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CiCe
Institute for Policy Studies in Education
London Metropolitan University
166 – 220 Holloway Road
London N7 8DB
UK

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Art Education as a space to improve us as citizens?

Vladimira Zikmundova
University of West Bohemia in Pilsen (Czech Republic)

Abstract

Giving examples of student projects, this paper shows some possible ways how to develop identity and civic competencies in the process of teaching of Art Education using interactive media. The paper briefly explains the opportunities Czech teachers of Art Education are given by the new national curriculum of elementary and grammar school in the context of developing civic skills. The author works also with concepts of visual literacy and Media Education.

In this paper I describe briefly the opportunities Czech teachers of Art Education are given by the new national curriculum of elementary and grammar school in the context of developing civic skills. Starting by the system of building life-sustaining competencies (such as communicative, social and personal etc.) through which the pupils should become conscious and autonomous citizens, I go further in my report in order to mention the evident analogy of Czech Art Education, how it is established in national curriculum, and the concept of visual literacy which is so close to Visual Culture Art Education. Speaking about the contemporary situation of the subject, I have to point out that there is a great challenge for Art Education to intertwine the relevant themes of Media Education to make us learn how to consciously 'use' our cultural context. Thirdly, there is an immense potential of using new media (such as internet and interactive applications generally) in Art Education in order to help pupils to work with cultural signs developing their own identity while becoming aware of their European and global context.

Key competencies in Czech national curriculum

The evolution of Czech national curriculum was quite dramatic in the last decade but now we have really modern and ambitious legislation that allows to develop all creative and personal potentials on both the teacher's and the pupil's side. Even in subjects like maths, geography and so on, the learning process is no longer the realm of transmission of separated encyclopaedic information, instead the accent has moved rather to practical knowledge providing the pupil with the essential abilities in order to lead an authentic and autonomous life of a high quality. The axis of the work in any subject is to build the 'life-sustaining' key competencies which are the basis to raise good citizens who are aware of their own identity in the complex of social and global contexts. That's why the scholar system is not divided into single subjects but the subjects are associated to 'educational domains' such as 'Man and Society', 'Man and Nature', 'Man and its Work' and also not least 'Art and Culture'. The relation of man to what surrounds him or what constitutes civilization is the basis for all cultivation. The Czech national curriculum distinguishes several key competencies being developed during the learning processes. There is the ability to learn, ability to solve problems, communicative

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competencies, social and personal competencies, civic competencies and working competencies in primary education. Key competencies was one of the most discussed part of Czech national curriculum because some critics considered them too idealistic while others said that this is nothing new as good teachers can implement these competencies to the teaching process intuitively without needing any list of them. Both comments have some truth but the aim of Czech national curriculum is to give the teacher an instrument to enable him to shift his action from an intuitive to an intentional position.

What is new about Czech Art Education?

I have to point out that Art Education was an especially problematic item during the process of ratification of the Czech national curriculum. Even today Art Education is considered more intuitive than 'scientific' disciplines and many colleagues from different fields smile when hearing about science associated to Art Education. They wonder what is to be analysed in the process of creating or reading signs while 'what you see is what you get'...

This happens because they still grasp this subject in a 'traditional' point of view. Speaking about traditions, Art Education during the communist era became an almost bizarre junction of several approaches linking the renaissance concept of realistic representation together with concept of creativity (Read, 1943) and the modernist tendency to originality. The creation of aesthetically beautiful output was the main target of every action. This mixture was completed by considering Art Education as a time to relax after studying knowledge subjects challenging the brain. This model started to be changed after the Velvet revolution. It was a post-modern quake of values that caused also in Czech Art Education a reconception of its functions.

It became evident that the subject has to redefine its basis in order to be able to stay included in the curriculum and get over its position of outsider. First was the effort to demonstrate that also in Art Education there are crucial things that have to be 'looked on, examined, explained and altered' (Slavík, 2001).

Searching for its specific purpose several streams formed within Czech Art Education, but after many difficulties and disputations the tendency to consider this subject as a space for conscious development and cultivation of understanding of the whole visual context surrounding the individual prevailed. The idea of key competencies was very near to this concept as the individual is taken as a part of social and global context needing to communicate by the signs he is producing and needing to understand the signs produced by somebody else or some foreign communities. The matter to be analysed has mainly a visual aspect but can be of course transmitted by other senses than eyes. The material to work with is coming not only from what is called 'Art', but from the whole reality that constitutes our living space including mass-media production, our inner worlds etc.

Comparing to what is said in texts concerning Visual Culture Art Education concepts (further VCAE only) we can see that there are a lot of similarities between the Czech

concept and this one coming from USA. This is how Tom Anderson from Florida State University introduces VCAE:

‘This increasingly visual world, constructed by human beings, is the focus of visual culture studies. It is important for success in contemporary culture that people be able to read the constructed environment and interpret and use the visual signs within it. In the art for life curriculum, then, in addition to teaching the traditional high and fine arts, it is important to include the broader category of visual culture’. (Anderson, 2003)

One of many objections against the influence of VCAE is that if we work with the general visual imagery brought by mass media or very contemporary art we haven’t enough methods to analyse it, critiques and theories to understand and clarify it well. But here we have to see all visual culture including art as a structure that evolves all the time and also that can have different meanings from different points of view. The point of view can change for example depending on which part of society we belong to. Here we have to take into account all poststructuralist theories of art and visual culture including contexts of gender studies and queer theories and many other contexts.

The basis of both the Czech and American versions of Art Education is the concept of visual literacy, which has several levels. First it is the ‘developing of perception sensitivity’, second is the boosting of ‘high order or critical thinking’, then cultivation of ‘culture habits’ together with ‘keeping ourselves aesthetically open’ to different cultural manifestations, and last but not least ‘ability to use adequate signs’ to understand and be understood (Fulková, 2004).

In the text of Art Education curriculum we can find three spheres: 1/ developing perception sensitivity, 2/ asserting subjectivity, 3/ verifying of communicative impacts (Vančát, Pastorová, 2004). Lukavský uses the following metaphors applying the topics above to practical civic life: 1/ spectator, 2/ author, 3/ critic (Lukavský, 2006). It is to say that to become an authentic individual competent to live in the human society we need first to be able to read properly the signs around us, then to be able to find or create adequate signs in order to answer and we have to be capable to control whether we are using the right signs. And all this very complex process is the matter of creation. Not only production of artifacts as it was before. We can say that even the phase of conceptualising belongs to the realm of visual imagery and creativity. By the way, this shows again how integrating the concept of visual literacy is when it can be independently constituted in so distant countries.

Media and Art Education

Media and the ‘reality’ formed by it was another objection of critics of the new concept of Art Education. They warned against the deformation of reality and alerted hidden or fully overt persuasion and power that mass-media production can have over society and human beings as individuals. But in fact the concept of the subject described in the text of the Czech national curriculum encourages the teacher and the pupil to carefully analyse the possible bad impact of mass media as well as to consider them as an inseparable part of reality in order to be able to benefit from its positives. To what is

positive we can only get if we try to understand media deeper. The new curriculum offers for example the possibility to relate Art Education with the concepts of Media Education.

As nowadays culture, and mass media especially, are crowded with visual images Art Education becomes a powerful tool to equip the pupil, and so next citizen, with a good level of ability to understand his own position, role and opportunities in between the complicated web of social and global contexts – one of the main characteristics of an information society. Art Education can show the pupils some methods of how to organise these contexts, how to link the entities in order to get complex and useful experience. This all is done through artistic activities. The real milestone means the new Czech Art Education curriculum in the realm of using digital technologies. They are included in the process of learning as a tool equivalent to traditional ways of expression. We don't know yet what computers means to us and to our civilization, but there's a strong need to analyse during the process of education what its possibilities are as a tool. We can do that by working with all of its functions including the interactivity and also working with it in mixing with other media. Here I would like to mention the theory of Marshall McLuhan who told us that no medium will disappear, but the new medium will only absorb the function of the old one and this previous one will be transformed according to its possibilities (Mc Luhan, 1964). Simply, we have to work with computers in Art Education as the biggest part of contemporary visual culture is created on computers and so it's useful to know how computers can change reality, for we could be able to decode the visual signs made or transformed by them.

We also have to know what functions computers can substitute in the process of making artifacts or to discover areas where especially computers can be helpful very much. This is mainly capturing or expressing of the dynamic change of the object or subject, description of the different states of the object in this process and the record and description of the relations to other states or processes. Here I mean the possibility to create interactive image maps that are really great to express the complexity of the things, ideas, motions, changes etc. Giving an example, the internet is one huge image map we can read in order to develop civic skills. It offers the user the chance to browse images from different parts of the world and by this he can become more aware of his cultural, European and global context while getting a more precise notion of what his identity is.

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