

Art Education and Contemporary Culture

Art education addresses the need to appreciate and understand the visual elements of contemporary society. The visual has become increasingly important forming a dominant aspect of economic growth, communication, knowledge acquisition, entertainment, work practices, cultural identity and creative development. These are the basics of our relation to society as a whole and reflect our ability to participate in and contribute to culture. The development of these abilities are crucial to any contemporary educational system.

Importance of the Visual

Economic Growth

The post industrial economy depends on the value added component, the concept or form, which has seen design industries boom. Every aspect of the constructed environment is designed, demanding ever higher levels of visual appreciation underpinning consumption and demand. Design has become a stated priority for the Victorian Government. The arts are now a billion dollar industry in Australia (Arts 2000) and the visual is integral to almost every arts activity. Web site design is a new industry which has rapidly become the foundation for information on sales, exchange, informative and publicity, and multimedia is being applied to all industries and programs.

Communication

The visual has long been the basis of modern communication through television, illustration, photography, advertising and films, but the vast growth in information technology has made the visual ever increasingly dominant. The application of multimedia to industry has generated the need for multimedia design to refine visual forms and improve communication in electronic systems which are now fundamental to global interaction. The world wide web has become the definitive shape of modern communication.

Knowledge

The acquisition of knowledge, ever more important in sustaining culture, is dependent on the visual. Research (McCrinkle, 2003) has demonstrated that 42% of students say that their preferred channel of learning is through visual experience and 52% of students say that they prefer to learn through kinesthetic processes. Both are defined as key domains of experience in visual art education.

Cultural Identity

The history of our culture is shaped by it's visual legacy and this forms the basis of who we are. Australian culture is increasingly diverse and pluralistic. Students live in a multicultural world which is also saturated with imagery from popular culture. Through art students learn to recognise how values and beliefs shape culture. The ability to interpret different visual cultures enables students to shape their own personal and cultural identity.

Entertainment

The visual is fundamental to the ways most people achieve a quality of life. Cinemas and television are the basis of mass entertainment; galleries, museums and architecture are the focus of our travels and the art and craft industries are integral to the expression of personal taste. Surveys have demonstrated that more people go to art galleries than to major sporting activities.

Work

Basic work activities increasingly rely on the visual; electronic technology has penetrated most work places; the internet sets the standard for purchasing and we interact with machines rather than people in many routine tasks, being cued by visual symbols. Our road, rail and air networks are negotiated through visual signs. The speed of interaction and movement in a modern city is

measured by the success of its visual symbolic forms and work places increasingly demand that employees use visual forms of communication.

Creativity

The achievement of our society is measured by its level of innovation, the outcome of its creativity and as Prof Richard Florida observed recently “creativity is the new economic driver.” Recent UNESCO research is focusing on the importance of art education in the development of educational and creative, abilities across the whole gamut of knowledge acquisition.

Resources for Art Education

Fundamental to achieving any educational outcome is the identification of the minimum resources essential to success. These can be divided into 2 categories: teacher education and curriculum.

Teacher Education

Recently proposed educational reforms in Victoria have identified ‘quality of teaching’ as the major factor in improving student achievement. It is essential that high quality art teacher education programs be funded to ensure quality graduates who are skilled to deliver challenging and worthwhile art programs in schools. Appropriate professional development opportunities are essential for art teachers to obtain specialist skills, upgrade knowledge and obtain higher degrees.

Curriculum

All students need to make art themselves and respond to art made by others. Although subject content must vary considerably because of the breadth and diversity of visual art disciplines, certain basic skills are implicit in all art education. Observation, perception, expression, communication, technical skill and creativity are the building blocks of all art education and the foundation of skills necessary for contemporary life. Through art students learn life-long skills of open-mindedness, innovative thinking, technical skill and cultural awareness. Curriculum design must ensure adequate time for visual art education to enable these qualities to develop.

Resources for School

To achieve the level of visual understanding necessary in contemporary culture and to ensure the quality of education referred to in Framework for Reform, the resourcing of schools will be crucial. In art education this means specialist education in visual art from teachers equipped to cover both practical and theoretical aspects of art disciplines; it will mean library resourcing, specialist classroom resourcing and technology resourcing to keep pace with cultural development.

Conclusion

High quality education in visual art should be a cultural priority because of our dependence on the visual in the 21st century. This can be achieved by addressing quality teacher education, designated art teaching time and art resources for schools. While this is partly concerned with funding the main issue is the recognition of the importance of the visual to contemporary culture and educating for this.

Art education provides the skills to negotiate the contemporary world.

References

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- Florida, Richard, UNESCO Division of Culture.