

Aesthetic Education, Technology and Globalization

Can "East" and "West" Learn From Each Other?

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Abstract

Exploring the eternal questions of life is important. Life without such exploration becomes a path of hopelessness and despair that ultimately leads to many social dysfunctions. Art is one of several methods that can be used to explore the eternal questions of life. It is important to have a sound moral foundation as a framework for exploration of these questions. Education is a non-linear process. The TOE model (tendency, opportunity, and encounter) is proposed as an alternative explanation of how education takes place. The education of art and aesthetics may be effectively undertaken using the TOE model coupled with the enthusiasm and passions of each teacher. Both the "western" and "eastern" approaches to the education of art and aesthetics can be improved. Both can learn from each other.

The Challenges of Globalization in an Increasingly Technological World

Modern life, technological innovation and globalization offer numerous opportunities and challenges to children, their families and their respective nations. Numerous cultures interact at an ever increasing rate, creating economic, cultural and religious clashes. The pervasive nature of the internet, cell phone usage, video games, music, television and other forms of media leave only a few areas in the world unconnected. Globalization has spread rapidly leaving very few countries and cultures unaffected. In the face of this, parents and educators are charged with assisting children with the task of developing their "natural inclinations" and seeing that these inclinations are "harmonized, adjusted and controlled" in order "to ensure healthy physical and moral development" (Effendi). If this task is done correctly - children will radiate hope. If not, these same children face a life of fear and despair.

Children Are Born With Questions

Children in every corner of the world face questions such as: Why am I here? Where do I come from? What will I be when I grow up? What will happen to me when I die? What is the meaning and purpose of life? These questions, along with a few others form part of the psychological basis of development from childhood, through adolescence and continue into adulthood.

Many cultures have creation stories that provide answers to these looming questions. But most children need to continue to explore these questions beyond

the answers that such stories provide. The pathways of exploration are many. Three of these pathways are provided through the study of science, religion and art.

Exploration of these questions creates hope, without which individuals experience a state of despair and manifest apathy. Despair leads to many dysfunctions such as drug & alcohol abuse, materialism, self-centeredness, greed and often ends in suicide.

This paper will examine how we can encourage the exploration of these eternal questions through the arts and how we can most effectively “teach” art and aesthetics.

The Monarch Butterfly

The migration of the monarch butterfly provides a wonderful metaphor for the challenges we all face in our search to understand the meaning and purpose of life.

Every year millions of monarch butterflies travel 3500 kilometers from eastern Canada to southern Mexico. They migrate to the same place in the pine tree filled mountains of Mexico. Each butterfly weighs less than a gram and yet can travel 150 – 200 kilometers per day. Like a great relay race, in order to make this journey, several generations are required. After flying about 800 kilometers the migration stops and mating takes place. The males die almost immediately. The females lay many tiny eggs on the underside of a milkweed leaf. The female dies shortly afterwards.

A few days later, the eggs hatch into caterpillars. These caterpillars eat huge amounts of vegetation. After about two weeks they create a cocoon which ends their life as a caterpillar. After a few more days the cocoon becomes a butterfly. The butterflies then continue their migration southward. They repeat this cycle several times along the journey. The butterflies that actually arrive in Mexico are the great-grandchildren of the butterflies that started the journey. In the springtime the process is reversed. This story of the monarch calls to mind our own eternal questions. The mysteries and beauty of creation surround us and we ask ourselves: "What is the world really like? How am I to live my life in it? How can I truly be myself? Who am I? How ought I deal with life's problems? What must I become?" (Bettelheim). Children ask themselves other more fundamental questions: "Are my parents benevolent? Are there benevolent powers in addition to my parents? How should I form myself and why? Is there hope for me if I have done wrong? Why has all of this happened to me? What will it mean to my future?" (Bettelheim).

Every child, in every culture faces variants of these same eternal questions. Every human witnesses the miracles of nature like the life cycle of the monarch. One of the inherent characteristics of human beings is to investigate and explore these eternal questions.

A Moral Foundation

But how can we safely explore these questions? As teachers and parents how can we best encourage our children to approach these eternal questions?

These questions are best explored from the context of family, cultural and / or religious values. These moral values afford the individual a safe framework from which to explore. Ignorance or avoidance of the security of such moral values is dangerous and often leads to the excesses we see associated with "modern" life. Though the topic of this moral foundation is beyond the scope of this paper, it is, never-the-less, an extremely important issue. Especially when it comes to the arts, this moral foundation is often considered "old fashion" and unimportant. It is of the utmost importance that this moral foundation is maintained as students of art begin to explore the eternal questions of life.

Western Education of Art and Aesthetics

In America aesthetics is studied primarily from one of two modes. In the academic discipline of philosophy, scholars attempt to understand what is art and what is "good art." They do this primarily through the use of logic and words. Some study is made of the importance of morality and of the subject matter of art. The number of students that take up this field of study is very small.

In the academic discipline of art, mathematical models such as symmetry and ratio are applied to improve the artist's craft. Generally speaking there is no reference to or instruction about morality. Morality is not considered relevant or important. Art is related only to art. The relative goodness of the art is judged by the skill with which an artist manipulates his media. Both of these approaches to the teaching of aesthetics are somewhat fragmented.

Art & Aesthetics Education in China

In the “East” art is generally viewed from a more holistic perspective. In China aesthetics are seen as a method to stimulate interest in study, to promote intellectual development, to enhance creativity and to improve the quality of the nation (Action Scheme for Invigorating Education Towards the 21st Century II). Some academics acknowledge the shortcomings of the system of understanding and of teaching art and aesthetics. “There is no complete understanding of aesthetic education” (Zhou & Hu). Some in China see a necessity to improve the approach. “The essence of aesthetic education rest in creation and cannot be separated from creative power” (Lu). “In China [and in most other countries] people do not emphasize aesthetic education enough.” “We try to make more money every day and we argue that we do not have enough spare time or money for art” (Zhang).

How can we shift these priorities?

Can education help people to “create and cherish beauty” (Zhang)? Can East and West benefit from their mutual perspectives? These two world views have much in opposition and it is the opinion of this researcher that the China view is more holistic and of more benefit to healthy development. Never-the-less educators from both “worlds” can learn from each other.

Building on what has already been presented in this paper, how then can we best teach art and aesthetics? If we perceive the process of education as “filling up” a student with knowledge, then to improve attitudes towards art and

aesthetics will be difficult. Attitudes such as “cherish” come from within. It is often extremely hard (if not impossible) to create an attitude of cherishing. Students can be taught to memorize phrases about art and the importance of art, but the internalization of attitudes such as cherishing art or cherishing nature, are profoundly more difficult to “teach”. Does it follow that we must leave this education to chance or can schools and universities help? If we, as educators, are to help with this, we must do so, based on a more effective understanding of the true nature of education.

Education is a Non-Linear Process

We love building models that show how to teach in a linear fashion. We often represent these models using blocks stacked one on top of the other. In America, we normally teach reading before writing. We would like to think that a linear process exists that dictates how we learn language arts. We normally think of this as a three step process. We learn to speak, then we learn to read and lastly we learn to write. Montessori changed the order of these last two elements and teaches children to write before they learn to read. In the process there are many efficiencies gained. While part of this is due to differences between Italian and English, other educators, like Rudolf Steiner, have followed similar paths. Steiner’s schools do not explicitly teach reading and yet most students learn to read.

Education is far more like a jigsaw puzzle than like a block diagram. As much as we educators are fond of linear curricula, the fact remains that a large

portion of learning takes place outside of the grades and streams that we often use to divide the educational process.

The TOE Model

DeRoche speaks of teachers in exalted terms defining them as “someone who helps a child mold himself or herself into something better” (xi). In order to be worthy of such a description teaching must be our passion, not just our occupation. There are many tools that teachers can use to demonstrate that passion. How best to teach art and aesthetics is determined by our understanding of the process of education. Towards this end, a simplified model of education called TOE, follows.

Learning can be described in many ways. From Piaget to Montessori, from Aristotle to Lao Tzu, great men and women have sought to understand learning and how it works. Others like Bloom, Gardner and Erikson have proposed theories and models that imply how we should approach learning. Their theories and models of education differ somewhat and yet there is enough common ground among their ideas to see their insights as facets of the same underlying truth.

The TOE model presents a perspective of common ground that is inclusive of the discoveries of all of these great thinkers. It includes formal and informal learning of all types. It acknowledges the important role of the teacher / educator while it validates the ability of individuals to learn without a formal classroom environment. Further it assumes that psychotherapy, education,

religious and spiritual growth, training, marketing and even advertisement can be described by a single unified model of learning. While there may be a great deal of difference in the quality, value or intent of these different types of learning, they are all learning.

The TOE model describes learning simply as the convergence of a tendency with an opportunity. The result is described as an encounter. Thus the acronym TOE for: tendency, opportunity and encounter.

Learning, at times, seems to take place almost randomly. There are many learning environments. Some are in classrooms, others, are in schools and colleges but occur outside of the classroom. Historically, some environments consist of an elder and her stories. Other learning environments are in religious centers, while others are on the therapist's couch. Beyond this, individuals through reading, contemplation, worship, journaling and a plethora of other conscious and unconscious methods, create their own learning environments. Though they may differ in many ways, these are all learning environments that can be described by the TOE model.

In the TOE model, Gardner's "intelligences" are called tendencies. But in the TOE model these tendencies are not limited to Gardner's eight "intelligences." TOE sees tendencies as a wide range of discovered and yet to be discovered abilities. The TOE model makes no distinction between genetic tendencies, natural human tendencies and tendencies that are developed from previous learning.

The TOE model holds that these tendencies can spread much like synaptic transmission. These tendencies can be created and destroyed by an encounter. For example, a child who has a relatively low tendency towards mathematics may find this situation changes through an interest in science that requires the use of numbers for its investigation. In another example, we might find that a child loved to read but had no tendency toward science until he or she reads a story that creates that interest. Then, through further encounters in science, the interest may spread from one area to another or to a general love or tendency towards science or towards learning in general.

Thus, life long learning is perpetuated in a chain-like fashion - where one tendency-opportunity-encounter set - leads to another.

Though some encounters may take place in serendipitous ways and others may seem almost random, never-the-less the TOE model acknowledges the role of the teacher or educator. In this sense, a teacher is a person who has an understanding of learning, can perceive tendencies in other people and is prepared to take advantage of opportunities as they present themselves. The teacher also creates opportunities for tendencies to be strengthened and developed through lessons.

In formal and informal environments when a teacher's tendencies align with those of the student, there is a higher probability of some intensive encounter. The implications for student-centered or teacher-centered learning are many.

As educators have grown in their collective understandings of education, much has been written about student-centered learning. While the TOE model acknowledges that learning is centered in the student, there are practical problems in the belief that lessons should be planned and centered on individual students.

Understanding that teachers (like students) also have tendencies, it follows that most intensive encounters are likely to take place when the tendencies of a teacher and those of a student are aligned. Thus a teacher, teaching what he or she has passion for, will more likely assist in the creation of intense encounters. In this way the classroom might be better viewed as teacher-centric instead of student-centric. The learning takes place in the student, but many of the opportunities are created by the teacher.

Learning takes place when tendencies in a student are given opportunities to grow and develop through encounters. Teachers, both in and out of the classrooms still have a major role to play. In formal education, an effective learning environment is created by a teacher. Learning takes place when the tendencies of a student are nurtured by an opportunity created by the teacher which results in an encounter.

The Teacher's Enthusiasm

The teacher's task in the process of aesthetic education is to perceive the tendencies of the students, to create appropriate environments and to share his

or her enthusiasm. This can be done in numerous ways utilizing all the academic disciplines and creating holistic, healthy and long lasting attitudes.

As educators we must ask ourselves certain generic question to help determine and define our methods, the content and the approaches we will use in our teaching of art. What do you see as sacred? In what ways do you experience beauty? How can you create environments that bring your perceptions, your passion and your enthusiasm into the classroom?

Conclusion

Life is full of challenges. We all face the same eternal questions. Exploring these questions brings hope. Art is one way to explore these questions. Many people have forgotten about art or see it as unimportant in today's modern world. Art education can help restore hope. We all have unique tendencies and opportunities. These tendencies must be utilized in the process of education.

Teachers (through the process of education) help students engage the eternal questions of life, thereby banishing despair and restoring hope.

We all can help. How will you contribute?

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