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January 27, 2013
Reading Review: Visual Culture

Summary:

A Visual Culture-oriented art education (VCAE) approach is “examined as [a] field of study that analyzes and interprets how visual experiences are constructed within social systems, practices, and structures” (Tavin, p. 197). VCAE serves as an in-depth study on cultural realities which are integrated into the art education curriculum. This art education approach, investigates the role in which popular culture intertwines itself with individuals “knowledge construction, social desire, and [capacity for] student agency” (Tavin, p. 198). Kevin Tavin, Elliot Eisner, and Terry Barrett are among the many art educators who are in favor of the benefits VCAE have to offer contemporary art education. They perceive VCAE as a tool for educators to develop and provoke students’ intellectual beings, as well as, a way to cultivate the fundamentals of the arts.

VCAE permits students to formulate assumptions and opinions about images or objects through the comprehension of personal integrity in relation to contemporary ideals. According to Barrett (2003), “images and objects present opinions as if they were truth, reinforce attitudes, and confirm or deny beliefs and values” (p.12). Eisner (2001) finds the inclusion of visual culture in art education to provide colleagues opportunities to communicate about the affects VCAE has on the students’ abilities to make deeper connections between contemporary content and the relevancy of personal experiences and social awareness. “Art education students benefit from this process when their lived experiences are integrated into classroom pedagogy and cultural production” (Tavin, 2004, p. 208).

Tavin (2004) believes “through contextualizing visuality and the visual subject, art education can pose questions regarding privilege, power, representation, history, and pleasure within the intertextual circulation of images” (p. 208). Further, lessons can involve investigations of stereotypes, racial and gender discriminations, fashion trends, social media, and environment and sustainability as a way to allow students to interpret or define significant attributes of visual culture. It is through these critical discussions on social, political, and economic circumstances that students learn to analyze contemporary culture in relation to their human identity. Barrett (2003) resolved through the many interpretations of connotations and denotations that, “learners

of all ages can successfully decipher the many messages circulating in the images and objects of visual culture if given the opportunities and some strategies” to investigate visual culture (p.12).

Terms/Key Concepts:

Elliot Eisner investigates *pluralism*, as a movement which encourages the interpretations of visual culture. Eisner (2001) defines “*pluralism*, [as] an approach to reality that recognizes that there are a variety of ways [and options] in which humans come to know and represent the world, the arts among them” (Eisner, p. 6). In the field of art education, *pluralism*, has encouraged the change of focus and provokes reformation of standards to remove political biasness, which can blur and spoil the goals for an affective and engaging art education curriculum (Tavin, 2001). According to Tavin (2004) “*critical pedagogy*, [visual culture], is explored as a political practice that critiques popular culture in order to promote human agency and democratic public spheres” (Tavin, p. 197). In order to understand and challenge the subjectivities of visual culture, students must study images and imaging to interpret and relate to popular culture (Tavin, 2004). It is through *denotation* and *connotation*, Barrett (2003) suggests, that students learn strategies to identify (denote) what it is that they are seeing as visual imagery and learn how to interpret what they are seeing and how they perceive (connote) the message in order to understand the meaning and the context in which the image or object is presented. This knowledge provides students with opinions which are shaped through the truths, attitudes, values, and beliefs of their contemporary world (Barrett, 2003).

Critical Response/Application/Personal Reflection:

Visual Culture Art Education oriented lessons differ from the more traditional art lessons we typically see in K-12 educational settings due to the heavy emphasis on teaching cultural and socially relevant material which provoke emotional responses to contemporary visual imagery. Visual Culture provides rich opportunities for students to become critical thinkers on politically charged topics. In addition, it educates students to break down visual imagery through personal interpretations and meaning based on personal experiences. Unlike the traditional teachings of museum high art, educators utilizing VCAE incorporate work from their contemporaries, validating what students see as an investigation of relevant issues or concepts of the time.

Two contemporary artists, from Art 21, that can be used to inspire a lesson on VCAE are Laylah Ali and Michael Ray Charles. Both individuals create art that investigates human form and condition. Their artistic styles have developed through the influence of events or situations

which occurred due to the cause of uneasy emotions or human injustices. Newspaper images, figurines or toys, company icons and words for advertisements, and images from real life situations can be used to investigate how social and cultural attributes can be manipulated to portray a message that may contain a controversial message.

What I found unique about these two artists is the way they draw from their backgrounds to develop and create images of figures. Looking at both artists' works, you can see a cartoon like appearance. Their use of color and bold lines force their creations to make a statement. Neither artist concentrates on the background or location of the figure. Typically the background has one solid color making the figure the dominate feature of the work. A VCAE project that could be associated with these two artists is to have students create a storyboard based on bullying. Students can create unique characters or creators that represent a situation where a bully is dominating the victim, the situation is resolved, and the victim is building confidence to stand up for themselves. The purpose of this assignment would be to educate students on how to portray confidence against bullying in a non-violent manner. Like these two contemporary artists they use their art to demonstrate discomfort with socially uncomfortable situations like bullying, discrimination, or racism. This assignment could allow students to express their person feeling against bullying.

According to Eisner, there are several inherent problems with the VCAE approach. He believes VCAE is a cultural based curriculum which has a tendency to become overly political or socially driven, forcing political/social issues to be presented by art educators who are not equipped to teach students about such issues. Eisner (2001) explains, "although political and social analysis can be illuminating, arts teachers are not social studies teachers, and competence in the political analysis of popular art may not be their long suit" (p. 8). Another issue that he mentions is one of the main reasons art educators are in art education, is because they had a positive experience in creating art at some point in their life and for that reason they want to share their passion for art with others so that they might have the same experiences with it. Through this approach alone, art education can lose the creative aspect of art making, causing art education to become the study of visual culture only, developing students to become 'analytic spectators' versus 'productive artists' (Eisner, 2001). Eisner recommends art educators to integrate visual culture into the art curriculum, balancing the curriculum to maintain "academic content, artistic forms of learning, and ways of dealing with accountability" (Eisner, 2001). By developing a well-

balanced curriculum, the students will have the ability to think, analyze, contextualize, and to create becoming knowledgeable of fundamental attributes of art education.

Eisner has some valid points, and I think it is important to maintain a well-balanced curriculum, that stresses an integration of visual culture. There are definitely ways to do this without losing aspects of art making and the traditional methods of art educations. As educators we need to adjust our teaching methods to the times in which we teach, reflecting on the histories of art and the influences it has made to modern times. By addressing the needs of the students we can creatively design a curriculum that addresses all concerns to maximize student take away.

References:

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- Eisner, E. (2001). Should we create new aims for art education? *Art Education*, 54(5), 6-10.
- Tavin, K. (2004). Wrestling with angels, searching for ghosts: Toward a critical pedagogy of visual culture. *Studies in Art Education*, 44(3), 197-213.