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### **Dialogue and Democracy through Museum Education: A Review Essay**

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Book Reviewed: Dytsthe, O., Bernhardt, N., & Esbjørn, L. (2013). *Dialogue-based teaching: The art museum as a learning space*. Copenhagen: Skoletjenesten.

A key attribute often proposed for arts education is openness to multiple meanings and perspectives. A point made by the late Elliot Eisner (2004), making and interpreting art cannot presume that there is one “correct” answer. Yet how art educators approach contextualized dialogue with students in ways that honors the meaning of art and art making as “multi-voiced” remains a daunting task. To contend with this complexity, *Dialogue-Based Teaching: The Art Museum As a Learning Space* provides an invaluable resource for arts educators. This well-designed book, replete with images in color, provides thick descriptions and useful interpretations of museum educators who offer workshops for primary, secondary, and tertiary students in seven different museums in Copenhagen, Denmark. The authors’ aim is to promote dialogue-based teaching that gives mutual life to different ideas, includes all students regardless of backgrounds and skills, and is varied in its form. Although its focus is on museum education, these insights are transferable to multiple arts educational settings including school classrooms.

This book accompanies related contributions that investigate how to promote dialogue in museums. Examples include Yenawine's (2013) *Visual Thinking Strategies*, Barrett's (1997) three critical inquiry questions about art, and the British Museum's (2014) *Talking Objects* methodology. These frameworks perhaps share the conviction that cultural artifacts can generate insights about prominent social challenges. Arts educators and their institutions, including schools and museums, can fulfill their democratic purpose by promoting dialogue through these artifacts in ways that value and extend different ideas. The authors of *Dialogue-Based Teaching* consider dialogue-based teaching fundamental to developing democratic habits among citizens in Denmark. There, like elsewhere, "the global" and "the local" are converging to produce mashed-up cultural practices that challenge reified and monolithic understandings of ethnic and national identity. Promoting "intercultural" and "cross-cultural" dialogue is thus considered a vital contemporary aim of education, and arts education in and outside museums has a unique and vital role to play here. This book comes at a crucial moment in arts education as its educators wrestle with dialogic approaches that do not presume the transference of unimpeachable truths, and instead acknowledge the perspectival, culturally dependent nature of interpretation.

*Dialogue-Based Teaching* consists of 5 chapters. The authors begin with a genealogical account of the seven museums that participated in this research. Tracing these museums' inceptions parallels museological trends likely found elsewhere in Western nations. These museums — as varied as the National Gallery of Denmark, the Design-Museum Denmark, the KOS Museum of Art in Public Space, and the Copenhagen Contemporary Art Center — have each been founded at different historical moments with varied aims to match: from the Enlightenment cause of elevating taste to advancing the international competitiveness of the nation-state through better design, from democratizing knowledge by placing art in the public square to promoting social inclusion and urban renewal in the so-called *knowledge economy*. Amidst these varied histories and purposes, each Danish museum described in the book participates in this research to explore the pedagogic possibilities of dialogic teaching.

In the second chapter, the authors consider theories of dialogue and their importance in education. The ideas and practices of Socrates, Buber, Habermas, Bakhtin, and Freire are reviewed. The authors are drawn most to Bakhtin, emphasizing that differing viewpoints can be a resource, not a threat, to the construction of meaning. Their theoretical emphasis on *multi-voicedness* is germane for arts educators who, for personal and political reasons, may eschew dialogue that they perceive as confrontational. Moreover, their emphasis might reassure arts educators that a successful teaching sequence in or outside the museum does not require identifying one correct answer. These authors emphasize the importance of how varied ideas, although not always equal, commingle, thus generating new interpretations and associations.

In the third chapter, the authors present selections of dialogue from workshops at each of the seven participating museums. Long passages of dialogue are presented. Contextual information is provided so that readers can make adequate judgements based on the nuances of each group. During these workshops, museum educators introduce workshops, invite students to discuss artwork and its salient themes, and task students with making art that investigate these themes and generate new ones. Towards the end of each workshop, the museum educators host group discussion about students' artwork and then reflect upon the workshop as a whole. To offer an example, the theme for one sequence is "New Words for Thrvaldsen." This workshop is designed to provoke 18-25 year olds to consider how artwork is presented in museums. Students are tasked with re-mediating museum sculpture by rewriting the plinth inscriptions. Some participants write inscriptions that draw on popular culture and are provocative, perhaps even transgressive. The dialogue that emerges, the authors note, is contentious, leading students to scrutinize "the compositional expression of the sculpture with an intense interest that a more traditional examination of the sculpture could hardly have aroused" (p. 171). The excited dialogue provided assures the trustworthiness of this claim.

In the fourth chapter, the authors highlight qualities of what they consider to be good dialogue-based teaching found in these seven workshops: *inclusion*, *variation*, and *multivoicedness*. Through these analytical categories, the authors promote a nuanced interpretation of dialogue-based teaching that avoids the reductive and dichotomous view that posits teacher monologue as one approach and student dialogue as the other. The authors are not dogmatic when it comes to their interest in multi-voiced and inclusive dialogue-based teaching, hence their emphasis on variation. They hold that arts educators can contribute substantive knowledge to meet curriculum objectives through opportunistic "mini-lectures" in ways that are not mutually exclusive with open-ended, unpredictable, and potentially transformative dialogue among arts educators and students.

In the final chapter, the authors provide a series of suggestions, mainly in the form of questions, that invite art educators to consider what dialogic teaching might entail in their settings whether they are museums, schools, or elsewhere. For example, they emphasize that multivoicedness does not in itself promote understanding, but requires arts educators who highlight differences in students' viewpoints. The authors differentiate their contribution to dialogue-based teaching in arts education by choosing not to provide a formula that they claim "works," say a list of questions to guide inquiry about art. The authors recognize the contextual nature of dialogue, as well as the varied and sometimes contradictory purposes of dialogue-based teaching. Although without a toolkit or formula, their descriptions, interpretations, and suggestions provide adequate points of connection and departure for arts

educators as they consider how and *why* they might promote dialogue that is multivoiced, inclusive, and varied in form.

My one criticism of the book concerns the second chapter on theories of dialogue-based teaching. Undergraduate and graduate students might find this chapter a good entry point for understanding the key figures and issues in dialogue-based teaching. But I found the chapter to read like a textbook, without adequate explanation of how and why theory was being used in this research. Moreover, acknowledgement of related contributions to museum education in and outside Denmark would have helped position the significance of their contribution (cf. Burnham & Kai-Kee, 2011; Falk & Dierking, 2000). These minor complaints aside, the beautifully designed and typeset *Dialogue-Based Teaching: The Art Museum as a Learning Space* does not shy away from the complexities of dialogic teaching. Read it to embark on making connections and associations that inform your understanding of how and why negotiating these complexities in and beyond museums is necessary to promoting thriving democracies.

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### About the author

Tyler Denmead is an Assistant Professor at the School of Art and Design, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Denmead has spent his career facilitating and researching highly collaborative community-based arts programs for youth, and his current research examines disparities facing youth in so-called creative cities. He is the founder

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