

A Proposal For Defining What Constitutes A Substantive Art Education

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Much of the material that has been published about art education in relation to the establishment of the National Goals for Student Learning in Art, as well as the role of art education in the general education reform movement, has referred to something called *substantive art education*. This is a term that has not been very well defined; certainly each art educator has a personal view of what *substantive* means in this context, but it is important that the meaning for this term be made clearer so that those outside the profession will understand it as well.

This paper proposes one way in which the clarification of this term can be approached. It puts the idea of *substantive art education* in terms that can be useful in talking with parents, administrators, and other decision makers who have an effect on the place art education can have in the school curriculum and it is intended to help in our own professional discussions about what constitutes *substantive*.

Consider that a substantive art education is one through which children and young people will learn answers to some very basic questions about art and the difference it can make in their lives:

Who?

Who made the work of art tells us much about when and under what circumstances a work of art was created. Knowing who did the work of art places it in a context of culture, time, and influence. It is through the study of art history that students will learn these things about the art they look at.

What?

The content of a work of art is what that work is about or what was the artist's intended meaning for the work. When an artist creates his/her work, she/he has ideas, feelings, information, or attitudes about some thing or experience which she/he is trying to convey to the people who will see the work.

There is, however, no assurance that the intended meaning is what the viewer will receive from it; this is the chance the artist takes and relates to his/her effectiveness in communicating intention to unknown viewers. It is through critical study of works of art that

students learn how to interpret the artist's meaning and get at and understand the content the artist was concerned with.

Where?

Art is, and always has been, made in all parts of the world. Knowing where an artwork was made will help the viewer discover what its purpose was at the time it was made and what influences and practices surrounded its creation.

Where the art work is viewed will also have an effect on how it is interpreted; some artwork, created for a specific religious or cultural purpose, may change in meaning if it is viewed in a glass case in a museum rather than in its intended setting. Study of the cultural history of the society or group out of which the art works came, clarifies its meaning and purpose and helps remove the distortion of interpretation that can occur when the art is viewed out of the context of its creation.

When?

When an artwork was created, along with any other information about it, gives the viewer additional insight into the meaning the artist intended for the work to have. It explains much about why the art looks as it does and what were the influences on the purpose and meaning of the artwork. The study of aesthetics and aesthetic response helps students discover what it is in the artwork they are responding to and how this affects their interpretation of the artist's meaning.

How?

The processes and materials from which artworks are created has a profound effect on what they will look like and be interpreted. A painting in oils is very different from a painting in watercolor and the effect on the viewer will be different. The same is true of sculpture from architecture of painting or printmaking from collage. How the materials are combined, arranged, and presented are choices the artist consciously makes for the specific purpose of eliciting understanding of his/her intent by viewers.

Studio work in art gives the children and young people the opportunity to learn how to use the tools, to manage the processes, and to select the media that will most effectively convey the meaning their work has. From the youngest ages, children find the directness of art media provides them the opportunity for this kind of communication. As they learn more complex ways of working and how to manipulate more complicated processes, they increase their ability to intentionally convey their own ideas through their own artwork as well as to more effectively read the works of art of others (because they understand better how a work is created affects the meaning of the work).

Why?

At the heart of any artist's work is why it is done. Whether the artist is a professional artist, a child, an adult creating a religious or cultural icon, or an architect designing a building, the art work is authentic and honest if it is intentional and purposeful. Children and young people with a substantive art education will be able to look at, respond, give meaning to, and create works of art that have content, substance, purpose, and value.

Does It Matter?

A substantive art education changes the way a person sees and understands his/her world. As they move toward adulthood, children form views of other people, other cultures, and the values of their own or other social systems based on their experiences. A substantive art education will give each person a better basis for understanding why people believe and act as they do and how the differences that exist between peoples and societies can be bridged through knowledge.

The sensitivity to the needs and concerns of others that can be developed through an education in art will also help individuals deal with and solve many of the problems relating to the use of public spaces, the sharing of world resources, and the creation of an environment in which people can live peacefully and with understanding of one another.

Art offers children and young people — all people, in fact — the unique chance to use a universal resource not limited by language or custom as a way of sharing their own ideas and views and learn those of others. Yet it is only through a substantive education in art that students can be provided the knowledge, skills, and practice that are required for this ability.