

ARTISTS WHO TEACH

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Abstract

There is, it could be argued, an enormous symbolic capital invested in the belief that it is artistic practice that informs the pedagogy of artists who teach. Despite the apparent tendency for artists to reproduce stylistic character in their students and apprentices, this paper argues that the instructional relations between student and artist teacher are driven by art educational convention rather than the formalised reproduction of their own practical artistic experience.

This paper reports on research undertaken by the writer into the relation between artistic practice and teaching practice. The belief that the sophisticated practice of artists conforms to an integrated and disciplined pattern is challenged. The study is designed to reveal the concealed frames of reference, which motivate the beliefs of two artists and their practice over time. The methodology focuses on a semantic analysis of the texts and contexts, which form a representation of the underlying folk beliefs of the two respondents. The evidence emergent in the investigation suggests that understanding is not transparent in the two artist's explanation of the works that they make.

In 1938 Walter Gropius, the influential architect, designer and founder of the most influential art school of the twentieth century, the *Bauhaus*, wrote that making artists was a problem; indeed he insisted that it was impossible. He believed that art is not a “profession which can be mastered by study”; it “cannot be taught and cannot be learned,” even if the “manual dexterity” of the craftsman can and must be (learned) (Gropius, 1938 p. 23). Gropius sought to displace the technique of academic drawing and painting with the objects and rigorous skills of the craftsman. The idea of the artist

isolated in his studio would be supplanted by the skilled craftsman, who would be liberated moreover by a new audience, a broad general public trained, in Gropius's words, in a "common language of visual communication...made valid by general education" (Gropius, 1948, p. 160-61).

Gropius's insistence that art cannot be taught was supported by many mid 20th Century artist academic's, especially those teaching in America and Australian academies. In an article published in the *College Art Journal* in 1951, it was a "widely held opinion" that "all one can teach are techniques, but that artistry is completely a matter of endowment and self-induced personal growth" (Steppart, 1951, p. 385). The possibility of incorporating any significant technical instruction into the curriculum was disputed by another artist academic when he opined "all but the most elementary techniques are fundamentally not teachable" (Hirsch, 1951, p.154).

The contradiction between the subsequent success of university undergraduate and post-graduate art courses and the doubts expressed by the teachers cited above are obvious. The effect of these early arguments was their displacement of art as a discipline in its own right, with a body of knowledge that can be taught. Ironically, perhaps, Gropius's philosophical position about the teaching of art reveals another set of contradictions; whilst positioning technique and dexterity as necessary to the practice of art, he assumes an essential separation of art from technique; "art" is that which escapes teaching, whilst technique is that which can be taught. Thus, technique, as something that can be taught, is destined to become "merely" technique.

The attitudes, beliefs and values about art teaching held by Gropius would, one assumes, be considered to be anachronistic when compared with contemporary views on the subject. However, the study of artist academics on which this paper is based reveals attitudes that are surprisingly similar in many key areas of art pedagogy. The study investigates a number of sophisticated artists who also teach art in tertiary institutions. Data emergent from a previous study into artistic practice has been used to inform the structure and content of the study. A number of emergent findings from the previous study will be discussed in this paper as a way of mapping the kinds of issues that may emerge as the focus of the present inquiry.

One of the respondent's to the previous study did not believe that knowledge about art theory was a necessary condition for being an artist, but saw it as merely an advantage for

him, especially in relation to his role as a teacher of painting at a tertiary level. Even though he claimed to believe that it is important for artists to teach because of the way in which they were able to “pass on the practice of art to the next generation of artists”, it was not necessarily his own practice of art to which he was referring. Rather, his teaching practice tended to bear out his beliefs about teaching art and not his beliefs about art. During his period as Head of the Department (HOD) of Painting at an art school, this artist developed a reputation amongst staff and students for his rigorous approach to the structuring of the curriculum, in respect of the inclusion of “fundamentals” such as colour theory and drawing skills. In justifying this approach he says, “I came from an ideas base”, (meaning his background in art education), and, “I come from a more discipline oriented perspective”, and “I started out (as HOD) by simply defining the discipline”. During a recent discussion held with this respondent (October, 2001), he reiterated that it was his belief that students must be educated in such a way that enabled them to understand what constituted “the canon” of artistic practice. By this he meant those fundamental principles about art (in the case of this discussion, about painting) that underpin an understanding of the discipline.

Ironically, a recent exhibition of this artist’s paintings revealed a tendency for him to fall back on formulas related to a photo-realist tradition of painting, which did not, in the view of a critical audience, substantially advance the genre.

The triangulation of emergent data in respect of a second respondent’s art teaching practice revealed a similar tendency for her own values about art not to impinge upon her teaching about art. For example, the connotative meaning of “teaching in an art school”, as a folk term, meant for her variously:- a way for an artist to maintain dialogue with the field (a socio/cultural motive); a difficulty for an artist, since teaching absorbs one’s own creativity, (a subjective/ psychological motive); a benefit for an artist because it affords ready access to resources (a pragmatic reason); and, as a way for an artist to gain recognition by the field (a kind of socio/cultural legitimisation). This artist/teacher did not even mention her artistic values, and the way in which teaching might enable her to “pass on” these values to her students.

This is not to say that for this artist her artistic values do not impinge upon her teaching; what it does say is that there were many other reality manifolds operating in this particular instance, and that these equally shape her motives and beliefs in relation to this included/cover term. Her beliefs, as well, were veiled, and were therefore not able to

shape her explicit intentions as revealed in her responses. Significantly, the role of each of the domains of art, and their interrelatedness does not even warrant discussion as a consequential issue in this context.

In an interesting illustration of the politics of influence which underpin the practice of one of the artist/teacher respondents in the previous study, it emerged that the included/cover term “art teaching is an acceptable/justifiable occupation for an artist”, as a folk term, had a number of connotative meanings, each serving as a kind of self-legitimation of his role as an artist and teacher. These include; “it is the occupation followed by many well-respected artists” (artists whom I admire, and aspire to emulate their achievement); “(it is) an important way for the practice of art to be passed on to the next generation of artists” (the artist in the role of sage); “(it is a way of) achieving social repositioning for acceptance into the artworld from a middle class origin”). In response to a similar question about the importance of engaging in dialogue with other artists, and the role that teaching in an art school fulfils in this regard, the emergent beliefs of this artist similarly fulfil a kind of self-legitimation of his role as a teacher. For him, art teaching” as a folk term, has the connotative meaning of; “a way for me to reinforce my ideas about art”; “important for my development as an artist”; an opportunity for me to develop friendships”; and, “a way for me to develop an identity in the world of art”. The proposed study would seek to significantly expand on these and other emergent beliefs in order to provide more complex explanations of the values and beliefs about art that underpin the teaching practice of artist/teachers in tertiary settings.

Of interest and relevance to the study is that foremost among the kinds of artistic lives reported on by the artist respondents was their “life” as artist educators. Their narratives about their lives as teachers were partitioned from their discourses about their lives as artists and about their art works. Rather than reflecting on the values and meanings which underpin their own artistic practice in their reports about art teaching, they tended to fall back onto a romantic rhetoric about the nature of creativity, or, on other occasions, they looked to externally derived competency-based outcomes as a way of determining how they should teach art. For example, when one of the artists was asked to consider the way in which an artist might develop and maintain a sense of direction, she immediately related her answer to the kind of advice she would give her students concerning the notion of “justification”. She explained that this is “why we make them talk about their work, and why we make them articulate their ideas” (SI, p.25) However, she failed to provide a coherent explanation of what she means by “justification”,

suggesting that it is the act of justification, rather than what is embodied in the meaning of justification that is significant.

In other words, within her narrative of teaching this artist saw “justification”, in respect of her teaching practice, as a way for the student to demonstrate competency in standing up in class and talking about their work. Ironically, she then goes on to claim that for her, the work itself establishes its own direction, and that the theory of art practice, of the kind that she might teach her students, is difficult to articulate. She said, “the work itself has to lead you on... I don’t feel comfortable with defining the theory of the area that I want to make work in, and then making the work follow the theory”.(SI, p.27 Cover Term: “Her Theory of Mind is Subjective”) This sets up a kind of “tail chasing” exercise, making it understandably difficult for her to pass onto her students a coherent explanation of notions such as “justification”, even though she claims that this is an important concept for them to grasp. The triangulation of data including the transcript of the interview from which these views were taken revealed that for this artist the included/cover term “sense of direction” incorporates connotative meanings such as “something that underpins my philosophy of teaching”, and “(teaching) seriously affects my own sense of direction because I am continuously giving out (to my students)”, and “(it is) a work ethic”.(SI, p.21,23,31).

The stories within these artists reports, as Rosaldo predicts they shall, embody compelling motives, strong feelings, vague aspirations, clear intentions, and well-defined goals.(p.129) The deep narratives disclosed in the triangulated reports of the respondents actually shape the events of their artistic lives. These narratives emerge as strategies for the conduct of their professional practices and are not merely a passive description or interpretation of what the respondents have already done. There is little evidence, for example, that they confused their ethical “lives” as teacher with their lives as artists, for the simple reason, this author believes, that they both intuitively sense how the uncertainties of the latter would overwhelm and immobilise the former. Their implicit separation of the two categories demands respect.

While one of the artists applies many of the art making activities that she uses as an artist with her students, her concept of the way these two activities were performed by herself and her students is not differentiated by degrees of sophistication on the same continuum. Rather, they were conceived under two qualitatively different discourses which were used by her for different intentions and different goals. Thus it is not inconsistent,

therefore, for this artist to ask students to deliver an oral defence of their art making practice, since for her art education and professional practice were about categorically different kinds of activity

A “narrative analysis” of the kind proposed by Rosaldo and others quickly reveals that the reality manifold of human experience has many layers, which are constantly changing in terms of settings, circumstances, episodes, time, and roles.

Two ways of representing the sophistication of artistic practice are the “artist” as agency, that is, the work represented as a function of sophisticated artistic practice. Versus the “art work” as agency, that is, artistic practice as a function of the representation of sophisticated art works. The former infers “sophistication” from the practices of the artist, the latter infers the “sophistication” from the art work.

What is a sophisticated artist and what is the function of a sophisticated artist (the causal agencies) in the resolution of valued art works? This question needs to be asked of an art curriculum, since, if an art student is to represent the understandings and competencies of a sophisticated artist as an end state in their tertiary art education, then doubt arises as to the model that best characterises the sophisticated properties one might prefer to represent (excluding the negative connotation of “sophisticated” as “affected” and “shallow”). In addition, if sophisticated artistic abilities were a causal agency in the production of sophisticated outcomes of artistic practice, then what are these abilities and how should they be inculcated in tertiary art curricula?

Those responsible for the development of sophisticated artistic practice in art students are keen to justify the connection between an artwork and an artist, especially to understand how such a connection is represented in the mind of the artist. Theorists suggest that one way of achieving this outcome is to find out what an artist believes about their work and then try to account for the functional limits of the effect of their beliefs in relation to their work. Despite the popularity of this approach in contemporary ethnomethodology it is important to be reminded that of every one hundred properties identified in a work only a small proportion of them may be theoretically accounted for through the intentional beliefs of the artist. (Beardsley - properties of an art work were determined by the beholder; Goodman - properties determined by entrenched convention; Danto - properties determined by the politics of the artworld; Lacan - properties determined by the gaze; Foucault - properties determined by textual power; Wolff - properties determined by the socio-economic fortunes of the artist).

Another way is to critically interpret the artist's beliefs in an endeavour to understand their motives for practice. An artist's beliefs about their practice may be neurotically opaque (driven by concealed motives) within their reports, and need to be challenged. Thus, considering that the significance of an artist's works may be determined externally in ignorance of their motives, it remains to be interpreted as to an artist's causal relationship with their works. For example, of all the agencies held accountable for sophisticated practice, the functional effects of the artist's beliefs may be the most obscure. The previous study placed the artist at the centre of inquiry rather than the work. The art work is only relevant as one among a number of causal influences and is invested with no particular privilege in the study. Although it is common to talk of an artist in terms of their work the theoretical basis for linking motives and properties of works are confined to psychoanalytic theory and clinical diagnosis, or to broad brush social interpretations.(Lacan 1977, Berger 1973) Otherwise the properties of art works, including their idiosyncrasies of style tend to supervene on artistic practice.(Brown 1989)

As it has been stated above, it is quite possible for an artist with sophisticated beliefs, dispositions or skills to make unsophisticated artworks or, conversely, for sophisticated artworks to be made by an artist with unsophisticated beliefs, dispositions or skills.

Because of the pervasiveness of outcomes based assessment and the shift towards standards and frameworks as benchmarks for assessment which has occurred in the tertiary sector of education, it is beneficial to uncover the complex ways in which artist/teachers define the criteria they apply to both shape the content of the curriculum they deliver and which they use to assess student achievement.

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