strictly formal sense. By openly recognizing the incompleteness of course curricula teachers can vastly expand

the resources at their disposal in helping students develop their skills both in the present and future. By building upon, and elevating the importance of learner control instructors can encourage students to draw upon expanded knowledge and information bases.

Personalization of curriculum is the key to this stratagem. Discovering what students want to learn, what their ideas and competencies already are about the medium and then building upon this existing foundation can be a more meaningful starting point for any art course. The open acknowledgment that learning (as opposed to a behavior equated with following instructions in class) is a voluntary activity, exclusively within the control of students paves the way for different instructional techniques.

Teacher approaches that tap into students' knowledge bases will enhance motivation and participation . The coercive use of grading as a goad to creativity is more likely to have counterintuitive outcomes especially diminishing enthusiasm and commitment to art. Helping students to do a better job (as they define it), acknowledges a basic human drive for improvement and acquired proficiency.

Embracing diversity in the class (adult classes are noted for their extreme heterogeneity) and espousing and incorporating greater variety in approaches to art go hand-in-hand. Students need exposure to an increased number of artist role-models that differ by age, sex, cultural background, work habits, philosophy, experience, orientation to the medium, and so forth. Visits of guests artists to class and study field visits to their studios and other venues can open up students to many more alternatives in art-making. This is as important as visits to museums which tend to emphasize ast as artifact, not as a stage in art making. By contrast, visits with artists can emphasize art as a synthesis of the interaction of artist, his or her context, view of life, personality, situational constraints, philosophy, and predisposition. Art does not magically appear on a wall; it is an outcome of human activity- not of the curator, but the artist-creator. As part of developing their own consciousness as artists, students must come to appreciate that there is as much diversity in artists as there is in art; one is a consequence of the other.

The real nature of artistic work -its many false starts and dead ends, the production of much "bad work", and the need for constant experimentation amidst a dedication to continued productivity (with periods of "artist block" [Audette, 1993]) in spite of the absence of "success"- is the reality that should be conveyed. Not the fiction of "A"-level-work masterpieces leaping off the easel with facile ease.

Information about other places to learn about art making including community centers, sketch and drawing clubs, and even apprenticeships in commercial establishments (such as graphic and design fields) can be incorporated in standard curricula through instructor discussions and student visits and reports. We need to encourage different ways of knowing and learning. The commercial sector, in particular, has been important through the centuries as an incubator of artistic talent- Nolde was a woodcarver, de Kooning a house painter, to name just two.

An expanded knowledge of books, films, magazines, libraries, and museum study centers as ways of learning about art belong in every curriculum.

Redirecting the art syllabus in this way so as to give more emphasis to individuals and art education sources, also compels a reexamination on the use of groups in the studio classroom. At present this is poorly conceptualized and is usually deployed for logistical reasons only- a small group around a still-life or model, not in any conscious pedagogic sense. Gardner's study (1993) suggests that creators had "significant" support systems at the time of their breakthroughs (p.43), often other artists that served as a reflective circle for experimentation and feedback. Groups in the art classroom can be reconstituted in this sense so that students can be both learners and teachers. For example, a group of students can serve as a study team, focusing on the use of color. Small groups offer increased opportunities for students to talk and discuss their work in addition to opportunities to help each other.

This can be a viable alternative to the public "critique" where humiliation always hovers in the wings. It is better to have students develop confidence in discussing their work and what were they trying to accomplish in small groups where the absence of a suitable technical vocabulary will not be hindrance. This

terminology can be introduced by instructors at a later point after students have practiced talking publicly about their art.

Conclusion

The challenge for adult art education is to enable participants to gain degrees of mastery and familiarity in art so that they may continue this pursuit with self-direction, through a variety of means, throughout their lives. The value of a more student-centered approach is that it anticipates this situation when students no longer have formal classes is their sole educational mode. The larger emphasis -on self-direction and continued learning- makes sense pedagogically and is compatible with how professional artists and artist/teachers continue to advance their own proficiency. The capacity to teach oneself new approaches, master new media, move one's art in new directions are all outcomes of self-directed learning. The formal art classroom is an effective bridge to this larger more ambiguous reality providing instructors can reshape their courses with this broader message in mind.

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