

**RECONCEPTUALISING THE ROLE OF ART EDUCATORS IN THEIR  
ENGAGEMENTS WITH ART MUSEUMS  
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*This presentation will outline an ongoing doctoral investigation into relationships between museums and schools, and more specifically between art museums and art education. Previous research by the author has identified problematic relations between museums and schools that, from a school-based art educational perspective, inhibit the realization of museum-based learning opportunities. Using extant research from the museum and education fields, and*

experiences of adult life. In New South Wales, recent curriculum reforms in the Visual Arts recognize that the visual arts exist within a network of relations that incorporate the artwork, the artist, the audience and the world (NSW Board Of Studies 1999, 2002, 2003). These reforms reinforce changes within the wider art education field, and further recognize that the provision of skills, knowledge and experience related to participation as audiences contributes to the capacity for students to engage in autonomous cultural practice beyond the school context. Such developments validate a link between art education and art museums and provide a compelling argument for the utilization of art museums within art education programs.

It is generally assumed that as public institutions with a common educational orientation, museums and schools have a natural association that is educationally beneficial. However, emerging research suggests that from a school-based perspective, the educational value of engagement is questionable. While schools have historically been associated with museums, only recently has the relationship between schools and museums been investigated in a rigorous and critical manner. The vast majority of the research has been generated from the museum field and thus represents the museum's perspective. Relatively little has been generated from a school based perspective. The body of research informing this analysis is drawn from both the museum and school-based education fields and reflects a specific secondary art educational perspective that is focused on secondary school aged audiences in the context of NSW syllabus reforms. Specific reference is made to the experiences and opportunities available to secondary school-based art education in regional contexts. The perspectives of this audience has not been acknowledged or addressed in previous research.

In this paper I explore these issues in an analysis of practices that are characteristic of engagements between museums and schools and develop a framework for re-considering the role of school-based art educators in their engagements with museums. First, in a review of extant research, I outline the characteristic practices of school-based educators in relation to museums and examine how those practices are congruent with, and contradictory to, the philosophical underpinnings of the subject of the Visual Arts. I then develop a theoretical framework that, in strategically deploying concepts drawn from Pierre Bourdieu's social theories, analyses and seeks to explain the practices identified from a sociological perspective. Finally, I utilize the implications for change embedded in Bourdieu's theories and the evidence presented, to develop a more dynamic conceptualization of the role of school-based art educators in relation to the utilization of museum-based learning opportunities.

### **The Problematic Role of School-Based Educators**

It is undisputed that school-based educators value the educational opportunities provided by museums and utilize museums within their educational programs. However, studies indicate that they have been unable to exploit the opportunities provided by museums in optimal ways (Commission on Museums for a New Century 1984, Grinder and McCoy 1985, Eisner and Dobbs 1986, Griffin 1999, Harrison and Naef 1985, Stone 1992a, 1992b, 1993, Berry 1998, Hooper-Greenhill 1991, Mathewson 1994, National Research Center for the Arts 1975, Newsom and Silver 1978). The nature of engagement is

evident in research that suggests that museum utilization by school-based educators is characterized by:

- a minimal investment of effort (Stone 1992a,1993)
- general use that is not specifically tailored to curricular needs (Stone 1992a, 1993)
- an inability to integrate museum experiences into classroom learning (Stone 1992a, 1993, Hooper-Greenhill 1991, Griffin 1999)
- a focus on the acquisition of information rather than the development of processes of learning (Griffin 1999, Hooper-Greenhill 1991)
- ill-defined educational objectives (Hooper-Greenhill 1991, Griffin 1999, Harrison and Naef 1985)
- a concentration on enrichment and social interaction (Brigham and Robinson 1992, Gottfried 1980, Laetsch, Diamond, Gottfried and Rosenfeld 1980, Griffin 1999)
- learning that is incidental to any desired outcomes (Harrison and Naef 1985)
- a 'consumer like' stance (Stone 1992b)
- passivity (Liu 2000, Stone 1992b)
- lack of mutuality and an absence of dialogue (Stone 1992b, Eisner and Dobbs 1986, Grinder and McCoy 1985, National Research Center for the Arts 1975, Newsom and Silver 1978, Commission on Museums for a New Century 1984, Mathewson 1994).
- a lack of self-recognition (Stone 1992a, 1993, Mathewson 1994)

Consideration of these characteristics, in relation to school-based activities, highlights the problematic nature of the pedagogical role of school-based educators in the museum setting and exposes a number of implicit assumptions as operating. In the museum setting, school-based educators appear to take a 'hands-off' approach, which suggests that they implicitly assume that museum experiences will inherently be of value and that the museum environment will provide the conditions necessary for meaningful learning to occur. In addition, the lack of self recognition evident in relation to the realization of learning opportunities and the absence of dialogue with museums further indicates that school-based educators assume that museums will initiate and maintain relationships with schools. These characteristics further suggest that the actions of school-based educators are motivated by the tacit belief that their own actions have minimal impact on the realization or value of museum experiences.

Publicly declared narratives and literature in the field of art education shows that the subject has moved away from naturalist conceptions of innate creativity to increasingly emphasize its intellectual and cognitive basis. Unlike earlier models that focused on engagement through art making, contemporary art education, particularly in NSW, reconceptualizes engagement with the visual arts field to acknowledge the importance of skilled and knowledgeable viewing. In proposing that the associated skills and knowledge can only be gained through systematic instructional intervention and experience, such approaches reflect the increasing acceptance that learning and development does not necessarily occur naturally. Consequently, the passive, uncritical approach school-based educators exhibit in relation to museums, is contradictory to the contemporary professional practice of school-based educators, challenges the publicly declared narratives of art education and suggests adherence to traditional child-centred notions of creativity within the museum setting. In addition, the reported practices of

school-based educators challenge policy and discourse within the museum field that encourages the active involvement of school-based educators and museological research that consistently shows the potential of school-based educators to enhance learning in museums to be considerable (Newsom and Silver 1978, Stone 1986, Housen and Duke 1998, Griffin 1999).

### **A Theoretical Framework: Deploying Bourdieu's Concepts**

The contradiction between theory and practice that is evident in the ways in which school-based educators use museums highlights a disjunction between the school-based pedagogical role of teachers and their educational engagements with museums. The reasons for this disjunction have not been explored and approaches evident in current literature have been judged theoretically insufficient. In attempting to address a lacuna in the research, this investigation is strategically applying sociological concepts drawn from the theories of Pierre Bourdieu to interrogate the social basis of actions evident in museum/school engagements. In this way those concepts are being used as methods for asking questions and theorising aspects of reproduction, continuity and change that are evident. For the sake of brevity the selected concepts will be outlined briefly.

Bourdieu's theory of practice opposes the persistent dualism of objectivism/subjectivism and agency/structure that has dominated sociology. Instead, he asserts that agency and structure are connected in a dialectical relationship and conceptualizes action as being determined both subjectively by the habitus and objectively by the field in which it is undertaken. This interaction is complex but is succinctly illustrated in this formula: [(habitus)(capital)] + field = practice (Bourdieu 1984: 101).

The term 'capital' refers to the possession and accumulation of resources. The most significant aspect of Bourdieu's conception of capital, in relation to this research, is the acknowledgment that power can be non-materialist in form. Specific forms of capital are produced, invested, exchanged and accumulated within the array of autonomous but structurally homologous 'fields' that Bourdieu conceptualizes as constituting social space. The distribution of capital and the dominance of specific forms of capital within particular fields reflects a hierarchical set of power relations among individuals within respective fields. These social relations determine and shape conduct and orientations within that field. By engaging in action and contestation within a field individuals 'play the game' associated with that field. Playing the game presupposes and produces a particular type of 'illusio', which is defined as a belief or acceptance in the worth of the game of a field (Bourdieu 1990: 76-78).

The idea that actors are practical strategists is linked to social structure through the concept of the 'habitus'. The habitus can be understood as the generally durable and transposable values and dispositions, which develop through formative contexts such as family and education. It 'is history turned into nature' (Bourdieu 1977:78). The habitus functions below the level of consciousness such that individuals normally think that the possibilities from which they choose are necessities that stem from commonsense or are natural and inevitable. The logic of specific fields is established in the form of a specific habitus that can be viewed as an embodied and intuitive sense of the game that enables

agents to feel “like a fish in water” (Bourdieu 1992: 127). This takes place gradually and for the most part unnoticed, and is practically never explicitly set out or imposed.

In his analyses of power and legitimation Bourdieu emphasizes the role of symbolic forms of domination. He asserts that the degree of domination agents experience significantly affects their ability to act or represent themselves within a given field. The more dominated a group or individual may be, the less likely that they will feel able, or in fact be able, to participate robustly in the field in which they are dominated. Bourdieu employs the term ‘doxa’ to explain how people from dominated groups often just accept that the way things are is the way they should be or have always been, even when it causes suffering or oppression (1984: 471). The ‘doxic attitude’ means a form of bodily, unconscious submission to the relations of order that makes certain courses of action unthinkable. ‘Misrecognition’ is conceived as a necessary condition for the exercise of power that enables the reproduction of essentially oppressive hierarchies of domination. It is a form of forgetting about the socially determined nature of practices (Bourdieu 2000:142-143).

### **Understanding the Practices of School-Based Art Educators**

Applying Bourdieu’s theories to the analysis of research findings enables a number of explanatory possibilities in relation to the characteristic practices of school-based educators to be identified and explored.

Using the tools of field analysis, school-based education and museums can be considered as sub-fields that exist as part of the larger education field and broader cultural field, respectively. Art education and art museums can further be considered as sub-fields within the larger field of the visual arts. Recent revisions of visual arts syllabii in NSW explicitly acknowledge the relationship between secondary art education and the visual arts field stating that “The content of Visual Arts provides opportunities for students to investigate the field of visual arts in complex and rich ways” and “These opportunities lead to a greater understanding of the field of art...” (Board of Studies NSW 2003: 8).

Considered as belonging to distinctive sub-fields co-existing within social space, the differences between the classroom practices of art educators and their practices in relation to museums can be explained by their position in relation to those fields. Art educators operate within both the school field and the art education field and can be conceived as visitors in the museum field, or in particular the art museum field, when they engage in museum utilization. In participating in activities in the museum field, art educators attempt to play the museum ‘game’, but do so at a distinct disadvantage because they are in a dominated position in the hierarchy of the museum field and are experiencing the displacement effects of crossing fields. Further analysis will show that this domination is the result of a lack of familiarity with the museum field, a lack of recognized capital in the museum field and the absence of a specific habitus that would enable school-based educators to effectively play the game involved in that field.

The capital deficiency of school-based educators in the museum field is clearly demonstrated in the ‘consumer-like’ stance that has been identified. This characteristic

suggests that the strategies of school-based educators are based on a belief that they have little of value to offer to museums. While this appears perplexing given the declarations and museum policies that both support the active involvement of schools and express a belief that school-based educators have much to offer, recent research by Liu (2000) demonstrates that it may be influenced by implicit attitudes communicated in the museum setting. Liu's research demonstrated that a reluctance in practice, among art museum educators, to enable the more active involvement of school-based art educators was based on a fundamental belief in the superiority of their own expertise and a desire to maintain power and status.

The implicit communication of this belief constitutes an act of symbolic violence, which is made possible by the higher placement of museum educators in the hierarchy of the museum field and is indicative of the competitive nature of fields. Museum educators, who are engaged in internal struggles within the museum field to maintain or advance their status, have a stake in protecting and emphasizing the symbolic power of their capital in the museum field. Actions that advance their own self-interests are also concerned with the collective interests of the museum field itself, the sub-field of museum education and the individual institution in which they are employed, in relation to the overall field of power.

The concept of habitus further demonstrates how the actions of school-based educators are a product of particular social conditions and social conditioning. In this case, experiences with the traditional museum structure are evident in practices that reinforce the unquestionable authority of museums and adhere to subjective notions of aesthetic experience. While such practices contradict and undermine the more contemporary concerns of school-based education and often contradict expressed intentions and beliefs, they continue because the action of the habitus is below the level of consciousness. The habitus functions such that school-based educators think that their action is necessary, common sense, natural or inevitable.

Museums would argue that contemporary museum experiences challenge the traditional perceptions outlined. However, the habitus that most current school-based educators have developed were formed from experiences with the more traditional museum structure. The durability of the habitus and its ability to reject the contradictory information that contemporary museums may offer is explained by Swartz (1997: 212). He reports that Bourdieu (1990: 60-61) speaks of "avoidance strategies" generated by the habitus "to protect itself from crises and critical challenges" by "rejecting information capable of calling into question its accumulated information" and by "avoiding exposure to such information" by tending to "favour experiences likely to reinforce it". In addition, conceptual change is field specific and thus the transformations that have occurred within in the museum field have not necessarily permeated other fields. This introduces the notion of a 'time lag' between the conceptual change within a field and the perception of that change within another.

Analysis thus far has shown that the engagement of school-based educators with museums occurs within hierarchical relationships that are dominated by the museum field

and agents positioned within it. While this relation of power is not overtly recognized or manipulated in practice, it has become accepted as the natural and logical order and the agents involved communicate an acceptance of their positions in their practical compliance with that order. In adopting practices that accept and legitimate their own domination, school-based educators have adopted a doxic attitude that is based on misrecognition of the oppressive basis of the symbolic power exercised by museums. The internalized tension caused by misrecognition is evident in the contradictory and pedagogically problematic practices identified. It is also evident in recent research that advances collaboration between museums and schools and the training of school-based educators in museum utilization, as a means of developing museum/school relationships. Both the preceding analysis and the rarity of successful instances of such assertions, provide a clear indication of the erroneous nature of such research. In assuming that museums and schools are equal partners, predisposed to cohesive and co-operative relations, literature advocating collaboration misrecognises the hierarchical and polarised positions of the agents involved. Likewise, those who propose instruction as a means of empowerment misrecognise the competitive nature of social relations and the implicit assumptions and beliefs that motivate practice. While school-based educators may concede that they lack knowledge, confidence and skill in the museum setting, and in theory, support the notion of training, because of their misrecognition of agency and doxic attitude, they ultimately see these inadequacies as natural, inevitable and inconsequential. Participation would implicitly acknowledge systems of stratification, legitimate the authority of the museum field and force school-based educators into an unfamiliar field in which the worth of their capital is unacknowledged and in which they are unable to maintain or improve their social position. They are therefore understandably reluctant to enter into this aspect of the game.

### **The Beginnings of An Alternative Model for Art Educators: A Dynamic Conceptualisation of Agency**

The ongoing research, of which this study is a part, is attempting to develop a model for learning in the museum setting that enables art educators to optimally utilize museums to provide a foundation for cultural practice. In recognition of the lack of attention given to the particular experiences of audiences in non-urban areas it is focusing on secondary school-aged audiences based in regional settings. Conceptualization of the model is very much a 'work in progress' and is yet to be fully resolved. However, some initial propositions for change based on the analysis presented thus far can be advanced.

Bourdieu has been widely criticized for providing a deterministic view of social structure (Butler 1999, Bohman 1999, Wilson 1988, Frow 1987). However, this investigation asserts that, while there are constraints placed on change, the dynamic and contestable nature of fields and the formative influence of education on the habitus provides art education with possibilities to initiate transformations. Bourdieu himself addresses implications for change within his theories and asserts that any attempt to create opportunities for transformation must first render explicit what is taken for granted and provide an objective sociological account of relationships. In this case, achieving this objective requires a raising of consciousness that enables art educators to critically reflect on the relation between social structure and conventional practices to expose the

misrecognitions operating. It is proposed that such action will empower art educators to identify the spaces in which change is possible and draw on the existing processes, possibilities and constraints to facilitate such change.

This research identifies strategies, emerging from Bourdieu's analyses, that applied to museum/school relationships can advance the collective position and interests of art educators. These strategies provide art educators with the means for reconceptualising their capacities for action to develop a more dynamic concept of active, intentional and creative agency in their engagements with museums.

1. the development of a self reflexive understanding of the position and resources of art educators within, and in relation to, the museum field
2. the development of a cognitive awareness of the ways in which the museum 'game' operates -the rules, regulations, values and cultural capital which are in play
3. the development of an ability to negotiate within and exploit the structure and actions of the museum field

It is proposed that strategy number three might involve art educators in :

- establishing strategic alliances with agents within the art education field, other educational sub-fields and other fields to advance marginal interests to challenge current mainstream practices in relation to the museum field
- increasing their involvement in the museum field in ways that assert the uniqueness and value of their capital
- gaining capital from the museum field to advance their position in that field. This could be achieved through professional development programs specifically developed for that purpose

### **Future Development of the Model: The Foundation for Cultural Practice**

This research further recognizes that the cultural practice of museum visiting requires a degree of cultural capital that students are unequally provided with from their primary habitus (family). Analysis thus far suggests that this unequal endowment is maintained and reinforced through educational experiences with museums that assume students to be autonomous in the museum setting and disregard the intentional role of art educators. It is proposed that art education can provide articulated experiences that extend the primary habitus of students and provide opportunities for the development of the cultural capital necessary to engage in the museum field within and beyond the school years.

While it will not be presented in detail in this forum, the model in development provides a foundation for a 'critical art museum pedagogy' that is designed to facilitate the development of critical reflective individuals with the meta-capacities and cultural competence to strategically negotiate the art museum field in an autonomous manner. This notion embraces Bourdieu's conception of the critical individual who can undermine symbolic violence and processes of domination by questioning perceptions of certainty and inevitability, thus allowing for social change and the advancement of previously dominated social groups. Informed by theories of art education and recent research originating within the museum field, the model is attempting to traverse the divide

between the two fields in ways that authentically represent and engage the perspectives of secondary-school aged audiences.

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