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## Philosophical concerns in fine arts education

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### Abstract

Due to the rapid changes in society it is increasingly important to ask why we teach the way we do, which teaching methods we should adopt and which we should reject or abandon. As a result, it is crucial that philosophical concerns are integrated into art and design curricula. Novel interpretations and applications of teaching methodologies that will offer new and diverse art forms, perspectives, and worldviews are necessary. In what ways do philosophical theories influence critical analysis and create new opportunities for both educators and students? How can the so-called ‘trendy’ deconstructive approaches stemming from postmodern theories influence the variety of artistic and educational fields? This paper will examine the ties between philosophical theories and art education in order to examine possible pedagogical connections between theory and praxis. These possibilities are set out by means of specific applications or methodologies as practiced in inquiry-based art classes in higher education.

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### 1. Introduction

Because art theory that is typically dependent on formalist rules and based on limitative Kantian aesthetics is now considered passé, instructors have come to recognize art education as an interdisciplinary and holistic field, incorporating a much wider range of fields such as philosophy, sociology, physics, and psychology. This is a period in which all identities, styles, and formats disappear and all approaches are encouraged. Owing to the rapid development of the information age, the borders between sciences, arts, philosophy, and other disciplines are dissolving. If art cannot be separated from various fields then it is imperative to include in our classes new approaches that will combine and synthesize these diverse areas of study.

Considering the reformatting of art education in higher education may open up possibilities of re-thinking art education in terms of method, curriculum, and responsibility. This presents the challenge of re-thinking art education within the framework of new educational and philosophical theories. In Philip Higgs’ (2002) words,

The philosophical challenge of re-thinking education, of deconstructing education, does not consist in changing, replacing, or abandoning education. On the contrary, to deconstruct is first and foremost to undo a construction with infinite patience, to take apart a system in order to understand all its mechanisms, to exhibit all its foundations, and to reconstruct on new bases (p. 175).

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Inspired by these words, I would propose that there is a need to think afresh about what can be done towards the enlightenment of art education. Although philosophical approaches may not provide clear-cut answers, they may help us to better understand what such an enlightenment of education could mean.

## 2. Fragmentation of Meaning and Assemblage of Converging Ideas

Structuralism emerged in France during the 1960's as a criticism of existentialists, who emphasized the concept of human freedom and choice. Structuralists argued that human behavior is determined by various structures such as culture, religion, socio-cultural conditions, and established norms. Based on the work of Swiss linguist Ferdinand Saussure (1857-1913), structuralists focused on the study of the constructs underlying the system of language. Understanding the underlying system involved the examination of patterns, systems and structures as a means to analyze narratives. While Saussure's linguistic work was considered a starting point of structuralism, French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss's (1908-2009) focus on structural anthropology gave rise to the 'post-structuralist movement' in France. This movement inspired such thinkers as Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser, Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida (Klages, 2007).

Post-structuralism paved the way to the assemblage of converging ideas, the fragmentation of meaning, the local situation of politics, the non-universality of meaning, and the centering of the subject (Applerouth & Desfor-Edles, 2007). The post-structuralists embraced the unstable nature of language and, concomitantly, its dynamism in historical context. It is through socially constructed interpretations of language – including the visual – which we communicate, and the primary concept of post-structuralism is the circulation of meaning through discourse (Balkir, 2009). Foucault (1981) has shown that identity is an unfixed concept, a discourse, a way of talking about self as a means of constructing and reconstructing meaning. This view coincides with Lyotard (1981) when he writes about the proliferation of multiple truths to be described as the postmodern condition.

Along the same line of thought with Foucault, who emphasized identity as a discourse in constructing and reconstructing meaning, Lacan argued that self becomes a sign itself that is created through relationships and differences. Lacan emphasized the instability of meanings, arguing that truths and meanings are slippery, tentative, and ambiguous, and based on complex interrelations. This generation of social theorists rejected the essentialist and foundational ideas and stressed the plurality or 'free play' of meanings (Reed, 1997, 2007).

Jacques Derrida set out to dissolve the fixed binary oppositions such as male/female, good/evil, light/dark, and right/left and erase boundaries between oppositions in order to deconstruct them. Therefore, Derrida's basic method of deconstruction is characterized by a combination of 'construction and deconstruction;' deconstructing "the old system by showing how its basic units of structuration (binary pairs and the rules for their combination) contradict their own logic" (Klages, 2008, p. 4). For Derrida, meanings of texts are diffused and have multiple interpretations; therefore, it is not possible to reach a truth. Texts always present a surplus of possibilities. Therefore, as Jones (2008) puts it, "rather than basing our philosophical understanding on undeniable truths, the deconstructionist turns the settled bedrock of rationalism into the shifting sands of a multiplicity of interpretations" (p. 2). Derrida believes that all texts are related to other texts and all texts exist only in relation to other texts that are constructed through discourse, symbols, linguistics, and grammars (Sulhanudin, 2007).

According to Slavoj Žižek, as a modernist approach Deconstructivism is a most radical version of the logic of "dropping the mask." For Žižek, a deconstructive attitude should not say, "Truth is this" at the end of its reasoning, but rather should question the "is." Thus we should set out to deconstruct meanings in order to make the truth. Questioning the "is" within a signification/explanation activity becomes a post-structuralist and deconstructivist criticism (Žižek, 1992).

## 3. The Impact of Theoretical Currents in the Field of Art Education

A philosophical approach in education is directly associated with freeing the student and teacher from the intellectual ties and established assumptions of the status quo to achieve a liberation that will shake off the assumptions of the academic world about the ideal and/or correct ways to practice learning and teaching. A

philosophical approach in education is about learning processes, knowledge and knowing through a critical eye. It is a way to begin questioning the dynamic of teaching and learning. As Deborah Smith Shank (1995) puts it,

How we think is directly related to how we learn. When learning is understood as thinking, it is a process and not a product. It becomes an ongoing process of inquiry, which cannot be defined by the limits of subject matter parameters (p. 236).

“Real inquiry begins when doubt begins. It ends when the doubt ends,” says Jessie Whiteland (2004, p.104). Whiteland believes that the desire to learn and decipher meanings starts with doubt and wonder. Established belief and social value systems can be transformed only as a result of questioning the validity of the ongoing systems. Questioning assumptions and accepting multiple worldviews as well as making connections between established beliefs and individual beliefs (that are fed by social and cultural conditioning) could be tools for teaching an inquiry/issue based art education.

A philosophical attitude in education is about opens a field of inquiry to enable certain previously unconsidered questions to be asked. Art education in higher education must set out to create a dialectic thinker in the student – one who is able to criticize in order to reformulate ideas and ideologies. This notion correlates with Peirce, who believed that the university is a place for learning and not instruction, as noted by Smith-Shank (1995). Thus, the role of the instructor evolves to a facilitator of the learning activity. This shift ultimately changes and challenges the whole notion of the primary foundations of instruction methods designed as modernist, behavioral, and information-processing cognitive models (Smith-Shank, 1995).

A philosophical approach to art education may involve different suggestions for the interpretation and application of art. For example, it is argued that different agendas and tactics of postmodern theorists may present a disunified body of theoretical ideas that may lack certain models and cogent ideas (MacDonald, 1999). From the academic standpoint, the openness and eclectic nature of postmodern thought may also be perceived as a distressing development due to the erosion of “high and elite culture against the surrounding environment of philistinism, of schlock and kitsch” (Marriner, 1999, p. 58) For such opponents, when the means of inquiry is complicated, a difficulty arises in relating thought to action, which is characteristic of deconstructive postmodernism. However, an art education based on deconstructive approaches would thrive on differences and possibly reconsider original contexts, bringing together elements and welcoming all the ambiguities and surprises that arise from multiple references. As eclecticism becomes central to contemporary art dynamics, art education automatically enters the realm of the popular –whether the popular is rejected or not. Since art education cannot be confined to narrow disciplines and technical qualities of art any longer, the key to new learning is to make connections and integrations between things, regardless of their artistic qualities.

For instance, an inquiry-based visual culture education is directed towards viewing things with a critical eye, with the goal of decoding and deconstructing every form of visual representation. Shi Pu and Shei-Chau Wang (2004) state that to have a critical eye is the readiness to take things apart and to go beyond their face value. A critical eye looks at everything in detail. Art education with an analysis of visual culture nurtures the critical eye and provides students and teachers with the freedom to challenge and explore ideas. While challenging ideas, an inquiry-based approach to art education at higher education level can result in the empowerment of both students and teachers.

Shi Pu and Shei-Chau Wang (2004) point out that a semiotic approach to teaching foundation-level art and design enables students to have a “critical eye.” For them, the criticality of looking does not exclusively refer to a deconstructive and ever-sceptical gaze bestowed upon every form of visual representation; rather, it is the readiness to take things apart and to go beyond their face value. As Wang and Wang further argue,

Hence, resuscitating the critical eye of college students who study art, we propose, has at least two dimensions.

One is a “de-contamination” process to restore the curiosity, alertness and rawness of visual encounters of a young child – what the 18<sup>th</sup> century British empiricists called a “blank slate.” Admittedly this restoration is a utopian proposal that is increasingly difficult to execute in today’s society of the spectacle (p.117).

As a particular frame of mind for experiencing ideas, deconstruction can significantly change the nature of educational discourse. Likewise, semiotics – the science of signs and their structures - offers a means to understand, think, and make connections in postmodern pedagogy. In terms of teaching the core courses to freshmen students, the interconnectedness of concepts serves as an ideal basis for semiotic inquiries. Such semiotic pedagogy may direct the attention of instructors away from teaching specific portions of knowledge and focus them upon the

cultivation of higher intellectual skills. Smith-Shank (1995) believes that while semiotics is not the only view that can lead to this conclusion, (unlike some others) it provides certain conceptual tools for analyzing intellectual skills and insights into ways in which these skills may be nurtured.

#### 4. In The Classroom

The deconstructivist Derrida held that the meaning of texts is diffuse with multiple interpretations. In the same manner, images present a surplus of possible meanings. For instance, the fast-food chain McDonalds' logo symbolizes not only a type of fast food but also America. McDonalds creates a conditioned response, luring children into buying a burger in order to get a toy. A classroom inquiry may involve questions such as, "How are children coding McDonalds's logo, and how is the clown associated with this burger brand?" The answer to these questions lies in the obscure relationship between visual culture and deconstruction. This type of a pedagogical inquiry strives to discover hidden codes and is influenced by a deconstructive attitude which attempts to see the chaotic structures of a language or culture where meaning is constantly transferred from one sign to the other. The poststructuralists and subsequently deconstructionists held that seeking the slippery, tentative, and ambiguous meanings and truths that are based on complex interrelations among language structures is similar to searching for the meaning behind visual codes and symbols. Objects in the environment hold many meanings beyond their local/primary meanings.

Some educators perceive popular culture as the embodiment of degradation and loss of traditional values, and avoid utilizing popular culture in their teaching in order to protect "refined" knowledge. Other educators conceptualize popular culture as new perspective, using it to point out links between new developments such as consumerism, globalism, communication technologies, and political and cultural diversities. In issue-based art and design classes, references to popular culture are aimed at connecting students' understanding with complex philosophical ideas. The use of analogies, for instance, can be used in order to explain the concept of 'mimesis' to students - they might be asked to consider why their mothers get attached to soap opera characters. Is it because they want to be them, or visa verse? This type of analogy relates complex ideas to the daily lives of students, and it allows students and teachers to interpret artefacts, images, signs, messages, representations, even feelings and psychological structures as the products of commercial and economic activities. Levent Basturk (1995) notes that as these images and signs are reproduced, the imagery permeates reality, creating a simulacrum or hyper-reality that exemplifies a blurred distinction between original and copy. Baudrillard first conceptualized the concept of simulation and simulacrum, asserting that in such cases a model replaces the real, and the real is produced in accordance with a model (eventually constituting reality itself). For Baudrillard, even the realm of religion may be subject to simulations working against reality (Basturk, 2005).

Furthermore, discussions centered on popular art forms can promote "communicative competencies" a concept that is currently perceived as a central goal of education. For instance, music videos, which are an important part of popular culture, can be excellent sources for learning discursive analysis. They can be valuable educational tools for the instructor to comprehend how students view the world. As Pamela Taylor (2009) suggests, music videos can become a "catalyst for understanding the social and political implications of both the representation and interpretation of ideas and meaning, when studied in critically contextual ways" (p.232).

Advertisements can also be excellent sources of critical inquiry, if the inquiry focuses on decoding and deconstructing forms of consumption. Key concepts to discuss might be representation, ideology, visual semiotics, commodity culture, spectatorship, and the male gaze. Examination of how meanings are produced in these visual communication cues and codes will help students understand visual codes and messages. Such deconstruction analyses challenge students to integrate the aesthetic sensitivity and social awareness necessary to create art in a world dominated by commercial images.

Likewise, an artwork can be analyzed through the deconstructivist approach in that students are confronted with questions and issues concerning the content, the artist's intent, its period, and its impact on viewers. Definite meanings of the artworks are put aside in order to understand the reality of the artwork. In his book, *The Truth in Painting*, Derrida (1987) states that we can never decide about the reality of a painting. He presents the readers a series of impressions in relation to the nature of art. For Derrida, deconstruction is never a meaning of something; it never takes an interest in a meaning of anything; instead, it provides us the opportunity to pinpoint the cracks that may occur when we wrongfully make an assumption. For him, even one artwork cannot exist wholly because to

exist wholly is only a myth. Questions related to the meaning of the artwork are transformed into questions related to the reality and meaning of language used to describe it. This would lead us to an infinitive number of questions that would restrain us from maintaining a strong ground that would help us to communicate our critical opinions (Murray, 2009).

Classical criticism that strives to find the criteria to determine the painting's meaning is nothing more than an authoritarian and demanding attitude in the eyes of the deconstructivist, who avoids such activities. For example, this is how Derrida evaluates van Gogh's *Old Shoes with Laces*: "Here they are. Let me start. What happened to the shoes? Which shoes are they? Whose shoes are they? What were the shoes made of? And even, who are these people? Here they are, only questions, that is all." (Murray, 2009, p.120). For Chris Murray (2009), Derrida's method of confronting readers or viewers with such questions in order to postpone the process of critical judgement is truly a deconstructivist approach. To Heidegger, the shoes belong to a villager, and to Shapiro the shoes belong to a town-dweller, or to the artist himself. To take side of one or the other part is to attribute a special meaning to the painting, as it informs us about the city or the country in which the shoes reside (Murray, 2009). Derrida asks, 'how could they be so sure if they are a pair of shoes? By asking questions like 'what is a pair,' he devalues a discourse regarding meaning in art history that is commonly acknowledged as a basic criterion. We immediately find ourselves contemplating issues beyond the borders of art criticism, outside a closed circle, as just desired by Derrida (Murray, 2009).

As another example, reproduced original works of art, such as the *Mona Lisa*, can be analyzed within the rhetoric of the age of mechanical reproduction. Walter Benjamin, in his *Illuminations* (1968), notes how the value of art is transformed by their reproduction on t-shirts or coffee cups in the age of mechanical reproduction. For Benjamin, the meanings of the original works of art change when they are reproduced, challenging their one-of-a-kindness. However, he views reproducibility as a potentially revolutionary element, because it frees art from its revered status as unique ritual artefact in the traditions of iconic reverence and exchange (Benjamin, 1968). Classroom discussions could be centered on the uniqueness and authenticity of reproduced images and how their meanings change as they are popularized. Another example might be a subject of scrutiny in an art class would be to consider how elite cultural forms have been popularized, while popular forms have been elevated to the museum tradition (Mukerji and Schudson, 1991). The canonization of the Pop Art of Andy Warhol, or the graffiti of Basque in the high museum tradition, and popularization of the image of the Venus de Milo classical music are further examples to draw upon. As Mukerji and Schudson (1991) wrote, "In this way, we capture some of the subtleties of new cultural theories and can help convey the array of studies that have made traditional conceptions of popular culture untenable" (p. 4).

#### 4. Summary

Fine arts education welcomes different suggestions for interpretations and application in order to provide emerging new possibilities of diverse art forms, perspectives, and worldviews. This approach, which stems from the poststructuralist, deconstructive, semiotic, and postmodern theories, has influenced a variety of educational and artistic fields. These discursive theories allow for the practice of critical analyses that creates new responsibilities for both educators and students - who can develop and organize their agendas, making them active recipients of information.

This paper was an attempt to outline how philosophy may enter into inquiry based fine arts education with some application suggestions, while aiming to create more questions. The insertion of philosophical concerns into the content of teaching and learning is legitimate as it allows us to ask why we teach the way we do, what teaching methods we should adopt and what we should reject. A philosophical strategy enables us to look at established beliefs in different ways, unpacking the concept of art education, helping us to raise fundamental questions and so expanding worldviews.

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