

The artist as teacher. Examining the boundaries of art education

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ABSTRACT

If an art product, and the process that produces it, cannot be defined in advance, as discussions about Art claim, how would this aspect of the artistic endeavor be incorporated in a well programmed lesson on art, in which aim, method, evaluation, subject matter are fixed and well defined? The present article attempts to provide a theoretical framework that lifts the before mentioned incompatibility through reference to “subjective teaching” – a way of teaching in which the teacher, as if oblivious of his students, permits them to witness his inner workings, which he externalizes.

KEYWORDS

Art didactics, education, monologue, subjective teaching, creation

RÉSUMÉ

Si le résultat d'une activité artistique, ainsi que le processus qui y conduit, ne peuvent être définis à l'avance, comme le relèvent les discussions sur l'art, comment la production artistique pourrait-elle être incorporée dans un enseignement bien programmé, dans lequel le but, le thème, les méthodes, l'évaluation seraient bien fixés? Le présent article est une tentative de fournir un cadre théorique qui remédie à cette incompatibilité grâce à l'“enseignement subjectif” - une manière d'enseigner, dans laquelle le maître parle pour lui-même, oubliant ses élèves, lesquels deviennent alors les témoins de son travail de réflexion intérieure, extériorisé devant ceux-ci.

MOTS-CLÉS

Didactique de l'art, éducation, monologue, enseignement subjective, création

Lévi-Strauss, commenting on art, considers it a process whose result is not known in advance; “the real problem posed by artistic creation lies in the impossibility of thinking through the

outcome ahead of time” (1978, p. 278). Equally, Merleau-Ponty, (1993, p. 69) is of the opinion that artistic expression is not the translation of an already well-defined thought.

This “fluidity”, existing in every form of art, is at its *forte* in the artistic production of today. The trends of modernism have created sharp and fundamental changes in the concepts about art, making thus art seem more vague and ill-defined (Danto, 1997, 2003). Such a “fluidity” pushes and redefines constantly the boundaries and the region circumscribed as “didactics of art”. As Eisner (1972, 2001) emphatically insisted even back in the ‘70s, there is a self-evident need to adjust the teaching of art to the changes produced by modern art.

In such an environment, a certain set of questions is emphatically, consistently and in different ways being posed. How can we draw a new map indicating what “teaching art” contains, a map that would include new, and hence uncharted, aspects of art? How can we incorporate the semi-specified, non-controllable and “containing the unexpected” projects and actions of modern art in an updated program of teaching art? Indeed, how do all the above mentioned comments on the nature of art combine with an attempt to teach art? In a well organized didactic act, aims, content, evaluation etc are well defined. In a well programmed lesson the teacher has thought in advance what he wants to teach and how the lesson will evolve. He expects furthermore to execute the lesson as planned. How can we speak of a “well-organized” lesson of art, while taking seriously into consideration Lévi-Strauss’s comment? The present article focuses on the theoretical examination of these issues.

EDUCATIONAL INTERVENTION AND THE ARTISTIC QUEST

There is no unanimous agreement as to the way art lessons should be incorporated in the school curriculum. Most art educational programs, however, are based on the assumption that students should be involved in artistic acts, and to a certain extent this involvement should be genuine and holistic. We adhere to the opinion which considers that in a child’s initiation to the realms of art, both educational and artistic acts should be contained (Efland, 2007; Dorn, 2005; Wilson, 2003). Hence, preoccupations, ideas, practices of the artistic world, have to be adjusted and to find their place within an educational context.

How can this be done? To the extent that art resists a general universal permanent definition, the artistic act also cannot be defined in such terms. The multi-dimensional and varied phenomenon of art is characterized by constant, and often fundamental, changes in its scope, values, attitudes; furthermore, all such changes are of equal value (Gombrich, 1995, p. 23, 25). Viewed thus, a well regulated inelastic educational proposal, defining rigidly and with logical exactitude the way an *oeuvre* of art is created or perceived is not the desideratum. We are faced thus with the problem of whether is it possible, and to what extent, to combine an educational intervention with the multiple aspects, dimensions and facets involved in the artistic quest.

Artistic act, according to Merleau-Ponty, is an expressive activity that gives meaning to human experience, and consists of giving form to what otherwise would remain unexpressed, existing solely within an individual conscience (Merleau-Ponty, 1993, p. 43, 45). The artistic act defies all boundaries posed by “ordinary” forms and ideas, creating new unprecedented connections and combinations. It does not obey any methodological limitations, and can go beyond any convention and acknowledged margins; hence it cannot be pre-defined and prescribed.

These characteristics of the artistic act, should not be ignored, neither hidden, when we try to place art within an educational context. The artistic expressive effort, should be present in an educational intervention, since otherwise a fundamental aspect, that should be present in an attempt to teach art, is gone missing. The real challenge thus is to institute the

artistic act as the basis of “art education”, keeping totally and genuinely intact its expressive dimension, its attempt to “give meaning” (Constantino, 2007).

THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER OF ART

The crucial question, that surfaces from the above mentioned, has to do with the way an educational intervention can be organized so as to avoid uniformity and conventionality. The answer has to do, initially, with the type of teacher that is being called upon to teach such lessons. The teacher is actively participating in the educational act and is charged with the task of creating a fertile environment within which the student will “meet” art. It is of primary importance, for our approach, that the teacher of art has already contemplated on and experimented with the artistic act, before he is called forth to teach. This entails that the teacher of art lessons should have some sort of artistic background. His previous artistic sensitivity will, it is hoped, inhibit him from adjusting his intervention in accordance to some rigid, fixed educational practices, which will suffocate artistic expression. To what extent, however, can the “artistic” functioning of the teacher of art operate during his lessons? Or, to put it differently, to what degree is it feasible for the teacher of art to act like an artist while teaching?

PROFESSOR LIDENBROCK AND SUBJECTIVE TEACHING

Let us turn, at this point, to a fictional character, far removed from the world of art, the mineralogist professor Lidenbrock, from the “Journey to the Centre of the Earth” of Jules Verne (1864/1998). This professor seems not to care if his audience learned when he taught them. We can imagine him entering a class and being engrossed in a monologue while teaching, preoccupied with some subject that interested him. Whether his students paid attention to his lectures or understood him, hardly bothered him. At first glance, professor Lidenbrock can be considered a “bad teacher”. It has been explained however (Sotiropoulos & Papandropoulou, 2010), that this seemingly strange teaching procedure may point to a specific educational aspect, somewhat ignored and bypassed today by the current educational theories and trends.

If we assume that professor Lidenbrock, in monologue in front of his class, is trying to express in words his thoughts – a process which Vygotski (1934/1985, p. 379-380) describes using the simile of the wind that collects the clouds so as to cause rain, wind being intention, clouds thoughts, and rain words, pinpointing thus the qualitative difference between these three facets – if we imagine professor Lidenbrock trying to articulate thus his egocentric speech (Piaget, 1923/1989; Vygotski 1934/1985), then his audience is witness of this process, that is taking place in its presence. If he is dealing with an issue that has caught his interest and is trying, thinking aloud, to achieve a creative breakthrough, irrelevant of whether he succeeds or not, the students in his audience are observing a creative act, which they can try, with empathy, to grasp. When teaching is of this nature, the teacher does not know beforehand what will be the result and the conclusions to which he will be led. Consequently, this is not a programmed didactic act, with aim, method, subject matter, evaluation. The lesson evolves through the internal dynamics of the teacher – stretching possibly beyond his control. The teacher seems to project himself fully on the subject that has his interest, and is present with all his entity, teaching through his holistic presence. (Obviously, we always teach with the totality of our presence, but, in the specific instance we are discussing, this aspect is at its most intense and apparent, while in usual teaching

situations the teacher may hide himself behind his role, and the systematic, rigid organization of a lesson can be used to this end).

In a well programmed and controlled lesson, the teacher has planned in advance what he wants to happen, and he attempts to bring the student to the pre-ordained route of his didactic action. In the way of teaching we are referring to, through reference to the fictional professor Lidenbrock, let us call it “subjective teaching”, nothing of the sort happens. Furthermore, the total investment of the teacher in the educational act he is performing, that characterizes “subjective teaching”, should not be considered to refer only to mental activities. The teacher is not limited in expressing himself only through an egocentric monologue that articulates his thoughts. While engrossed in a creative act, facets of his internal functioning of a sentimental or aesthetic nature may take form and be evident to his audience. Since however, the teacher is present holistically in the educational act he is performing, we should beware of “dividing” him in facets; we may, simply, assume that anything from his internal functioning that surfaces and takes form, expresses his subjective “speech”.

Could we presume that “subjective teaching” (in the way the marginal, admittedly, case of professor Lidenbrock permits us to imagine it) could be useful as a theoretical framework for the problematic we have expressed (of how to teach art), since we meet with a kind of teaching where the result is not beforehand predetermined?

AN EDUCATIONAL INTERVENTION BASED ON THE ARTISTIC ACT

Let us examine, on the basis of all the above mentioned, a pilot program, produced by a three year cooperation between the Department of Educational Sciences and Early Childhood Education of the University of Patras and the Art Workshop of the Municipality of Rion (Rion is the area where the University of Patras is situated). The functioning of the Workshop will not be fully discussed; only its aspects that have to do with the problematic issues we expounded will be examined. Interest in the case of this Workshop is limited in examining if, and to what extent, the possible theoretical solution to the problematic issues we referred to above, can prove of aid in explaining and commenting upon a program of teaching art. We hold that a systematic analysis of the functioning of the said Workshop is enhanced through reference to the theoretical framework provided by “subjective teaching”; “subjective teaching” constitutes a fertile way of viewing the teaching of art, and in the rest of this article we will elaborate on this theme.

The Workshop was hosted in small rooms that did not remind one of classrooms and were fully equipped to function as ateliers for painting and ceramics. In the duration of the pilot program five artists were employed and more that 100 children (4,5-9 years old) participated. They were involved in artistic acts for 2 or 3 hours weekly.

The artists chosen to lead the activities of this Workshop did not have any particular educational experience. The aim of this choice was to let them work on the basis of their artistic experience, acting as artists, and creating working groups together with the children. The only educational condition placed on the artists – now educators – was to permit the children to observe the way that they thought and worked. This condition was considered necessary, so as to permit the disclosure of all the actions an artistic act entails, and also anything that leads up to it. The wish for artistic expression, the rising of an idea, and the implementation of this idea, were considered as complementary stages, which did not sever up the unfolding of the artistic act (Chapman, 1978, p. 24, 38).

The role of the artist/educator, in every stage, was to make obvious to the children/students the processes in which he is involved, his intentions for expression, his

thoughts, his ideas about the materials and means he is using, the produced results and the relation of all these parameters to what the final product represents. This was however intended to operate indirectly, through the actions of the artist in front of the group of the students. In this sense, even though some educational aims were fixed, the teacher was not intent in “teaching” them. Suffice that he was living, experiencing, these conditions of the artistic act in the presence of his class. For example, regarding the thoughts and internal workings during the conception of an artistic idea, suffice that the educator/teacher, permitted his class to observe the way he grasped and developed such an artistic idea.

The interest of the children was not taken for granted, nor as something that had to be cultivated and incited. Suffice that children were considered as commencing from an equal basis with adult artists.

Thus, each artist undertook to work and produce a piece of art, within the time span of the Workshop meetings (the production period could extend up to 2-3 meetings). The children witnessed the way the artist created, while at the same time they were participating themselves on an equal status to the artistic act. The final object/product was thus the result of a combined action, but each member of the group had acted individually. The educational intervention thus coincided with an artistic quest, since both children and adult artist were involved actively in a communal effort, each one from his own standpoint, either with words and ideas or with more concrete artistic actions.

In such an environment, children were offered a possibility, through an expressive effort, to specify their position *vis a vis* something, an idea, a situation, an experience, and to produce their personal “mark”. Equally, the children had a chance to be actively present in the authentic artistic quest of the teacher/artist. Based on this concept, importance was placed on the “comment”, individual and simultaneously collective. A dialogue was thus established in which all contributed on an equal basis.

In this context, artistic act was considered *ab initio* as the act that makes something tangible and visible to others. The artistic expression – in the sense given to it by Merleau-Ponty (1993, p. 43, 45): a visible “articulation” of meaning – was considered the starting point of a course, in which everything was subjugated to the service of the expressive intention.

The adult artists contributed with their presence a climate where existing information did not prescribe, new and old experiences were combined, situations and known things were experienced in new ways (which did not always converge with “normal” models), new connections and combinations were developed.

Anything could be put in the service of the artistic expression. Everything could be seen in an artistic way and be incorporated in a composition. The expressive means, consequently, were not correlated with any specific category of objects or elements, but were related each time to a different artistic decision, sparking hence a “stand” *vis a vis* any element (Focillon, 1942, p. 83). Anything could be highlighted – within an aesthetic context – in such a way so as to be an object of art. It seems that, the children, being witnesses of the processes of the teacher/artist, imitated him, expressing like him their own internal “speech”.

The search for a personal artistic style is not an aim in itself, nor is it an eccentricity; it is not even an exhibition of craftsmanship. It may be considered as an open search for a way of personal expression, a route of communication; it thus looks so much like personal monologues in the presence of others. Consequently, the various techniques used, do not constitute closed systems, but can be considered as human inventions in the service of the expressive intention, and are hence open even to the most radical transformations (Ardouin, 1997, p. 83).

In such a framework, what the final result would be, was not from an aesthetic viewpoint the principal issue. What surfaced as a major aim was a broad and open field of “searching” quests (Parsons, 2002, p. 25, 32). Every new idea, every new proposal did not

annul, neither did it undermine the previous ones. It opened up a new perspective. Every art object was created through a constant search, and the process seemed to evolve in stages. The fact that the initial idea was elaborated and discussed, did not prescribe the final form the object to be created would take. In any case, an object of art does not exist as a preexisting mental form that materializes. An idea can remain rather vague even during the process of its implementation, being constantly transformed. The exact moment that the artist succeeds in conquering a special skill, he realizes that he has opened up a new field. In a new context, anything that has been successfully expressed previously can now to be reshaped in a novel way. In this sense an art object is never fully complete. The grasping and working of an idea is not implemented previously to its execution but simultaneously.

COMMENTING ON THE PROGRAM OF THE MUNICIPALITY OF RION ART WORKSHOP

In the pilot program of the Art Workshop of the Municipality of Rion – aspects of which we very broadly described – the educational intervention was developed along two axis: the disclosure by the artists/educators of the way they work/operate, and the involvement of the children in the artistic process.

What makes the artists/educators of this artistic workshop look like professor Lidenbrock is the fact that they functioned primarily as artists, engrossed in their creative effort and minimizing their direct educational intervention; they permitted, though, the children/students to witness and observe their artistic actions. Not everything, however, in the functioning of this Workshop can be defined as “subjective teaching”. The interactions between students and between students and teacher during the class, would not probably pass the test, since in “subjective teaching” the teacher/creator is engrossed in his own thoughts that take form in front of the others. However, we may also consider the class acting as a totality during all the stages of the artistic process. The characteristics that make such a totality function like the fictional character of the professor are a/ the freedom from convention, b/ the free investing of the self in everything that is happening, c/ the insecurity is regards to the end result, and d/ the fact that all are participating in an artistic experience by developing/articulating an internal monologue.

The Workshop is not an exemplary case of “subjective teaching”; it is an instance which illustrates how “subjective teaching” can be a useful concept, which aids discussion on the didactics of art, and resolves to some extent the incompatibility we stated at the beginning of this article.

CONCLUDING REMARKS, RELATING TO ART EDUCATION

Evidently, a lot of obvious questions can be raised in regards to the results and the possibilities of implementing such procedures in a school. However, any attempt to approach “subjective teaching” from a typical, classical educational framework, with fixed, concrete didactic aims, is not recommended, since this is a different type of teaching. Hence, comparisons between “subjective teaching” and more traditional teaching methods could possibly be out of place, perhaps would even be to some extent misleading, if a common evaluation tool were to be used to pass judgement on two completely different educational conditions.

Naturally the case of the art Workshop is, from an educational point of view, marginal. It is, though, an educational condition, an effort to understand from within the functioning of

an artistic act, a way to introduce one to the world of art, based in the authenticity of the artistic effort.

School, obviously, as an area of general education/pedagogy, constitutes truly a very different framework into which art lessons have to fit. The artistic act in school is more structured, more programmed, wanting to familiarize the student with art and to introduce him to this realm. Still, the artistic effort ought to be present also in this context, even as a secondary characteristic, otherwise the teaching obscures what it sets out to teach. If the facet of expression is reduced or eliminated from the teaching of art, how is it then possible to understand why artistic forms are created, the ways in which they are created and the tremendous variety depicted by artistic creation? (Freedman, 2011, p. 15).

In “subjective teaching” it is not the teacher who tries to pass something to those being taught. It is the students, to the extent that they can or want, who try with empathy to enter in the processes of the thought of the teacher. In the framework of the school, also, all the contents of a program of didactics of art are constructed and developed in constant reference to the artistic act. Students have to get acquainted with the processes artists are involved in. Within this reasoning, if art lessons are formalized beyond a certain degree, then a considerable part of their significance is lost. The attempt to intrude into the internal monologue of the “other”, which is taking “art form”, cannot hence be neglected, by giving precedence to what may be considered a well-organized, well-defined, formalized didactic practice.

Within this educational framework, we cannot deem as an aim the fixing in advance of what an art product will be, and consider it a success if such an end result is produced as planned. The multi-facet fluid area in which the artistic expression is formulated, should be present in any educational intervention. If we are truly interested in involving children in the artistic process in an authentic way, then its character should be acknowledged. This character is not compatible with a preordained process and with expected results. The educational intervention has without doubt greater interest, when it acknowledges this complex and possibly vague aspect, which defies formalization.

A didactic intervention thus incorporating the multiplicity of opinions and points of view, that can handle relativity, subjectivity even obscenity, even contradiction (Eisner, 1972, p. 45). Reference to “subjective teaching” provides us with some sort of a theoretical stand that permits us to remain within the educational context, incorporating in this framework, aspects of the artistic act, which more classical approaches seem to exclude as incompatible. The content of art education should be fluid, full of options, and permitting varying points of view, since artistic action cannot be constrained to one approach only (Gaillot, 1997, p. 99-100).

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