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Experiential Learning and Discipline-based Art Education

For Clark, Day, and Greer (1987), works of art are at the center of experience-based learning in the visual arts. "Placing works of art at the center of DBAE provides a natural means for integrating learning from the four disciplines. In DBAE students should emerge with an integrated view of the visual arts based on *learning experiences* offered in their classrooms" (p. 170) (emphasis added). Smith (1987) also addresses the important role that experience plays during aesthetic encounters with works of art. He reminds us that text-based knowledge about a work of art is not a good substitute for the kinds of knowledge that are acquired during an actual encounter with the work.

What is important to appreciate is the distinction between *knowledge about* art and *knowledge of*. The distinction implies that one may have substantial information about a work of art—information, say, about its origins, meaning, and influence—without ever having really experienced its expressive presence." (p. 6)

Smith quotes Frank Sibley to support and develop his argument: "Merely to learn from others, on good authority, that the music is serene, the play moving, or the picture unbalanced is of little aesthetic value; the crucial thing is to see, hear, or feel" (Sibley, 1965, p. 6). Smith then qualifies his stance: "Ideally, of course, relevant knowledge about a work should help one to experience it in the way indicated by Sibley, and most of the writing discussed in this essay assumes in one way or another that knowledge does indeed have an important bearing on both our interest in and experience of art" (p. 7).

Knowledge: The Complement of Experience

Smith has touched upon an important notion. Knowledge does have a key role to play in the way we undergo and understand our experiences and how we learn from them. In the published proceedings of the

1987 Getty Center for Education in the Arts National Invitation Seminar, art historian David Ebitz, like Smith, further expressed a concern for the need to integrate knowledge about art with the experiencing of art. In the Getty Center's summary of his address, he is reported to have said that: "specialization has created a gulf between intellectual knowledge and direct emotional experience. The art historian has become too dependent on the text as the primary source for understanding and knowledge of art; current modes of learning stress the 'content of knowledge' rather than the 'practice of inquiry'" (The J. P. Getty Trust, 1988, p. 19). Ebitz later reiterated this position: "This specialization [of the art disciplines] has compartmentalized experience and knowledge, going so far as to separate the kind of knowledge that we acquire from reading—book knowledge—from the experience we gain from actually doing something—the skills acquired by hand and eye" (Ebitz, 1989 b, p. 11).

Artist Joseph Goldyne (1988) examines the same concern from the artist's point of view; he proposes the notion of connoisseurship as an explanation of the interdependence of knowledge and experience during an aesthetic encounter with a work of art.

What specifically does the connoisseur do that should interest a proponent of DBAE? The connoisseur looks first and enjoys looking carefully. But his looking is not that of a hedonist, as too frequently has been the allegation rendered by those who sense a weak academic base to the activity. Nothing should be further from the truth, for what one observes must, at once, be filtered through a considerable fund of both visual and historical data to rank as connoisseurship. When what the connoisseur has seen is in some way related to this data, a connection is noted. When enough connections are established the connoisseur will propose them as a new piece of knowledge—an attribution, forgery, relationship, or chronology. (p.167)

The process that Goldyne's connoisseur uses for investigating works of art resembles in some respects the "practice of inquiry" to which Ebitz refers. Both visual art experts are commenting on the complementary roles of knowledge and experience within the process of aesthetic experience. Ebitz talks in terms of "intellectual knowledge" and "direct emotional experience" while Goldyne uses the terms "visual and historical data" and "careful looking." The art historian and the artist may be using different terminology, but they are in agreement about the importance of both of these components in aesthetic understanding.

Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990) have also examined the problem of the relationship between knowledge and experience within

aesthetic experience. They bring to this discussion a different perspective, one from cognitive psychology.

Despite the obvious importance of knowledge and education [in shaping aesthetic experiences], there is more at stake than the mere application of knowledge. . . . *Informed experience* is a good term to characterize the process by which exposure to works of art gradually transforms the nature—and the experience—of aesthetic interactions. Informed experience involves developing the ability to see as well as developing understanding. Many of the interviewees [in our study] saw the two processes as intimately related. . . . Knowledge means educational experience combined with seeing. (pp. 152-153)

Once again, two components are identified as the essential elements of aesthetic experience. In coining the term "informed experience" Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson have managed to encapsulate the very essence of aesthetic experience: aesthetic experience is the coming together, through a process of interaction, of the two key constituents, information and experience.

A Harvard researcher, David N. Perkins (1994) has examined how human intelligence is manifested in aesthetic responses to works of art. Perkins has concluded that the "intelligent behavior" evident in a person's aesthetic response involves three different types of intelligence: "neural intelligence," "experiential intelligence," and "reflective intelligence." Neural intelligence consists of "the contribution of the efficiency and precision of the nervous system to intelligent behavior." Experiential intelligence is "the contribution of intuitively applied prior experience to intelligent functioning." And reflective intelligence is "the contribution of mindful self-management and strategic deployment of one's intellectual resources to intelligent behavior" (pp. 13-14). Perkins uses the construct of "the intelligent eye" (pp. 7-11) to explain how the three intelligences described above come together during the course of an encounter with a work of art.

The intelligence of the "the intelligent eye" lies in more than the reflexive work of eye and mind represented by experiential intelligence. The missing ingredient is reflective intelligence: In essence, reflective intelligence is a control system for experiential intelligence. By cultivating awareness of our thinking, asking ourselves good questions, guiding ourselves with strategies, we steer our experiential intelligence in fruitful directions. This steering function is reflective intelligence. (p. 15)

Reflective intelligence fulfills its steering function by compensating for the gaps that exist in our experiential intelligence. According to Perkins,

the gaps in experiential knowledge that we are most likely to encounter during the course of an aesthetic experience are gaps in the "background knowledge" required to understand specific works of art and gaps in our "knowledge of art" itself.

The way in which Perkins has conceptualized the aesthetic encounter in terms of three different types of intelligence seems compatible with the thesis I have been developing in this discussion. His concept of "experiential intelligence" is sympathetic to my notion of "experiential learning." Furthermore, the function of Perkins's concept of "reflective intelligence" is essentially the same as that of "theoretical learning." As in the case of reflective intelligence, theoretical learning is an activity in which learners engage in order to fill gaps in their knowledge about the work of art, and its historical and social contexts.

During the course of my own research with adult museum visitors I have begun to understand that, for the viewer, each new encounter with a work of art is in fact a learning experience. Based on actual observations of adults' responses to selected works of art, I have developed a hypothetical model that has become the focus of my current research. *The Model of Aesthetic Understanding as Informed Experience* (Lachapelle, 1994) examines the process of aesthetic experience from the educator's perspective: it identifies the kinds of knowledge involved in aesthetic encounters with works of art, as well as the types of learning that occur in each stage of the process that leads to aesthetic understanding. Three theories informed the development of the model; these were: the *Model of Aesthetic Experience by Interaction* (Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990), the *Model of Learning as the Integration of Knowledge* (Artaud, 1989), and the *Model of Experiential Learning* (Kolb & Fry, 1975; Kolb, 1984).

In *The Model of Aesthetic Understanding as Informed Experience*, the process of viewing and understanding a work of art is conceptualized as a two-phased type of informed experience. In the first phase, the viewer encounters the work of art through a process of experiential learning. During the second phase, a theoretical learning process is employed by the viewer as a means to confront a related body of theoretical knowledge. This two-phase process of learning results in a reconstruction of knowledge about the art object. Use of the two learning processes in tandem not only permits the viewer to expand his or her understanding of the work of art, it also favors aesthetic growth and development. During each new encounter with a work of art, the interaction of experiential and theoretical learning results in an expansion of the viewer's background knowledge in art, resulting in better preparedness to encounter the next work of art.

As I noted earlier in my reference to Smith, when it comes to appreciating and understanding a work of art there can be no substitute for an actual encounter with the work of art. Likewise, without some prior knowledge on the viewer's part about art in general and about the context and possible interpretations of the work of art in question, it is doubtful that the encounter between viewer and art object would ever take place. Those scholars whose work has been discussed here, all refer to the fact that aesthetic understanding requires two types of knowledge: experiential knowledge and theoretical knowledge. The viewer encountering the actual work of art learns about it through actual experience of it. However, no viewer ever approaches a work of art with an empty mind. Prior knowledge is necessary for a successful aesthetic encounter. Such knowledge can sometimes be acquired from the experiences provided by previous encounters with works of art. However, the greatest proportion of the prior knowledge we bring to our aesthetic encounters is theoretical in origin, acquired by studying the text-based work of art experts: art educators, art historians, art critics, and philosophers. These texts act as a source of information to guide and further the understanding of works of art.

Text-based or theoretical learning can take place either before the encounter with the art object or after it. The latter commonly occurs when a viewer does a little reading or research after seeing a work of art in order to seek answers to questions that arose during the course of the initial encounter. Theoretical knowledge, then, is knowledge about the work of art and about the historical, social, and aesthetic contexts that surround its creation. It usually exists in the form of printed text, but it can also be transmitted by other means such as verbal communication, or films and video. Such knowledge is the result of the work of art experts and, therefore, it is the product of discipline-based inquiry.

Experiential and Theoretical Learning Within the Four DBAE Disciplines

An adequate curriculum in aesthetic education needs to be modeled on the actual activities undertaken during the course of successful aesthetic experiences, both in the studio and in the art museum. In other words, students need to learn the skills that will allow them to engage favorably in these activities.

Experiential and theoretical learning interact in the context of art criticism activities. There can be no question that art criticism, for example, requires an actual experiential encounter with the work of art, and that the learning this involves is both challenging and rewarding.

Furthermore, there is no doubt that without the insight provided by external sources of information about the work of art, the student's appreciation of the work of art will not proceed beyond limited, idiosyncratic understanding. Student learning in art criticism requires both experiential and theoretical learning.

Can the same be said for the other three disciplines: art production, art history, and aesthetics? Is learning in each of these disciplines enhanced by the interaction of experience-based and theory-based learning?

The activity of responding to works of art is a key factor in all four DBAE disciplines. One of the ten defining characteristics of a DBAE program, as proposed by Clark, Day, and Greer (1987), is that "works of art are central to the organization of curricula and to integration of content from the disciplines" (p. 135). The visual and critical analysis of works of art is a major component of the process of inquiry used in art criticism and figures prominently in the processes of inquiry that are specific to the study of art history and aesthetics. Not surprisingly, visual and critical analysis is also a key element in the process of making works of art. Since the disciplinary practices specific to each of the four disciplines require that the student engage in aesthetic encounters with works of art, we can conclude that, inasmuch as those aesthetic encounters are concerned, the process of inquiry of each discipline requires the use of both experience-based and text-based sources of knowledge.

However, each discipline provides its own specific opportunities for experiential and theoretical learning. There can be no doubt that studio art provides ample opportunities for experiential learning. This has been the very foundation of art education practice for decades. Students learn the skills required for drawing, painting, sculpture, ceramics, photography and video by engaging in activities which require that they hone different aspects of these skills. Making art, however, is not just a question of technique and craft.

Producing art, from conception to conclusion, involves a range of human processes that include thought, perception, feeling, imagination, and, importantly, action. Exercise of these processes contributes to their development and can lead to the sophisticated judgment and critical sensitivity needed to deal with today's complex visual stimuli and multimedia statements. (Spratt, 1987, p. 199)

In Spratt's terms, art production is a very complex activity, one that involves all facets of intelligence. For this reason, the development of many of the skills required in art production can be assisted, up to a point, by learning experiences that are text-based. For example, students can hone their skills in the use of color by reading and studying color theory. They

can learn about the basic chemical formula required for making new glazes for use in ceramics by studying the theory of glazing. Students and teachers regularly turn to books for answers to problems of a technical nature in photography, printmaking, sculpture, and other media. Accordingly, in the study of art production theoretical learning is an essential complement to the experience-based learning involved in art making.

Art history can provide ample opportunities for both experiential and theoretical learning.

Art history is the branch of knowledge or learning that involves the investigation and interpretation of works of art. . . . Concerning themselves with objects of aesthetic creativity made in the past and physically existing in the present, [art historians] seek to discover the historical niche that a work of art occupies and to assess that work in the light of its unique position. They therefore set forth to identify its physical properties, creator, and time, as well as to relate it in a historically meaningful way to other works of art of the same creator, school, period, and culture. At the same time they attempt to remain sensitive to its essential aesthetic individuality. (Kleinbauer, 1987, p. 209)

A student need not learn about art history only from books and slides. A creative teacher will devise art history assignments that encourage students to become involved actively in historical inquiry. A work of art, whose author and origins are kept hidden from the student, can become the starting point for the student's own investigation of the object. By visiting the local art museum, by researching different archives, by perusing the production of related artists and art movements, the student will find the visual evidence needed to provide a classification and, perhaps, an attribution for the work of art in question. In a second phase of inquiry, the student can proceed with text-based research to verify findings about the work of art and, in a written exercise, justify and defend his or her conclusions.

The study of aesthetics provides additional interesting avenues for combining experience-based and theory-based learning in attempts to maximize outcomes.

Philosophy, then, is not simply reflection but critical reflection, the assessment of chains of reasoning (or "arguments," as they are called) in the attempt to gain insight into our beliefs and values. It aims at understanding our ideas, clarifying them for ourselves and others. Thus, Hospers [1969] introduces the problems of aesthetics by stating that philosophical inquiry or reflection on the arts is concerned "to clarify the basic concepts we employ in thinking and talking about the objects of aesthetic experience." (Crawford, 1987, n. 228)

The creative art educator will devise student assignments that promote active investigation of issues in aesthetics based on a process of inquiry similar to that used by philosophers. A classroom reenactment of the 1927 U.S. Customs Court Trial pertaining to Brancusi's *Bird in Space* provides such an opportunity. At issue in this trial was whether or not Brancusi's abstract bronze sculpture was indeed a work of art and, therefore, qualified for duty-free entry into the United States. Customs officials maintained that the object was nothing more than "manufactured metal and therefore taxable at 40 percent of its value under paragraph 339 of the Tariff Act" (Adams, 1976, p. 37). By using a trial such as this as a case study, students can be brought to investigate such issues as the definition of an art object and the differences that exist between a personal appreciation of the work of art and its critical evaluation within the context of the art world. In the example presented here, students could begin their investigation of *Bird in Space* by writing about their own personal understanding and appreciation of the object. Afterwards, in a reenactment of the trial, they could assume the roles of the various participants in the trial: artist, art collector, lawyers for the defense, custom officers, lawyers for the state, expert witnesses for both sides, and jurors. During the reenactment, students could develop and present an argument in support of the point of view of the characters whose roles they have assumed. Following the end of the trial, students could be invited to reflect on their experience by studying the account of the trial presented in the second chapter of Laurie Adams's (1976) book *Art on Trial: From Whistler to Rothko*. Students might compare the arguments they have developed with the actual events and outcome of the trial. Finally, the art teacher could conduct a debriefing exercise that leads to the identification and elaboration of the key points in aesthetics encountered before, during, and after the reenactment.

The Interaction of Experience and Knowledge Leads to Understanding

I have argued that experiential learning is an essential component of a Discipline-based Art Education pedagogy and maintained that theoretical learning is its necessary counterpart. I have also argued that the interaction of these two types of learning assists the student in constructing a new, more complete, and integrated understanding of the art material being studied.

According to psychologist Gerard Artaud (1989), profound changes in the very structure of personality result from a learning process where experiential and theoretical knowledge come together to generate a new body of integrated knowledge.

[Use of] the word integration [to designate this new knowledge] means precisely that this new knowledge can only take form by being integrated into the very structure of personality and, thereby, modifying it. . . . The learner—who has thus acquired a new vision of his world, who has attained a more profound understanding of the phenomena that, before, were hidden from him or her—can no longer remain as before: his or her attitude has changed. There is every reason to believe that he or she will not be able to behave in the usual way. The goals of learning have been reached: by its interaction with scientific knowledge, experiential knowledge has not only broadened and consolidated itself, it has been transformed into a whole new way of being, which is the essential condition for a new *savoir faire*. (1989, p. 141) (author's translation)

Evidently, the aesthetic encounter is a common feature of the four DBAE disciplines, and requires both experiential and theoretical learning. Furthermore, each discipline—art production, art criticism, art history and aesthetics—is a locus for the interaction of such learning. Therefore, we can conclude that a pedagogical approach based on the integration of experiential and theoretical learning is compatible with a Discipline-based Art Education program. DBAE programs that integrate the four disciplines are particularly suited to provide opportunities for the integration of experience-based and text-based learning.

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To Leilani Lattin Duke

*for unparalleled leadership
in art education*
