Philosophical Aesthetics in Art Education:
A Further Look Toward Implementation

Despite our profession's focus on discipline-based art education in the past few years, implementation of the fourth discipline, aesthetics, remains far from a classroom reality. Aesthetics still was referred to as "the mystery discipline" and "the one nobody knows what to do with" at the recent Getty Invitational Conference in Los Angeles (February, 1989). Of course there have been highly qualified people dealing with aesthetics and art education for years (see Kaelin, 1989 for example), but it remains an amorphous grey shape for many art teachers.

There still is confusion between understanding aesthetics as an adjective, as in "aesthetic scanning" and aesthetics as a noun, the philosophy of art, a distinction made clear years ago by Jon Sharer (1983) and others. Aesthetic scanning clearly is a method of art criticism, of responding to a specific work or body of work. Aesthetics clearly is a branch of philosophy, a discipline with its own substantive content. This content deals with general questions about art such as "What is art?" "What's the difference between a work of art and a copy?" "Are there objective criteria which may be used in evaluating all works of art?" "Is the concept (some would say myth) of originality in art a meaningful one?"

This simplistic explanation of aesthetics does little to clarify its potential role in the K-12 art curriculum. And if we look at the writings of aestheticians and their ongoing debates about questions such as those above, we may remain just as puzzled about the discipline and its proposed place in art education. I have advocated the study of philosophical aesthetics by art educators (Hagaman, 1988). I still do. However, the typical university aesthetics course or the reading of essays in aesthetics on an individual basis offers little sense of how such scholarly and, yes, often dull, writings relate to what happens in the art class, especially at the elementary level. Indeed, nothing could be more inappropriate than to ask elementary students to recreate the experience of aesthetics class by analyzing George Dickie's institutional theory of art (Dickie, 1969) and weighing the strength of counter-arguments raised by Jan Bachrach (1977) and other aestheticians. Certainly no one proposes such a thing. But what then?

I contend that philosophical aesthetics must be reconstructed as an integral part of art education. We do not need another discipline laid on top of what we already struggle to do in the schools, a culminating layer of the instructional cake, so to speak. Rather, we need to mix aesthetics throughout the cake by reconstructing the ideas and experience of aesthetics and adding those needed ingredients to our recipe for art education.

Why are these ingredients needed? There are two major reasons why the study of philosophical aesthetics is important in art education. First, the ideas from that discipline and appropriate methods of dealing with that content can serve to tie...
the often disparate parts of the art curriculum together. Art teachers know it is often difficult enough to make meaningful connections among various aspects of production such as 2-D and 3-D or fine arts and crafts. Throw in art history and art criticism, and one has to attempt to integrate increasingly complex sets of content and method. Because of the general nature of the concerns of philosophical aesthetics, it can function as the binding agent for all this complexity. Specific examples of this function are discussed below.

Secondly, philosophical aesthetics, like all philosophy, is based on wonder. Philosophers wonder about things others take for granted. Young children do the same, until their sense of wonder is deadened by socialization, education, or some combination of the two. They reach a plateau in their sense of wonder and their willingness to express that wonder as they reach a plateau in drawing development, usually around fifth or sixth grade. Ironically, it is at this point, around age twelve, that cognitive developmentalists like Piaget say that children are ready to begin philosophy, having likely reached the stage of formal operations, the "age of reason" (Piaget, 1950). It may be true that this is the appropriate time to teach formal logic, but it is late to begin dialogues with children about issues from aesthetics. We need to focus early on the openness, the willingness to voice wonder, and the desire to find meaning in a problemactic situation that may have no definitive solution, all of which characterize the young child. To say that young children cannot function as aestheticians is quite true; to say that they cannot engage in meaningful aesthetic inquiry is not.

Philosophy for Children
In an attempt to avoid reinventing the wheel, I have investigated existing methods and materials which might serve as models for dealing with aesthetics in art education. Like some other art educators, I investigated the work of Matthew Lipman, Ann Margaret Sharp, Ronald Reed, and others associated with the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children (IAPC), Montclair State College, Montclair, NJ (Lipman, 1974; Lipman & Sharp, 1978; Lipman, Sharp & Oscanyan, 1980; Reed, 1989). These philosophers have helped develop and disseminate extensive curriculum materials in general philosophy for children. These materials include a number of "novels," written for children of all ages, which incorporate issues from the various fields of philosophy, such as metaphysics, logic, ethics, and aesthetics. There are also extensive teacher's manuals which accompany each text, filled with discussion ideas, exercises, and activities.

The main objective of this approach is to develop critical thinking skills by encouraging philosophical inquiry through class dialogue based upon the texts. Lipman and his associates contend that thinking about philosophical issues is best achieved through dialogue. Dialogue generates reflection rather than the reverse. Many people confound thinking by oneself with thinking for oneself and are under the mistaken impression that solitary thinking is equivalent to independent thinking. The discussion of issues embedded in a child-centered story format draws upon the child's sense of wonder and develops his or her critical thinking skills within the context of philosophy. Older children are taught formal logic, but at all levels, children are encouraged to use informal logic or a "good reasons" approach. There is a concerted effort to develop a "community of inquiry," a class climate wherein each child feels comfortable to express an opinion or observation, with an end goal of largely child-child rather than teacher-child (Continued on Page 33)
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discussion. Three important components of such a community are:

1. Use of criteria: children are encouraged to explain why they think as they do about certain issues or points raised;

2. Self-correction: individuals are encouraged to listen carefully to comments of each member of the group and be willing to reconsider opinions and judgments, although no group consensus is sought (as with a vote); and

3. Attention to context: the importance of making judgments within particular contexts is crucial, as in considering what a standard of beauty or realism in art might be.

I have now participated in three ten-day intensive (literally 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. daily) training sessions in philosophy for children. Working with a group of thirty international philosophy professors and graduate students convened by the IAPC, the process of "doing" philosophy with children was investigated and analyzed. What has this to do with art education? Certainly some of the materials used deal directly with art and aesthetics. But more importantly, the curriculum model and pedagogical method explored during the sessions were ones which I strongly feel can be effectively adapted for art education. The intensive sessions convinced me of the applicability of this model, despite the shortcomings inevitable in any curriculum model. My earlier readings of some IAPC novels and manuals had left me unsure of the feasibility of drawing upon this work of artworld outsiders. Further, my experiences as an elementary and middle school art teacher left me skeptical about the pragmatic reality of using such materials in the classroom. However, the depth of analyses, the modeling of the process, and videotaped examples of philosophical dialogues taking place in Newark, NJ, inner city schools helped convince me.

The basic process involves a round-robin reading aloud of text by the group of children. This practice serves several ends, including hearing the language of the story, listening to one another in the group, and providing a simple exercise in reciprocity. Next students raise questions or points of interest which have been spurred by the readings and which they would like to discuss. The teacher may help students thus propose the agenda for discussion by asking upper elementary students "What puzzles you in this story?", intermediate students "What interests you in this story?", or younger students "What do you like about this story?" The use of open-ended questions allows the student to draw upon his or her own interests as they relate to the textual material. The questions or points raised are written on the board (students are encouraged to point out the place in the text where their questions arise). Then discussion continues on one or more of the questions raised.

Reconstructing Aesthetics

I am now in the beginning stages of writing and field testing a series of art texts for grades 1-6. These texts, like the books of Lipman, Reed, and others, are populated with children who interact with their peers, families, and teachers. In these texts, however, a small group of children leave the art class each year and travel through time and space. They actively explore the meanings and contexts of art and the roles and status of artists within the cultures visited. Hence, the perennially occurring questions of aesthetics can be effectively and, it is to be hoped, enjoyably embedded within a child-oriented story. Perhaps more importantly, this approach allows the natural integration of art history and provides numerous opportunities for art criticism experiences. The accompanying teacher's manual for each text will provide extensive discussion ideas and activities to
enhance class inquiry and dialogue based upon the text, plus numerous production activities which relate to the textual materials. Another important aspect of this approach is its multicultural nature. As we know, it is increasingly important for all educators to provide meaningful knowledge and experience of many cultures for students.

The stories themselves are divided into short episodes, designed to be read by or to the children. Examples of subject matter for episodes include: a visit to a sacred cave in Mali where a Dogon man is carving a Kanaga mask from wood, participation in a workshop in medieval Persia where various steps in producing miniature illuminations are divided among artists/artisans, joining the crowd watching Hokusai paint an image of the Buddha with...
a broom-sized brush, or a visit to the contemporary Egyptian child guild, Ramsis Wissa Wassef Center in Harrania, which produces tapestry weavings.

The following excerpts of dialogue are from a fifth grade class which had read a draft of the Dogon Kanaga episode. Although the characters in the episode observed the masks being used in a ritual dance, they were unable to observe the actual carving of a mask, a process which, in Dogon tradition, is shielded from females and uninitiated males. This discussion session was the group's first attempt at dialogue on aesthetic issues. The only prior meeting with the group was to explain general tenets and processes for class discussions. Rather than following the typical approach to gathering questions as explained above, I allowed a rather general discussion after the text reading. I then chose issues embedded within that discussion to delineate in question form on the board. I took this approach because it offered a modeling session for students. In other words, it helped them recognize the kinds of issues which already were part of their comments, but which needed further discussion and clarification. In later sessions with this group, the typical reading, questions, dialogue approach has been followed.

**Trent:** Well, if none of the kids could see the man making the mask, then it wasn't really art. You have to see something for it to be art. It can't be invisible.

**Susan:** They did get to see the masks at the dance. Besides it's religion. If your religion says you're not supposed to do something, you better not do it.

**Nathan:** But religion and art are different things.

**Susan:** Not there. They need the masks for religion. We think they're art, but for them, they're something else.

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Teacher: When does a religious article become art?

Nathan: They don't always. Maybe they don't ever because if they're using them...well, I don't think people really use something that's art.

Jennifer: We use pictures to decorate our house.

Bobby: That's different. They're using the masks to attract spirits of dead people. That's a lot different.

Teacher: And if the masks are in a museum instead of used in a ceremony, then are they art?

Emily: Yeah, then they're art. You can be sure then.

Tom: They might be art but they're not good. Look how rough they are in the pictures. They didn't sand them smooth or make them very fancy.

Trent: Yeah, and the white paint was made from chalk dust and lizard manure! I wonder what our white paint is made from?

At this point, I made a list on the board of some of the important issues that had been raised:

1. Do you have to see something for it to be art? Can art be just an idea? (Trent)
2. What is the relationship between art and religion? Art and ceremonies? (Susan, Nathan)
3. If an object is used for something (functional), can it be art? (Nathan)
4. Does where an object is found determine if it is art? (Emily)
5. How do we tell if something is good art? What are our criteria for judgment? (Tom)
6. Do the materials an object is made from determine whether or not it can be art? Or good art? (Trent)

Note that the student's name is included after the question. This practice helps to develop a sense of ownership for the student, a valuable component of this pedagogical approach. We easily could have spent three or four sessions discussing just the ideas raised in this early part of our discussion. However the teacher needs to focus the discussion by zeroing in on an issue raised by students and based on the text. In this instance, we focused on
question #3 and continued the dialogue. The following is a partial recording of this discussion:

Jennifer: Like I said before, art is to decorate...at least here it is.
Teacher: Let's name some different kinds of art that are used to decorate.
Various
Children: Paintings...drawings...statues in the park...paintings on the sides of buildings downtown...pictures in books...posters...bulletin boards...
Teacher: Is there anything besides being used for decoration that all these things have in common?
Mike: Usually they're pretty. Or they look good.
Susan: The way they look isn't the same, but they all usually look nice. I mean a statue in a park with a man on a horse is nice, and the painting in my room is a nice one...with a horse, too.
Tom: Well, a rock poster maybe doesn't look nice or pretty, but it looks good. It looks like somebody planned it to look cool.

(Conversation degenerates to a listing of favorite rock groups and posters.)
Teacher: Are there things that look good or pretty but which we don't consider art?
Anna: Flowers.
Maria: Clothes...cars...houses.
Steve: Houses are too art. Remember when we did that architecture stuff in art class last year?
Marie: Yeah, I guess so.
Anna: My mother spends a lot of time working on the flowers around our house. She said her flowers are her way of making art because she can't draw or anything very well. So maybe they aren't art by themselves, but they are if somebody grows them in a special way...so they look even prettier than before. And she fixes them to decorate the inside of the house, too.
Teacher: Is the vase Anna's mother uses a work of art?
Nathan: No, it's just to hold something else.
Shellie: What if it's pretty too? It would depend on the vase.
Beth: Some really fancy vases cost a lot money. And sometimes you can see them in museums, I saw a blue one from Japan with flowers and stuff on it in Indianapolis.
Teacher: Can we say that the way something looks is more important than what it's used for in deciding if it's art?
Nathan: Yeah, because my grandpa says that this metal sculpture
downtown...that looks like a big shovel-end...is too ugly to be art or anything else but a waste of money and space.

Susan: Well, it could be a cup or vase or painting or a house. If it's just a plain old cup, then it's not a kind of art. But if it looks good, it might be.

Teacher: Nathan, how does that relate to what you said before?

Nathan: Well, maybe if something looks real beautiful or real cool then it might be art even if you use it for some job. It's hard to say.

Tom: I think it's more important that somebody made it look nice or good on purpose that makes it art, whether it's a cup or a painting. It's not just what it's used for. It's if somebody plans it out, like a poster, so it looks good.

Michelle: I don't think we can say that something isn't art or can't be art just because we use it for something.

Teacher: How does that connect with the Dogon masks?

Michelle: I think they're art because they look neat. And the people who make them make them look a special way.

Jennifer: Just because we might not like the way they look doesn't make them not art.

Mike: I think they do look neat. I like them better than a lot of art stuff that's boring. They use them...they don't just look at them.

Nathan: I still don't know if you can use something and call it art. It's hard to say.

Teacher: It surely is.

It is clear from these excerpts that much remained to be done in making this classroom group a real community of inquiry. First, students did not really seem to listen to one another carefully. Their comments did not necessarily build upon previous comments. Second, the discussion jumped around excessively, with students reluctant to follow any one point very far. Third, my comments may at times have been a little too directive. In developing a community of inquiry the teacher should function as a facilitator, encouraging clear thinking and the dialogue process by asking questions such as "Why do you say that?" "How does that relate to what you (or someone else) said before?" "Can you draw that conclusion from the information in the story?" And fourth, too many of the same students spoke, and too many students failed to contribute to the discussion. However, a good foundation was laid, and later discussions have come closer to the student-student model espoused in philosophy for children. Let me reiterate that such a model does not mean that the teacher has no voice in the class dialogue. To the contrary, the teacher must work very hard to facilitate discussion, to gently attempt to involve all students, and to keep discussion at an inquiry level focused upon the important issues of the dialogue.

For our next session, students brought in functional and nonfunctional objects (or photographs of objects) which they thought were or were not art. We discussed their criteria and the contexts which surrounded their judgments. Once again, the important points of function, form, and intention were raised by students. Finally, students began making paper relief masks, focusing on building architectural forms, reminiscent of the Kanaga masks and on whether the masks were to be somehow functional or merely decorative. The masks were finished during the next session. Products ranged from masks to scare other soccer teams to a wind-catching mask with spindly extensions. This unit took three 55-minute
sessions, but could easily have been expanded to allow for more discussion or another production activity. The issues raised were added to a "Big Art Questions" list housed in the classroom (this idea comes from Marilyn Stewart and her colleagues at Kutztown State College). The issues are then available for later reference and dialogue.

Conclusion
The task of designing and testing a curriculum based upon issues from aesthetics embedded in child-oriented stories is a formidable one. The walls of my home are slowly disappearing under charts of philosophical issues, concepts and examples of styles and periods from multicultural art history, names and works of individual artists who could be "visited," and production activities which correlate with everything else. Friends who are art teachers, philosophers, and writers of children's books offer advice as I try to put all this together in a grade- and age-appropriate manner. But I am convinced that such a project is worthwhile, and, while certainly not all elementary art educators will warm to such an approach, it should be valuable to others seeking ways to modify the elementary art curriculum.

By the way, the use of textual stories to teach art is not a new one. For example, in the 1930's, a graded series called *Art Stories* (Whitford, Liek & Gray, 1934) was published. So this educational wheel is not a reinvention, but merely a reconstruction, based upon art education and philosophy for children theories and practices.

References

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