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The Arts: Making Sense, Making Meaning of Ourselves

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Abstract:

The author investigates the subject of the Arts and how it might be differentiated from other subjects in the curriculum framework. The traditional Arts/Science binary has become blurred, when the Sciences now insist that the student become responsive to and responsible for the environment. The responsiveness required of the Art student however is still of a different kind, being not simply a subjectively intuitive awareness of a physical world so much as an dialectical communication between writer and reader, artist and viewer and particularly actor and audience. This ongoing conversation makes social sense of our worlds and requires understanding of cultural rules and symbols. Our artworks are physically embodied and culturally emergent entities, through which we, as artist, critic or appreciator, continually construct and reconstruct subjectivities, societies and selves.

Biography

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Article

The Arts: Making Sense, Making Meaning of Ourselves

Beneath the uniformity that unites us in communication there is a chaotic diversity of connections, and for each of us the connections continue to evolve. (Quine 1960, 13)

I inhabit a life-world infused with artworks, arts people and arts language, and even though I have distanced myself enough to give lectures and seminars in aesthetic education, I remain curious about what it is that makes the Arts so valuable, or why the Arts should be given a special place in a curriculum framework. That was a challenge that those who write the outcome statements had to face. This paper should be read as an exploration of the particular way in which the Arts make sense by making meaning rather than seeking explanations and truths. One way of beginning to understand why I value it so highly (and why many politicians and educators do not) is to place it in a historical context and begin to offer not only a description but the beginnings of a historical explanation of its identity today.

Forty years ago, when I entered university, C.P. Snow's distinction between the two cultures, Arts and Sciences, in universities, made sense to me. Scientific formulae just did not interest me. The truths I was after were ones of the mind, not ones of the physical universe. Herbert Read (1934) had said much earlier "In the end I do not distinguish science and art, except as methods, and I believe that the opposition created between them in the past has been due to a limited view of both activities. Art is the representation, science the explanation of the same reality." So I was more interested in representation than in explanations and that informed my love of language, and in particular metaphor and symbol, those fuzzy and contextually

dependent representations.

It wasn't until I was studying for my doctorate in the seventies that I became aware that aesthetics were their own topic of research and understanding. One set text was James L. Jarrett's *The Humanities and Humanistic Education*. With a background in literature, Jarrett was concerned more with the study of the Arts than their production. He worried that his definition of the humanities focussed more on the musicologist and the art historian than the painter or the actor. But even if Read was right that there was a common reality to which both art and science were answerable, Jarrett wanted to insist that there were important differences in their respective ways of treating that reality.

He began (Jarrett, 1976, 65 -79) by describing the sciences in such a way as to distinguish them from the arts saying the sciences had a strong tendency towards generalization, abstraction and systematic synthesis, as in grammars or logics of explanation. This makes the scientist's way of thinking strongly "convergent" rather than "divergent." Scientific investigation also tends to intellectualize its procedures as much as possible, discounting the feelings, emotions, attitudes and most of the values of individual investigators. Impersonality and value-neutrality are important so that one can deduce particular hypotheses and instances from systems of laws. For similar reasons, scientific findings tend to be expressed in "hard" or "tough" propositions" statements that are either verifiably true or false. Typically, says Jarrett, imagery, metaphor, idiosyncratic language are frowned upon in science (and I would add irony or humour).

On the other hand, says Jarrett, Humanities honour individual achievements not only for what they tell us about the world, but for what they tell us about the age, nation or person that produced them, that is, they are contextual. A Monet painting of water lilies does not facilitate interest in the family of lilies: it tries to show us how one very particular group of flowers looked on a certain day in a certain season, with the light just so. The artist unlike the scientific camera cultivates the uniqueness of his own outlook and there is certainly no assumption that any artist competently addressing the same problem will come up with the same answer. Artists and humanist scholars alike are notoriously individualistic, and their language uses much more metaphor, imagery and ornamentation, with not only a higher tolerance of ambiguity but indeed an exploitation of it.

On the face of it this is uncontroversial, and many of Jarrett's ideas were reflected in my PhD on metaphor and reason. His general conclusion was that in the increasing emphasis on the value of scientific approach, schools were becoming de-humanised. He wanted to make sure that schools moved beyond their concern for more facts and a faster reading rate to appreciate the humanities, well, for their human-ness, to "help young people develop compassion, concern for others, faith in themselves, the ability to think critically, the ability to love and above all, the ability to remain open to other people and to new experiences". (Weinberg, in Jarrett 1974 p 106).

One might criticise Jarrett for being too defensive here, of defining Arts from the back foot, only in terms of its un-Scientific qualities. It is the weak Other of the Arts/Science binary, and continues to be devalued relative to technological and scientific endeavours. One could argue, contra Jarrett, that the Arts do seek to generalise from a particular context or experience in a similar way to the inductive methods of science, and that the meanings of artistic symbols and rituals have meaning only in relation to their perceived similarities with their use in other grounded contexts. Individual artists are important and often prized for their uniqueness in daring to break with conventions, but they can still only be recognised by and within artistic communities, and even in these postmodern times, there is still a desire of the artist to reach others, to share values. If the differences between the inferences made in science and those in the arts and between the necessary shared languages and rules of practitioners of both, have become more subtle, they demand more sophisticated investigation.

Twenty-five years after Jarrett, the arts have moved from their binary opposition to Science, moved from a marginalised and optional status to equal status with eight other key learning areas in the revised Australian national curriculum in Australia. As with many other dominant hegemonies, the Science/Arts binary is collapsing. Integration of all of the areas is to be encouraged, and the Sciences too change from an academic theorizing to become an ethical agent, making individuals responsible for future worlds by understanding their place in a deep ecology of fluid energy and transformation. In the Sciences, Man shifts from being at the top of the ecological hierarchy, and in control, to being responsible and responsive to the world around him (or her). There is an ethic in both the Arts and Sciences that demands responsibility, yet there is still a difference in the quality of responsiveness.

The 1998 WA Curriculum Framework states that "Studies in The Arts learning area benefit students by developing creative skills, critical appreciation and knowledge of artistic techniques and technologies in

dance, drama, media, music and visual arts and combinations of arts forms. The Arts develop students' sense of personal and cultural identity and equip them for lifelong involvement in the appreciation of the arts.' The Framework document continues

Although these five arts forms are often used in interrelated ways, each has its own symbolic language, techniques and conventions. Students use their senses, perceptions, feelings, values and knowledge to communicate through the arts. Students develop creative ways of expressing themselves as well as a critical appreciation of their own arts works and experiences and those of others.

Unlike the Sciences the Arts split up its four major anticipated outcomes into strands, namely Communicating Arts Ideas, Using Arts Skills, Techniques, Processes, Conventions and Technologies Understanding the Role of the Arts in Society Responding to, Reflecting on and Evaluating The Arts

Even though "these major outcomes and strands are interrelated and interconnected. All are equally important and are developed concurrently.", only the first and last would have fit Jarrett's agenda. Jarrett operated within a modernist framework in which the cultural assumptions driving a Western European patriarchal culture were taken as essential and unchanging artistic truths. He had as one of his agendas to outline what the fine arts had in common across time, an agenda doomed, according to Peter Kivy (1997) to failure. The two aberrant strands here indicate a shift away not only from the essentialist to the constructivist, but from the aesthetic to the responsive artisan or participant and, and while they refer to the arts, they assume that any definition of an Art will be contextually dependent upon its temporal and cultural situatedness, even to its use of tools.

Within the contextualist programme there is no firm centre. The history of the arts as a progressive development towards an essential truth has ended (Danto, 1991). Communication becomes an integrated process involving the relationship between the makers and audiences of arts works. This strand includes the complete range of communication processes students engage in when they generate and experiment with ideas: using arts languages; bringing new arts works into existence; reworking and transforming existing arts works or ideas; working individually or in groups; applying arts skills and processes, such as problem solving, rehearsing, structuring and shaping arts works; incorporating their understanding of historical, social and cultural knowledge; presenting them for others and using feedback from others in doing so. (WA Curriculum Framework)

Is this the sort of communication that comes about in Playback Theatre? The dramatic performers on stage are reworking and transforming the cues they get from the audience working and reworking them to become symbolic performances that feedback to give new meaning to the experiences of the lay audience. One must ask, who is the artist here and who the spectator? The actors are drawing on their knowledge of standard figures in theatre, of almost stereotypical heroes and victims, but often their knowledge is as much psychological as artistic. Is psychodrama a new discipline or art form in itself, requiring its own rules for understanding and production? And so does that move in itself imply an infinite regress of new disciplines as each group defines and refines its own protocols?

The presumption of existing protocols for each of the Arts has not been thrown out with the idea of an Essentialist Aesthetic. In order to apply "arts skills and processes, such as problem-solving and rehearsing, structuring and shaping arts works" one must know what the appropriate procedure is for each Arts form. Are such problem-solvings and rehearsals different in sketches in the visual arts and rehearsals in drama? And to what extent are the processes which drive the differences between the visual arts or drama, different in kind or degree from the problem-solving in scientific experiment or hypothesis building?

Many people who say that critical thinking skills are non-discipline specific, that they cross the traditional disciplinary boundaries, will want to claim that problem-solving is the same intellectual process no matter what discipline the problem arises from. The framework says " Students understand how they choose from a repertoire of appropriate tools in making and appreciating the arts. In particular, they use a repertoire of appropriate arts skills, techniques and processes to participate in and understand the arts; they use the conventions of the arts confidently and appropriately; and they use and adapt traditional and emerging technologies to create, explore, develop and communicate". The framework does not dictate which are the art skills appropriate to music, or to drama or to poetry and indeed says "in communicating arts ideas, students integrate all other strands and major outcomes," but there still seems an assumption that the "Knowledge" whether tacit or explicitly formulated of each art form is important to teaching it in schools. One has to be familiar with the languages of the specific art to be able to SEE any issue as a problem to be solved. Whether to place the green next to the blue is not a science problem. It is a matter of cultural sensitivity and meaning. If it shocks, as it did with Bridget Riley's Op Art, it is because it breaks the

anticipated convention that "Blue and green should never be seen", but only so far as we can expect that the conventions are known and deliberately stretched. How many seconds to pause before breaking into laughter on the stage is a different kind of problem-solving from whether to add two drops or three of hydrochloric acid to the water. The latter requires a knowledge of the laws of catalytic reaction, the former a knowing of shared meanings and expectations which are often deliberately and perversely disrupted..

If we blur the distinctions between arts and sciences completely, then we are falling into the trap that Robert Hughes warned us of in the *Shock of the New*, that we lose any notion of what an art work is. This is after all what Danto warned against - that if we lost sight of the values that the arts in particular had to offer, then any artwork would run the risk of being valued only as a commodity, for the price it could command either from museums, arts connoisseurs, or business people (witness the huge prices paid by Alan Bond for artworks demonstrating not his appreciation of the arts but his power). This is using the arts to make cents, rather than sense, and I often fear that the driving force behind the National Curriculum in the early nineties, the Trades Unions, in their attempt to break the universities' stranglehold on school curricula, may have led to a valuing of the arts only for their potential vocational value and earning capacity. We have seen from our new tax reforms how low this is! But in this, the Sciences are also corrupted, scientific research fast becoming valued in universities for its commercial viability rather than any intrinsic scientific value or contribution to knowledge

Thank goodness the statements in the Curriculum Framework were not written by the economic rationalists who seem to prevail in the large educational bureaucracies and who manage to exercise power over many school practices such as evaluation and funding. In moving the emphasis away from teaching to student learning, they move closer to the experienced and sensed meaning of art which Jarrett in his academic distance had tended to ignore. The fourth strand in the W. A Curriculum Framework, "Students use their aesthetic understanding to respond to, reflect on and evaluate the arts" shows, as Jarrett indicated, that the arts are a matter of individual response and responsiveness as well as reflecting and analysing.

In this strand, students generate arts works that communicate ideas by creating, interpreting, exploring, developing and presenting ideas in and through the arts. In particular, they make arts works that communicate original ideas; make arts works that interpret arts ideas, taking known ideas and transforming them by exploration and experimentation; explore arts ideas by using direct experience, observation, curiosity, research, imagination and emotions; develop their arts ideas to satisfying conclusions using a range of creative processes; and communicate their arts ideas through presenting or performing them for a variety of purposes and a range of audiences.

One of the difficulties of containing the Arts within any theoretical framework is that it is magically holistic, relying on making and renewing connections between the individual and sensed realities, between the individual and the social and cultural values within which each person is immersed. Any artistic presentation can shock a person into an awareness of his or her own situation, by stretching the imagination.

So an important social function of the Arts is to situate the student in a social and human context. This is another facet of the making of meaning. In drama, the student has to know what the rituals of human interaction mean, whether in an Australian context of the 60s, a Greek tragedy, or a Russian comedy. This is not just literature. It is stretching the student's awareness of their own social place here and now in history. Once again, from the Curriculum framework:

At earlier levels, students work with familiar contexts such as their own families, the world of the school or local area. They understand, in increasingly complex ways, the purpose and functions of the arts in Australian and other societies. At later levels, they understand the relationships between artists and arts works and the particular societies in which they were made. Through understanding the arts in these broader contexts, they also understand their own values about aesthetic experience as they are shown in their own lives. In understanding the role of the arts in society, students integrate all other strands and major outcomes

It is noted here that the starting point is the student's egocentric world, the familiar which makes sense to them. The arts encourage entry into a moral domain by stretching sensitivities, making each participant aware of self in relation to other possibilities. The shock of an artistic presentation can provide new awareness by confronting the senses as in a theatrical display where the characters on stage are larger than life, or the curves on a sculpture present new possibilities of form. Through the arts, students' senses as well as their conceptual schema are extended, and through visual or aural perceptions they can make sense of contexts which were previously not experienced in an adaptive and creative way.

You could say that this is what the science teacher also does, make present and real the scientific theories which give our world meaning. Chemical experiments are explained in terms of theories and causal laws which provide a sort of "cosmic glue" to hold our theories together. But in the arts it is different. In science, water is H₂O, a combination of hydrogen and oxygen molecules which will predictably run downhill, and predictably combine or not combine with other molecules. It is lawlike and logical and any novelty or unexpected appearance either remains unseen or is transmuted into the theory. Bronowski (1959 p.330-31) believed that "the scientist or the artist takes two facts or experiences which are separate; he finds in them a likeness which had not been seen before; and he creates a unity by showing the likeness." I agree (Haynes, 1978) that making connections where none existed is the essence of learning, whether in science or art, and that such making of meaning is essentially fluid and metaphorical, though many scientists would contest this. One could imagine a chorus from a play or film chanting "Hydrogen, hydrogen, hydrogen" and in so doing making us hear the word as waves lapping on a shingled shore. The senses make the meaning as much as the logical connections. In a painting of a swimming pool by George Haynes, the visual juxtaposition of blues and turquoises help us see the water as strangely real and yet solid. The meaning of water and our relationship to it is changed by our experience of the artwork and our awareness of that experience.

The latter point is important, otherwise we would not need an education in the arts. We could simply go out and respond to the world around us. As Maxine Greene constantly reminds us to be aware of the multiple perceptions required to gain a "sense" of the world's reality is to awaken to the reflective life of consciousness. Reflecting on one's self as a conscious object is made easier by stepping outside our mundane space. Any individual who reflects on self as a conscious object is confronting his/her relation to his/her surroundings, the manner of conducting him/ herself with respect to things and other human beings, the changing perspectives through which the world presents itself to him/her. Artworks of whatever form therefore are not things. Their importance lies in the fact that they have intentional properties, expressing the beliefs, values, emotions, senses of the artist or performer. This is what makes them human rather than scientific. The "positioning" of one's self in relation to others is what makes a drama real.

I opened this paper by announcing an intention to place the Arts in a historical context to see if I could capture a sense of what the Arts were. Margolis (1999, p.68) describes "artworks as physically embodied and culturally emergent entities." Simply put, artworks are ways of representing reality through human eyes. Often they USE and manipulate physical matter, but they do so not to experiment and test theories, but to present and re-present human meanings. This is close to Jarrett's original point about the need for humanities, but it has moved away from Jarrett's intellectual and essentialist distancing to a participatory and intentional act. Human meanings are bound to historical contexts. As cultural entities they possess a certain cultural historicity, which cannot be discerned simply by the senses in the same way as purely physical properties. This ties the arts to the development of an awareness as to who one's self is in relation to the culture within which we are embedded but which we have the power to transform. The perception of art and history becomes an extension of human self-perception and the perception of cultural phenomena is inseparable from the perception of physical phenomena. In drama particularly, as Beryl Chalk points out in her chapter, we are given a space apart to re-cognise who we are. My concept of self is in-formed by representations of human intentions in the arts. I respond to them and reflect on my responding in order to know myself. This ongoing making of meaning, or making sense of physical objects through the arts and their rituals is what makes us human rather than physical objects and is the reason for insisting on its importance in enriching our curricula and our worlds alongside the sciences.

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