

## **FROM FINE ART TO VISUAL CULTURE: THE CHANGING ROLE OF ART EDUCATION**

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Doug Boughton, InSEA President  
Professor of Art and Education, Northern Illinois University

Fifty years ago InSEA was founded in the hope that international understanding could be promoted through the exchange of ideas between art educators from different world regions, and that the lives of children would be enriched by education through art. The vision of the founding members of InSEA was astute in 1954, but it is doubtful if any of those great art educators could have anticipated the enormous changes in the social and cultural life of children that have occurred in recent years. And it is particularly unlikely they could have anticipated the changes that have occurred in the role of the arts in contemporary life. Here are a few highlights of important influences on visual culture over the past half century.

The invention of the breakthrough computer language Fortran provided enormous impetus to technological development in 1954, and is still used today. Fortran provided the basis for higher level programming language, and is still used for computer games, air traffic control, scientific and military applications. Also in 1954 the first transistor radio was invented, The integrated circuit (silicon chip) was patented in 1956 and Chip based computers were developed in 1961. In 1962 “Spacewar” the first computer game was developed and in 1969 the first internet exchange took place between Stanford University and UCLA.

Of even greater importance to popular culture over the past fifty years is the way in which images have become available, and reproducible for the population of ordinary people. In 1954 the Polaroid Camera was just seven years old, color television was four years old, the musical synthesizer was invented by Robert Moog USA in 1964, video games became commercially available in 1972, and in 1980 the Compact Disk (CD) was invented Philips and Sony in Holland and Japan.

The pace of adoption of new communication technologies is rapidly increasing. If we take 50 million users as the benchmark it took radio 38 years to reach that number, television 13 years, PC users 16 years, and the internet 4 years. Digital technologies in

particular have changed the nature of the image world and challenged our traditional conceptions of fine art.

Fine art has traditionally served an important role in the preservation and representation of cultural beliefs and practices, and art education has been instrumental in promoting appreciation and understanding of those traditions. During the last half century changes in the ways art has been employed for entertainment, advertising, media communications, and the symbolization of knowledge in all fields has changed the nature of the way cultures are represented. So profound are these changes that art education must also change from a celebratory and appreciative function to a critical role if students are to be equipped to understand and participate in both their local and global cultures of the future.

Recent discussions in the field of art education has pointed to the need for change in the content and pedagogy of art education. A growing body of international literature (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2004; Freedman, 2003; Duncum & Bracy, 2001; Hernandez, 2002) and recent attention to visual culture in international conferences has indicated a need for changes in both classroom practice and the substance of what is taught in the curriculum. Recent special issues of *Studies in Art Education* (Spring 2003), and *Art Education* (March 2003) have focused upon the notion of a visual culture approach to art education and the implications for change in content and practice.

A series of annual visual culture seminars held in Saint Charles, Illinois (2001), University of British Columbia, (2002), Penn State University (2003), and Ohio State University (2004), have engaged art educators and scholars from outside the field in productive exchanges about the potential for more relevant approaches to art education in contemporary classrooms.

Evidence of the move to a visual culture approach in the field to is not limited to the United States. The two most recent European regional congresses of InSEA in Scandinavia (2003), and Turkey (2004) contained many sessions that reflected considerable interest in visual culture, and an Asian international conference in Taipei (June 2004) focused exclusively upon the issue as was reflected in the title *Visual Culture and Lifelong Learning*. In Denmark a new academic research unit titled Visual Culture in Education has recently been established within the Department of Educational Anthropology at the Danish University of Education in Copenhagen.

There are several important motifs that have emerged from the meetings I have attended and in the literature related to this new approach. The first is that visual culture is a broad concept that embraces all forms of cultural production of which fine art is a very important part. Museum art is no longer regarded as the primary focus of attention and the content for study in classrooms is expanding to the arts of entertainment and commerce. In the past, the media, level of technical skill demonstrated by the artist, and aesthetic sophistication largely determined whether an object could be considered a work of art or not. Traditional fine art objects such as paintings, drawings, and sculptures were

thought to possess these qualities exclusively while popular arts, like cartooning, quilting, and graffiti did not. Today these kinds of qualitative differences between visual forms have become less clearly defined. Objects with equivalent levels of aesthetic sophistication now span a wide range of genres including fine art, popular films, tribal masks, toys, environmental designs, television, body art, web sites, Manga, video games, and so on.

Fine art plays a more complicated role within communities today. Many of the visual arts that were considered to be “popular” because of their media decades ago, such as ceramics and photography, are now often considered part of the fine arts, depending on the artist’s intent and viewers’ interpretations of the work. Fine art is recycled in advertisements, Manga comic images, and the renderings for *Star Wars* films have found their way into art museums. Boundaries are dissolving and roles of popular and fine arts have intertwined.

The second motif that has emerged in the discourse is that the approach to teaching is no longer a celebratory activity in which selected great works are appreciated for their aesthetic quality, but instead all forms of visual cultural production are critically examined in terms of their social and personal meaning. Context plays a crucial role in the creation of meaning for both viewers and makers of visual culture. Visual culture is a complex idea. It actually refers to a plurality of visual culture(s) and is at the same time multicultural and intercultural. Different world cultures employ different images representing the complexity of their life-worlds.

Overseas travelers immediately notice differences in signage, clothing, architecture, and art forms that represent the age old values held by people in different countries. These differences reflect the histories of peoples who, in the past, evolved cultures and traditions at a time when limited travel and communications insulated people from contact with the populations of other lands. These differences today have been diminished by the homogenizing effect of improved communications media, international trade, and the marketing practices of multinational corporations. In a global sense visual culture is *multicultural* only in as much as it represents vestiges of the visual traditions of the past.

In the context of the contemporary world visual culture can be more properly regarded as intercultural because ancient visual traditions of individual cultural groups have mingled not only with each other, but also with newly evolving cultural groups like the hip-hop culture of urban American cities. In countries like the United States, Canada, and Australia, colonization and later immigration policies have brought together peoples from all parts of the world. In Asia the impact of trade from the west promoted by advertising and spread by electronic media has imported western values that sit together in strong contrast with traditional cultural ideals. The resultant evolving mix of intercultural images provide a compelling source of study in art education programs.

The third defining motif of the change taking place is that a visual culture approach requires that the content for study is no longer defined solely by the teacher. In today's media saturated world students are far more sophisticated in terms of their exposure to art than they have ever been in the past. Teachers and students have visual experiences in today's image saturated cultures that are different from one other. Individuals negotiate the multi-layered world of images to construct their own pathway of experience and meaning. In a postmodern business sense the world of images can be thought of like a specialized clothing market. Images are designed to appeal to the specialized interests of different individuals. There is something for everybody. Two individuals like a student and teacher can live in the same urban or village world without even noticing the images designed for the other.

To learn art through a visual culture approach will require students to become be more *self-directed* than has been the case in the art classrooms of recent decades. No longer can the teacher be the sole custodian of all art knowledge that is to be passed on to students in easily digestible curriculum chunks presented in the same linear sequence for all students. No longer should students always work in class groups on the same project with the same materials to achieve homogeneous outcomes. In a visual culture approach to art education, children produce their own visual culture and become partners in the art learning and making process. The learning experience is now significantly different because children know things about aspects of visual culture that their teachers may not.

Nonetheless, fine art remains as an important part of art study because it is a significant proportion of visual culture. The content of the art program is expanding to include applied arts such as advertising and entertainment arts like film and video games. Critics of the visual culture movement may ask "why should we spend any curriculum time paying attention to the popular arts?" Surely these images are banal and commonplace and the time spent paying attention to them is nothing more than mindless entertainment. Nothing could be further from the truth!

Apart from the fact that the social and personal identity of all people is powerfully shaped by the popular arts, critical educational attention needs to be paid to it simply because it is designed to be seductive. I repeat the word critical because it should not be understood that study of the popular arts, or the fine arts for that matter, should necessarily be studied approvingly. The popular arts particularly have the power to engage the interest of children and adults, so compellingly that they return to it over and over again. Why is visual culture seductive? Not because it is simple. Simplicity generally does not maintain the interest of viewers. In fact the best popular visual culture is both complex and highly sophisticated in aesthetic terms. It is seductive to a large extent because of its complexity. The *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, for example, has kept critics busy talking at length about the layering of images and meaning, the complexity of the stories, the magic of the animation, the power of the aesthetic content, and the connections with fine art. The background material about the making of these movies

affords fascinating insights into the artistry employed in constructing this piece of popular visual culture. There is no question about the sheer creative genius of the team of artists and designers who fashioned this piece of popular entertainment.

### **The Problem of Assessment**

I have outlined three motifs defining the changes in pedagogy and content of a visual culture approach to art education. When we put them together we have a complex curriculum in which the content of art teaching embraces all forms of visual cultural production, enables students to pursue their interests in popular, as well as the fine arts; and pays more attention to both the content and context of artistic expression. Learning about media and form is repositioned in the curriculum to support the development of ideas and critical visual consciousness rather than serving as the sole content of a didactic instructional model. The ways in which critical analysis of artworks is conducted by students now includes, among other things, attention to the political aspects of art in order to better elaborate the context of understanding. Understanding the social meaning of visual form does not displace aesthetic understanding as the central goal of art education in a visual culture curriculum. Instead the power of the aesthetic is understood in relationship to its persuasive intention rather than as an end in itself.

While it may be virtuous on the one hand to propose a more appropriate conception of the art curriculum the real pedagogical issue, on the other hand, is that the problem of assessment consequently becomes more complex. This is because understanding the complex relationships of form and meaning in both artists' and students' work requires assessment to be more intimately related to the curriculum, specifically in relation to students' own art making. This is a particularly vexing problem if we want to understand how students are thinking as they develop ideas for their own production. If students are to understand visual culture, and also contribute to it, they have to understand the power of visual seduction and the complex ways in which this works.

A major problem confronting effective implementation of a visual culture approach to art education is the assessment issue. Assessment is conducted very differently in different world regions. European and Australasian countries, in contrast to the United States, admit students to university based upon state or national public examinations of senior school subjects (including art), rather than administering standardized university admission exams. Rigorous summative assessment procedures at the senior school level in art education have a lengthy tradition in Europe, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and parts of Asia. **Portfolios in various forms play a significant role in these assessments.**

Arts teachers in the United States, on the other hand, do not have the same history as their European counterparts with large scale arts assessments, and are not as well equipped to deal with demands to demonstrate publicly the quality of their students' achievements through regularized assessments of their subjects. American teachers are

much more accustomed to making individual classroom judgments about their students' learning that are not challenged by external reviewers or compared to the judgments made by other teachers in other schools. A large-scale survey of art teachers conducted by Burton found that the majority of American art teachers conduct assessment by informal means, "such as observation of students (87.3%), viewing artwork (75%), critiques or evaluations upon completion of projects (62.7%), or conversations (50%)" (Burton, 1998 p1). This professional autonomy has long been treasured in the American context so that recent demands for public testing of students in the arts has created new anxieties about public scrutiny for teachers.

At the same time as DBAE evolved in the United States during the eighties and nineties, political pressure to demonstrate accountability in education produced national and state arts standards, and from these have been derived the content of standardized paper and pencil tests that have been used by seven states to date to determine the performance of schools against standardized criteria (State Arts Education Policy Database, 2002-2003). Selection of content for these tests is driven by the form of the test - multiple choice being the most common type because performance tests are expensive and computer forms are easier and cheaper to administer. Teachers of all subjects in the United States, including art teachers, are experiencing enormous pressure to teach students skills that will help them pass multiple choice tests. Some art teachers who are in-service students in my graduate classes have been forced to write commitment statements for their school administration explaining what measures they will implement in the arts program to improve students' skills in test-taking so they will be more likely to pass multiple choice tests in language arts and math.

This is happening at a moment in the evolution of art education when the very opposite kind of assessment is required for effective implementation of important new curriculum ideas. The state of affairs in the United States at present is, in fact, a showpiece of contradictions. On the one hand there is evidence of significant and much needed revolutionary change in the conception of the field of art education that I have described above, and at the same time institutionalized assessment practices across the board promote homogeneity, assess inappropriate content, and trivialize subject matter content. Other countries can benefit by observing what is happening in the United States and taking pains to avoid the same mistakes.

When we think about assessing the arts the words "standardized" and "art" should not be used in the same sentence. We need to ensure that our assessment practices place value on diversity in the arts and restore the central place of imagination in the education of our students. The current assessment zeitgeist in the United States has it the wrong way round. An art curriculum should not be thought of as a body of knowledge, pre-defined in quantifiable chunks, taught systematically in sequential units, so that it can be measured by multiple-choice tests. Nor should it be thought of as a sequence of traditional art media based activities that require students to produce similar objects

skillfully (something I frequently see in media based high school art programs). While simple content knowledge and media skills are easy to test, and accountability requirements are easily satisfied, the whole purpose of engagement in the arts is lost if we allow the form and content of art to be shaped by inappropriate assessment practices.

### **Developing Appropriate Assessment Models**

The important point I want to make here is that if the visual culture reforms that I described previously are to be successfully fulfilled we will need to employ forms of assessment that will enhance and facilitate these changes. We need to engage students in the sustained pursuit of ideas that are relevant to their lives and to their culture. We also need to teach them to be critical participants in the cultural life of their communities. To do this we need them to understand the seductive power of the visual to engage and persuade as they participate in the world of ideas.

If we want students to engage with personal interests, relevant to their lives, we need to create an assessment structure that not only accommodates individual pursuit of ideas, but also actively promotes this kind of activity. If we want students to exercise imagination we need to reject standardization of content and tests. If we want students to reveal their felt responses to the seductive nature of visual forms **we need provide assessment tools that offer insights into their minds over significant periods of time as they think about the things they see and make.** We also need to build into the assessment process ways to understand the affect and associations generated by student work upon other students.

### **Traditional Portfolios**

The way we can do this is **through enlightened use of portfolios to gather assessment data** and the use of reflective debate among interested communities to clarify the values employed for judgment. The portfolio, once the sole province of art education, has now been embraced widely throughout the educational community. **Portfolio assessment has its origins in the visual arts and, interestingly, has been recognized as a useful solution to the shortcomings of paper and pencil testing** in other subject areas but is largely ignored by both the state high-stakes assessment programs and by teachers of the visual arts in the U.S David Burton (1998) found that in the United States only 17.1% of teachers use portfolio review as a primary method of assessment.

### **Defining Characteristics of Good Portfolios**

While much has been written about the portfolio, it is an instrument that is frequently misused or misunderstood. The **commonly understood characteristic of a portfolio is that it is a collection of work accumulated over time.**

**Other important features are that the content is embedded in classroom instruction but remains open ended, and also that students enter their thoughts (reflections) about their work. These last two features, if overlooked, reduce the potency of the portfolio as an assessment tool.**

The first of these is that the content of the portfolio process is *embedded* in the ongoing program of instruction but *open-ended* in the sense that students are encouraged to develop classroom experiences into independent explorations of ideas (Stecher and Herman 1997).

The central intention here is that portfolio entries should be derived from regular instructional events and are not be the result of “on-demand” tasks. The student should be free to interpret the ideas encountered both inside and outside class and to develop independence in their exploration of art ideas. This characteristic, if present, enables students to take risks and move beyond classroom exercises.

Taking responsibility for learning, and developing the capacity to work independently are important indicators of good art learning and this is a central characteristic of the International Baccalaureate program taught in more than half the countries in the world. Not only does the portfolio serve as an assessment tool it also plays a vital role in the meaningful elaboration of curriculum intentions. In short, the portfolio becomes integrated with the visual culture curriculum in very important ways, and is not simply a repository for all class assignments set throughout the year.

Burton’s (1998) survey also found that 52% of all visual arts teachers surveyed in the United States assessed their students at the completion of each studio project or written assignment. A portfolio that contains only a collection of assigned work and lacks open-ended content is one where the teacher defines both the content and the outcome of each project. Such practice ultimately defines the complete form and content of the portfolio. At the end of the term, semester, or year students in the classes of these teachers will typically present portfolios that look very much the same as each other with products that meet the common project criteria demanded by the teacher. These kinds of portfolios do not reflect the student’s capacity to work independently, nor do they reveal the degree to which students are willing to take risks in order to extrapolate from, and interpret the ideas presented in class. By definition, the only thing these portfolios can do is showcase the teacher’s capacity to invent tasks for student response, and to direct their outcomes.

Good portfolios in contrast may contain some common features of students work, but for the most part will be comprised of work that will be unique to each individual, will represent the particular visual culture interests of each student, may be very different in content and depending upon the teacher’s background, may represent a wide array of media as well. Students will certainly have worked outside the classroom and be encouraged to bring their spontaneous work to school to include in their portfolio.

A second feature of good portfolios identified in the literature is that they contain *student-selected entries* (Stecher and Herman 1997; Castiglione, 1996). While the idea of educational portfolios is prominent in the professional art world the educational application of portfolios is different (Castiglione, 1996). The artist portfolio is usually a

display of a person's public professional persona and does not usually contain works indicative of process, doubts, or failed explorations. The purpose of education portfolios is to promote students' knowledge of their own progress, and to support their ability to demonstrate independence in researching and evolving projects of their own. Thus, works in progress, sketches, and re-worked pieces are important as portfolio entries because they provide insight into student growth, and the pattern of decisions students have made in relation to their evolving work.

Without student choice there is no indication of the student's capacity to make informed decisions about their own ideas and progress. Often it is possible to discover as much about a student by what they choose to include as it is from the quality of the work itself. Clearly, the degree to which this is possible is determined to some extent by the age and sophistication of the students involved. Less is expected of younger students, while more fully resolved work can be anticipated from senior students. Nevertheless, some choice is possible at all levels of schooling. The International Baccalaureate assessment criteria provide useful guidelines, Purposeful Exploration (Studio), and Independence of Research (Research Workbook) reflect the capacity of portfolios to effectively reveal these qualities in ways that other assessment instruments cannot.

A third, and most important, feature of good portfolios is the importance of *student critical self-reflection*, which may appear in journals or portfolios in written or taped form (Wolfe, 1988). Interviews are commonly used methods in conjunction with portfolios to determine the degree to which students understand their own growth and development. The International Baccalaureate and Arts PROPEL programs in the United States both use this methodology (Blaikie, 1994). Ross, et. al. (1993) found, during reflective discussions with students, that teachers tend not to listen carefully to students; appear to drive their own agendas through teacher talk; and that students understand more about their own feeling states and sensibilities than adults comprehend. Ross claimed that dialogue, properly conducted, can reveal valuable insights into the process of arts making particularly students' understanding of the quality of the work, the manner of its production, the reasons for choices, influences on the work, difficulties encountered, new ideas to explore and so on.

Here are some examples from International Baccalaureate students' candidate statement submitted as part of their exhibitions of studio work:

It is unfortunate that portfolios are not more widely used by teachers of art for assessment. However, in light of the numbers of students most art teachers face each week the sheer volume of artifacts makes storage impossible unless digital storage techniques are used.

### **Digital Portfolios**

We need to remember that the visual world today is largely transacted in digital form. Rapid development of digital technology has enabled portfolios to assume far more complex forms than the conventional humble collection of artifacts. The benefits of

traditional portfolios can be significantly enhanced in digital form. In our work at Northern Illinois University we have found many benefits of digital portfolios (Boughton, 2002, 2004). One of the most interesting of these is student motivation to create portfolios. Students are excited about viewing their work on screen, are more willing to record reflective comments (so useful for understanding their thinking), are interested in working further with their images once digitized, and can more readily see their own progress.

Ultimately the thing we need to work most upon is understanding how to assist students to think about the ways they have been influenced by seductive images, how they have tried to use images in persuasive ways themselves and then to assess the value of all of this in our contemporary cultural context. Electronic portfolios offer enormous promise as tools to encourage reflective insight and imaginative personal pursuit of ideas.

### Conclusion

There is no question we live in the world of rapid change. The impact of technology, commerce, social mobility, increased industrialization, and increased consumption worldwide has changed the fundamental nature of visual culture. It is no longer possible to think about a singular representation of culture. Instead, visual cultures intersect and overlay one another to make up the complex patterns of social groups and visual representations of those groups in classrooms. The challenge for art educators is to create the kind of learning environments appropriate to the life experience of students that will enable them to actively participate in this complex cultural environment. Good visual culture curriculums need to be supported by reflexive assessment practices that value and promote individual pursuit of visual understanding, engagement with important ideas, and the capacity to critically respond to the visual world.

Portfolios, properly used, provide the most promising way to do this. Existing practices in Europe, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and the International Baccalaureate Program offer valuable models for guidance. Standardized testing, widely practiced in the United States, on the other hand, provides a model of practice to avoid. Inappropriate assessment is the surest way to destroy the most imaginative curriculum reform.

Portfolio assessment presents some difficulties of management and cost, but the benefits far outweigh the disadvantages. The advent of digital portfolio possibilities holds considerable promise for the future.

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