

2009 Lowenfeld Lecture by Olivia Gude

Art Education for Democratic Life

Much arts education research is devoted to articulating the development of students' modes of thinking and acting, describing the development of various aptitudes in terms of the individual's experiences and accomplishments. Today, I will focus on how the unique abilities that are developed through experiences in the arts are the qualities and habits of mind of art-educated, artistically-self-actualized individuals who are situated within and constituent of a democratic society.

Self Aware Citizens of a Democratic Society

Let us begin with a Lowenfeldian affirmation of the importance of early and recurring experiences of art education rooted in individual self awareness and free exploration. A child gains a sense of him or herself by freely playing with materials, images, and ideas. Paradoxically, immersion in the sensuous materials of the world, allows the child to vividly experience his/her separate self, his/her uniquely personal idiom of feeling and making. Of course, what is important here is not ultimately the uniqueness of the artistic product, but rather the deeply felt connection between self, process, and product. The child develops the capacity for nuanced attention to the world and to his/her interactions with the material world. This attentiveness is not based in fear or wariness of the world, but in wonder and awareness of the potential to act and interact with the world.

A teenager or adult immersed in life drawing, shooting video, or in the ages-old activity of looking for images in clouds or in ink blots or stains is similarly drawn into a state of mind that is intensely conscious of both inner experience and of the promptings of the outer world. This heightened dual awareness is a defining characteristic of the artistic process. This is neither a journey to an isolated inner self nor an out-of-this-world trip, but the developed capacity to be aware of a self process through which one vividly notices and interacts with a world of objects and ideas.

How does this engaged, aware person participate in a democratic society? First, the artistically engaged individual couples intense awareness with a strong sense of agency, a belief that he or she can shape the world. This belief in the average person's creative power lies at the root of any democratic society. As democratic citizens, we must believe that what we do affects the world around us, that what we do makes a difference.

Second, each autonomous individual, with his or her capacity for seeing and for shaping, must be able to tolerate a sense of aloneness, of isolation. Paradoxically, a pre-condition for fully joining in democratic life is the ability to sustain a sense of identity when not immersed in a collective.

In his studies of creativity, Carl Rogers identified anxiety as a necessary component of the creative process—as the maker takes responsibility for formulating and working through a problem. People who deeply engage the world through creative thinking and making, learn to expect and accept the accompanying anxiety of recognizing one's simultaneous power and vulnerability in confronting a self-formulated problem. We have the power to ask questions of the world, to structure inquiries—and the responsibility for pursuing those investigations, for shaping answers—however incomplete.

These observations can be related to Viktor Lowenfeld's description of the harm caused by overly restrictive schooling and parenting in which children do not develop the capacity for sensing and expressing their own thoughts and perceptions. As Lowenfeld famously said, "Having experienced the devastating effect of rigid dogmatism and disrespect for individual differences, I know that force does not solve problems and that the basis for human relationships is usually created in the homes and kindergartens." (1952, (p.ix) Lowenfeld believed that harsh discipline and lack of opportunities for creative expression created individuals who would be susceptible to totalitarian control.

It is useful to remember that as educators we create citizens of a democratic society, not so much by filling students with ideas or facts about democracy, as by creating the conditions through which youth experience the pleasures, anxieties, and responsibilities of democratic life. Our responsibilities to democratic society begin as individuals who perceive fully, consciously integrate our perceptions into complex constructions, and habitually act on the basis of our deepest awarenesses.

Forming Voices for Democratic Dialogue

Art education supports each person in telling his or her own story. Though the stories told by today's children and teenagers will often be very different in content and structure than those told by the children represented in the classic works of Viktor Lowenfeld, the stories still function as Lowenfeld described, as a means of "self-identification." Through quality art education, students are introduced to a range of tools and develop the skills needed to represent their experiences in their fullness, complexity, and contradictions. Through experimentation with media and with aesthetic and theoretical methodologies, students represent their life experiences in images, words, sounds, movements—through contrasts and comparisons, juxtapositions and layerings, reverberations and silences.

Telling one's story—representing self experience—is more than simply re-presenting one's experience. Through the process of making and re-making the story, the image—the student/artist/maker makes self. The structure of a self is not formed just by what happened, what one experienced, but always also how one has understood and interpreted this experience—at the time of the initial experience and upon later reflections.

A story cannot be told—an image cannot be understood—as pure form. In being made manifest by its maker, the story/image has entered the realm of culture, of signification. The maker can only signify, can only tell his/her story, paint her/his picture in the context of other signifiers, other stories, other images, other bits of meaning with which the maker formulates his or her own unique meaning.

The student/artist/maker thus shapes and re-shapes self—through recalling felt, lived experience and then interpreting, re-shaping, this felt experience in material form, utilizing systems of meaning that have been developed by others. The student artist, indeed all artists, create by drawing on, rearranging, reformulating, remaking existing shared, socially constructed meanings.

The realm from which student artists can make personal meaning is greatly enlarged by the introduction through art education experiences of a wide range of contemporary and traditional art and ideas. In drawing on and contributing to the reservoir of signifiers and significations, the artist maker shapes self and re-shapes the culture, subtly shifting all future use of these signifiers, all future collective meaning making.

A self is itself a society, a drawing together of many ways of feeling, being, perceiving, receiving, thinking, making and expressing. The self is not coherent, unified, singular. A thoughtful person in the 21st century's "self-identification," identifying internal multiplicity, contradictions and incompleteness—accepts the complex and always shifting nature of the self. The artistically aware person recognizes deeply felt aspects of experience that are irreducibly ambiguous, beyond words and beyond representation.

Yet this self, who is beyond summarizing representation, this self who is not singular and coherent, need not be incoherent. Education in the arts creates the capacity to see and sense the complexity of oneself. Arts education develops the capacity for nuanced and eloquent articulation of experience, for developing the methods by which self and shared meaning is made.

A truly democratic culture must be composed of many voices. Through quality art education, students recall and represent their own experiences; they formulate their own stories and images. Through exposure and experimentation, youth develop their own unique idioms of investigating and making: they craft the voices through which they contribute to and shape public democratic dialogue.

Modeling Democratic Communities of Discourse

Through art education, students develop enhanced skills for understanding the meaning making of others. Through quality art education, youth develop the capacity to attend to nuances of meaning. Most significantly, engagement with the arts teaches youth to perceive complexity as pleasure and possibility, not as irritating uncertainty. Heightened self-awareness is extended to heightened awareness of others.

When one plays at looking for images in ink blots with others, it is fascinating to find out that one's neighbor often sees entirely different images. Sometimes a slight prompt will cause one to see what the other sees; sometimes a sketch or extended conversation will enable one to share a neighbor's vision; in other instances even the most elaborate descriptions and urgings fail to draw one into seeing what the other sees. Through this delightful game, students recognize that perceptions of reality as such always involve the projection of self into and onto the world. This simple game of image-making yields profound realization of the uniqueness of each individual's perceptions and the sobering recognition that we are a collective of individuals who see the world quite differently. This is not to deny that reality is "out there," but to affirm that truths are "in here" in the meaning that we construct personally and socially.

Through art education, students learn the skills to engage a wide range of art. Their perception is enhanced by learning to utilize various frames for considering the art they are experiencing. They recognize many strategies for making meaning. They recognize strategies for uncovering how meaning is made. They contemplate and collect ways of understanding, seeing, being in the world. They form various habits of mind which can be used as lenses through which to view and re-view art and their life experiences.

The vividness of art experiences blurs the boundaries between self experience and the experiences of another. Through artworks, students absorb the perceptions of others— situated in other times and places, embodied in other races, genders, ages, classes, and abilities. Through art, the self becomes vitally interested in other selves, sensing the possibilities and problems of those selves within oneself.

A democracy cannot long function as the tyranny of uncaring majorities over various minorities of interest, nor can it long function when powerful minorities disregard the interests and needs of the majority. Democracy requires that difference be perceived not as an assault on selfhood, but as an invitation to be a fuller, more open self who incorporates the sensations and experiences of others into one's own perceptions of the world and into one's contributions to collective decision making.

Quality art education creates individuals who have the propensities and skills to form communities of discourse, spaces of shared and contested meaning. Heightened awareness of the uniqueness of perceptions and points of view creates people who have the capacity to make connections with others who hold beliefs that vary from their own; they do not feel solidarity with others solely on the basis of an often imagined uniformity. Decision making, planning, and envisioning in a democratic society require individuals who have the capacity for empathy and for

imagination.

Knowing and Not Knowing as Democratic Responsibility

You will have noticed that the child with whom I began this lecture has morphed into a student, a youth, a teen, a young adult, just plain folks as the saying goes. As we imagine art education for a democratic society, we imagine the child growing up, becoming an engaged citizen. Quality art education provides access to the art and practices of making through which today's youth can actively investigate local and global themes.

What art we experience and study matters. Though the art of the past may still speak to the present, we cannot hope to understand the present, or the past in its fullness and complexity, without attuning ourselves to our times through contemporary art and related theoretical perspectives. Through art, we open ourselves to pleasure, beauty, and harmony, to suffering and tragedy, and also to the odd and the edgy. Through art, we recognize that which we know to be important and true; through art, we encounter that which is not yet known, yet hovers on the edges of consciousness. Through art and theory, we form new patterns of perception that enable us to see the world with fresh insight.

Because the arts are a necessity for a vital democratic society, not merely a decoration, (though decoration is a joy in life that should not be frowned upon), it's important that the disciplinary skills that students learn are those needed to make art through which they can investigate and understand contemporary times. As the students say, they must learn the skills to "break it down" as well as to put "it" back together again. Contemporary art and theory enables us to create interdisciplinary mental models of the psychological, the spiritual, the social, the physical world. In challenging outmoded world views, contemporary art prepares people to engage, to shape, (and sometimes to preserve) aspects of our ever changing world.

Quality art education introduces students to a wide-range of art—from practices situated in museums and concert halls, to those that are created and disseminated in community centers, urban streets, local copy shops, or the home computer and the world wide web. Youth learn that it is their democratic right to have access through understanding to the full range of cultural practices. Youth learn that it is their democratic responsibility to be life-long makers of meaning through active participation in receiving, deconstructing, and reconstructing shared meaning.

Through quality art education, people learn that they do not know many things that they once thought were certain. They learn to play, not just with materials, but with ideas. Study of the arts, especially contemporary art forms, cultivates in people the capacity to tolerate cognitive dissonance. They develop the strength to continue to engage in perception and reflection even when they do not find easy answers or even, readily discernible patterns.

By making and experiencing art that engages the complexities, contradictions, ambiguities, and ironies of lived experience, people internalize a significant lesson for democratic life. Despite difficulties, misunderstandings, seemingly irreconcilable disagreements, and all manner of setbacks, to be a truly democratic society—we must persist in our individual and collective

investigations of possibility; we must remain committed to thoughtfully engaging each other in our endeavors to make meaning and to make meaningful lives together.

The Aesthetics and Ethics of Democratic Life

Art generates deep inner engagement with feelings, images, stories, ideas, forms. Through making and experiencing art, people generate, apprehend, and hold multiple ways of knowing and being in the world. Through these rich experiences of psyche and soma—experiences of connection to self, to family, to community, to others—experiences of connection to the natural world, to social collectives, to past histories, to the issues of present times, and to the possibilities of the future—people develop astute self awareness that is interwoven with keen awareness of others. They encode in themselves concerns and sensibilities that are generated beyond the limits of personal experience.

This wide range of vivid lived and vicarious experience gives people the materials with which to form values of care, equality, and justice. These values are woven from the strands of many experiences and are interwoven into structures of self. Through quality arts education, people encounter a wide variety of forms and styles of art; they are introduced to a variety of strategies for making meaning and to many meanings that have been made in response to lived experience. People come to recognize meaning, not as fixed and immutable, but as the unfolding result of dynamic processes. They recognize that significance is not so much in the product, as in the specificity and complexity of process.

Thus, quality arts education attunes us to how methods of making are always strategies for being. Students, teachers, and communities are vitally interested in the things they make because ultimately these are not so much about aesthetics as about the insights and experiences that can be generated through the many methods of aesthetic investigation. The arts are an avenue through which youth and communities experience their power to make things and to make things happen.

The curriculum of quality art education is thus centered—not merely on the teaching and learning of art vocabulary, media, and methods—but rather on learning about and utilizing strategies to produce individual and cultural meaning, meaningful culture. The oppositions and tensions, harmonies and contradictions, points and counterpoints—the clash of codes and styles of art and ideas in contemporary times—these are the elements and principles of democratic life.

Awareness of the significance of investigating and representing experience, engaging and re-working traditions, making and sharing meaning—builds within students key habits of democratic people—freedom to experience fully, reflect freely, and represent without fear. People who have participated in quality arts education experiences identify the importance of free expression for themselves and for others. They recognize that values and visions, cannot endure unless they are continuously seen, examined, challenged, and re-envisioned within individual and collective life.

Lowenfeld, Viktor. 1952. *Creative and Mental Growth*, 2nd edition. New York: Macmillan.

Rogers, Carl R. 1961. Toward a Theory of Creativity in *On Becoming a Person*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.