

The Pursuit of Memory: Examining Art Teaching and Pedagogical Practices through Hannah Arendt's Actor-Spectator Theory

À la recherche de la mémoire : étude de l'enseignement des arts et des pratiques pédagogiques en fonction de la théorie « acteur-spectateur » de Hanna Arendt

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Memories of our schooling and teaching experiences shape our curriculum and pedagogical decision-making process in art education when we become teachers and teacher educators. In this paper, using Hannah Arendt's Actor-Spectator Theory, I engage in retrospective critical introspection of my practices as an art teacher and curriculum developer in Singapore.

Les souvenirs liés à nos expériences scolaires et d'enseignement influencent notre prise de décisions en termes de programmes d'études et de pédagogie de l'enseignement des arts une fois devenus des enseignants ou des formateurs d'enseignants. Je me livre ici à une introspection critique rétrospective de mes pratiques en tant que professeur d'art, conseiller et concepteur de programmes d'études à Singapour.

Introduction

This paper considers the practice of art teaching from my experiences in the secondary art education fraternity in Singapore. In my professional journey, I have taught the secondary art curriculum to students in Years 7 through 10 for over a decade. I have had many opportunities to conduct sessions for sharing pedagogies with colleagues and peers. Between 2007 and 2009, I left the school setting to be involved in providing curricular and pedagogical support for art teachers in secondary schools. Throughout this time, I had many discussions with fellow art educators, and I observed that a few practices in school art rooms have certainly enjoyed longevity despite changes in the art curriculum in Singapore. I believe it is important to examine some of them, using a different set of lenses to rethink the purpose and rationale, hence the purpose of this paper. I wish to examine them in a context where learner-centered curriculum ideology has gained momentum.

In this paper, I analyze my experiences in the context of secondary art teaching, through the lens of Hannah Arendt's critical theories on thinking and reasoning. Using Donald Polkinghorne's (1998) analysis of memory and self-narrative and Paul Ricoeur's (2004) philosophy on memory, my discussion also considers the influence of memory. To set the discussion in the Singapore context, I consider the secondary art national curriculum documents. They are two successive art syllabuses from the early 1990s to the present. I will refer to the embedded art education ideologies using the terms '*Aesthetic Education*', the stance that supports discipline-based and formalist practices; and '*Curricula-as-lived*', the stance more akin to interpreting visual experiences in a social context (Irwin and Chalmers, 2007). The narratives consist of autobiographic and biographic elements that are re-presented as impressionist and confessional tales (Van Maanen, 1988). Like the impressionist works of the 19th century that evoked more open sensory and affective participation from the viewers, I invite contemplations through two striking stories.

I must state at the outset that the narratives that I provide are from an individual perspective relating to specific accounts of my experience; thus they are not unproblematic and certainly not a generalized representation of art teachers' practices in Singapore. I am aware of inherent subjectivities as I posit myself as the *spectator* in the construction of the two-fold narratives and still stand within the arena of art education practitioners as an *actor* (Arendt, 1971/1978). Ricoeur (2004) aptly wrote, "Does not the very act of 'placing oneself' in a group and of 'displacing' oneself or shifting from group to group presuppose a spontaneity capable of establishing a continuation with itself?" (p. 122). The two-part narrative focuses on some of the factors influencing art teachers' curriculum decisions, beginning with the analysis on the confusion between commonsense reasoning and thinking, followed by that on the confusion between art and fabrication. But it is important that I first discuss my own positionality as the spectator-narrator.

Spectator-Narrator: A Matter of Positionality

My experiences supporting art teachers left me with several questions and they have motivated me to critically reexamine my past curriculum practices and the underlying beliefs of such practices. To have a perspective apart from a teacher, I needed to shift my positionality. Arendt (1971/1978) alluded to the withdrawal into an analytical role, like that of an arbiter or an umpire in a game. Unlike Arendt's analogy, I see myself as a sportsperson-turned-commentator, engaging in a post tournament analysis¹, not an umpire. A commentator needs a spectrum of knowledge, which includes the rules of the game, the strategies and the sporting roles. I further link it to Eisner's (2005) notion of an educational connoisseur, which is not confined to a singular dimension of an informed observer; instead it operates in the duality of educational connoisseurship and criticism. Eisner (2005) succinctly asserted, "Connoisseurship in education, as in other areas, is that art of perception that makes the appreciation of such complexity possible. . . . If connoisseurship is the art of appreciation, criticism is the art of disclosure" (p. 48–49). Thus the connoisseur is both the informed observer and analytical commentator.

A spectator's view is not independent. Rather it is engaged in active but distanced observation for impartial contemplation on the whole. The impartiality is not the severance of affiliation but a withdrawal of actions out of a cultural setting, where the pressures to conform to certain collective parameters of "readability" in a contextual norm is absent (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 144).

The withdrawal allows the mind's attention to shift from focus on action and prepares it for thinking in the absence of general rules. This preparation is called *de-sensing* (Arendt, 1971/1978, p. 77). One factor that inhibits a teacher's capacity for de-sensing is the concern with practical reasoning in actions, which according to Kant, is a moral concern. In other words, What ought I to do? (Arendt, 1971/1978, p. 95). In the actor's role, the art teacher's main concern, a perennial one, is the students' art products and achievements. However, I must shift my positionality to have critical de-sensing. It makes sense in Arendt's terms:

What storyteller narrates must necessarily be hidden from the actor himself, at least as long as he is in the act or caught in its consequences, because to him the meaningfulness of his act is not in the story that follows. (1958/1998, p. 192)

An actor is caught in the day-to-day actions and their consequences. The larger meaning can only be revealed at the close of an episode. The two narratives/parables presented here are also a critical reflection on my episodes of ignorance as an art teacher.

The First Parable: When Curriculum Practice Divorced Purpose

During a discussion with a young art teacher, she showed me some Year 7 students' pencil drawings of sports sneakers. She lamented the students' inability to draw naturalistically despite her having tried teaching them tips on observing the lines, colors, tones, and additional art and design elements. I had a concern. The perceptual complexities involved in a subject such as a shoe should not be overlooked, but the crux of the discussion here is not about technicalities of drawing but about understanding the purpose of a curriculum decision. The teacher was trying to mix learning and skill-drilling with one short subject. The purpose of the task was based on the subject matter. We need to keep asking a fundamental question when making curriculum decisions, that is, whether a lesson activity would contribute towards the learning intention and how this in turn would fit into the larger view of the holistic purpose of art education. As a young teacher, I had taught the shoe-drawing lesson. In hindsight, it was a curriculum decision based on convenience (because all students had them) and familiarity. Furthermore, observation drawing exercises have been a staple for many secondary school art students in Singapore. For the two decades prior to the art syllabus revision in 2001,² two out of three components in the assessment requirement for Year 10 and 12 examination requirements were on observational drawing and painting skills.

The 6012 art syllabus was implemented from the early 1990s to the year 2000. All eight aims of the syllabus strongly advocated Aesthetic Education practices. One key competency is discipline skills mastery. Another competency is the ability to perceive and understand what is expressed in artworks. This, it could be argued, is an aesthetic education learning outcome, as the awareness and appreciation is not articulated in terms of experience but of perceiving the visual (Irwin and Chalmers, 2007).

In 2000, there was an overhaul of the art curriculum and the 6012 syllabus was replaced by the 6009 syllabus, a close predecessor of the current syllabus. Despite the revamp, two Aesthetic Education-centered aims have survived. This, it could be said, is a legacy of art and design education dominant in the UK, with the emphasis on the use of aesthetic elements for a utilitarian purpose. The emphasis on an art product was concretized into one of the five syllabus aims, as stated in the following objective: 'to solve problems creatively in visual and tactile forms' (GCE 'O' Level Art Syllabus 6123, 2011, p.1). The inclusion of the terms 'creatively', 'inquiring mind' and 'spirit of experimentation' (2011) in the current syllabus clearly signals a conscious move towards open inquiry and experience-based processes more akin to curricula-as-lived.

Many of our current art teachers are products of the 6012 syllabus. In addition, the strong influence of Tyler's curriculum model, where the acquisition of competency as reflected behavioral objectives is a priority (Schiro, 2008; Tyler, 1965), has resulted in the reification of certain art teaching methods. In my opinion, the difference between the purpose of art learning and specific learning objectives has been blurred and the changes in the syllabus have not reduced the murkiness.

Furthermore, we need to look at one important concept often misconstrued as thinking that of common sense or *sensus communis*. It is "a kind of sixth sense to keep my five senses together and guarantee that it is the same object that I see" (Arendt, 1971/1978, p. 50). This points to the explanation that the sixth sense is based on familiarity with perceptible appearance, which emanates from and comprises the workings of five senses. Arendt highlighted the temptation to equate the faculty of common sense, with the faculty of thought because thinking occurs in a space of appearance. The critical difference is that thinking deals with the invisible concepts, the abstract. The thinking faculty serves us to conceive, to reason and grasp meaning, which is beyond appearance. Our perception and apprehension of the appearance, including perceptual analysis, is part of our common sense under cognitive knowing (Arendt, 1971/1978, p. 57).

Thinking operates concurrently with knowing (cognition), but they are not the same thing. Visual art, like poetry and music, is a "thought-thing" (Arendt, 1958/1998; 1971/1978, pp. 49, 62). Although visual art processes produce art objects with physical appearances, the processes are much more than just cognizing. Commonsense reasoning through cognition calls for narrowing towards a predictable end point, but thinking is dialectical.

Many of the art-making tasks at the secondary level in Singapore have been cognitive tasks with the intention of building technical competence. While teaching discipline skills is not objectionable, the potential to nurture lateral inquisitive thinking could be truncated when the emphasis is solely on the development of technical skill. Deborah Britzman (2003) wrote about the limiting effect of fragmented experience and compartmentalization of knowledge. Although Britzman (2003) referred to issues in teacher education, noting how student-teacher development can be impeded when programs segment knowledge into delinked disciplines, the same principle is relevant to art teachers' curriculum deliberation and practices. A common art teachers' complaint is that students have little capacity for idea generation. We need to pause and ask ourselves whether we have unconsciously contributed to that by perpetuating our predecessors' practices of fragmented teaching.

Despite the shift in direction of the art syllabus, I have heard many teachers' description of how they guided their students' work processes. Many have placed greater emphasis on streamlining processes that focus more on medium manipulation and technical competence. Systematized learning is necessary but to allow an overly structured process to dominate students' learning experiences invariably limit the span of learning (Kan, 2008).

Teachers' practices seem to assert a belief that art-making competence is the same as creative and artistic ability. Having analyzed the confusion and difference between commonsense reasoning with thinking, I would like to offer a different perspective on this: Art-making competence is a part of the cognitive capacity, and when worked in concert with the faculty of thought, it could serve creative and artistic purposes. My argument here is that we need to understand the purpose of any specific art task in relation to its contribution to learning about art. If we unreservedly subscribe to the belief that streamlined practices and drill-style tasks in art techniques serve a purpose in developing students' ability to think and conceive art ideas, we risk turning the learning of art, a thought-thing, into mechanistic art-making activities. Hickman (2010) succinctly pointed out that 'imagination involves thought' (2010, p. 113), and I would add to the stance by arguing that imagination is not emanated from common sense reasoning.

The Second Parable: The Pepper Seed Fabricator

The following narrative comes from an experience that I had when invited along with senior colleagues to share innovative art teaching practices. It resulted in pervasive mimicry and mass production, and this is what I wish to address here. In my early teaching days, a feverish pursuit of models of schemes-of-work (SOW) took place. SOW is a comprehensive curriculum plan over a semester, which states the specific instructional objectives (SIOs), content and resources. The use of SOW as a planning framework, a byproduct based on the Tylerian principles, has been a common practice among teachers in Singapore. Many teachers were very eager to look at other teachers' SOWs, especially those whose students consistently produced good artworks.

A group of the established teachers shared their SOWs, and one of the major tasks involved naturalistic and detailed studies of dissected peppers. The task extension involved the same subject matter being repeatedly rendered with various art media and techniques. Those who had begun this experimentation process in lessons were genuinely exploring aesthetic principles through the manipulation of art media. What followed was infectious mimicry. The same rendering of pepper images sprouted in many students' art works across schools. The season of peppers has come to pass, yet it seemed the practice of fabrication has come and

stayed. It is evident this fabrication was given impetus by the indoctrination of systematized discipline-based practices, and that would have discouraged more indepth critical aesthetic inquiry (Kan, 2007). But, before we can think of ways to break from the shackles of product-driven pedagogy, we must examine the various driving forces behind mass fabrication.

The focus of the second part of discussion is fabrication, which is the “most refined mode of commonsense reasoning” (Arendt, 1971/1978, p. 57). The intent in scientific investigation is not to produce a definitive product; instead it is a structured questioning process. The originator of the pepper investigation was engaged in a process, and the by-product illustrates what the process could do. In contrast, the mimicry of the process was more a replication of a by-product than investigation with understanding. Kan has critiqued that the secondary students’ endeavors in avant-garde art has been diluted because of the fixation on churning out an art object (2007). Kan’s discussion is a good illustration of Dewey’s analysis of the relationship between form and substance (Dewey, 1934). Dewey had critiqued that when form (format and structure) overrides substance (content and concept), the whole work becomes contrived. Through Arendt’s lens, this would be seen as fabrication.

One characteristic of fabrication is the two-fold process of production, which begins with a perceived image of the end product and then organizes the means to commence execution (Arendt, 1958/1998). The execution is mechanistic because the end has been predetermined, discouraging reflective diversion. The pepper exploration by-product samples were passed from school to school. In some exhibitions of students’ works, process works were part of the display. The uncanny resemblance in the process works among students from the same school is an evidence of fabrication, which has the hallmark of “a definite beginning and a predictable end” (Arendt, 1958/1998, p. 143).

If all art learning experiences were dominated by a predetermined product type, we run the risk of circumscribing art education with product essentialism, where student becomes a *homo faber*—a maker or fabricator—one who works towards a utilitarian end. The Singaporean examination structure has been a central platform on which career and vocational pathways are determined for school leaving students. Despite the systemic drive towards diversification and customization of educational pathways in the last decade, the early economical survival driven mode of education is still part of that commemorative memory.

Arendt's (1958/ 1998) analysis of the ideology of the *homo faber* has almost taken on a prophetic dimension. According to Arendt (1958/ 1998), a *homo faber* only sees anything as worthy if it can be a material that serves utilitarian purposes. Any thought process that does not contribute to a fabrication process is treated with contempt (Arendt, 1958/1998). Arendt's (1958/ 1998) words remind me of my beginning teacher days and my heavy reliance on drill-styled exercises.

Asking the simple 'why' before acting on the 'what' helps prevent us from partaking in massive subscription to a code of practice in unreflective fashion, confusing commonsense actions with thinking. Arendt's (1958/ 1998) critique of Hegel is that he convinced himself that "to think is to act" (Arendt, 1958/1998, p. 91). Thinking is a solitary engagement, but acting in the presence of peers is a social one. While in the midst of peers, we act in concert with them in a recognizable way as defined by norms of practices (Polkinghorne, 1988). This puts us in an existential position that pulls us away from the solitary reasoning, from asking why (Arendt, 1971/1978).

The need for actions to yield a recognizable product is an invisible but immensely gravitating force that binds the actors' minds to that of the *homo faber*. The making of a product is not the critical concern here because the processes of art creation invariably lead to end products. It is, however, critical to seek clarity in the purpose in solitude before one reengages in action in the public realm. I have seen many younger teachers who seem to be caught between the newer curriculum ideas and their memory of learning under older curriculum practices. It is very easy to be absorbed into the commemorative memory at work in the public realm. Ricoeur (2004) referred to the term *commemorative* as a celebrated practice that imbued subsequent generations with obligated memory, turning history into an obsession. The centrality of a common memory of the previous curriculum must not be underestimated.

The marketplace can become a powerful platform for the mutual reinforcement of the *homo faber* ideology. An analogy is the public exhibition of students' works. In Singapore, exhibition of students' work is a celebration of youth's artistic endeavors. Yet, we must be careful not to turn showcased works into models for fabrication. It is easy to be lured into the belief that the scrutiny of excellent artworks offer trade secrets, but the real market place is a platform for exchange of products; not trade secrets (Arendt, 1958/1998). Arendt has pointed out the holding power of the marketplace "is not the potentiality which springs up between people when they come together in action and speech, but a combined 'power of exchange' (Adam Smith), which each of the participants acquired in isolation." (Arendt, 1958/1998, pp. 209–210)

For example, any desire to learn the secret of the farmer is not at the farmers' market but during a visit to the farmer at work.

Memory and an Art Teacher's Identity and Self-Narrative

I wish to return to the idea that memory becomes a determinant in teachers' curriculum deliberation. Learning art in school is only one dimension of memory and in fact all forms of pre-service experiences have impact in similar proportions. Our present experiences reshape our interpretation of the past while the past influences future decisions (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Polkinghorne 1988). Ricoeur (2004) has also discussed the way memory influences our thought and actions, arguing that the act of remembering is a choice and so is forgetting.

This influence of memory is significant when we consider the chronological stages of a teacher's evolving identity. The individual teacher's experiences since childhood, combined with cultural and environmental factors, shape curriculum decisions and practices (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988). Britzman (2003) classified a teacher's experiential journey into four biographic chronologies, which include the teacher's cumulative experiences as a student, as a student-teacher, as a student-teacher at practicum, and finally as a beginning teacher. The first chronology is all the more significant when we consider that the length of this phase is a minimum period of 12 years, in which art teachers in Singapore have mostly been nurtured in a milieu under a dominant Tylerian curriculum model, and a dominant art education ideology rooted in Aesthetic Education.

Can we unbind ourselves from the commemorative memory in our learning experiences to have a sustainable reflexive curriculum practice? Unbinding is a preparation for the new—natality. Arendt's notion of natality must first be set in the context of secondary art teacher's narratives. I know of teachers who have wholly subscribed to discipline-based art education practices, while some have gone the other extreme, nearly eliminating the teaching of discipline skills. The former is a case of too much memory, the latter is a case of too little memory. Whether too much memory or too much forgetting, both are acts of the abuse of memory (Ricoeur, 2004, pp. 81, 449) in the selective employment of experiences in memory.

I suggest that we take this from another angle in dealing with the rootedness of our belief in the authentic semblance as art teachers. Our commemorative memory always gives new curricula ideas a fight if new ideas are not coherent fit within existing employment. The coexistence of commonsense reasoning and thinking in our minds will always create tension. But if this tension is a result from our engagement in a reflexive and critical introspection, it is a generative tension, which opens the window to natality—the birth and hence possibility of the new (Arendt, 1958/1998, 1971/1978). Instead of trying to suppress the tension, we could use them as a litmus indicator to inspect the acidity-alkalinity balance between commonsense reasoning and

thinking. The occurrence of rents and tension will persist as the curriculum landscape evolves, and it depends on how we posit our rooted beliefs in our memory. The two stories discussed art-teaching practices that we may hardly pause to reexamine. I question whether these long held practices are genuinely sustainable.

In this paper, my proposition of natality is the bringing forth of the new through unbinding, a concept that both Arendt and Ricoeur have discussed in relation to forgiveness. Arendt's notion of unbinding is the dissociation of the past action from the consequential present, what she termed "release from the consequences of what we have done" (Arendt, 1958/1998, p. 237). Taking this one step further, the release is not merely of the action but also pertains to the actor, or agent. The exclusion of the actor in the act of release is Ricoeur's critique of Arendt's discussion on unbinding (Ricoeur, 2004, pp. 488–490), which I concur. We must be willing to unbind ourselves (not evade) from our predecessors' and our past curriculum practices. I am not focusing on Arendt's and Ricoeur's discussions of guilt in this unbinding; but the notion of causality in curriculum decisions. My argument for unbinding is the disentanglement from our commemorative memory accumulated through the four chronologies of our professional identity.

First, we need to unbind from the deep rootedness of discipline-based, means-ends focused art experiences. Arendt cautioned that if "we act in the mode of making within its categorical framework of means and ends" (1958/1998, p. 238), we close down possibilities that lie outside action because we convinced ourselves that the only way to counter action is through more action without truly changing the mind. I do not advocate the abandonment of existing curriculum practices or an indiscriminate frenzy of pursuing alternatives but for a re-thinking and renegotiation of the thought behind them.

Reflection has become a default activity in all teachers' professional development engagements in Singapore but I would like to use Arendt's lens to make a distinction. Using Socrates' practice of contemplation as an illustration, Arendt referred to this private critical introspection as a two-in-one dialogue. It is possible only when one chooses to withdraw momentarily from the hustle of everydayness, and to become one's own adversary to question one's own actions and mind (Arendt, 1971/1978). To select favorable memory as an aesthetic construct exerts an irresistible pull, but this introspection is to examine the issue from a renegotiated position, not a nostalgic remembering because memory is governed by ideology (Ricoeur, 2004).

With reference to my earlier analysis on the dominant art curriculum in Singapore for the last three decades, only conscientious introspection can pull us from the sedative commemorative memory. But it must be complemented with public dialogue. It is a visiting aimed at understanding others' differing perspective and practices (Arendt, 1971/1978). This is a way to broaden our thinking, what Arendt called the enlargement of the mind in her discussion of Kant's philosophy (Arendt, 1971/1978, p. 257). Art teachers in Singapore often work in isolation and intellectual provocation through exchange is needed.

This visiting is not the exchange of products at the commemorative marketplace but a visiting of imagination through discerning public dialogue. No one answer indicates who may be best for such dialogues, but, importantly, the dialogue should not orientate around the end product, where the operative dynamic of commonsense reasoning supersedes thinking.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I suggest that the only sustainable way for art educators to deal with the tension of change is to have a reflexive curricula approach. We work within the curriculum heritage from which we come, by the everydayness of a preset structure and the obligation to do the right thing for our students. Five decades ago, Arendt wrote, "It is in fact easy to do the right thing in matters of education without even pausing to consider what one is really doing (Arendt, 1964/2006, p. 190). Let us pause and ask whether what we think is right is truly expedient for the new—the students, born into a context vastly different from ours. Most art teachers in Singapore work very hard, many in a sacrificial way. But we must realize that a "simple, unreflective perseverance" (Arendt, 1964/2006, p. 191), whether it blindly presses forward or preserves the status quo, is unsustainable. Changes are unsettling but they are also opportunities for regeneration. Unreflective adherence to familiar practices based on memory can suffocate renewal because "the world is old, always older than they [the students] themselves, [and] learning inevitably turns toward the past, no matter how much living will spend itself in the present" (Arendt, 1964/2006, p. 192). To critically ask why we do what we are doing is not to devalue and invalidate any art curriculum practice.³ This questioning, an act of unbinding, is to flush out the accumulated muddle to regain clarity in the purpose of art education, to see familiar practices with refreshing unfamiliarity. By passing on that of the old, with our commemorative prejudices, wholly unto those of the new—the students—while not setting aside room for the new, we merely fabricate instead of edify. To do that, we need to assume the dual role of the actor and spectator (Arendt, 1971/1978). It seems a lofty vision, but I believe it is an attainable goal because it is a choice. Natality is an act to initiate, not to replicate (Arendt, 1958/1998, p. 177).

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Endnotes

¹ A sports arbiter, or umpire, is one who enforces the rules during a game to ensure smooth proceedings and fair play, and it is not the role I have played in my professional engagements and in this paper.

² The Singapore–Cambridge GCE Ordinary (O) Level Art 6012 syllabus consisted of three papers; two of the three papers tested candidates on observational drawing and painting skills. The 6012 syllabus was replaced in 2001 by the 6009 syllabus, which was revised (code 6123) to add a compulsory component called Study of Visual Art (SOVA), based on the approach of Description-Analysis-Interpretation-Evaluation, introduced by Edmund Burke Feldman (1967, 1993).

³ Although this paper does not set out to discuss the differences between art practices and art curriculum practices, based on my interactions with art teachers, I believe the analysis of the differences is a good starting premise for art teachers' critical introspection of long-held curriculum practices.