

INTRODUCTION

MEMORY SEED

My introduction to teaching art began in September 1971 when I took up a post as art teacher in a secondary school in the West Riding of Yorkshire. Apart from my desire to survive and establish myself amongst students and staff I remember holding firm ideas about what I should be teaching. In relation to drawing and painting I had clear expectations concerning practice and representation. Students' art work which did not correspond to these I rather naively) considered as weak and in need of correction. I assumed wrongly that when students were making paintings and drawings from observation of objects, people or landscape, they should be aiming to develop specific representational skills associated with the idea of 'rendering' a reasonable likeness. I was reasonably familiar with the development of Western art and different forms of visual representation and expression and I knew, for example, that the projection system perspective is only one and not the correct representational system for mapping objects and their spatial relations as viewed from a particular point into corresponding relations in a painting or drawing. Nevertheless I still employed this mode of projection as an expectation or a criterion of judgement when teaching my students. In retrospect the consequence of my approach to teaching observational drawing or painting practices was that in expecting students to be able to produce a particular representational form I could be accused of assuming that all students had the same perceptual experience. That is to say, that all students viewed the world in a similar way and therefore in order to produce a good representational drawing it was a matter of them acquiring the appropriate representational techniques. My teaching practice was, therefore, grounded upon the idea of a universal vision that could be represented, given sufficient degrees of perception and drawing skill, which it was my job to teach and develop. Looking back, in many ways my teaching was a strange mixture of unquestioning acceptance of specific cultural traditions of visual representation that I had received in my training and education, coupled with my awareness of contemporary art practices and their eclectic use of representational form.

It was during this early period that I had to teach whole classes of boys from India and Pakistan, who spoke very little English. I introduced a variety of art activities to these students including printmaking and collage, however lessons concerned with observational drawing and painting left me feeling quite bewildered but also fascinated. The work they produced in these lessons was quite different to those of Western students to whom my training allowed me to respond. Essentially the Asian students' drawings and paintings were

highly decorative, there was no indication of depth representation (or so I thought) and the proportions of objects represented (such as plants or people) seemed exaggerated from my western viewpoint. These students appeared to be more concerned with design and decoration as opposed to representing views from particular viewpoints. My training did not allow me to respond to this work with any degree of confidence and I remember feeling a sense of muddling through even though I was struck by the remarkable difference of their drawings and paintings.

During this time in the early 1970s these students were generally unsuccessful in the GCE (16+) Art examination and many were not even considered for examination entry. The consequence for many was that their art practices went unrecognised by the examination system. Their work was frequently viewed with interest but not treated seriously within the institutional framework of formal examinations where ability in art practice was defined and identified. In terms of identity, these students' identities as learners appeared to be produced within two kinds of discourses, one in which their *difference* as students of art practice was acknowledged through a curious pedagogic voyeurism, and another in which their ability as art practitioners was unacknowledged and often pathologised (see Atkinson 1999a). In retrospect this was perhaps my first encounter with what writers in contemporary cultural and social theory refer to as 'the other'. Although as a newly qualified teacher my thoughts on pedagogy were inchoate, my experiences with these Asian students remains unforgettable and I believe they taught me a great deal about the teacher's need to be able to respond effectively to the different ways in which children and students make art. The need for teachers to be eternally vigilant of the criteria used to evaluate and assess students' art work is an important theme of this book.

In later years my interest in developing approaches to teaching art that accommodated the diverse practices of students grew and was given a strong impetus in 1980 when I was accepted for a part-time Masters Degree at the University of Southampton. There I worked with W.M. Brookes who introduced me to a host of ideas concerned with exploring the relationship between language and action that I found I could apply to my professional work teaching art. In many ways this book is the outcome of these initial explorations. It attempts to raise some of the professional issues with which art teachers are confronted, largely those concerned with the interpretation of children's and students' art practices, and offers a variety of theoretical tools which might inform appropriate responses. I was always unhappy with examination and assessment structures which valued particular forms of practice and representation over others, even though as a teacher I participated in these institutionalised judgements. My attempts to value all students' forms of representation and expression in art practice conflicted with my political and professional awareness of the need for students to be able to produce particular forms of representation in order to gain success in the public examination system. My early experience of teaching the Asian students indicated pow-

erfully the cultural basis and bias of examination and assessment practices in which ability in art practice is classified. In later years it taught me that as a teacher examining and assessing art work I was actually involved in a form of cultural politics, (see Williams 1977; Eagleton 2000), even though I thought I was involved in identifying or recognising students' 'natural' abilities.

My concern for valuing *difference* in students' forms of representation and expression continued throughout my teaching although I made frequent mistakes and even though I knew the examination system, of which I was a part, marginalized the art work of many students. It is important to note that my interest in the difference of students' art practices is not simply concerned with formal qualities; rather, it is to do with the representational or expressive logics, the semiotics of art practice, which underpin these formal structures. This interest runs alongside that concerning the frameworks of interpretation which we employ in order to try to understand the art work of children and students we teach. I will show that conflicts of interpretation can arise between the significance of the art work for the student who makes it and its significance for the teacher who has to assess it.

Particular issues that emerged during my early years of teaching art have remained with me, in modified form, throughout my work. This book is largely about these issues. Working with young people in school has taught me that the ways in which they explore and represent their experiences through art practice are diverse. A central focus of the book therefore will be upon representation (signification) and meaning in art practice in the context of art education. How do children and older students structure and give meaning to their art practices, and, in contrast, how do teachers interpret and give meaning to their art work? Consider the drawing in Figure 1. What is it about? How can we understand it and, further, how is our understanding formed? On first glance it seems a rather strange drawing and perhaps we can make little sense of it. However, knowing something about the context in which it was made allows us to make a reading. It was produced by a young boy who was fascinated by high structures and also with the letter 'r'. Looking closely at the drawing we can pick out numerous tall 'r' linear structures joined together in a complex matrix.

Although the drawing has significance for the boy it is not easy for others to interpret and understand. What can we deduce about the process of the drawing practice that led to the production of this drawing; is it possible to understand the dynamics of production? Can we say anything about the dialectical relationship between the emerging drawing and the boy's ongoing response to it? Do meaning and signification change for the boy as he makes his drawing? In my experience, art teachers are often faced with mysterious drawings and paintings and these can raise interpretational difficulties for their professional practice and result in different ways of responding.

Such issues lead into a major concern that is to do with how teachers and students acquire and develop their identities as teachers and learners in the

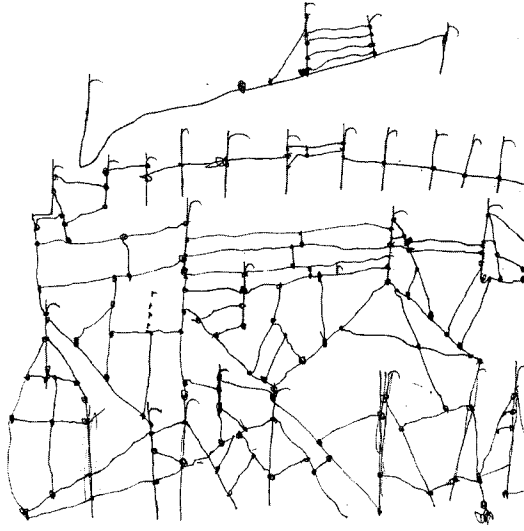


Figure 1.

context of art in education. I shall explore how such identities are developed within specific discourses of practice and representation that constitute pedagogic contexts. I will argue therefore that the construction of what I call *pedagogised identities* arises as a consequence of valuing and legitimising particular kinds of teaching and learning experiences in art. I will also argue that in different contexts of teaching and learning art different pedagogised identities are formed. For example, a secondary school art department that places great emphasis upon developing skills in observational drawing and painting and on students acquiring a series of skill and techniques in other areas such as printmaking, ceramics and collage, will precipitate different pedagogised identities to a department where the emphasis is placed upon using art practice to explore personal and social issues; where the emphasis is not upon skill and technique but upon exploring ideas and developing personal responses. This situation raises questions about the notions of universal provision and standardisation which underpin the National Curriculum for Art in England and indicates that in reality art education is comprised of a wide range of discourses and practices in which students' work is positioned and regulated.

One of the most complex issues in teaching arises when we try to reconcile what appear to be opposing ideas. How far can art be viewed as a personal practice when programmes of study and practice in art education prescribed by curriculum policies are culturally derived and framed? Teachers are concerned with getting their children or students to develop personal responses and personal investigation but equally teachers are expected to initiate students and children into conventional practices and techniques. In many ways this

seems to be an irreconcilable but inevitable project. Is it possible to reconcile the idea of developing self-expression with cultural determinism? Connected to this pedagogical dilemma are other difficulties that concern firstly the teacher's interpretation of the child's or student's work. How can the teacher empathise with the work from the child's or student's perspective without letting his or her expertise, or traditions of practice, influence judgement? Secondly, how can we initiate work in art education that is relevant to and located within children's and student's socio-cultural life-worlds whilst simultaneously expanding their understanding?

THEORIES OF LEARNING

The tension between the personal and the cultural is reflected within different theories of learning and development. Vygotsky's (1962, 1978) work on learning and child development, for example, foregrounds social and cultural factors that affect and condition learning, whilst Piaget (1950, 1956) on the other hand stressed the internal evolving cognitive processes that facilitate learning. Thus whilst Vygotsky's work provides a socio-cultural model of learning and development, Piaget proposes a biological model. Ideally it seems that we need to reconcile these two major theorisations of learning: we want to understand the context of learning but we also want to understand the learner's *modus operandi*, his or her learning processes.

In general terms Piagetian constructivist theory of learning argues that children, equipped with internal processes, actively construct their knowledge of the world. This is not a rejection of an external world beyond the mind of the learner but the child's knowledge and understanding of the world is an active construction determined by inner processes and representations that organise and give sense to experience. The child's construction of the world occurs in a series of different stages which Piagetian theory proposed as universal stages of development. Knowledge is therefore actively constructed and the educative task is to create an environment conducive to different stages of learning, practice and expression. Inherited techniques and traditions of practice guide the child or student but he or she creates her own independent understanding. In social constructivist theories of learning based on the work of Vygotsky or Mead (1934), knowledge and practices are inherited and reconstructed by the child. Individual learning is governed by structures of knowledge and practice that already exist and are culturally defined. Both constructivist and social constructivist theories of learning suggest a determinism which can be reduced respectively to nature or culture.

Hermeneutic theory, particularly the work of Gadamer (1989) and Ricoeur (1976, 1981), when applied to processes of learning, would blur the distinction between the individual and the social. For hermeneutics the individual is always already part of the world she perceives. That is to say perception of the world stems from how the world presents itself to consciousness which in turn is formed within social processes. We can't stand outside the world

Art in Education

Identity and Practice

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2002, IX, 206 p. 45 illus., Softcover

ISBN: 978-1-4020-1085-9