On Discipline-Based Art Education: A Conversation with Elliot Eisner

An eminent scholar and researcher in both the arts and education, Elliot Eisner has long taken an art critic's view of schooling. With the Getty Center for Education in the Arts, he has influenced a new structure for art curriculums. Eisner is currently on leave from Stanford University as a fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, Palo Alto, California.
You've gone on record as favoring discipline-based art education. What is that?

Discipline-based art programs are intended to provide systematic, sequential teaching in the four things people do with the arts: they make works of art, they appreciate art, they learn to understand art in relation to cultures, and they make judgments about the arts. These four major operations are art production, art criticism, art history, and aesthetics.

All four of these disciplines should be reflected in the curriculum. Students should not only have opportunities to make visual works of art, they should learn how to see these works as well. And they should not only learn to see works of art, they should also know something about the times—the social circumstances—in which the works were created.

Is the practical effect of this broader approach somewhat less emphasis on production of art?

Well, time is finite, so somewhat less time devoted to production is probably inevitable, but there is no intention to exclude the productive aspects of art in order to pay attention to the appreciative or cultural aspects of it. Ideally, the four areas should be taught not as independent strands but in relation to one another.

How would you compare the discipline-based approach to teaching art with others that you feel are less effective?

Historically, especially in the heyday of the Progressive Era in American education, the major function of the visual arts in schools was to give youngsters an opportunity to express their creativity and release their emotions. Art was not so much taught as caught. It was seen not as subject matter to be learned but as a contribution to youngsters' mental health.

That view began to change in the 1960s with interest in the structure of the disciplines. While others were looking at physics and chemistry and mathematics in terms of the basic ideas and processes characterizing those fields, art educators were paying attention to the structure of art. Unfortunately, the ideas that were developed then never took hold, except in the journals. Now, the Getty Center is providing a great deal of help to further develop and implement these ideas in practical ways in schools.

You said that the discipline-based approach didn't take hold in the '60s. How is that related to the fact that quite a few school systems downgraded their art programs in the '70s and early '80s?

I think people in this country—educators and the public at large—have viewed the arts, for young children at least, as having little value other than something to put on the refrigerator door. That conception of art can never compete adequately for time in the school program.

In addition, curriculum in American schools is driven to a considerable degree by assessment practices. To the extent that the arts are neglected in assessment programs, they will be neglected in other ways also. Assessment has to do with what the public learns the schools are doing and what administrators and teachers believe they're going to be held responsible for. The creation of a renaissance in American education will require not only a broader conception of what youngsters need, but assessment procedures that will make visible and public the achievement of sophisticated forms of learning without doing violence to the essence of the subjects being assessed.

Learning in the arts is cognitively a very sophisticated operation. It requires the exercise of imagination. It requires the cultivation of human sensibility, the ability to pay attention to nuance, the ability to capitalize on the adventitious and on surprise in the course of working on a project or topic, the ability to know when to shift goals when working on something. It is the farthest thing from an algorithm. Much of the lack of development of critical thinking in American schools has been due to an emphasis on subject matter and on processes that do not cultivate human judgment and other forms of higher-level thinking.

Let's clarify terminology just a bit. I assumed that the term "discipline-based" referred to the various art forms. You're saying the reference is to something else?

Yes. To the four major things that people do with art: they make it, they appreciate it, they understand it, and they make judgments about it. These processes are parallel to the disciplines of art production, art criticism, art history, and aesthetics.

From a curriculum standpoint, it seems there might be an articulation problem. For example, how can teachers be expected to teach aesthetics year after year in various contexts without repeating the same content?

I agree that this conception of arts education does not simplify the pedagogical life of the teacher. We need to
figure out how that can be done in some reasonable way. But the initial problem is to adequately conceptualize what youngsters need to learn. What we're saying is that it is not adequate simply to give youngsters opportunities to work with art media without paying attention to these other areas.

Furthermore, there's been a misconception about the use of media in the visual arts in American elementary schools. It is widely believed that the richness of an art program is directly correlated with the number of materials a youngster has an opportunity to work with during the course of the year. But if the teacher shifts material too frequently—for example—the chances that children will learn to use that material with a sense of control and imagination are diminished. It would be like trying to learn to play the violin one week, drums the second, and clarinet the third. There would be no continuity in the program, hence no competence, no mastery, and no possibility of using the instrument as a vehicle for artistic expression.

For supervisors, that raises a whole new set of curriculum considerations.

Yes. What one looks for is continuity: a conception of what the activities youngsters are asked to engage in are for. Unlike mathematics, the arts have too often suffered from being without goals, without structure, without any sense of continuity and development. So while instruction in mathematics and some of the sciences may need to be loosened up to include more use of imagination and speculation, the arts need more purpose and continuity.

Can you be more specific about how a particular topic can be taught reflecting all four disciplines?

Let's say that a youngster is introduced to the use of the coil method of constructing a clay pot. That activity provides opportunities for the teacher to help the youngster develop an awareness of things like proportion and technique and the expressive character of a vessel. That is, the shapes of different pots generate different kinds of feelings in viewers.

pots can be delicate, they can be strong, they can be clumsy or graceful.

The pot a youngster makes can be related to pots made in other cultures by other artists. The Greeks and the Aztecs made pots, the French, the Japanese, the Chinese made pots. So there are many opportunities to establish connections, to significantly broaden the kinds of things a youngster learns from the simple act of making a pot.

It may be hard for generalists to distinguish between aesthetics and criticism in an example like that.

Let me try to clarify. There is a difference between aesthetics in learning and the learning of aesthetics. Aesthetics in learning is the feeling of satisfaction one gets from making a beautiful object, for example, or in doing a scientific experiment, for that matter.

The learning of aesthetics is introducing children and adolescents to a set of ideas that have been around for a long time: questions that have never been adequately resolved. For example, do works of art need to be beautiful, or is it possible for a great work of art to be ugly? Works of art such as literature and poetry are fictitious—they are constructions of artists, of writers. Can something that is fictional tell the truth? Do you need to understand the intention of an artist to evaluate the adequacy of his or her work? These are examples of questions that come out of aesthetics. Raising those kinds of questions, particularly with adolescents, opens up the artistic world in a way that the making of images does not.

And how does criticism enter in?

When, for example, a teacher reserves part of the classroom wall to display a painting or sculpture that a child has made. And when the teacher has the child look at that object and talk about what he or she sees—how the form is organized, how the image makes the child feel, what the child likes best about it, how it compares with other things that were made, the child begins to do art criticism. Criticism takes place when a teacher puts on display 20 paintings of, let's say, still life or imaginative drawing that have been made by members of the class, and helps the class recognize the special qualities of each of the drawings, so that youngsters begin to learn that in school not everybody has to have the same answer in order to do excellent work. Criticism pertains to growth in perception.

Your examples refer primarily to the visual arts. Does this four-part approach apply to other art forms?

Yes. The same four operations, or disciplines, apply to music, poetry, literature, and dance.

And you're saying that the four disciplines are not necessarily taught separately, but that the teacher must pay conscious attention to each of them?

Yes. It's also possible to relate some of the things that children are learning in art to some of the things they're learning in the social studies or other curriculum areas. As you know, one of the great needs, particularly in our secondary schools, is the construction of conceptual bridges across subject matters.

Yet you've taken the position that the "integrated day" approach is perhaps not the best way to organize an elementary school.

Too often when that approach is used, the arts become a handmaiden to other subjects. The arts are used primarily to teach reading or math or social studies. When the arts are used that way, it's not the arts that are being taught, but something else.

There are three basic ways to handle the teaching of the arts in a classroom. One way is to teach each of the arts as a subject with its own particular characteristics, its own continuity and development. A particular block of time during the week is assigned to...
teaching the arts, and each of the arts is treated in terms of its own aesthetic or artistic features.

A second way, sometimes used with younger children, is to provide spaces in the classroom for youngsters to pick up on their own individual work at various times during the week—but that approach tends to be fairly ad hoc in character.

Ideally, the arts should be taught in relation to other subjects. In the best of all possible worlds, each of the arts would be taught in a way that allows for parity between subjects. What is aesthetic or artistic about each of the arts would not be neglected.

If it were possible to teach the arts in an integrated way without sacrificing their integrity, I would endorse it. I fear, however, that where this is the only model, the arts will not be treated appropriately because of existing priorities and assessment practices. Therefore, I prefer to protect some space during the school week for focused instruction in each of the arts.

What about in the secondary school where art is usually taught by specialized teachers? What are the problems there?

Secondary art teachers have developed professional commitments and routines that heavily emphasize the productive aspect of the arts. They regard themselves—and rightly so—as specialists, as artists with a particular body of knowledge and set of techniques, a particular style of teaching. We are just beginning to work with secondary teachers to encourage them to expand their view of appropriate content so that there will be greater curricular balance than at present.

To what extent is the idea of discipline-based art education gaining acceptance among teachers?

It's hard to say on a national basis. I can tell you that the discipline-based approach is being promulgated in a variety of centers and institutions around the country, although the major emphasis to this point has been on the West Coast. For practical purposes, the Getty project is only about three years old, so we are still in a growth stage.

Now, I should explain that even among the theoreticians in art education there are some who are concerned about the approach. Some think that it neglects the child, that it may become overly rigid. Some are concerned that it will look too much like other school subjects and lose the special qualities that art should contribute to the school curriculum. I am as concerned about these matters as anyone, but I do not believe that the problem resides in the conceptualization; the problem can reside in the way it is implemented. I have no doubt that the provision of continuity and sequence in learning is inappropriate for art teaching, but I agree that reducing it to a mechanistic approach would be a disaster. We need both structure and magic in art education.

You do recognize that sometimes what actually happens when schools try to implement new ideas isn't what was intended?

Oh, indeed. One of the great problems of implementation in American schools is that often, rather than the new ideas changing the school, the ideas are changed by the school. We learned in the 1960s that what was supposed to be inductive, discovery-oriented science could be handled in a routine, didactic way. We need to watch out for that sort of thing. But again, that was not the fault of the conception; it was a function of the inadequacy of our in-service education, our consultation, our support, and our school structure.

If discipline-based art education succeeds, what results do you expect?

If a sound art education program were implemented effectively in schools from kindergarten through twelfth grade, youngsters finishing school would be more artistically literate. They would be able to respond to works of visual art in museums and galleries, and they would have developed dispositions and abilities to attend to and experience the visual world at large.

Youngsters finishing schooling would understand something about the relationships between culture and content and form of art. For example, the Shakers who populated the Eastern seaboard states in the 18th century produced images of a particular kind because they embraced a particular religious ideology. Young people would understand this connection between belief systems and expressive form and technique, they would understand that the images that characterize a culture come out of a tradition, a set of ideas. Youngsters would be able to provide reasons for the judgments they make about works of art. Their judgments would not be simply a matter of personal taste; they would be a matter of grounded preference, of reasoning. Their conceptions of what art is, what the mind is, and what knowledge is would be more sophisticated. The world of art and the visual environment in which they live would be a major resource for enriching their lives.

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