

International Journal of Education & the Arts

Editors

Tom Barone

Arizona State University, U.S.A

Liora Bresler

University of Illinois at Urbana—Champaign, U.S.A.

<http://ijea.asu.edu>

ISBN 1529-8094

Volume 7 Review 5

December 11, 2006

Culture and the Arts in Education: A Review Essay

Janet R. Barrett

Northwestern University

Smith, Ralph A. (2006). *Culture and the Arts in Education: Critical Essays on Shaping Human Experience*. New York: Teachers College Press and the National Art Education Association. ISBN 978-0-8077-4654-7.

Citation: Barrett, Janet R. (2006). Culture and the arts in education: A review essay. *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, 7(Review 5). Retrieved [date] from <http://ijea.asu.edu/v7r5/>.

Abstract

Culture and the Arts in Education: Critical Essays on Shaping Human Experience is a collection of essays written by Ralph Smith selected from his nearly three decades of work in aesthetic education. In this anthology, Smith presents his case for viewing the arts as humanities through their emphases on creation, communication, continuity, and criticism. This view is embodied in an excellence curriculum built around the study of masterworks and the cultivation of percipience, or “the ability of persons to experience works of art for the sake of their constitutive and revelatory values, by which I mean the ways in which the experience of good and great art holds potential for shaping the self in positive ways while simultaneously yielding insight into human existence and natural phenomena” (p. 14). In addition to obvious implications for art education, Smith also explores how music education might be construed and taught as one of the humanities.

Introduction

Art educators are well acquainted with the writings of Ralph A. Smith, professor emeritus of educational policy studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Smith's contributions to art education and aesthetic education are notable and wide-ranging, including many authored and edited books, and his leadership as founder and editor of the *Journal of Aesthetic Education* from 1966 to 2000. Numerous tributes to Smith's work cite how he has remained steadfast to his well-articulated vision of excellence through various cycles of reform in art education. *Culture and the Arts in Education: Critical Essays on Shaping Human Experience* is a compilation of essays that span nearly three decades from 1977 to 1995. These provide a valuable introduction to Ralph Smith's views or a useful compendium of characteristic ideas for those already familiar with his work.

The essays—which trace their origins to various keynote speeches, invited addresses, book chapters, and articles—are arranged in broad thematic groupings rather than in chronological order to foreground the salient concepts, arguments, and issues that have animated Smith's thinking. The preface provides a sense of the context in which the original pieces were written. Smith justifies the relevance of these ideas to current discourse by noting that in comparison to the sciences, where timeliness is critical, “the dynamic of communication in the arts and humanities is more relaxed” (p. xxiii). He also addresses how key notions recur throughout; this repetition is not distracting when the essays are read in sequence. There are thirteen chapters, divided into four sections: Background and Vision, The Artworld and Art Education, The Arts and Humanities, and Art and Diversity.

Background and Vision

In this section Smith provides a rationale for situating arts education firmly within the humanities. The four chapters in this section trace the roots of this perspective as well as provide a road map for studying diverse conceptions of aesthetic education. In chapter 1, “Arts Education as Liberal Education,” Smith revisits the Greek notion of culture, or *Paideia*, which serves as the bedrock for understanding how study of the arts leads toward the ideal of the formation of human character. Poetry, dance, drama, vocal and instrumental music—alongside geometry, arithmetic, rhetoric, and logic—were viewed by the Greeks as the “materials with which one composes a self” (p. 4). To study these disciplines is to examine the values and expressions of the human condition. For contemporary Western culture, this Greek ideal constitutes a robust call to transfigure the self through the arts, establishing the humanities as the means and the context for inducting the young into educated society. Smith cites the British philosopher Michael Oakeshott, who cautions schools to resist “dancing to the tune of relevance” (p. 8) by staying true to their primary mission, which is to stress “stability, concentration, form, discipline, excellence, creativity, and civilization” (p. 10). The congruence of the arts with the humanities is established through instilling communication (akin to languages and literature), continuity (parallel to history), and criticism (in line with philosophical studies). In this first essay, Smith begins to lay out the

foundation of a program of study that would be most suited to students in the middle and secondary grades, the function of which is to cultivate the self through the development and refinement of “percipience in matters of art and culture” (p. 14).

In the second chapter, Smith compares how four philosophers—Monroe Beardsley, Harold Osborne, Nelson Goodman, and Eugene F. Kaelin—define the nature of aesthetic experience. Smith considers each thinker’s primary emphasis in turn to elucidate this fundamental concept. These emphases include: “for the quality of gratification it provides; for its stimulation of direct perception for its own sake; for its contributions to new perspectives on the world and self, or to understanding; and for ensuring the free functioning of the institution of art” (p. 19). The comparative analysis underscores Smith’s view that “excellence in art implies the capacity of works of art at their best to intensify and enlarge the scope of human awareness” (p. 19).

The nature of aesthetic experience, the qualities of that experience, and the potential of art works “to invite aesthetic experience of a fairly high magnitude” (p. 35), comprises the substantive opening of chapter 3. Smith uses brief excerpts from literature and art criticism from Harold Osborne, Sherlock Holmes, Pepita Haezrahi, Harry Broudy, and E. F. Kaelin to illustrate a continuum of experience, moving from the simple awareness of fleeting qualities of everyday life to the deeply arresting, multivalent experience of interpreting Picasso’s *Guernica*. A justification for the arts on the basis of their capacities to arouse aesthetic experience seems especially relevant for arts education at this particular time. In a brief section on policy and general public attitudes toward the arts in the United States, Smith warns educators and policymakers to avoid the “vigorous and incautious instrumentalism” that is often used to promote the arts, promising that they will “humanize the grey fortresses of learning, help teach basic skills, integrate a compartmentalized curriculum, reduce the early school-leaving rate, and much, much more” (p. 34). His call for caution reminds us that these perennial motives to justify the arts are as ubiquitous as the arts themselves.

The fourth chapter is organized to present familiar dichotomies that recur periodically in the discourse of art education, and that are often used uncritically to promote “new” initiatives. Smith sets up tension, however, by enclosing the “versus” between the opposing ideas in quotation marks (process-centered “vs.” product-centered aesthetic learning; instrumental “vs.” noninstrumental uses of art; high culture “vs.” popular culture). In doing so, his analysis leads the reader to the conclusion that in many cases, no dichotomy exists, or that the polarities are sufficiently multidimensional or ambiguous to render the quotation marks unnecessary. Through discussion, Smith’s position comes into clearer focus in the dialectical territory between the poles. For example, although the developmental nature of learning in the arts is a paramount concern for educators, Smith’s humanities-based interpretation rests on the notion that “value resides principally in the completed work of mature artists” (p. 50). This orients study toward understanding complex works rather than in the emerging artistic expressions of students. He also dismisses proposals to build

upon student interests and preferences as a basis for selecting educative experiences by arguing that the judgments and tastes of mature and experienced teachers best reflect the cultural heritage.

The Artworld and Art Education

The second section draws from Smith's earliest writings. The 1970s was a time during which many disciplines and fields considered and worked through implications of a cognitive view of mind, prompted by the publication of Jerome Bruner's seminal work, *The Process of Education*, in 1960. Chapter 5 reflects this historical perspective as Smith defines aesthetic concepts and describes concept acquisition with reference to the theories of Ausubel, Kuhn, Novak, and Toulmin. The influence of CEMREL, an Aesthetic Education program sponsored by the University of Illinois during the 1960s and 1970s, is felt as Smith offers an agenda for research and development in art education that reconciles the broad artworld, educational policy, and aesthetic appreciation and skills (Chapter 6). In the opening of chapter 7 (the earliest in the collection, first appearing in 1973), Smith refers to the "mindblowing cults of instant sensation and militant anti-intellectualism" (p. 88) that made teaching critical analysis in the schools a particularly difficult enterprise. Nevertheless, Smith addresses the nature of criticism, and offers two types of activities to engage students in thoughtful work: exploratory aesthetic criticism (through phases of description, analysis, characterization, and interpretation); and argumentative criticism, which elevates the standards of critique to those held by experienced critics.

Chapter 8, "An Excellence Curriculum for Art Education," may be viewed in the wake of *A Nation at Risk*, a report that had considerable ramifications for public education in the 1980s and thereafter. The tide of criticism that challenged public education in that era prompted educators and professional associations to respond with curricular proposals and strong arguments in defense of educational ideals. Smith, drawing upon to Matthew Arnold's call for excellence as that which raises up the underprivileged through universal education and schooling, responded to an invitation in 1987 by the National Association for Art Education to write *Excellence in Art Education: Ideas and Initiative*. The book's focus was criticized by some as elitist; in this essay, Smith answers that criticism by explaining how the notion of excellence is congruent with democratic ideals. He enumerates four propositions that guided this work, that "excellence in art education is a commitment to general and common education from kindergarten through the twelfth grade" (p. 100); that excellence requires the "study in a number of contexts in which students learn to perceive art, to understand it historically, to appreciate it aesthetically, to create it, and to think about it critically" (p. 102); that teacher preparation should be altered to devote more time to "substantive work in the humanities, in particular to historical, philosophical, and critical studies of art" (p. 103); and that "a commitment to excellence implies an acknowledgment of the claims of traditional as well as contemporary culture" (p. 105). At the close of this chapter, Smith describes the power of art to dislodge the ordinary and lift individuals toward

transcendent encounters with outstanding works, a stirring rationale for widespread arts education.

The Arts and Humanities

In the third section, Smith addresses more specific guidelines for realizing these aesthetic and democratic principles through the curriculum. He begins by arguing for the necessity of art education, because such a program develops finely tuned abilities to apprehend great works of art. He also lists dispositions of mind that attend the serious study of the arts, including the acquisition of finely honed capacities for appreciating and identifying artistic excellence, the cultivation of critical thinking, and greater awareness of “cultural alternatives,” as he describes that there are “right and wrong ways to celebrate cultural diversity” (p. 117). Smith draws upon the work of Walter Kauffman in literary theory to examine how a dialectical approach to multiculturalism in art education offers students opportunities to reflect on their own cultural assumptions, compare and contrast diverse value systems, and maintain open-mindedness when studying art of a different culture.

The most specific and detailed overview of a humanities-based curriculum appears in chapter 10, “Toward Percipience,” in which Smith draws from work he conducted with Bennett Reimer in 1992 to produce the NSSE yearbook. He builds on componential views of human knowledge, as well as a multidimensional view of the features of art works, to propose a five-phase curriculum. The phases, which begin in kindergarten and extend through the serious study of art in high school, are organized to foster students’ abilities in perceiving aesthetic qualities, developing perceptual finesse, developing a sense of art history, engaging in exemplar appreciation, and, once students refine their perceptual abilities to respond to art, culminating in critical analysis through a senior seminar.

In chapter 11, “Teaching Music as One of the Humanities,” Smith raises a number of issues to be addressed if music instruction were to be oriented toward this aim, including whether music criticism should be adopted as the primary model for a humanities-oriented curriculum; how an emphasis on criticism relates to historical understanding, performance, and creation; and how cognitive theories of musical understanding complement this approach. In this chapter, Smith also speaks most directly about teachers’ capabilities and goals, stating, for instance, that a teacher of music appreciation who builds a curriculum around musical masterworks holds the principal goal of cultivating “musical percipience in young people to the point where they will be able not only to enjoy and participate in music at a respectable level of comprehension but also to engage in intelligent conversations about it” (p. 144). Smith frames the argument for criticism by building on distinctions that Leonard B. Meyer made between art and science. The work of the humanist-theorist, or critic, resembles that of a scientist more than an artist in that the theorist’s principal task is to build explanations, principles, and generalizations, often deriving these from the art works themselves. These principles illuminate “relationships in works of art as they are experienced

as beholders” (p. 142). The humanistic impulse focuses on particularities, the distinctive features of a select work of art, and the way these unique qualities engender aesthetic response. Humanist-critics and teachers therefore both occupy a “middle ground—between the composer and the performance of a work on one side, and the audience for the work on the other” (p. 144), and so draw from multiple sources to guide their work, although in differing degrees of depth. Traditional emphases within music education on performing and listening would not be supplanted by adopting this curricular direction, but rather augmented through the inclusion of historical and critical understanding. The theories of Peter Kivy, Nelson Goodman, and Monroe Beardsley are employed in a discussion of musical meaning, and whether music’s distinct abilities to move listeners through the growth and continuation of sonic ideas can help situate music within the humanities. Smith concludes the chapter with a brief allusion to the shape of a humanities-based music curriculum, which parallels the proposals for art study listed above: exposure to music, perceptual training, historical inquiry, the study of masterworks, capped by a senior seminar focused on the creation of an elementary philosophy of music.

In the penultimate chapter, Smith discusses Harry Broudy’s book *Truth and Credibility: The Citizen’s Dilemma*, an elaboration of his 1980 lecture for the John Dewey Society. Smith takes up the discussion of how the arts can contribute to the remoralization of society by strengthening imagination and character. I found his erudite elaborations on Dewey’s calls for social change and Polanyi’s concept of tacit knowing most compelling in the prospect that the values embodied in the arts, and strengthened in classrooms through the study of exemplary works, leave traces in the imagination that guide persons toward justice and compassion once they have left formal schooling.

Art and Diversity

Although cultural diversity is a theme that appears throughout the book, the last section is comprised of just one chapter foregrounding the relation of the self to art in cultural contexts. This brief postscript offers Smith’s commentary on one of the literary critic Lionel Trilling’s last essays, “Why We Read Jane Austen.” In that piece, Trilling mused on his students’ enthusiasm for reading Jane Austen, remarking that students were in effect using the novels to seek answers to their own contemporary dilemmas, thus strengthening their sense of self through art. Trilling contrasted this use of art works with what the anthropologist Clifford Geertz had written about the role of Javanese cultural forms in “induc[ing] its members to become as much as possible like works of art” (p. 167), thereby relinquishing individuality to the larger artistic enterprise. In the preface to this collection, Smith reveals why he chose this essay as the coda, using these cultural distinctions as an invitation to the reader to ponder the dialectical tensions of life and art.

Reflections

Culture and the Arts in Education puts forward a strong rationale for the inclusion of the arts in the curriculum by giving readers a grand tour of Smith's central points: that the arts can be constructed as humanities, and thus are essential within education through an emphasis on communication, criticism, continuity, and creativity; that pursuing such a path rests on experience with art works that are worthy of being deemed excellent, and that the cultivation of percipience should be the cornerstone of curricular efforts. Smith deftly reviews a panorama of ideas that characterize intellectual discourse in the past few decades and one of the strengths of the collection is the way in which it points the reader toward key figures in aesthetic education, cognition, the humanities, and the arts. He leads the reader to consider or revisit the work of Monroe Beardsley, Albert William Levi, Leonard Meyer, Harry Broudy, Bennett Reimer, Matthew Arnold, and others. Individuals interested in tracing key notions in aesthetic education would find many intriguing leads from the study of these essays.

Smith's writing also provokes critical reflection and counterpoint with current discourse in the field. Given that masterworks comprise the centerpiece of a curriculum for percipience, I was surprised that relatively few works or artists are given substantive discussion to illustrate in tangible or vivid ways how such a curriculum would engage students in the development and refinement of critical capacities for judgment. From a curricularist's standpoint, this would have been a useful addition, but given Smith's prolific writing and influence, examples can no doubt be found elsewhere. In the foreword, Geahigan states that "the locus of study would be exemplary works of art, both traditional and contemporary," yet there are few instances in which the perplexities and conundrums of contemporary art are used as a means to engage readers in critical thought. A tension develops in the preface when Smith discusses postmodern curricular theory, often specifying that his reservations with such views center on "destructive, radical forms of postmodernism" (p. xxiv), and cautioning that problems arise when art education is used to foster social change. Yet, several times, Smith cites a roster of questions that can be used for examining a work of art deeply and thoroughly. Among these questions are: "What is its place in the culture in which it is made? What is its place in the culture or society of today? What peculiar problems does it present to understanding and appreciation?" (p. 126). Although Smith argues that the central function of art education is not to forward the sociopolitical meanings that works embody or convey, it seems that these very questions lead teachers and students to numerous instances of art works that were created to provoke such meanings, such as Picasso's *Guernica*, the works of Goya, or in music, Penderecki's *Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima*. Postmodern curriculum thought acknowledges the power of art works to challenge and transform points of view; it engages students in recognizing and forming judgments about the social and political meanings of art works. Perhaps this is an example of the "softer" or more constructive postmodernism that Smith supports, but these clarifications are certainly worth pursuing through lively dialogue in classroom settings.

Smith's Excellence Curriculum has a particular focus on secondary schools. His well articulated vision of high school students engaged in informed critique of art works and the development of rudimentary philosophies of art invites comparison with the current state of high school programs (here, I speak primarily from knowledge of music education). Parallel to the predominant focus on production in art education, music education has also privileged performance over other forms of engagement in secondary music education. When music, like art, becomes an elective in students' course-taking patterns, participation in bands, choirs, or orchestras is the typical mainstay, and sometimes the only avenue open to students. While these ensemble experiences are vibrant and significant in students' lives, there is a growing interest within music education to offer a greater diversity of courses at the secondary level, based on the premise that students will seek additional study in music only if the offerings remain relevant to their musical interests outside of school. A few high schools have responded to the need for diversification by scheduling music technology, composition, or popular music classes, or in some areas, ensembles not typically found in school settings, such as mariachi or African drumming groups. Questions about the capacity of these expanded offerings to meet Smith's curricular visions arise while reading. How does the inclusion of an expanded array of genres and styles cohere with the pursuit of arts as humanities that Smith describes? How do various cultural forms (like the example of Javanese and Balinese forms in the last chapter) challenge our tacit notions of excellence? How does the immediate relevance of these studies to students' school experience transform into a continuing search for the arts once they leave school? In what ways can the arts curriculum become more comprehensive to engage students in diverse artistic roles while maintaining values of lasting importance? What kind of stability can arts education provide given the kaleidoscopic shifts of ideas and society that characterize postmodern society?

Ralph Smith's body of work, as represented in this anthology culled from decades of scholarly contributions, raises questions about the role of the arts in education that are made even more pressing in this current measurement-driven era in public schools. These essays contribute to our understanding of the centrality of the arts in human experience, the fundamental assumptions on which we claim this position, and the role of schools in providing meaningful arts education for the young.

About the Reviewer

Janet R. Barrett is Associate Professor of Music Education at Northwestern University where she teaches courses in research methods, curriculum development, general music methods, and the arts in education. Her research interests include curriculum studies, interdisciplinary approaches in music education, and professional development in music teacher education. She is a co-author of, *Sound Ways of Knowing: Music in the Interdisciplinary Curriculum* (Thomson Wadsworth), and *Looking In On Music Teaching* (Primis/McGraw-Hill), and has contributed chapters to the *New Handbook of Research on Music Teaching and Learning*

and the *International Handbook of Research in Arts Education*. Barrett serves on the editorial committees of the *Bulletin of the Council for Research of Music Education* and the *Mountain Lake Reader*. She is past president of the North Central Division of the Music Educators National Conference, and currently serves on the executive committee of the Society for Music Teacher Education. Barrett holds B.M. and M.A. degrees from the University of Iowa and a Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Prior to her appointment at Northwestern University, Dr. Barrett served as chair of the Music Department and professor of music education at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater.

International Journal of Education & the Arts

Editors

Tom Barone
Arizona State University, U.S.A

Liora Bresler
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, U.S.A.

Executive Editor
Gene V Glass
Arizona State University, U.S.A.

Associate Editors
Laurel Campbell
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, U.S.A.

Jason Helfer
Knox College, U.S.A.

Regina Murphy (2002-2004)
St. Patrick's College, Dublin City University, Ireland

Tracie Costantino (2000-2004)
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, U.S.A.

Alyson Whyte (2002-2004)
Auburn University, U.S.A.

Editorial Board

Peter F. Abbs	University of Sussex, U.K.
Eunice Boardman	University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, U.S.A.
Norman Denzin	University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, U.S.A.
Kieran Egan	Simon Fraser University, Canada
Elliot Eisner	Stanford University, U.S.A.
Magne Espeland	Stord/Haugesund University College, Norway
Gary McPherson	University of New South Wales, Australia
Robert Stake	University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, U.S.A.
Susan Stinson	University of North Carolina—Greensboro , U.S.A.
Christine Thompson	Pennsylvania State University, U.S.A.
Peter Webster	Northwestern University, U.S.A.