

National Art Education Association

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Source: *Studies in Art Education*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (Spring, 1990), pp. 149-157

Published by: [National Art Education Association](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1320762>

Accessed: 06/03/2014 15:37

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The Community of Inquiry: An Approach to Collaborative Learning

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Sociocognitive theorists have stressed the importance of both teacher and peer collaboration in learning and academic achievement. Such collaboration may be lacking in an art education modelled on the tradition of the solitary artist producing original works of art in the studio. This paper describes the Philosophy for Children program in critical thinking, its pedagogical approach involving the community of inquiry, and the sociocognitive learning theories upon which it is based. This program may serve as a pedagogical model for development of collaborative learning approaches in art education, especially within the discipline of aesthetics.

As the field of art education continues to include and evolve ways of knowing about art other than production, the traditional image of the artist may no longer function well as a major pedagogical role model for the field. Since the time of the Renaissance, a widespread conception of the artist, at least in Western thought, has been one of a solitary person making art objects in the privacy of the studio. Indeed, the notion of the artist as solitary producer of highly original objects of self-expression was of primary importance throughout the modernist period (Gablík, 1984). Despite recent examples of teams or groups of persons working together to make art (consider the Starns Twins or Gilbert and George or the earlier group projects of Judy Chicago or Miriam Shapiro) and despite the deliberate contemporary use of image appropriation (consider the work of Sherrie Levine), the prevailing conception of the artist remains one largely characterized by individual vision and achievement. Perhaps this idea is part of a larger cultural mindset which values, as most worthy and authentic, those material and intellectual products which are the result of intense individual effort. Clearly, the general face of education in this country is one which reflects the encouragement and evaluation of individual achievement. It is no great surprise that the model of the solitary artist characterizes much of what occurs in the art education programs of the United States at all levels of instruction.

As a model for art education, the example of the solitary artist is not completely flawed. Producing highly original works of art, like thinking for oneself, is something we value greatly. Nevertheless, many contemporary critics and philosophers have pointed out that the idea of originality in art may be little more than a modernist myth, since apparently every image relies in some degree on at least one other image (Krauss, 1985). Among the pedagogical outcomes of recognizing the inevitable reliance of one image on another has been the call for increased stylistic and thematic knowledge of other works of art that may serve as graphic models for the drawings of art students (Wilson, Hurwitz, & Wilson, 1987). This modified understanding of originality in art produced by artists and students may serve art educators well as they strive to understand the nature of artistic inquiry and enhance creative expression

through art production. Individual achievement is not negated by this notion, but the ways in which it is realized are better understood and may be better facilitated.

A similar reconsideration of the methods of inquiry and avenues to achievement in other components of the art curriculum may also be in order. Those art disciplines which are largely verbal in nature may require especially careful consideration. Aesthetics, perhaps the most complex and troublesome of the components now being advocated in a discipline-based approach, is a particular concern for this writer. For example, the carefully examined positions and supporting arguments which characterize the refined end-product of the professional aesthetician may be confused with the processes for reaching such an end. If so, then the academically sound end-product of thinking critically *for* oneself about philosophical issues in art may be confounded with the process of thinking *by* oneself, reflecting the modernist myth of originality in yet another guise.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the Philosophy for Children program in critical thinking as a possible source in determining educationally and philosophically sound approaches to dealing with the issues of aesthetics in art education. A major point of focus is the program's emphasis on what is called the "community of inquiry" and its use of collaborative pedagogical methods based upon theories of sociocognitive learning. After examining the approach and theoretical underpinnings of this exemplary program, its implications for art education will be drawn.

Philosophy for Children

Philosophy for Children is an educational movement based upon the assumption that critical thinking skills are best developed within the context of group dialogue about philosophical issues (Lipman, 1988). The Western tradition of dialogue can be traced to Greece in the sixth century B.C., when philosophers began to think seriously about the process of thinking itself. Socrates, as portrayed in the dialogues of Plato, is an excellent model of how intellectual discovery and understanding are heightened through dialogue. In the Socratic tradition, genuine dialogue avoids indoctrination and subjectivism because each point of view, including one's own, is subject to the same rigorous tests of experience and logic (Johnson, 1984).

Building upon this tradition and incorporating pedagogical theories from various twentieth-century philosophers and psychologists (discussed below), Philosophy for Children has proven to be highly successful in developing critical thinking skills. In fact, over 20 studies of the Philosophy for Children program have found statistically significant gains in participants' abilities to think conceptually and reason proficiently (Reed, 1989a). Several qualitative studies have shown that the program is effective in helping students identify problematic philosophical issues within a variety of contexts and use a diverse set of problem-solving techniques in addressing those issues (Lipman, 1988).

The movement began in 1974 when Matthew Lipman published the first of many philosophical "novels" for children and established the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children (IAPC) at Montclair State College, Upper Montclair, New Jersey. Lipman had been a philosophy professor at Columbia University and had worked with adult students in New York City community-outreach programs for many years. Although he recognized the value of philosophy for these students, he felt that they were being reached too

late to take real advantage of the improved reasoning and other academic and life skills which philosophy offered them. Lipman decided to write a book for and about children that would include ideas from philosophy but avoid the formidable terminology and academic writing style of that field. The storyline would provide a child-oriented context for philosophical issues and encourage students to consider those issues in terms of their own experience. The result was *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery* (Lipman, 1974), a novel about children and their friends, teachers, and parents, which has become the 5th- and 6th-grade text in the K–12 philosophy curriculum series of texts now available from the IAPC.

Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery, like other philosophical novels for children (e.g., Lipman, 1978, 1981, 1982, 1983, 1987; or Reed, 1989b), is written in episodes designed to be read aloud by or to children. Many issues from the various areas of philosophy (aesthetics, logic, metaphysics, ethics, and so on) arise within the story and are designed to prompt curiosity and discussion in children. Available for this novel is a comprehensive teacher's manual (Lipman, 1984), which includes discussion plans, exercises, and activities for each philosophical issue within the story. Similar manuals are available for the other novels referenced above (Lipman & Gazzard, 1988; Lipman, Sharp & Oscanayan, 1980; Lipman & Sharp, 1980, 1982, 1985, 1986; Reed, 1989c).

Crucial to the operation of the Philosophy for Children program is the development of a classroom environment conducive to peer interaction which is referred to in this program as a "community of inquiry" (Lipman, 1988). In such a classroom community, the emphasis does not fall upon the development of socialization skills or the provision of therapeutic experiences through discussion activities, although such skills and experiences often are secondary products of involvement in the process. Rather, the emphasis is upon dialogue and reflection, with the class discussion building upon the philosophical issues present in the philosophical novels for children. After reading episodes of the novels—episodes which provide excellent examples of inquiry-level dialogue among the child characters—the students suggest from among the many issues present in each episode those which they wonder about or find puzzling and would like the group to discuss. In a typical Philosophy for Children session, a short episode is read, questions or points of interest are listed on the board, and one or possibly two of the questions are addressed through group dialogue. Discussion may well be continued in later sessions and, quite often, the same issues arise at various times and in different contexts. This spiraling of issues allows for a deepening of the dialogue and inquiry processes.

The Philosophy for Children approach to dialogue within a classroom community of inquiry is ideally characterized by the following:

1. Use of criteria: Children are encouraged to examine and explain *why* they think as they do about issues under discussion. They are asked to go beyond mere statements of opinion by giving reasons for their judgments and reflecting upon the criteria employed in making these judgments. The objective is to help students approach conceptual issues with a readiness to appraise and evaluate those aspects of the issues which call for judgment. In the case of art education, an example of this approach might involve asking children to specify their criteria for realism in painting if they have been contending that realistic painting is best.

2. Self-correction: Individuals are encouraged to listen carefully to the com-

ments of each member of the community and be willing to reconsider their own judgments and opinions. Mindless relativism is not reinforced. Each opinion is subject to careful (and caring) scrutiny. The ability to admit that one's initial opinion may have been incorrect or partially flawed is valued. However, there is no attempt to come to a single "correct" judgment for the group, as in the form of a vote. Such grasping for consensus (democratic though it may seem on the surface) does little to encourage reflective thinking and dialogue, and, as a preemptive attempt at closure, it is likely to be counterproductive to collaborative learning in the realm of philosophical inquiry.

3. Attention to context: Understanding the important influence of context upon one's judgments and opinions is valued. Relativity theory has made a difference, not only in how we think about the world, but also in how we think about concepts such as certainty and truth. Insofar as knowledge is a historical, linguistic, and social construct, it is dependent upon context. Members of a community of inquiry learn to pay attention to the contexts in which they make judgments and develop understandings. (Lipman, 1988)

Thus, reflection and dialogue within such a classroom community of inquiry is understood to require a reciprocity of effort, a willingness to be challenged by the ideas of others (teacher and peers), a process of reconstruction of one's own ideas and judgments based on such factors as coherence, consistency, and comprehensiveness, together with a sensitivity to the particularity of each situation (Sharp, 1989).

In the Philosophy for Children program, the role of peer interaction is regarded as absolutely critical to the successful development and growth of a community of inquiry. In this pedagogical approach, the teacher helps the group focus on the primary issues under discussion, responds to and participates in the dialogue, and fulfills the function of facilitating the inquiry through asking questions, such as: Why do you say that? How does that relate to what you (or X) said before? Could we talk about the criteria you used in reaching that conclusion? While the teacher, especially in the beginning stages of a classroom community of inquiry, is ultimately responsible for performing these tasks and keeping the dialogue at an inquiry level, student members of the group are expected soon to do the same. In fact, student-peer dialogue is most highly espoused by the Philosophy for Children program.

Theoretical Background

The stress upon teacher and peer collaboration in Philosophy for Children's community of inquiry is based, in part, upon the ideas of sociocognitive learning theorists such as Bruner (1985) and Vygotsky (1978). Bruner (1985) contends that:

Social transaction is the fundamental vehicle of education and not, so to speak, solo performance. . . . Too often, human learning has been depicted in the paradigm of a lone organism pitted against nature — whether in the model of the behaviorist's organism shaping up responses to fit the geometries and probabilities of the world of stimuli, or in the Piagetian model where a lone child struggles singlehandedly to strike some equilibrium between assimilating the world to himself or himself to the world. (p. 25)

It may seem nothing more than a truism to state that we learn from one another, that the symbolic world of human culture cannot be mastered without the collaboration of others, for as Bruner (1985) points out, that world *is* others.

But Lipman (1988) contends that a superficial understanding of the need for collaborative learning can lead to the type of didactic teaching in which adult lectures child and child performs some set task, such as filling in study sheets or making a painting in the style of the Pointillists. This type of teaching fails to capitalize upon the deeper meaning inherent in the concept of collaborative learning. The structured collaboration of the community of inquiry is an attempt to avoid the didactic approach which, regrettably, constitutes much of what goes on in the name of education.

Vygotsky (1978) has spoken of the importance of both teacher-student and student-peer interaction in the process of learning in the educational environment. He contends that children are capable of performing at higher intellectual levels when asked to work in collaborative situations than when asked to work individually. His much-touted "zone of proximal development," which has to do with organizing classroom experiences so that the student utilizes "higher" levels of intellectual functioning, is "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86).

Vygotsky holds that when one establishes the right kind of environment, that is, one of structured teacher guidance and collaboration with peers, students are able to produce something together, which they could not have produced alone, such as a significant inquiry into issues of aesthetics. Thus, for real learning (not just reinforcement of previous learning) to occur, children must be helped by an adult and/or other children to function intellectually at a level beyond that at which they might otherwise be expected to perform.

Bruner (1985) explains it in this manner: The adult and/or peers serve the learner as "scaffolding," a vicarious form of consciousness, until such time as the learner is able to consciously and independently control the new function or conceptual system being utilized. This support system makes it possible for the learner to internalize both external knowledge and critical thinking skills, and to convert them into tools for conscious intellectual functioning. If this interpretation of learning is correct, then the contention that it is inappropriate to attempt to do aesthetics with children below the Piagetian level of formal operations because they lack sufficient intellectual stature and breadth of knowledge for philosophical thinking is a faulty contention (Matthews, 1984). One must "simply" provide an appropriate pedagogical structure, the correct scaffolding as it were. In the Philosophy for Children program, that structure is provided by the collaborative processes involved in developing and nurturing a community of inquiry.

It is in these processes of collaborative inquiry where one may most clearly see Vygotsky's "zone of proximal development" or Bruner's "scaffolding" in action. Here, too, is where the notion of "more capable" peers, as specified by Vygotsky (1978) in particular, comes into play. Because some students have better verbal skills and are less reticent about sharing their ideas aloud, they help provide a model for students who are less prepared or more reluctant to voice their ideas. However, the notion of more capable can also refer to those students who tend to be less vocal, but who listen very carefully to the content and progress of the dialogue and make relatively infrequent, yet insightful, comments. It should be noted that there are other parts and extensions of the Philosophy for Children program which are different in nature, such as making

puppets or performing plays based on a theme or idea which emerges from the dialogue. In these activities, other students may prove more capable and provide a qualitatively different scaffolding for members of the group.

Dewey (1902, 1933) is prominent among the other theorists whose ideas have influenced Philosophy for Children. Those ideas of Dewey that are of major importance to the program include his perceptions that reasoning is perfected by disciplined discussion as by nothing else, that the logic of a discipline must not be confused with the sequence of discoveries which would constitute its understanding, that student reflection is best stimulated by experience, and that education needs to be redefined as the fostering of skillful thinking within disciplines rather than the mere transmission of knowledge (Lipman, 1988). Additional influences upon the character and structure of Philosophy for Children include Oakeshott (1962) on disciplines as languages to be learned whose interaction constitutes the "conversation of mankind," Peirce (1955) and Ryle (1972) on the processes and nurturing of thinking and reasoning, and Buber (1965) on dialogue.

Implications for Art Education

While the Philosophy for Children program may be largely unknown to art educators, the theories upon which the program is based certainly are not. Fielding (1989) recently provided art educators with a concise and helpful overview of the ideas of Vygotsky and other sociocognitive theorists. In drawing implications from this body of research for art education, however, Fielding concentrates only on the teacher's role in the learning process. Granted, the role of the teacher is essential to real learning as described by Vygotsky, Bruner, and others. It is because the young are in need of adult guidance that there are teachers in the first place. Fielding's assertion that teachers should not follow a laissez-faire approach to teaching if they expect real learning to take place in the art classroom is a point well taken. Teachers not only must present information and model the process of aesthetic/artistic inquiry, but they must also encourage children to take initiative, build on their ideas and formulations, and question the assumptions underlying those formulations. Teachers must suggest and model ways of arriving at more comprehensive understandings and solutions (Lipman, Sharp & Oscanyan, 1980).

Fielding (1989) contends that students ought to be challenged by problems which require "artistic behavior, thinking, and knowledge that are in advance of those which they can perform independently" (p. 47), but which require the *teacher's* assistance for successful completion. However, in emphasizing the crucial nature of the teacher's role, Fielding neglects the important role of peers as described by Vygotsky and Bruner and utilized in Philosophy for Children's community of inquiry. Fielding's suggested approach, which might be seen as a variation of the master-apprentice model of education, falls short of a comprehensive approach to education in the visual arts in that it neglects the critical component of peer interaction in the process of inquiry.

In contrast, the Philosophy for Children program acknowledges the importance of collaborative experiences to learning, utilizing the pedagogical theories of Bruner, Dewey, and others well known to art educators. It is interesting to note that Fielding (1989) refers to the educational theories of Dewey, in particular, as having been discredited by the work of Vygotsky, Bruner, and other sociocognitive theorists. However, the structure of the community of inquiry, with its emphasis on the roles of teacher and peers in collaborative learning,

escapes the laissez-faire trap, as described by Fielding (1989)—a trap which may result from a misinterpretation of Dewey's ideas.

Perhaps Fielding's omission of the importance of peer interaction in art education merely reflects the general lack of attention to the topic in educational practice and in much developmental and educational research. There has not been great emphasis upon group work in American schools, even though schools obviously are social environments (Galton, Simon, & Croll, 1980). Most research into the effects of peer interaction has dealt with the socialization of behavior and personality and has not considered the intellectual and cognitive aspects of peer interaction (Forman & Cazden, 1985). However, those studies which have focused on the intellectual and cognitive aspects of peer interaction within school have all concluded that peer interaction helps individuals acknowledge and integrate many perspectives on a problem and that this process of coordination and collaboration produces superior intellectual results (Inagaki, 1981; Inagaki & Hatano, 1968, 1977; Kol'tsova, 1978; Lomov, 1978).

Given such conclusions, a call for the development of new approaches to and utilization of peer collaboration within the art classroom is well founded. An emphasis upon individually conceived and produced end-results in the art program fails to acknowledge the crucial nature of both teacher guidance and peer collaboration in learning. The collaborative community of inquiry approach used by Philosophy for Children may be valuable in development of successful pedagogical approaches for the newer components of art curricula, particularly aesthetics. Although further research is required to determine the ultimate worth of such an approach in art education, preliminary results of its application are available (Hagaman, in press-a, in press-b).

In order to prepare art teachers to develop communities of inquiry within their classrooms, preservice and inservice classes would need to be redesigned to include a significant portion of activities utilizing such a pedagogical approach. Teachers would need to be prepared in a manner which did not differ in kind, but rather in degree, from the sort of education which they would organize for their own students. If teachers are expected to organize and facilitate meaningful dialogues and collaborative inquiry in the classroom, they must be provided with opportunities to experience the nature and rewards of such processes firsthand.

A community of inquiry approach to collaborative learning in the visual arts would not diminish the importance of individual achievement, but rather it would provide a broader view of how such individual achievement might be realized. In order for students to have an art education which allows for real learning in the Vygotskian sense, the effects of teacher and peer collaboration in student learning and the inquiry process must be more fully acknowledged. Changes in curricula will not be enough if there are not effective changes in pedagogy as well. A collaborative approach *does* have a needed place in art education, and it should not be limited to the occasional group mural.

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