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POSTMODERNISM IN ART EDUCATION: CONTENT FOR LIFE

Crime, drugs, homelessness, violence, sexual abuse, teen pregnancy, endangered species, conservation, pollution...the list of issues and concerns generated by fifth graders was long and surprisingly sophisticated. Students discussed and brainstormed their concerns after viewing work by two postmodern artists, Krystoff Wodiczko and Ciel Bergman. This activity was part of a year-long curriculum designed to involve south Georgia fifth-grade students in a district-wide study of postmodern art and related issues. The discipline-based art education (DBAE) curriculum offered opportunities not only to discuss art, but also to investigate the functions of art in contemporary society through authentic instruction.

DEFINING POSTMODERN ART

Postmodern art eludes a single definition. The many meanings within postmodernism are complex. The first use of the term "postmodernist" in reference to the visual arts was made by an American critic, Leo Steinberg, in 1972, in his description of the mixed media paintings of Robert Rauschenberg (Wood, Frasca, Harrison, & Harris, 1993, p. 237). However, the roots of the movement began much earlier, at least in spirit, with the work of Marcel Duchamp (Horowitz, 1992). Associated with the Dada movement, Duchamp insisted that art must stimulate the mind and use everyday objects to challenge traditional definitions of art. Likewise, postmodernists have connected art to the concerns of daily life, preferring the personal contextual narrative to scientific or universal accounts.

Postmodernism is probably best understood as a critique of society in reaction to modernism (Kissick, 1993). Modern artists, particularly the American abstract expressionists, sought their identity through opposing traditional roles society offered following World War II. The initial meaning of the popular modernist term "avant garde" implied duality of aesthetic innovation and social revolt (Gablik, 1984). In practice it created an estranged elite of artists and intellectuals who preferred to step away from the expectations of the social mainstream. The attitude of "art for art's sake" focused primarily on the modern artist's response to a social, materialistic reality that was difficult to justify or intellectually affirm (Gablik, 1984).

While some would say that the philosophical tenets of modernism actually continue today, postmodern philosophers have rejected many of its assumptions (Barrett, 1994). While modernists believed in the possibility of art as universal communication, postmodernists believe art to be contextual or culture specific. While many modernists created "art for art's sake," the postmodernists seek a connection between art and life (Gablik, 1991). Modernists viewed art as formalist, aesthetic, and without necessary function, with the creative individual central (Bowers, 1987). Postmodernism has decentralized the individual and creativity (at least in theory), while emphasizing the interaction of language, culture, and society (Barrett, 1994). Postmodernists assert that facts are interpretations and that truths are not always absolute but constructs of groups or individuals. Knowledge itself is viewed through the lens of culture and language. Thus, postmodernists accept multiple views, fragmentation, and exhibit tolerance for ambiguity (Barrett, 1994). In this postmodern era, pluralism has become the synonym for

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diversity in content and style (Wood, Frascina, Harris, & Harrison, 1993). Postmodernism is not so much a chronological period of art as an attitude, or frame of mind that questions or critically reviews the dominant modus operandi and status quo (Sullivan, 1993).

Generally there is no sudden or qualitative shift from the art of one period to another, yet patterns of transition or change eventually emerge. The authors of Modernism in Dispute (1993) offer three major issues that have evolved as thematic content within the postmodernist's visual arts agenda:

1. Postmodernism as a critique of grounds of difference;
2. Postmodernism as a critique of the myth of originality; and
3. Postmodernism as a critique of historical narratives. (p. 238)

In addition to these issues, Gablik (1991) suggests yet another postmodern concern which might be termed an interactive critique of social/ecological issues. This means that rather than taking a stance that is against the larger audience as in modernism, art may realize its purpose through relationship or a conscious collaboration with the audience to deal with an ecological or social agenda.

STRATEGIES FOR STRUCTURING A POSTMODERN CURRICULUM

AUTHENTIC INSTRUCTION

One means of addressing postmodern concerns and building constructive connections between education and society is evident in Newmann and Wehlage's (1993) framework for authentic instruction.

The term “authentic” is used to distinguish between "achievement that is significant and meaningful and that which is trivial and useless" (p. 8). In defining authentic assessment Newmann and Wehlage (1993) suggest five criteria for judging the quality of the authentic instruction. These involve the use of higher level thinking, a depth of knowledge, content which has value and meaning beyond the instructional context, substantial conversation about the topic, and peer support for achievement. Student performance for proficiency or success is based on criteria parallel to authentic adult achievement, that is, the construction of knowledge and disciplined inquiry in a work that connects to issues beyond the classroom.

DISCIPLINE-BASED ART EDUCATION

Newman and Wehlage's definition of authentic instruction displays characteristics common to a DBAE curriculum. Postmodern content presented in a discipline-based framework further enhances authentic instruction. Because the nature of postmodernism is critique, it raises questions that involve the viewer in a search for meaning and higher level thinking. As a critique of contemporary society postmodern art engages the viewer in real-world, authentic issues important for learning beyond the instructional context. Often in postmodern art important critical or aesthetic issues involve students in sustained conversation and encourage student participation and peer support.

Eisner (1988) suggests that “both curriculum and teaching should help students internalize what they have learned and relate it to life outside of school” (p. 29). Therefore, art by postmodern artists used within a discipline-based framework may provide a means of restructuring an art education curriculum based on socially responsible intellectual inquiry.
POSTMODERNISM IN THE ART CLASSROOM

Postmodernism (defined by the four critiques of pluralism, historical narrative, social/environmental issues, and the issue of originality) was presented to Lowndes County, Georgia, fifth-grade students in a unit of four lessons. Postmodern artworks and artists provided the content base that allowed exploration of the four critiques through the disciplines of art history, art criticism, aesthetics, and studio projects (DBAE). An example of a postmodern lesson, developed as a critique of ecological and social issues, was based on a collaborative design, Homeless Vehicle by Krzysztof Wodiczko, and an installation by Ciel Bergman and Nancy Merrill entitled Sea Full of Clouds, What Can I Do.

LESSON CONTENT

KRZYSZTOF WODICZKO: SOCIAL ISSUES OF HOMELESSNESS

Polish-born designer-artist Krzysztof Wodiczko uses his art to engender debate about social problems, hoping to make people think about solutions. Some of Wodiczko’s most famous works are large projected images on well-known buildings. Using projectors mounted on trucks, Wodiczko engineers huge public art that pushes its way into the public domain and consciousness (Haus, 1993).

Today, Wodiczko lives in New York City and has used his industrial design background to produce new works. One of the most notable is the Homeless Vehicle Project. Wodiczko held countless discussions with homeless people to discover their needs and concerns, then designed a vehicle to meet those needs. The prototype is a metal, rocket-shaped compartment large enough to crawl into and lie down or sit up. It also has room for storing personal belongings and collecting up to 500 bottles and cans scavenged for cash. Instead of removing the homeless from sight, the vehicle heightened their visibility and legitimized their status as members of the urban community (Gablik, 1991).


CIEL BERGMAN AND NANCY MERRILL: ISSUES OF ECOLOGY AND ACTIVISM:

Ciel Bergman, assisted by Nancy Merrill, created a 1987 installation at the Contemporary Arts Forum in Santa Barbara, California, that raised environmental concerns throughout that community (Gablik, 1991). She and Merrill spent several hours a day for 5 weeks picking up all nonbiodegradable material found along Santa Barbara beaches. They hung it from the ceiling, creating the focus for the work, *Sea Full of Clouds, What Can I Do* (Gablik, 1991).

From these materials the artists created a plea for conservation and recycling in a poetic, almost sacred way (Muchnic, 1987). The ceiling was hung with trash, dark to light, like rain clouds. Additional trash was scattered about the flour-covered floor. Being inside the museum installation was like being in a temple. For Bergman the most basic issue was one of choice, empowerment or helplessness (Ciel Bergman, personal communication, April 19, 1997).

Instead of a traditional opening, a closing of the exhibit was held in a public forum to discuss what should be done with the trash (Gablik, 1991). People from all walks of life and professions became involved in the project. The impact on the citizens of Santa Barbara was so great that a recycling program for plastic was instituted by the city (Gablik, 1991).

STUDENT RESPONSE

After looking at these two works of art and discussing their development, students realized that collaboration and interaction were critical aspects of each artistic approach. Likewise, students' substantial conversation as they investigated social or environmental issues became important to learning. As students viewed art work by both artists they discussed a number of aesthetic issues, such as: “Does art have to be pretty to be considered good art?” “Does it matter what art is made from?” “Can art be made out of trash?” “Can art have a function and still be art?” Since students had previously discussed traditional aesthetic...
categories of representationalism, formalism, expressivism, and functionalism, they were quick to decide that these works best fit the criteria of functionalism, because the artists were raising issues that invited political or social action. Students also saw these works as expressive, because they initially elicited a strong negative response from the viewing audience.

Because the school district was bordered by a busy interstate highway, students had encountered people who appeared homeless or migratory. During discussion of the artworks students seemed most intrigued by the design for the Homeless Vehicle. They speculated how a homeless person might survive and why Wodicizko built his vehicle. They puzzled over the

threat some spectators initially felt in seeing the vehicle on the streets of New York City. In comparison, students were adamant that the installation of trash by Bergman and Merrill was visually disturbing. Students had been involved in recycling projects in their regular classrooms and had developed a basic understanding of ecological problems. They expressed concern for the logistics of gathering trash for an art exhibit, but were impressed that it was instrumental in motivating a recycling program. Regardless of their personal reactions to the artwork, students concluded that the works were done to draw the viewer’s attention to critical problems in society. Student comments revealed a shift in their perception of art from primarily decorative and expressive to a purposeful activity in society.

**STUDIO COMPONENT**

Based on the Wodicizko and the Bergman-Merrill collaborative effort a group puzzle-mural was chosen as the studio component for this lesson. From the brainstormed list of issues students chose one social or environmental concern and planned a painting that would communicate that issue. A large piece of white butcher paper, approximately 4 by 8 feet, was cut into puzzle-shaped pieces. Most students quickly chose a topic for their puzzle piece, began drawing their ideas, then painted. Students utilized visual images, but many also included words
to deliver a message in a poster-like manner. After each student painted his/her concern on a puzzle-shaped section, the pieces were reassembled into a large mural reflecting input from every member of the class. Students utilized a variety of solutions in the assignment. The problem of representing pollution in either air or water, or just trash in general, was an interesting challenge for many students. Creating a mural was symbolic of solving the complex problems facing our world. Everyone’s contribution was needed for the group effort to succeed.

Class dynamics were good during this lesson. Students enjoyed working cooperatively and seeing everyone’s ideas fit together as a visual puzzle. In an effort to interact with the audience several of the puzzle pieces were purposely left blank. An invitation for anyone to write on them, expressing personal concerns, was hung next to the mural in the school hall. In several days writing appeared in the empty spaces. Most comments were slogans, such as “Stop the Violence,” “Save the Planet,” or “Save the Environment; Recycle.”

**POSTMODERN THOUGHT IN CURRICULUM AND ART EDUCATION**

Emerging postmodern curriculum models emphasize and celebrate “the interconnectedness of knowledge, learning experiences, inter-national communities, the natural world, and life itself” (Slattery, 1995). Art education must provide means to present a more holistic approach to education, presenting models of the artist-collaborator rather than the artist as solitary maverick or hero.

Modernity with its faith in reason and emancipation offers the hope that individuals can address and change the world when necessary for the betterment of the collective whole. Renewing urgency for this task in a postmodern world where racism, class oppression, sexism, and nationalism must be continually challenged may be the most demanding educational mission (Giroux & Simon, 1989). Such programs build moral courage and connect, rather than distance, the teacher and students to the most pressing problems and opportunities of the times (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991). As Aristotle observed “We become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts” (Woodward, 1994, p.39). If we want good citizenship from adults then it must be part of children’s lives. Virtues take on meaning when they are lived (Boyer, 1995). In essence, Boyer (1995) suggests that a school should be a community with a:

- coherent curriculum, a climate for learning, and a commitment to character, one that helps students develop the capacity to judge wisely and act responsibly in matters of life and conduct. The goal is not only to prepare students for careers, but also to enable them to live with dignity and purpose; not only to give knowledge to the student, but also to channel knowledge to human ends. (p. 193)

**IMPLICATIONS FOR ART EDUCATION**

Historically, teaching art in relation to society is not a new concept. Feldman (1970), Chapman (1978), McFee and Degge (1980), Lanier (1982) Anderson (1990), Freedman (1994) and others have raised concerns regarding multicultural issues, gender equity, and economic control that parallel the postmodern agenda. The duration of these concerns suggests that many postmodern issues are not only important in reconstructing society, but also implied within the general curriculum of our current educational system. Through a well-planned study of selected postmodern art and issues, art education can encourage more positive interaction between art and society. Possibilities may emerge for the recovery of both a more meaningful society and more meaningful art (Gablik, 1991). Within postmodernism certain frequently raised issues offer relevant content for art education. As forms of cultural criticism both modernism and postmodernism are flawed, yet each has elements of strength. Educators have an opportunity, if not an obligation, to fashion a critical pedagogy based on the best insights of each (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991). An art using authentic instruction, DBAE strategies, and the content of postmodern art engages students in art, learning, and life.

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**NOTE**

The theoretical base and the ecology lesson in this article are part of a larger curriculum study, _An Authentic Instructional Model for Fifth Grade Using Postmodern Content_, conducted for a doctoral dissertation at the Florida State University, in 1995-1996. The curriculum study was implemented in a south Georgia school district with approximately 700 fifth-grade students. The research was supported in part by a Doctoral Dissertation Fellowship from the J. Paul Getty Trust.

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