

Scrapping subjects and introducing ‘topics’? An inquiry over integrative approaches to learning departing from the case of Arts in the curriculum

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Abstract: It is proposed a critical reading of educational research literature approaching the role and place of Arts in the curriculum. The purpose of this proposed critical reading is to explore the implications of research and/or practice informed discussions of the role Arts play in the curriculum in current reformist debates. Pre-modern approaches to education placed great emphasis on subject-knowledge, assigning to arts a particularly important place in the system of liberal arts. Modern and post-modern approaches to understanding the role of arts in education prompt significant shifts in the view and practices of not only arts, but education itself which deserve attention. Disciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches to structuring learning contents mark the opposite ends of a continuum where every system of educational practice may be positioned closer to either one, based on the approaches to learning it endorses. In what follows, it is proposed reflecting on what moving across this continuum may mean for the place arts may be attributed in the curriculum.

Keywords: curriculum, arts, educational reform, integrative approaches

Deciding what role and what place Arts should be assigned in the curriculum is no simple problem. Some very interesting discussions in reformist discourses around the Western World today have sprung out of it. The mainstream curriculum had traditionally valued particularly two forms of artistic expression: music and visual arts. The long lasting history of arts’ status quo in the early, pre-modern approaches to systemic education in Europe has been strongly debated in modern and post-modern discourses on educational reform, with abandonment of all subject-based teaching figuring as one possible perspective to curriculum in some of the most progressive understandings to the topic.

It is proposed here a critical reading of current research literature approaching the role and place of Arts in the curriculum. The purpose of this proposed critical reading is to explore the implications of research and/or practice informed discussions of the role Arts play in the curriculum in current reformist debates.

The traditional conceptualizations of subject knowledge or learning content in the form of arts disciplines placed an important amount of pedagogic emphasis on training the taste, reasoning and aesthetic attitude of learners towards appreciation and consumption of art and art works, either musical or visual, as significant parts of the world’s

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cultural patrimony. Appreciating their quality of serving as great deposits of cultural memory, traditionalists believe that the art works enjoying centuries of cultural recognition have the merit of securing us out of the danger of becoming prisoners of our own time, as Efland (2007) argued. In the curriculum, work as vehicles to the history of human creativity and culture in the absence of which, traditionalists believe new generations would be less rich spiritually. Hence, a specially preserved place in the curriculum is recommended to be secured so that arts' specific subject-knowledge to be taught and learned. The work of art, as traditionalists see it, does not concern itself with the everyday trivia of one's life. It provides a way out of the ordinary, into where the exceptional and the imaginary live. This apparent breakage with the mundane, explains Julian Johnson (2002, p. 49) does not mean a breakage with the human being; instead it signifies arts' refusal to admit that everything which can be said about men lies in the everyday mundane objectivity (idem).

The Modern Age of the Industrial Revolution determined rapid transformations in the demographic, geo-political, cultural and socio-economical structure of life, with major consequences on the understanding of time, space, work productivity and human identity. These changes charged shifts in all major aspects of life and work; knowledge is defined by attributes such as certainty, systemic structure and accuracy (Toulmin, 1990); work is defined by efficiency and productivity, under a new-found appreciation for reducing costs and increasing the volume and speed of production; learning too, is - more than ever in history of education - significant mostly as a process deemed improvable in this cost-efficiency logic making its mark in every aspect of life at the time. Important for education is only the knowledge imbued with resources for increasing work productivity and employment, making arts subject-knowledge obsolete and marginal in a new order of things placing the greatest value on measurable aspects of learning related to the world of work and economic gain. At best, arts are regarded as a luxury – great to have in the curriculum, but not a necessity (Eisner, 2004).

The rate and amplitude of changes charging the world in all its' dimensions and aspects of life at the end of the XXth century fueled even further the inquiry and the continuous quest for renewed meanings for education and for arts. Postmodern interpretations of art processes prompt new roles and positions for both the work of art, and the artist. Meanings are co-constructed in the dynamic relational milieu pulling together in one fluid system the artist, the work of art and the consumer of art; the work of art is no longer understood as a product, dissociated from its' public. It rather functions as a pretext for experiences and judgments making up the act of co-constructing artistic vision and meanings in this particular relational dynamic. Irrespective of the degree of initiation, taste or maturity of aesthetic reasoning, individuals are engaged in the exercise of artistic production of meaning, at times by intrusive intervention, other times by integrating the artistic situation in the systems of social milieu, such as architecture, mass-media or folk art production do (Kwon, 2004, pp. 56-99, apud. Nae, 2015, p.182).

Current post-modern inquiries on education call out the immediacy and importance of accounting for the modern approaches to school curriculum's capacity to effectively respond to the major shifts in technological, demographical, socio-economical, geopolitical and cultural aspects of life. Communication, creation, learning, poverty and prosperity,

success, accomplishment, collaboration etc. are all notions expanding their meaning, with ample consequences on how people understand to procure what makes them lead a happy and fulfilled life. The main question in contemporary debates on education is whether the conceptions and approaches of modern industrialism, underlying the vast majority of approaches to curriculum today, are still capable of responding to the requirements of life and work today?

More often than ever educationalists tend to turn to exploring the potential for school learning that arts participation and arts production may present. Elliot Eisner (2004) provides a few good reasons as to why this may be the case. His arguments are worthy of a closer attention particularly because it seems to attempt closing the gap between the opposing ends of a curricular dichotomy prophesying a conceptual divorce between literacy and arts:

- Arts do not separate between form and content. The way in which something is being said determines the experience of receiving that which is being said to the same extent the content of that message does. What does this mean for education? It is a memento for the implications bared for learning by the way in which the school and the curriculum are being structured: learning owes to teaching just as much as it owes to the context (material, systemic, process etc.) of teaching.

- In Arts everything interacts: there is no form without content and no content without form. Whenever the form of an object or phenomenon changes, it simultaneously determines changes in the quality of the experience with that object or phenomenon. A color interacts with other colors on the canvas. Alterations of its' intensity determine alterations in the ways in which we perceive everything surrounding it. The way in which something is being taught or learned in school, faster or slower, difficult or simple gains its' meaning in relation to everything surrounding it in the relevant context of learning.

- In Arts nuances matter. Interpreters define their interpretations in the details, in the nuances. There are many ways in which the interpretation of a musical fragment may differ from one interpreter to another, not because they read a different music notation, but because the nuances the interpreter sees in the music are uniquely read and uniquely mastered in interpretations. The quality of learning is greatly influenced by the nuances of interpreting and constructing meaning afforded in the curriculum.

- In Arts surprise does not stand in the way of reasoning, instead it is considered a desirable part of the rewards and outcomes anyone participating in the artistic event awaits and hopes for. Without surprise there is no discovery and without discovery there is no progress. School learning could benefit greatly from hosting a lot more surprises than it manages to, as long as we are able to recognize the incredible intrinsic value surprises have in building motivation for learning.

- In Arts slowing perceptions are the surest way of securing the observation of what's going on. For the school learning though, the academic performance often emphasizes wittiness, quickness of reaction, sharpness of mind and responses. Perception, in authentic Deweyian sense, is more than simply the result of observing an object

for the purpose of recognition and labeling; slowed down perception allows savoring – meaning a qualitative exploration of the many aspects and relations the object or phenomenon under study affords.

- In Arts, the limitations of language are not signifying limitations of reasoning. We know more than we can say, famously warned Michael Polanyi (1960, apud. Palmer, 1998). Literacy is conventionally understood in relation to school learning as our ability to read and write. Eisner invites our reflection on the possibilities arts open up for expanding our current understandings of and approaches to literacy in curriculum and education. He is encouraging understanding literacy as someone's ability to identify or create forms of representation helpful in constructing and communicating meaning, even when or where similarities to conventional language are not available or possible. Moreover, conventional curricular approaches associate literacy to higher order thinking skills. Admitting we know more than we are able to say, schools may be able to cultivate an interest for multi-literacy, meaning to cultivate an interest in fostering a variety of forms of literacy, each prompting another way of being in the world, of leading a life of experiences and knowledge, of recovering and expressing meaning.

- In Arts the somatic experience is indicative of people getting the message. The school learning experience is often accused of focusing too much on everything else but the somatic experiences. Robinson (2001) notes that it is as if school only cares for our heads, as if it would be separate from the rest of the body. In a more serious note, he mentions Susanne Langer's metaphor of senses functioning as boulevards for consciousness. Somatic ways of knowing are bodily, visceral; they build in a sense of appropriateness to making a choice such as expressing a preference or a rejection, without necessarily putting into words all the reasons why that choice seems the right choice. Should wording be always required, then all the poetry of the choices we make would no longer be, such as falling in love, for instance, would be reduced to giving a logical structure and wording the entirety of our reasons and motives.

- In Arts the problems with an open ending are the best ones to elicit our imagination. The imagination, as a fundamental human capacity, is the source of all new possibilities. In the exercise of imagination, not in the necessity, lies the impulse for discovery. In the arts, the place for imagination is very highly regarded. School based learning could learn from the Arts this special positioning of imagination, and it seems to explore exactly that in systems of educational practice proposing the study of not merely subject-knowledge, but the exploratory venture into horizons of knowing which may include possible actions of discovery which have not previously been tested in any school culture of learning. This may seem to be the case of Finland's dropping the curricular plans focusing on subject-knowledge and replacing it with integrated approaches to learning, where imagination and inquiry are top rated intellectual exercises in engaging with 'topics' pedagogically designed to foster a phenomenological understanding of the world.

However compelling and enthusiastic Eisner's call for reconsidering the place and the role of arts in curriculum may be, different degrees of skepticism mark the practices of many systems of education and the discourses on educational reform in Europe today. Certainly, there is a great variation in the conceptions and approaches to

learning and education and in the ways learning contents structure current views of knowledge, particularly of academic knowledge. Disciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches to structuring learning contents mark the opposite ends of a continuum where every system of educational practice may be positioned closer to either one, based on the approaches to learning it endorses. In what follows, it is proposed reflecting on what moving across this continuum may mean for the place arts may be attributed in the curriculum.

Possibly the greatest advantage a disciplinary approach to structuring academic knowledge presents consists in the predictability of learning conditions and the linearity of the learning trajectory it affords. Standards of academic performance can be formulated in relation to each subject and every unit of learning content in it, whereas contexts for transmitting and assimilating the content can be secured from as little variation as possible, allowing for similarity of learning conditions and efficient control of the resources directed at reaching the proposed standards of academic performance. It bears no surprise, that such an understanding of knowledge and of learning is also impactful on learners and teachers identities, as it is consequential to the relational aspects of learning and of agency. It follows a logic of control and consistency building on the idea that what it is valuable in the human cultural patrimony can be established and needs to be preserved for future generations to identify with or be identified by, and that there is a level of predictability which objectivist conditions to acquiring knowledge afford to indicators of academic performances in relation to the macro-systemic criteria of productivity and economic gain. Although it made history and continues to frame the most impactful rhetoric in education in the world, this logic is detrimental to all learning that is difficult to measure and ends up in prompting segregationist approaches to knowledge in the curriculum. In most cases, it leads to marginalization and diminished formative value being attributed to the subjects in the curriculum which do not make the object of assessment and have no predictive value in relation to productivity and economic gain. Even where arts make it in the curriculum, a disciplinary approach to learning contents prove limiting to the possibilities of exploring art forms and creative experiences out of the scope of delivering the propositional knowledge endorsed in the curriculum.

Interdisciplinary approaches to arts in the curriculum prompt no less of a debate. Dispersion of views and positions can be explored when looking at notions of *transfer* in learning, attributing to Arts a position of being *instrumental* to learning in other subjects in the curriculum (i.e music may or may not be instrumental to higher performances in mathematical reasoning). Albeit all interdisciplinary approaches sprung out of a need to reposition arts in the curriculum, the better part of educational research studies endorsing interdisciplinary approaches before the turn of the century, have argued along the lines of a presumed instrumental effect arts have in regard of teaching and learning the core-curriculum heavies like language or mathematics. Thomas Brewer (2002) gives a comprehensive view over some of the earliest research studies warning against this extrinsic motivational build-on supporting the idea that Arts could play a more central part in the curriculum:

- Hetland and Winner (2000) edited a meta-analysis of studies on the impact interdisciplinary approaches repositioning arts in learning and curriculum bare on the academic performances of various disciplinary subjects and

noted only three causal relations: that of learning Music and the impact on spatial and temporal reasoning, and that of studying Drama and its' noted effects on the verbal reasoning of students. The reduced number of correlations and causal effects identified prompted the two researchers to caution against promoting arts for the sake of promised improvements in the performances tested in non-artistic disciplines in the curriculum.

- Walker and Schaffarzick (1981) published a synthesis of 26 comparative studies focusing on traditional and innovative approaches to curriculum. The two researchers concluded their report by noting various possible constellations of acquisitions attributable to learning in various approaches to curriculum, but it cannot be concluded on the general effect on learning as an integrative phenomenon.

- Looking at various possible didactic associations between arts and non-arts disciplines, Kindler (1987) remarks on the lack of empirical evidence in support of notable benefits of learning in the arts, partly because the assessment instruments and procedures do not match the nature of learning in the arts and are more suitable to measuring learning in other areas.

- Significant differences have been noted between arts as well, with Samuel Hope (1997) cautioning on the importance recognition of specificity every form of artistic expression requires and careful advancement in what and what cannot be done interdisciplinary in the arts as well. Although they may share some common principles, the art forms do not substitute one another and it cannot be said something in the name of all forms of arts learning just by exploring any one of the artistic forms which made it above the cut in the curriculum.

For either too much or too little supportive enthusiasm to the idea of interdisciplinary approaches to learning, repositioning arts in the curriculum proves tricky, especially when the arts are regarded as adjuvant to academic performance in other curricular areas. A more commendable approach to interdisciplinary learning actions inclusive of arts learning seems to be those engaging educationalists with the intrinsic educational value of every learning content and empowering systematic searches for connections between knowledge distributed across the various disciplines in the curriculum and beyond the curriculum. This quest for what brings everything together in terms of knowledge may not serve well the purposes of specialization (Russel, Zembylas, 2007), it may elude the narrow paths of traditional assessment practices and it may upset the positivist claims against subjectivity in deciding what knowledge should be a part of the curriculum, but it has the merit of presenting the participants to the learning situation – teachers and students – with an opportunity to explore and inquire into expanding horizons of possible actions with knowledge, ones in which sound, form, color, vibration, movement, light etc. allow for pluri-dimensional exploration and experimentation, inclusive of relevant aspects of knowing in the arts (affective, bodily, intellectual, imaginative), of knowing in sciences and technologies (imaginative, rational, aesthetic) and of knowing in social, cultural, humanist endeavors (volitional, intellectual, affective).

The literature supporting this new, integrative understanding of various forms of knowing and their place in the curriculum, advances arguments and empirical evidence placing emphasis on other aspects of learning and development than those announced through traditional measurements of academic performances or of cognitivist

approaches to testing various intellectual categories. New, integrative approaches to arts in the curriculum facilitate learning experiences intellectually and emotionally stimulating for both students and teachers (Veblen, Elliott, 2000; Deasy, 2002; Chrysostomou, 2004; Mansilla, 2005). Studies also show the repositioning of arts in the curriculum encourage holistic approaches to problem solving (Mason, 1996; O'Donnell, Fitzpatrick, 2016) and facilitate a more situated, context sensitive and culturally mediated approach to learning and meaning making (Efland, 2002; Freedman, 2003; Rose, 2011; Share, 2015), as well as introduce to the educational enterprise the pedagogical resources distributed in the community outside the school, such as museums and arts galleries (Sternfeld, 2012; Coelho Valente, 2016).

Should integrative approaches to learning contents in the curriculum mark the beginning of a new pedagogical age, in which abandoning pedagogical approaches rooted in subject-knowledge becomes the rule, not a bold, but singular move in an avant-garde educational system such as Finland's, it will most likely be as a reflection of this integrative view melting into every aspect of life in and out of school. To illustrate the way in which this principle of connectedness imbues the pedagogical truths we look for, much of Finland's great educational success over the past decade has been explained on the basis of a combination of political will, purposeful efforts to promote equity by the educational system, high quality teacher education, teachers' professional and moral responsibility and society's trust in educational actors (Niemi et al, 2012). What this teaches us is that it takes an all integrative, dynamic view on education and life for the realization of which it is not simply enough to adjust the pedagogical technique, as it is to engage all participants to education in this relational approach to knowledge and learning to seriously inquire into the deep meanings of what, why, how it can be done beyond the traditional confines of pedagogic imagination and of the resources available. What fuels the support for this integrative vision seems to be the acknowledgement that working in education towards finding the connections between forms of knowing, between the participants and the non-participants to the learning situation, between the individual and the collective capacity building is not a pedagogical luxury or a fad. It may be, in view of what goes on today in the world, the soundest pedagogical way to move forward.

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