Art Education from The SAGE Glossary of the Social and Behavioral Sciences

Curricula involving the pursuit and construction of artistic and aesthetic knowledge and skills. Art education, in the visual and tangible arts, includes understanding, responding to, and producing drawings, paintings, sculpture, and variations of design. In addition to facilitating acquisition of art knowledge and skills, qualified art educators attempt to stimulate critical thinking, relate art to social issues, and build cultural identity.

Summary Article: Art Education
From Encyclopedia of Educational Reform and Dissent

Art education, like other educational trends and movements in American public schools, has been inexorably influenced by the intersection of historical events and conditions, perceived societal needs, and the context of general education. Since art education was introduced in American schools in the mid-19th century, three general movements within the art education field have been identified: art to support society, art to support the child's individual development, and art as a unique curricular discipline. Each of these functions in the justification and content of art education can be viewed as a manifestation of reform or of dissent, depending on the particular viewpoint taken.

During the 19th century, art was promoted to support the well-being of the social order and to develop a strong economically independent nation. Art, narrowly defined as mechanical drawing, was first introduced in 1847 at Boston English High School to train draftsmen for the Industrial Revolution. In 1870, Massachusetts passed the first law making drawing a required high school subject. The rationale for art was to develop skills in working with tools, materials, and techniques. Walter Smith's book Teacher's Manual for Freehand Drawing and Designing (1876) consisted of a series of paced exercises in which students were required to copy geometric patterns of lines and shapes. Smith viewed art education as a sequence of drawing lessons that were so clear and precise that non-art specialists could teach students to draw.

The child-centered approach to art education emerged in the 1920s as a reaction to the lack of concern for individual growth and development associated with the society-centered approach. For John Dewey and the Progressive movement, art served as a catalyst to the child-centered approach. The work of Viktor Lowenfeld, an Austrian art educator who, before the Holocaust, fled to the United States, provided the impetus. His Creative and Mental Growth (1947) reflects his postwar vision of art as a tool for enhancing individual creativity through freedom of expression. In contrast to the “art to support society” closed-ended instruction, teaching strategies associated with “art to enhance the child's development” were open-ended, relying on unguided discovery and embracing creative expression. Art was deemed a humanizing and therapeutic endeavor that aided the development of physical, mental, emotional, and creative capabilities.

The third broad movement, a subject-centered approach, focused on the importance of art as a stand-alone curricular discipline. In the post-Sputnik era of the 1960s, a back-to-basics movement in general education prompted a reexamination and redefinition of art education. The push and pull of art education change and reform to a subject-oriented and content-centered approach was largely in response to a perceived “lack of substance” in the child-centered laissez-faire attitude associated with freedom of self-expression. In addition, Harry Broudy's advocacy of aesthetic education during the
1950s contributed to the evolving view of what art education should be. Art education thus was redefined as a body of knowledge with its own set of distinct subject-matter concepts and skills. This shift in art education increasingly became referred to as a “discipline-based approach.”

The subject-centered, discipline-based approach got off to a slow start. Due to the advocacy of the Getty Education Institute for the Arts and other individuals, the subject-centered approach gained momentum in the 1980s. The term discipline-based art education (DBAE) became formalized during the 1980s. The Getty Institute’s examination of teaching practices of art education classes in the United States found a predominant focus on studio production to the exclusion of art history, art criticism, and aesthetics—important components of art as a discipline. To broaden the scope of the subject-centered approach, the Getty Institute provided research, curriculum, and training for art educators to implement the intent of DBAE. During the 1980s and 1990s, controversies emerged within the subject-centered movement of DBAE. In debates about the purposes, appropriate content, and instructional strategies associated with art education, some were supportive of child-centered approaches fostering authentic expression. Others argued that DBAE provided a much-needed framework with distinct and well-defined content and structure. Elliott Eisner, a noted writer, Stanford University art educator, and key supporter of DBAE, bridged these perspectives by making the case to redirect focus on the cognitive nature of art production and art criticism. Eisner emphasized the idea of “art as basic” for meaning making through the involvement of numerous complex cognitive processes such as problem solving in art activities. Consequently, he has had a significant impact on the recent direction of art education. Thus, Eisner notes that art is not to be viewed as driven solely by emotional and creative forces but also, and importantly, as involving higher-level thinking skills.

In the 21st century, art education is again influenced by a convergence of historical events and conditions and societal needs. Although the No Child Left Behind Act included the arts disciplines in general (visual arts, music, theater, and dance) as a core subject, the implementation of the Act did not require reporting or assessment data on arts instruction. Arts classes in some states, particularly in high-poverty schools, have taken a back seat to the seemingly more practical science and math courses that politicians and policymakers assume have a direct link to professional and economic success. Some school districts have mandated that the content of art classes be directly linked not only to national arts standards but also to national standards of science, math, and other core subjects. The National Art Education Association, the leading professional organization for art educators, founded in 1947, advocates that all students deserve a comprehensive, balanced, and sequential program of instruction in the visual arts, including visual culture reflecting contemporary products and digital images. Influential advocacy groups emphasize the predominance of visual images and demand in the contemporary workplace for new abilities such as visual-spatial thinking, reflection, and experimentation. Such groups also promote the centrality of the visual arts to a total school program, positing that art education fosters sophisticated cognitive processes that are as necessary for addressing 21st-century challenges as is scientific and mathematical knowledge.

See also
Progressive Education

Further Readings


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