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Studio Thinking: A Review Essay

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Introduction

Studio Thinking addresses two issues of vital importance to the arts: a) students' ability to transfer knowledge and skills learned in one situation to other situations where they may be relevant, and b) the role of studio art as compared to other more academic approaches to the visual arts.

Transfer

The issue of transfer has had a central place in the debate on secondary education since the rise of German neo-humanism in the beginning of the 19th Century. Proponents of disciplines at risk to be marginalized, such as Latin a century ago and the arts after World War II, have argued that their cultural tools are especially apt to promote academic success and a well-rounded personality. However, empirical studies have repeatedly failed to support such claims and thereby questioned their credibility. On the contrary, Thorndike in the 1920's and Winner & Cooper in a landmark study, published in 2000, advised educators to "mute those claims" concerning the effects of studying Latin and the arts respectively.

Ellen Winner and Lois Hetland have a reputation of sound empiricism and intellectual integrity. Winner's research reviews from the 1970's and forwards have been much quoted in graduate programs in arts education. Her project Arts PROPEL (an acronym for PROduction + PEception + reflection = Learning) 1986-1991 widened arts educators' scope from merely doing things, to combining production with learning to observe and reflect. Hetland is, among other things, known as an inspiring former chair of Harvard Project Zero's annual summer institutes on Teaching for Understanding. Both Winner and Hetland applied meta-analytic techniques for the Reviewing Education and the Arts Project (REAP), 1997-2000.

Studio Arts

A new book by these eminent scholars will, no doubt, attract attention. Moreover, the fresh look upon transfer and studio arts taken in *Studio Thinking* will put it at the top of the list of essential texts in arts education. Previous analyses of transfer seem superficial compared to these fine-grained analyses of eight studio habits of mind and three supporting structures. Informed by theories of "thinking dispositions", familiarity with studio art, and modern video recording techniques, the research team managed to identify some of the dimensions on which transfer is likely, although not yet proven.

Furthermore, *Studio Thinking* will help to improve the quality of studio art by providing an empirical look at good practice and by clearly describing previously unidentified elements of instruction. Below follows a presentation of the study, based on the book and two articles by its main authors (See "References" below).

Design of the Study

There are few studies like this one in the literature. Previous studies on arts transfer failed to document what kinds of thinking were going on in arts classes. Hetland et al. (2007) set out to describe what excellent visual arts teachers teach, how they teach, and what students learn in their classes. In order to determine what kinds of thinking emerge from "serious" visual arts study, they undertook a qualitative, ethnographic study of five excellent, but very different, arts classrooms. Here 38 visual arts classes were observed and videotaped. After each class, the teacher was interviewed to find out what he or she intended to teach and why.

Since Hetland & Winner (2008) wanted to start with "strong exemplars" of arts teaching, they chose to study schools for students with an interest and a commitment to an art form. Students in these schools spent at least 3 hours a day working in their chosen art form; the teachers were practicing artists. Thus both students and teachers were highly privileged as far as conditions for studio work are concerned. This bias was not considered as a problem; however, since the researchers were primarily interested in what visual arts could achieve given optimal time and resources. The video recordings of teaching were coded by two independent judges in order to test the reliability of the findings. Based on these data, collected during one academic year, Hetland et al. (2007) developed the framework they call *Studio Thinking*.

This framework describes two aspects of the art classroom: (1) How these classrooms are structured, and here they described three *studio structures*, and (2) What is taught in these classrooms, and here they describe eight *studio habits of mind*.

Three Studio Structures

The *studio structures* support different aspects of student learning. *Demonstration-Lectures* convey information, *Students-at-Work* emphasizes the development of individual students, while *Critiques* support a dynamic flow of thinking among teachers and students.

The essential difference between *Demonstration-Lectures* and traditional lectures is the frequent and often extended use that teachers make of visual examples, including objects (e.g., art works, still-life objects, tools), images (e.g. books, slides, photographs, posters or cards, electronic media), and processes (e.g., modeling step-by-step how to use materials or tools to accomplish particular intentions). Moreover, the information presented at *Demonstration-Lectures* is intended to be immediate useful.

Students-at-Work forms the heart of an art class. Here students work independently on a project, typically one introduced to them in a *Demonstration-Lecture*. As the students work, the teacher circles the room, offering timely interventions on an informal basis. The teacher generally works with individual students, personalizing their comments and suggestions.

Critiques are central to a studio class. They give students and teachers a chance to reflect as a group on their work and working. *Critiques* focus attention on students' work and work processes and are at the same time explicitly social. Students share their work with the teacher and other students and get responses from them.

Eight Studio Habits of Mind

In addition, Hetland et al. (2007) identified eight studio habits of mind that art classes taught, including the *development of artistic craft*. One of these habits was *persistence*: Students worked on projects over sustained periods of time and were expected to find meaningful problems and persevere through frustration. Another was *expression*: Students were urged to move beyond technical skill to create works rich in emotion, atmosphere, and their own personal voice or vision. A third was *making connections* between schoolwork and the world outside the classroom, e.g. drawing parallels between their own art and professional work.

Although these habits clearly have a role in school and elsewhere in life, Winner & Hetland (2007) were particularly struck by the potentially broad value of four other kinds of thinking being taught in the art classes they documented: *observing*, *envisioning*, *innovating*, and *reflecting*.

The first thing they noticed was that visual art students were continuously trained to *observe*. There is looking, and there is seeing. Student learned that looking is not always seeing. Seeing

is framed by expectation, and expectation often gets in the way of perceiving the world accurately. In a design class, for example, looking through a viewfinder helps students to see objects as only lines, shapes, and colours in a frame.

Another pattern of thought Winner & Hetland (2007) saw being cultivated in art classes is *envisioning*, i.e. forming mental images and using them to guide actions and solve problems. One might think that envisioning occurs only when artists work from imagination. However, every time artists plan next steps, they are envisioning. Art teachers gave students a great deal of practice in this area: What would that look like if you got rid of this form, changed that line, or altered the background? Questions like these were heard repeatedly, prompting students to imagine what was not there.

Innovating was also found to be a central skill. In the visual arts studio, students were asked, implicitly and explicitly, to try new things and thereby extend beyond what they have done before: to explore and take risks, to be creative. For example, teachers in the Winner & Hetland (2007) study told students not to worry about mistakes, but instead let mistakes lead to unexpected discoveries.

Finally, many people don't think of the art class as a place where *reflecting* is central, but instead as a place where students take a break from thinking. However, teachers in strong visual arts classes often asked students to step back and focus on an aspect of their work or working process, something that Winner & Hetland (2007) believe occurs much more frequently in the art than in non-art classes. Students in art classes were repeatedly asked to step back, analyze, judge, and sometimes reconceive their projects entirely.

Conclusion

The transfer hypothesis remains a hypothesis to be tested. In a separate article, Hetland & Winner (2008) reveal their plan to test the hypothesis that particular habits learned in the arts transfer to particular domains outside of the arts. For example, after completing the Studio Thinking Project, they find the following hypotheses reasonable:

- Observing: Art students who learn to look more closely at the world and at works of art, may bring that improved observation to the science class
- Envisioning: If art students in fact become better at envisioning in the art class, they may transfer that learning to the study of science
- Innovating: Art students who become comfortable with making mistakes and being playful may be willing to take creative risks in other areas of the curriculum
- Reflecting: Art students who become meta-cognitive about their working process/products in art may show more meta-cognitive awareness of their working process/products in other areas of the curriculum

The eight Studio Habits of Mind are believed to be the real benefits of visual arts education. They do not offer a recipe for teaching studio classes, but are presented as a set of lenses for thinking about teaching and learning in the visual arts. I have used this work as compulsory

reading for my graduate students. However, I would also recommend it for undergraduate courses, in order to explore the wider implications of using the art studio as a model for the thoughtful classroom.

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