The Discipline-Based Art Education (DBAE) and the Visual Culture Theory

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Abstract

The Discipline-Based Art Education (DBAE) and the Visual Culture Theory have been two major influences in art education in the last decades. The Discipline-Based Art Education (DBAE) is believed to be a response to the accountability concerns and the common impression that art is not an academic subject. The Discipline-Based Art Education (DBAE) supports sequential, academically oriented, organized contents, which is subject to a reasonable degree of objective evaluation in curriculum. Visual Culture approach started in the mid-1990s as a very diverse field and many of its advocates make connection with power relations in the society. Visual Culture adapts a critical discourse based on imagery and art works within their contexts through political, sociological, cultural, and psychological perspectives. They also put it in a place where Visual Culture plays a role, either it is a starting point or the description of inequalities in power relationships of capitalism. These two major approaches are discussed in this paper from an educational perspective.

1. Introduction

The Discipline-Based Art Education (DBAE) approach and the Visual Culture Theory have been two major influences in art education. The DBAE is believed to be a solution to the common view that art is not a school subject and does not receive the respect it deserves. DBAE supports sequential, academically oriented, organized art programs, which is subject to a reasonable degree of objective evaluation in curriculum; Visual Culture approach which started in the mid-1990s as a very diverse field and many advocates of it makes connection with power relations in the society. They also put it in a place where Visual Culture plays a role either it is a starting point or the description of inequalities in power relationships of capitalism. While both approaches have contributed to art education in many ways, DBAE is believed to be a more applicable approach; it is practical and can address many educational concerns and questions. The Visual Culture approach, however, focuses art and visual cultural materials within their contextual, sociological, and political power dynamics.

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2. Discipline-Based Art Education (DBAE)

Through publications and policy statements put forth by the Getty Center for Education in the Arts, DBAE was initiated as a theory of art instruction, and is often seen as a solution to the common view that art is not a school subject and does not receive the respect it deserves. As a result DBAE believes that art programs should be organized, sequential, academically oriented, and subject to a reasonable degree of objective evaluation (Young & Adams, 1991). In other words, DBAE is discipline-related as the name indicates, so knowledge and certain skills are necessary in the four discipline areas of the art curriculum encompassed by DBAE: *art history, aesthetics, art criticism, and art production.* As a comprehensive approach to art instruction, DBAE attempts to achieve balance and integration in these four areas in a sequential program that will eventually include grades K-12.

Although DBAE first emerged during 1980s, it has been noted that the original theory and practice of DBAE in the 1980s were undergoing significant changes and the so-called neo-DBAE had emerged by the 1990s. These changes were the result of criticisms of the original DBAE theory (Hamblen, 1993). In theory DBAE represented a drastic change from previous art instruction, which tended to emphasize modernist elements like freedom of expression, creative responses, and studio production.

2.1. The function of the four discipline areas in DBAE

Stankiewicz (2000) quoted psychologist Jerome Bruner (1960/1977), who argued that "The foundations of any subject may be taught to anybody at any age in some form" (p. 12). The key to such teaching is discovering the structure of a discipline and representing its underlying principles in a form that would appeal to and be understood by the learner (p. 309). DBAE approach defines art education, which consists of four discipline areas: art history, aesthetics, art criticism, and art production.

First, art history helps the student understand more about the artist who created artwork, the functions of the work, the culture in which it was made, its social context, and how and why art has changed over time. This gives students awareness of how cultures have communicated through art and how the past relates to the present.

Aesthetics provides the student with a way to organize questions about the nature and quality of art and other objects of beauty. The reasons that aesthetic objects result in certain viewer responses are also considered. The student also learns to understand and value art and asks questions such as: "Why is this a work of art?"

As for art criticism, it requires the student to observe, describe, analyze, interpret, and evaluate art in written or oral form. To do this, they need to acquire knowledge and the ability to make judgments based on objective criteria.

Finally, art production is also a part of DBAE approach, and it requires the student to make choices and to solve problems during art production. These choices must be deliberate and be based on knowledge and experience. There will be choices about materials, visual elements, and visual principles, and the communication of these choices will be part of the problem-solving process in production of art.

It is clear that DBAE is not a prescribed method of teaching, thus the question of how DBAE might function in the classroom has been studied and discussed in many ways, Clark and Zimmerman (1978)'s model was an early sign of these discussions. As a comprehensive approach to art instruction, DBAE attempts to achieve balance and integration in the four above areas in a sequential art education program.

3. Visual Culture Theory

The study of Visual Culture starts with *cultural studies*, which is a complex interdisciplinary field originating in England in the early 1960s. Cultural studies primarily concerned with signifying practices both in terms of people's lived experiences and the structural dynamics of modern society (Duncum, 2003). It is also grounded in the belief that society is structured by dominance and that signifying practices are always a means of establishing and maintaining power. Because of its emphasis on power relationships, the Visual Culture approach is also connected with fields such as sociology, psycho-analysis, feminist studies, media studies, and art history (Duncum, 2003; Duncum, 2001).

Following *cultural studies* the more recent field of *Visual Culture studies* started in the mid-1990s as a very diverse field, but many of its advocates theorize this field based on power relations in the society. They also argue the role of Visual Culture in society where it is either a starting point or the description of inequalities in power relationships of capitalism.

Basically Visual Culture studies comprise two principal concerns: visual objects and the ways in which we look at them. Although it is similar to *philosophical aesthetics* in that they are both concerned with describing objects of study and with the nature of aesthetic look, *Visual Culture studies* considers a much broader range of objects and larger number of ways of looking at objects, that is to say, from the perspectives of sociology, and feminist studies and so forth. Moreover, conditions under which we look at objects, their relations to viewers become problematic in Visual Culture studies. From this perspective of the Visual Culture approach, aesthetics is an integral part of education and should not be a separate discipline as it is in DBAE. In answer to this critique, Hagaman (1990) suggested connecting aesthetics to the whole curriculum by reconstructing the ideas and experiences of aesthetics as a discipline-based approach.

While some people define *Visual Culture* as manifestations in visual forms, others define it as simple aesthetic representations that depend on context. From this perspective it is closer to *philosophical aesthetics*. As our century becomes more and more visually saturated, especially in information societies, the concept of Visual Culture becomes more complex in its meaning, since it is treated as a picture of the responses of spectators or audiences and their psychological and social ways of looking at things. In this visually saturated world, images and realities became difficult for people to distinguish.

Given this highly intense visual environment, Duncum (2003) notes a gap between seeing imagery and reflecting upon what we see and this gap indicates an urgent need for education that deals directly with the images that constitute the world of our students. Henceforth, the question of "Is studying all of the Visual Culture

elements and objects within its complex relations possible to re-conceptualize art education in that frame?" seems problematic. Studying *Visual Culture* from a *cultural studies* perspective is based on student experiences in their daily lives; however, it could also be based on the fact that many examples of popular culture images are just marketing strategies of corporate capitalism and have nothing to do with art education.

4. DBAE and Visual Culture approaches to art education curricula

When we compare the Visual Culture and DBAE approaches to art education we can see some common ideas. First, both approaches favor a contextual approach to art education that is an understanding of the fundamental structure of art education as a discipline. This suggests that art education does not consist of only art production. Teaching of art similar to teaching English in a way that an English teacher would never teach literature simply by having his or her students write personal essays. Why, then, should art be taught solely through art making (Hill, 1999).

DBAE was a big change when it appeared in 1980s, proponents of child-centered instruction objected to DBAE on the grounds that it ignored individuality, the possibilities of idiosyncratic artistic responses, and the holistic nature of art learning. Other critics suggested that DBAE had become too similar to other areas of education in its emphasis on sequenced instruction, predictable outcomes, and testable learning. DBAE's emphasis on Western fine art was also criticized because it was deemed that DBAE should focus on art identified by experts as important and significant since the time for art in schools was limited (Hamblen, 1993). But during 1990s non-Western art forms and art forms that go beyond traditionally designated fine art were included, which is one reason for the name neo-DBAE. Multicultural art forms and multiculturalism have also been included; Zimmerman (1990) explained this global view of art education.

However, some of these criticisms were seen as myths that had developed in response to a perceived threat to the status quo of studio production and child-centered instruction. The emphasis of DBAE was the disciplinary status of art within the four disciplines, but the integration of art with other subject areas was not promoted. The Visual Culture approach, on the other hand, favored a larger understanding of art in its contextual relations with other areas without classifying it within the DBAE's four disciplines. This view of DBAE, actually, was opposed to holistic nature of art.

The Formal characteristics of art criticism in DBAE were also criticized in that the focus was on the art object rather than the social functions of art as part of the cultural production of society. Thus, following the critiques of the 1980s' DBAE approach, there were attempts to include art that was socially critical and instruction that examined controversial issues in art (Greer, 1992). Although some issues such as feminist, folk, domestic, commercial, craft, etc., were not included in DBAE curricula to the extent that some might wish, their presence represents a major deviation from the fine art look of the 1980s. Thus Hamblen (1993) claimed that these changes were strong indications of postmodern leanings in neo-DBAE.

Stinespring (1994) suggested that another serious problem with the DBAE was its notion that schoolteachers and their students could successfully emulate professionals in the different disciplines of DBAE. He suggested "art criticism" was an example of the serious difficulties inherent in any effort to follow the example of these professional practitioners. He argued that it was not realistic at least for art criticism in DBAE approach.

Therefore, a major difference between the Visual Culture approach and that of a DBAE curriculum is that art would no longer be the servant of other subject areas, however in some programs where art would be taught with strong linkages to other subject areas for purpose of enhancing learning in those subjects (Hamblen, 1993). A characteristic of Visual Culture approach is that art cannot be separated from other subjects because of its strong links in a complex contextual relationship. However, this complex relationship of art has always been a problem in the curriculum since people from other areas feel confused about the exact place of art in a curriculum. If you claim that art is everywhere, there is a risk of being nowhere in the curriculum.

Visual Culture approach implies a huge cultural paradigm, very complex in nature, and not easy to relate to or apply to an art curriculum, whereas DBAE is a more concrete approach, and easier to understand and use by teachers. Further it is the kind of approach they need, for it provides a more organized and systematic approach for the art curriculum.

One issue could be perhaps application differences of DBAE in the classroom since it does not give a prescribed curriculum but only provides theory. For example, most of art teachers try to use the four disciplines at once or combine them with integrated lesson plans according to how we understand DBAE. However, since art education is a complex structure of these four disciplines, they can't always be applied together to every lesson. Let's look at math education as a way to clarify our point. In this discipline, curriculum designers know that math consists of different topics at different levels of understanding. A student cannot understand geometry without knowing equations or multiplication, so math starts with easy problems as early as first grade. When students come to high school they are expected to be ready for high school level math, and the math teacher does not have to deal with earlier levels of math. The similar point about art education is that the four disciplines of DBAE are unique subjects of study. They cannot be taught as or reduced to a single integrated lesson plan. Thus, as in math example, we perhaps should start with different levels of the four disciplines at the elementary level, and then we could expect our students, later on to be ready for more complex issues in art education.

As parallel to the explained problem, today we see a problem related to standardized objectives we have in today's art classrooms. If we are teaching the same things again and again at high school that have already been taught in middle school, it could be a real problem. That means we do not have standardized, sequential objectives for different grade levels. We therefore have to define our objectives based on different grade levels. In a sequential curriculum students should gain certain skills or learn certain knowledge at different grades.

DBAE also has contributed to strategically organized view of a curriculum that addresses the issues mentioned above, but we still have a long way to go in practice. Of course there are opponents of DBAE as well; some art specialists think that DBAE takes the fun of art. They claim that it would intellectualize art education, and that students would spend all their time talking and writing about art instead of producing it (Hill, 1999). Of course, art production is a very important part of the art curriculum and perhaps DBAE does sometimes intellectualize art education, but without organized knowledge, which is possible with DBAE, we may not gain this respect. The point is that we can produce or expect more higher-level thinkers and problem-solvers in art when students get their knowledge through four disciplines of art education.

When we compare the DBAE and Visual Culture approach by means of a postmodernist perspective, it could give us different educational implications. Postmodernism holds that many positions may be taken about relationships among persons, art, and education, and that many of these positions are likely to be in conflict (MacGregor, 1992). In general, postmodernism thrives on differences rather than common sense, and rejects the commonly accepted norms of society. For example, in art the use of whatever comes to hand, eclecticism, and the deliberate plucking of elements out of their original contexts and bringing them together arbitrarily, are some postmodernist traits. Ambiguity is expected along with deliberate multiple references. Paradoxes, arising from unlikely choices of material, allusions to discrepant periods in art history or from cultural contradictions are used in this view of art. According to this view, DBAE would not be an appropriate approach, as it embraces to highly organized structure of the four disciplines, and ignores postmodernist qualities, which are important for postmodernists. For example, Efland (1990) suggested the abandonment of grand narratives with their emphasis on a unified conception of art, science, philosophy, in favor of little narratives, extracted from personal insight and local experience would be a characteristic of a postmodernist curriculum. This means there must be more attention paid to alternative points of view, with particular attention to minorities and gender issues, in increasingly multicultural classes.

In the postmodernist view, the study of four disciplines, advocated by DBAE, conflicts with the notion that distinctions between the disciplines are not certain and are subject to changes, which is decided by power relations in social and cultural structure. Clahassey (1986) claimed DBAE is a postmodern phenomenon, because of its multiple content areas and the possibility of team approaches, which these provide. Holt (1990), on the other hand rejects DBAE as a postmodernist movement based on accountability and authoritarianism and talks about DBAE's lack of attention to non-Western, folk, commercial, or popular art.

While art educators have been struggling to strengthen art education's place in the system, the uncertain nature of postmodernism in many views of art and education could make this job more difficult. A major strength of postmodernism is that it forces educators to take note of voices which are often ignored, and the increasingly multicultural character of Western nations requires the accommodation of uniqueness, and difference between cultures by means of a flexible curriculum.

Postmodernist theory mainly built to oppose the norms of modernism—individualism, the formalist approach to artwork, and creative self expression—was also supported by modernism as the expression of individual (Anderson, 2003). At first it might seem that DBAE is a formalist approach built upon the priority of constructivist theory within four disciplines; however, DBAE is neither directly connected with modernist theory, nor it is against it. Rather DBAE is an educational approach that contradicts both modernism and postmodernism in an interesting way. First, modernism emphasizes that individualism promotes creativity and self-expression, and rejects context-based cultural differences. For example, an artwork is the production of an individual, and it is valued for its formal characteristics and unique self-expression. Art therefore becomes the representations of individual personalities rather than collective sensibilities. The modernist influence lasted about seventy years. During this time, educational approaches in art education were mostly blurry and uncertain, individualism and self-expression terminated every kind of formal approach to art instruction. Fortunately, DBAE signaled the end to many of modernist tenets, such as individual creativity and self-expression. In a way it brought reality back into the field after many years.

The second point to be made about DBAE is that it contradicts postmodernism and the Visual Culture approach at many points. At first, it may seem nonsense to compare DBAE to these theories, since DBAE is not a theory and thus is not comparable to modernism and postmodernism in some respects. However, in the art education field we have observed modernist and postmodernist influences for decades at different levels and for the first time a comprehensive educational approach specific to art education, appeared in the form of DBAE. After many years of influence by these theories, DBAE had to answer some questions, and prove itself as an alternative educational approach. For one thing, the DBAE approach seems to ignore individuality, social understanding, and functionality, but these are not concerns of DBAE. Rather it focuses on the understanding of particular disciplines so as to build a comprehensive or holistic understanding of art. Therefore, critics who claim that DBAE ignores the holistic nature of art do not reflect reality. In fact, what DBAE tries to do is to make the complex issue of the holistic nature of art more understandable. In a way it provides applicable theories in the classroom.

Based on the theory of DBAE, it is still of course possible to look at social issues, multiculturalism, and localized art. Through DBAE, art instruction may become too similar to other school subjects at some respects such as sequenced instruction, predictable outcomes, and testable learning; but at the same time it may be a response to the complains about art not being a respectable academic subject it deserves to be. However, most of the views favored within postmodernist and Visual Culture theories, such as the necessity of studying all of the Visual Culture objects within contextual domains and their complex relationships in society, do not seem to be able to re-conceptualize art education and may not be feasible for curriculum. Some of these issues could be addressed with specific instructional strategies designed within a DBAE-based curriculum.

Anderson (2003) tries to frame a model of postmodern art education with its key elements, these are: (1) Teaching art for life and integrating it with students' human concerns; (2) Encouraging students to immerse themselves in real issues, to solve real problems that have significance beyond the classroom, an orientation of learning that is defined as an open-ended system which allows personal transformation and social reconstruction; (3) Teaching students that the rituals that support the cosmology and beliefs of all cultures are so permeated by the arts as to be frequently inseparable from them. Anderson further concludes that art provides the holistic, metaphorical quality of understanding necessary for social wholeness and cultural health (p. 65).

Freedman (1994) studied gender issues and Visual Culture in art classrooms and suggested certain teaching practices: (1) define art education broadly to include various forms of Visual Culture; (2) promote an understanding and acceptance of differences in student interpretations of Visual Culture; (3) address gender issues represented in student and professional artistic imagery; (4) Use the relationships between images to enhance learning; (5) Develop group learning activities that accommodate both male and female interests. In short, she believes that the future of art education depends on teaching Visual Culture and relating it to vital social issues. In another study (Freedman, 2000) she stresses our responsibility for teaching our students about the power of the visual arts and the freedom and responsibilities that come with it. She further suggests that we would spend less time arguing about the structural character of the curriculum and more time on its meanings. For instance, we should focus more on local and global communities; and we should be less concerned with the technical qualities of art and more concerned with its reasons for being. Finally, she claims that by doing these things we would be leading, instead of following the general educational trends. In that way, we would help people understand life in the context of the visual arts (p. 326).

5. Art's central role in education as a disciplinary integration tool

When a well-designed art education curriculum is integrated with other subjects, the art serves to motivate students by making learning more fun and, with respect to the visual arts, increasing students' understanding by providing them with the opportunity to process information in two different ways—visually and verbally (Laney & Moseley, 1994)—. At present, DBAE is increasingly addressing this cross-disciplinary approach and the Visual Culture approach also supports this notion because it provides an understanding of culture within its context. While DBAE view on the understanding of art is based on the four disciplines, Visual Culture approach requires an understanding of cultural context in addressing art-related issues as a complexity. DBAE may be seen more feasible in the classroom in that it reduces context to objective practices. The Visual Culture approach addresses art-related philosophical questions by the agency of critical theory, though it might be difficult to define such questions within classroom practices.

5.1. Accountability

Cross-disciplinary nature of art puts it in a rather difficult position in terms of accountability in the school curriculum. Educational policies such as *"No Child Left*

Behind Act" have largely ignored art in the curriculum. The limitations of accountability may be one reason why art has been left behind in these policies. DBAE offers an understanding of art based on its content within four disciplines. DBAE resolves measurability of these four constituents with corresponding objectives. However, Visual Culture approach requires understanding imagery and art within elaborate ways relying on and making connections to sociological, political, cultural, psychological perspectives. The major premise of DBAE is measurability of student performance, and DBAE advocates should seek to take advantage of the benefits that can accrue to a group that moves ahead on an issue like accountability (Kaagan, 1990). Eventually, developing set of indicators for success in art education may support its position in the local and national educational budgets.

Young and Adams (1991) noted that the Getty Center found that academic rigor is essential for changing people's attitudes about art and for the survival of programs such as DBAE, and this academic rigor depended on (1) a clearly stated rationale and conceptual base; (2) a written, sequential curriculum; (3) well-specified instructional goals; (4) continuing in-service teacher training and (5) strategies for program review and development.

5.2. Applicability

Mitchell (1995) rejects the idea of organizing a curriculum as a comprehensive survey and the idea of conventional cultural forms as simply replicating existing disciplinary divisions (As cited in Duncum, 2001, p. 210). He argues that the point of studying Visual Culture would be to provide students with a set of critical tools without transmitting a specific body of information or values (p. 210). Creating a dialectic environment without providing students with specific body of information may be a questionably difficult issue.

Young and Adams (1991) noted that curriculum guides with specific instructional goals gave teachers confidence and helped them maintain quality. A sequential curriculum allows students to build on prior learning and enhances the students' appreciation and understanding of art. There are still questions about a typical curriculum and classroom practices of Visual Culture approach. While strengthening of students' critical thinking skills is very crucial, understanding and questioning power dynamics through imagery may be intellectually difficult for students. Questioning power dynamics freely may be problematic, especially in authoritarian societies.

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