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Art Education with Attitude

- Civic literacy should be more than understanding of facts and structures.
- It includes cognitive skills in interpretation and evaluation that result in action dispositions.
- We have developed habits of interpreting symbols wherein the nature of the symbols is poorly understood.

Purpose: This paper explores the way in which art education advances the goals of citizenship education. In the first section of this paper the similarities between ethical and aesthetic concepts will be outlined and the visual art symbol system will be carefully examined.

Findings: It will be argued that the transference of a value-adaptive attitude developed through the study and practice of art to its application in civic literacy and engagement is valuable and warranted. The second section of this paper will investigate the impact that compositional study in both art practice and experience has on the reinforcement of and the alteration of values.

Keywords:

Art education, ethics, civic literacy, compositional analysis, attitudes

1 Introduction

Art education cultivates the value-adaptive attitude required for effective democratic citizenship and actual cultural value re-evaluation (the alteration or reinforcement of particular values). The use of “art education” is intended to include studio art practice (primarily visual art), art history and the philosophy of art. Effective democratic citizenship requires civic literacy, and civic literacy should be construed as more than merely an understanding of facts and institutional structures. The following excerpt is from a recent paper by Reimers, Ortega, Cardenas, Estrada, and Garza (2014):

“Current scholarship sees ‘civic literacy’ as the result not just of knowledge of facts which are relevant to understand the functioning of democratic institutions but of skills in applying this knowledge to interpreting situations. For example, the ability to interpret a political message and make inferences about the intents and interests of its source or to be able to determine when specific situations violate basic democratic rights. In addition, civic literacy includes dispositions to act in ways congruent with democratic interactions. (Reimers et al., 2014, p. 42)

What is particularly important according to these authors is process related Literacy in this respect is not a passive understanding but rather a complex movement of human being towards action. It includes the development of cognitive skills in interpretation (relevance determination and inference making) and evaluation that result in action dispositions. An action disposition is a component of an attitude and this paper will show that an attitude of a particular type is of significance: a value-adaptive attitude. It is important to note that what we

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label as civic virtues, civic values, or civic literacy has ethics at its base. The extension of the same rights to all adult citizens in a democratic society is based on judgments concerning justice and equality, the study of which is ethics.

The authors of the previously cited paper on empowering teaching also believe that transference to novel situations is particularly important. The transference of learned processes from one domain to another domain is similarly crucial. The first section of this paper explores associations between ethical and aesthetic concepts, their nature and use. It will be argued that the *transference* of a value-adaptive attitude developed through the study and practice of art to its application in civic literacy and engagement is valuable and warranted. The second section of this paper will investigate the impact that compositional study within art has on the reinforcement of and the alteration of values.

2 From Art Practice to Civic Literacy

Ethics and aesthetics are related in significant ways that have a direct impact on the capacity of arts education to play an important role in civic education. In this section I will develop an understanding of the vague, non-quantifiable, and culture-dependent nature of ethical and aesthetic concepts. In the following passage from his book *Philosophical Investigations*, Ludwig Wittgenstein (1999) addresses the state of indeterminateness caused by the inability to draw clear definitional boundaries for ethical and aesthetic concepts.

“Anything—and—nothing is right.—And this is the position you are in if you look for definitions corresponding to our concepts in aesthetics or ethics. In such a difficulty always ask yourself: How did we *learn* the meaning of this word (“good” for instance)? From what sort of examples? In what language-games? (Wittgenstein, p.36)

Concepts are, in these practices, blurry. The concept of art, the definition, changed in response to the many challenges presented by avant-garde artists during the 20th century. What was considered good art also adapted to the changes in its definition. During the 20th century in the United States the civil rights and women's rights movements brought about the extension of the concepts of equality and justice to these groups from a position of relative exclusion prior to these movements. There is more work to be done, but the concept of equality as holding between white men only is no longer the prevailing use of the concept.

Complete sets of necessary and sufficient conditions for the correct use of a concept exist only where a philosopher or scientist has intentionally constructed a system to eliminate ambiguity or vagueness in its application. The important point here is that this indeterminateness Wittgenstein points to does not entail that a concept's *usefulness* is hindered. Difficulty only arises when we cling to the ideal of certainty or in other words an infallible use based on having identified some immutable essence expressed as a set of necessary and sufficient conditions. This point is crucial for the promise of art education because art's capacity to contribute to knowledge has been disenfranchised by the pursuit of real knowledge, verifiable facts, or in other words, propositional knowledge. We must let go of the idealistic attachment to certainty underlying this reductive measure by which to know we are *right* and approach the need for a sense of rightness that is better aligned with a world in consistent transformation. Pragmatism is a good option. A pragmatist perspective will face not towards the essence of a concept in determining the correctness (rightness or truth) of its use but rather in the other direction, towards the consequences of using that concept in one way or another. The consequences determine if the use is correct, true, or good through a combination of both imaginative and actual experience. In this respect, the study and practice of art make fertile ground for learning to assess the consequences of holding and exercising one or another belief.

While aesthetic and ethical concepts have vague and shifting definitional boundaries, their *use* does have grounds for acceptance and can be effectively learned. In the creative processes of making and experiencing artworks, *using* a concept means bringing it to bear as part of an interpretive or evaluative judgment. I am not asserting that the use is propositional and that felt or intuited judgments are excluded. That the sculptor chooses concrete rather than steel, wood, chewing gum, asbestos, etc. as the material for a particular component in an artwork is a judgment that doing so is beneficial. And let's not perpetuate a mind-body dualism. Presence, where all action necessarily occurs, requires both, and the sculptor's judgment is nonetheless a judgment when *feeling right* is all that can be said about it.

Both the study and creation of artworks cultivates what is being referred to as the *value-adaptive attitude*: being capable of holding and using a value (an evaluative belief) while remaining open to and adapting to the

changing circumstances relevant to that value. A value-adaptive attitude makes for effective use, and use justifies the value-adaptive attitude. One will find similar sentiments in Maxine Greene's (2001) use of *wide-awakeness* and Elliot Eisner's (2004) thoughts on means and ends where he uses Dewey's expression "flexible purposing" to capture the "process of shifting aims while doing the work at hand" (Eisner, p.6). My thoughts on this issue are similarly grounded in the work of John Dewey and Nelson Goodman. The objective here is to develop an understanding of an attitude that is no mere synonym for *open-mindedness*: the state wherein we accept the presence of differences and agree to consider new possibilities. A value-adaptive attitude, while having open-mindedness as an aspect, is an attitude that has as its object the *persistence* of beliefs underlying an attitude. It carries an epistemic component that affords change while preserving the possibility of right, true, or in other words, good judgment. This effectively avoids the pitfalls of a thoroughgoing relativism and gives structure to the indeterminism indicated by Wittgenstein. We need to be able to believe in our judgments to effectively use them, and in affording some measure of adaptability to changing circumstances we must justify evaluative judgments without an appeal to immutable definitions.

Art education is extremely valuable in cultivating this attitude, and the transference to and application of this attitude in the realm of ethics, civic literacy and action is not only important but also warranted. This might seem like a futile exercise in convincing those that believe non-propositional knowledge to be no such thing. The argument here is not designed to refute this position directly, but an assumption is being made that non-propositional expression is intelligence bearing and contributes to the holding of beliefs as true. Neither is this an argument that justifies the relevance of art education through its value to another discipline or to a related competency such as critical thinking. I will assert without further argument that art stands on its own as intrinsically valuable. It should also be said that a value-adaptive attitude is neither found nor cultivated solely within art. The objective here is to delve into the particulars of visual art symbol systems to find good cause for being confident in understanding how the processes of making and experiencing art require this attitude.

Consider how in both ethical and aesthetic cases students make demands for a *right* answer. And as a suitable answer many students struggle to accept that merely being better than other available or conceivable options is what it means to be *right*. The debate in philosophy on the issue of being true or right is exceptionally broad and deep, and Pragmatism as a philosophical position has great promise. Richard Rorty (1999) characterizes the pragmatic position on truth as follows: "To say that a belief is, as far as we know, true, is to say that no alternative belief is, as far as we know, a better habit of acting" (Rorty, p.xxv). Being a habit or *rule for action* is how Charles Peirce first characterized "belief" within a pragmatic philosophy. In this respect we hold our values, evaluative beliefs, as true (or right) in



aesthetics and in ethics to the degree that these habits of acting result in better consequences than the alternatives.

In order to better understand a value-adaptive attitude, let's take a closer look at what an attitude is. Milton Snoeyenbos (1975) provides a solid analysis of the concept of an attitude in an unpublished dissertation entitled "Art Theory." An attitude, he says, is a mental state composed of an action disposition towards an object, a preference disposition towards that object, and a set of beliefs (some must be evaluative beliefs) about that object. An attitude is not the same as a preference because we can simply have preferences (such as liking beer) while attitudes carry "an implicit claim to justification" (Snoeyenbos, p. 107). That is, we think attitudes are right whereas preferences are tastes that just are what they are. Other things being equal, the choice of beer over wine is based on a preference that isn't itself considered right or based on truth. Snoeyenbos believes that dispositions are emotional and instinctive and somewhat beyond direct conscious control. However, our preference and action dispositions are influenced by the beliefs that we hold. This means that any measure of control over or any change in an attitude will stem from within the collection of beliefs (some of which are evaluative) about the object of the attitude. What I am referring to as a value-adaptive attitude has as its object the persistence of beliefs, their adaptability, their growth or decline in strength over time.

Being an effective citizen in a democratic republic (such as the United States of America) means that citizens not only pay their fair share of taxes, abide by the law, and vote. They must participate in ensuring the extension of constitutionally granted rights and exhibit an ongoing commitment to observing, interpreting and analyzing political (and cultural) content. For effective citizenship we must be capable of integrating the awareness generated by encounters with new objects, cultures, and contexts into our attitudes about these objects such that our actions will result in better than worse consequences. Understanding that this value-adaptive attitude is present in the creative processes of making and experiencing art prepares students, who also recognize that judgments in ethics and art are of the same type, to allow this attitude space to operate in ethical cases. It's important to understand how the symbol system used in creating and experiencing visual art makes a value-adaptive attitude *necessary*. One might object by pointing out that many people don't come to the experience of art with this attitude and yet they experience, interpret and evaluate artworks. It would seem that there is no necessity here. However, there is, and this line of thought fails for educational reasons; these individuals have yet to understand the nature and use of the visual art symbol system. This cultural construct (the symbol system) makes these acts of communication (visual artworks) possible and therefore determines what is and is not necessary with regard to them.

Simply put, that something is an artwork means that it is an object, act or event that has been used in an act of communication; the point to be made here is narrow so consider this classification of artworks to be incomplete. Communication necessitates symbols (within notational schemes and overall systems) that are publically perceptible; it is important to note that each artwork, as a whole, is a symbol. The notational scheme in the representational system that underlies visual art is such that no two marks can be known to mean the same thing across different artworks; this is an analog scheme as Nelson Goodman (1976) has construed it. Let's say that the *same* mark (or pictorial object) can exist in two separate, distinct artworks. The representational symbol system under which these two works are classified as "art" necessitates that there is no way to determine that the mark or pictorial object doesn't belong to more than one character class; being in a character class makes them the same. Notice that in the notational scheme for the English language different marks (MARK, **mark**, *mark*) can be known to be members of the same character class while belonging to no others. Once that is established the attempt to coordinate a meaning with the character can happen. In the visual art system we can't ascribe a particular meaning to a mark or object and expect (or stipulate) it to be the *same* from artwork to artwork. What this means is that at its foundation, every art making or art experiencing situation is a novel situation where exercising interpretive judgments and evaluative beliefs with unclear boundaries on new material is a necessity. The symbol system itself requires that we exercise this value-adaptive attitude every time we engage the creative process in making or experiencing visual art. We do develop habits of seeing/conceiving and tend to entrench meanings, but the system itself does not cause this entrenchment. With this in mind, our habits of seeing can be employed with a sense of adaptability that strengthens the benefits we actually do get out of using them.

3 Art's moral function

It might seem obvious that the experience of art from other cultures can generate emotions, causing empathy and acknowledgment of a shared humanity. John Dewey (2005) has insightful things to say about the effect of art on attitudes and the connection of art practice to morality.

"The moral function of art itself is to remove prejudice, do away with the scales that keep the eye from seeing, tear away the veils due to wont and custom, perfect the power to perceive....We understand it [art from other cultures or art outside our defined norm] to the degree in which we make it a part of our own attitudes...we install ourselves in modes of apprehending nature that at first are strange to us....This insensible melting is far more efficacious than the change effected by reasoning, because it enters directly into attitude. (Dewey, 2005, p. 334)

This passage is particularly interesting with regard to the argument this paper presents. What Dewey claims to be the moral function of art doesn't happen automatically. Should we hold fast to fixed ideals that establish what is "good" or believe in sharp boundary lines defining concepts we employ in interpretation then nothing will enter directly into attitude. As such art couldn't perform its moral function and ultimately it's civic function of managing re-evaluation, the informed alteration of or reinforcement of values. The effective reinforcement of civic values occurs when the exercise of one or another particular cultural value is allowed to be openly tested. This is real reinforcement. Similarly, the alteration of a value is in effect to allow a belief and corresponding action disposition to adapt to circumstances such that a better consequence is experienced.

A value-adaptive attitude makes it possible that art is more powerful than reason in removing prejudice and expanding our awareness. In his book entitled *The Meaning of the Body*, Mark Johnson (2008) comments on Dewey's account of reasoning as it relates to attitudes.

"The crux of Dewey's entire argument [in *Art As Experience*] is that what we call thinking, or reasoning, or logical inference, could not even exist without the felt qualities of situations: "The underlying unity of qualitative-ness regulates pertinence or relevancy and force of every distinction and relation; it guides selection and rejection and the manner of utilization of all explicit terms" (Dewey 1934, 247-8). This is a startling claim: Insofar as logic pertains to real human inquiry, logic can't do anything without feeling....Logic alone cannot define the problem you are trying to solve by inquiry. Logic cannot tell you what you should count as relevant to your argument. Logic can only work because we take for granted the prior working of qualities in experienced situations" (Johnson, 2008, p.78).

The important relationships in the preceding quote should not be underestimated with regard to the similarities of civics and creative practice in the arts. The ability to interpret artworks/designs, to make inferences based on compositional analysis or to recognize violations of democratic rights (as being pivotal to civic literacy) is on this account not solely rooted in an abstract logical analysis that can dispense with the qualities we feel in experienced situations. In actuality, attitudes rest upon the interdependence of logic and emotion. To make art and to experience art is to effectively navigate the construction of interpretations and evaluations wherein the perceptible experience of a felt, emotional, situation is of vital importance. Practicing this process in itself is beneficial as far as transference to ethical inquiry is concerned, but when the content of an artwork concerns morals or civic values then the consequences approach Dewey's expectations for art in culture.

The value-adaptive attitude allows one to be confident in exercising the evaluative beliefs underlying an attitude while remaining open to and adapting to the changing circumstances relevant to those values. It is valuable to the extent that it makes possible the development of better consequences, better habits of action, that are

themselves considered better as judged by lived experience (which includes imaginative experience). The value-adaptive attitude is transferrable from its use in the creative processes of art making and experiencing to the realm of ethics because the concepts (such as "good") used in art are of the same qualitative character as the concepts (such as the word "good") used in ethical cases. Both ethics and art require us to grapple with vagueness, and they afford felt experiences great significance in determining actions. As such, art education has a role to play in civic literacy.

4 Compositional analysis

In creating art in the studio one weighs the possibilities and ultimately takes action. In order to effectively create an artwork, the artist must practice the ability to take action and revise their action. Many artists describe the process as feeling, intuiting their way through the construction of an artwork. Other artists spend more time forecasting possible outcomes to their actions before taking them. More often than not the process is a blend of the two. However, in neither case are the felt qualities of experience absent, as the qualities of an actual situation or as the predicted (imagined) felt qualities of a possible action. Interpreting and evaluating actions, with both emotion and reason, taken in the course of making an artwork, cultivates not only the value-adaptive attitude but is also to practice what Johnson argues is of primary importance to human inquiry in general.

Teaching students to create artwork is made difficult to the degree that they desire to *know* what or how to do something in advance. Teachers uniformly use ostensive training with art students to help guide them towards an emotional and conceptual experience that they (the teachers) believe is of value. However, this does not entail nor do many of them maintain that a right answer exists as to how a composition will best achieve an original intention or why a composition will ultimately be evaluated as good. Yet it is the cultivation of this value-adaptive attitude that both allows one to act with some confidence and to adjust to the actual results in the production of art. This statement also applies to the experience of art, the interpretation and evaluation of artworks as a spectator. The following example affords us the opportunity to examine the art director's compositional decisions in the production of a particular mass-media advertisement. This is essentially a study in composition, the ordering of elements in a design, and in this instance it's a visual design. Compositional study is of primary importance in all art and design disciplines, and it is particularly impactful with regard to the reinforcement or alteration of the ethical beliefs underlying attitudes.

Consider Figure 1, an advertisement for a large international bank. What we are judging is the actual, publically perceptible work and not an intention on the part of the artist or art director that may or may not have been successfully produced. The author is one among all as a creator of an interpretation of the actual work, and the job of the viewer, while being engaged in the



author's act of communication, is nonetheless not simply to discover the right answer in the form of the artist's intention. Certainly failure to communicate a particular intention needs to be possible and aesthetic experience need not be impoverished. In considering Figure 1, interpret what is being sold and to whom through this advertisement. Notice the staging, the use of perspective in the architectural lines, the color choices, the facial expressions, and the juxtaposition of the logos. Consider the text that accompanies the image, its positioning, the emphasis granted to certain ideas through scale, and its overall relationship to the characters.

Figure 1 (2014)



Deutsche Bank [Advertisement]. (n.d.). *The Economist*. Original can be retrieved at <https://www.db.com/cr/en/special/deutsche-bank.htm>

Now consider Figure 2. Does the reintroduction of the woman in this scene change your interpretation? What can be interpreted in this composition with regard to her presence, the color choices in her hair and accessories, her presence in the foreground, and the focus of her attention. Figure 2 is the original advertisement. Building an interpretation of this piece has proven to be complex, and responses from high school age students to these two images have been quite diverse. Many students simply see people in an airport walking to catch a flight. It is certainly a plausible interpretation that she is the CEO of a company, hustling to catch a plane to the next shareholder's meeting with her vice president of investor relations by her side. An equally plausible interpretation is that she is an object of desire, an object that two male characters are competing over. No attempt is being made here to prove that any particular interpretation is in fact *the* designer's or *the* company's intention. That

these interpretations exist among an indefinite number of possible meanings does not render visual art incapable of contributing to knowledge. It does not mean that without a definitive interpretation that art contributes little to our beliefs in how things *ought* to be.

The visual art symbol system, unlike a system such as the English language, does not stipulate what is and what is not the index and the characterizer of an artistic expression. That is, the system itself has no rules that determine what a visual artwork's subject (index) is or what its subject is not (Beardsley, 1981). This also applies to the characterizer (predicate) or in other words what it is that is being expressed about the subject. The viewer assesses what is and is not relevant and makes interpretations and evaluations that settle on some index and some characterizer; it is not the case that an explicit index or characterizer must be identified or that one or another is capable of being expressed in linguistic form. The point is that compositional analysis is the mechanism through which the process of description, interpretation and evaluation occurs, and that to lack an understanding of compositional decision-making has as a consequence poor civic literacy. To interpret an image with the civic literacy objective of judging the interests of the creator is a second step. This exercise in compositional analysis precedes such a judgment. Preparing students for engagement as productive community members necessitates that their experience of artworks, or any form of visual communication, does not pass through to belief and action without compositional analysis.

Figure 2 (2014)



Deutsche Bank [Advertisement]. (n.d.). *The Economist*. Original can be retrieved at www.db.com/cr/en/special/deutsche-bank.htm.

Studio art teaches the weighing and measuring of actions with regard to the use of elements (space, line, color, etc.) in a composition. This weighing and measuring must remain adaptive because the notational scheme itself requires it. The system also imposes the same adaptability on the coordination of cultural references in each individual artwork or design. Cultural references, external references in this respect, become elements with which the designer-artist composes the piece: gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, economic class, etc. Consider the relationships between the people in Figure 2. A white woman is in the foreground, with blonde hair, red shoes, and a red bag; her shirt color (blue) matches that of the white male and the large logo. She is looking at the black man and he is looking at her. They all appear to be of the same socio-economic class. The heads of all three people in the foreground are aligned on one of the perspective lines created by the light breaks in the windows. The woman is walking directly on another perspective line as reflected in the floor. The horizon line (the camera's and therefore the viewer's eye level) is just below their waistlines. The two men are (relative to the flat picture plane) located on either side of the woman. The men are facing towards but to the left of the camera and have facial expressions that are clearly visible. The woman's facial profile is visible and her expression is partially discernable.

Again, it is not the case that any particular interpretation is *necessarily* the true, right, interpretation. However, this does not mean that one or another interpretation cannot be supported or be argued to result in better consequences based on compositional analysis (the pragmatist position on truth or rightness). We can point to the elements in the piece as support for decisions of relevance, and the inferences made can be shown to result in particular meanings. The point is to consider the consequences of what was actually done, created, independently of any authorial intention, and it can be shown that this advertisement for banking services contains content interpreted as directly involving morals and cultural identities.

The white man is walking with a serious, determined facial expression. He is about to walk across the path traveled by the woman as she walks away with a black man. The white man is closest in proximity to the expression "Passion to Perform." Consider the difference between Figure 1 and Figure 2 with regard to the interpretation of the white man in the foreground. The presence or absence of the woman in the image makes a difference. We can even define the relevance of an element or object in an artwork or image such that the absence of that element or object renders an actual interpretation no longer possible. The absence of the woman is significant. Furthermore, the compositional organization of color, scale and juxtaposition make the woman the most prominent, emphasized object. How does this emphasis occur? Many of her colors are warm and advance while the vast majority of other colors in the scene are cool and recede; this color organization directs attention to her. She is striding next to a man

relative to the ground plane, but relative to the organization of the picture plane she is between the two men. She is looking into the eyes of the man next to her and is visible in profile only. In other words she isn't looking towards the viewer of this image; this empowers the viewer with unconstrained observation. Her body type is tall and fit and her hair complements this physique. Her sexuality is emphasized.

In general, does the passive digestion of images result in better consequences for our culture? Does this seemingly run-of-the-mill advertisement (Figure 2) reinforce action dispositions congruent with the democratic cultural value of the equality of men and women? To be an object in this respect is to be unequal, and the interpretation of Figure 2 as objectifying a woman does not reinforce the cultural values of equality and justice we espouse in western democratic culture. There are competing interpretations for this image and no attempt has been made to argue that the intent of this bank is to objectify women in order to appeal to an audience. Knowing the intentions of the bank is irrelevant insofar as we have learned to interpret and evaluate visual expressions. We act according to our actual interpretive experience of the piece and not what the artist, art director or company claims to be the intended meaning. What is needed is experience with compositional analysis and the open examination of evaluative beliefs that follows from a value-adaptive attitude. It is through the felt experience that emerges in concert with compositional study that the real reinforcement of the value of equality, in this instance, can happen. Passive exposure to images such as this can reinforce an attitude that women are objects or it can contribute to the failure to uncover conflicting beliefs. Art education is a bulwark against passive consumption.

5 Conclusion

A perplexing and insightful exercise is to ask students to develop a plan to teach someone how to use the word "beautiful." The difficulty in doing so touches on many of the issues this paper identifies: vague definitional boundaries, application in multiple realms (nature and artifacts), cultural dependency, actual felt situations, and the value-adaptive attitude. A discerning response I have received when assigning this exercise is that "no one sits you down and teaches you to label things 'beautiful'...you just come to use the word." It also might seem that we are not expressly taught how to interpret or use images and that we have mastered this ability independently of guidance. In neither instance is this really the case, and we have developed habits of seeing (interpreting) these symbols wherein the nature of the symbol system is poorly understood. In his book *The Gift*, Lewis Hyde (2007) bolsters the need for art education because of its deep cultural implications. "The work of art is a copula: a bond, a band, a link by which the several are knit into one [people into a community].... These creations are not "merely" symbolic, they do not "stand for" the larger self; they are its necessary embodiment, a language without which it would have no life at all"

(Hyde, p.199). That visual forms of expression in current western democratic cultures are ubiquitous is not contentious, and possessing a deep understanding of the visual art symbol system and compositional analysis can only be beneficial if not absolutely necessary for effective participation in one's own culture and across cultures. Therefore art education has a role to play in helping to achieve the goals of citizenship education.

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