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GENERAL EDUCATION AND INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES IN THE ARTS

Dennis J. Sporre, Director

General Education in the Arts

The conservatory approach to education in the arts is commonplace. Even in land-grant institutions which purportedly espouse a liberal arts or general education (there are differences between the two) the tendency in arts instruction has been to shape the curriculum into more and more specificity, so that even at the undergraduate level the student is given an option to choose, within his major, rather narrow specializations. The resultant increase in specialty courses and their need for staffing constantly refires the age-old arguments relating to general and liberal education and how, within various matrixes, general students or non-majors can be accommodated. What I would like to do here is to suggest a practical possibility for course development in interdisciplinary general education in the arts. Prior to that, and by way of introduction, however, it is important to deal with some philosophical prerequisites concerning relationships among artists, artworks, aesthetics and non-artists.

There is a persistent attitude, as Hebert Read puts it, that “Common to both sophisticated and simple people is the assumption that whatever art may be, it is a specialist or professional activity of no direct concern to the average man.” (“The Necessity of Art,” in Curricular Considerations for Visual Arts Education: Rationale, Development and Evaluation, George W. Hardiman and Theodore Zernich, editors, Stipes Publishing Company, 1974 p. 7). Such an attitude is
perhaps more firmly entrenched in the arts community than it is even in society in general. Its result is a resistance to any idea which suggests that art education must consist of more than the conservatory, into which a few non-artists are ingested, whirled around, and then spit out in the name of liberal or general education. However, there is little question that aesthetics plays a major role in society as a whole. As I have suggested elsewhere (see Dennis J. Sporre, *Perceiving the Arts: An Introduction*, Kendall/Hunt Publishers, 1978, p. 8), we all co-habit with the arts whether or not we traffic in galleries, theatres, or concert halls. Individuals put on color-coordinated, matching socks in the morning. They wear clothes and make-up which flatter their physiognomy. They make aesthetic (artistic?) decisions constantly, not merely when they are in the concert hall or in the gallery. An aesthetic education, which is at least part of an arts education, is as important in the running of a business and the design and decoration of a home as it is in the production of a ballet. A store's floor plan, sign, and advertising for example, are important financial and artistic matters, and trusting them to others can be precarious. Aesthetics is important in areas of daily life that touch people's pocketbooks, and concerns matters perhaps more permeating (if not more mundane) than formal artworks. Therefore, while the ultimate relationships among artists, artworks, aesthetics and non-artists (or society in general) are complex and difficult to sort out, certainly the relationship of the non-artist to the arts and aesthetics is different from that of the artist to his art. As a result, the formal, i.e., educational, development of the non-artist obviously should be different from that of the artist. As valuable as the participatory experience is in achieving a full understanding of the aesthetic and creative process, dabbling with a paint brush or shifting scenery does not teach a non-arts student to function in his most important and relevant relationship with the arts, that is, as an informed audience member or respondent. So for all intents and purposes, in the classroom setting general education and the conservatory are mutually exclusive. Artists and audiences cannot be trained in the same classroom. (In terms of the overview of total aesthetic education, the conservatory and general education go hand in hand. One cannot have one without the other. Despite contentions to the contrary, it is impossible in our society for an artist to do his work without a receptive and perceptive audience, which consists of a broader spectrum of society than the artist's own peers. Likewise, and perhaps in the long run more importantly, it is impossible for an audience to adequately appreciate and support the arts without having the best of the art form available for its time and ticket price.)

What these considerations lead to is a practical matter of course development for general education in the arts. The first question to be raised is, in what or in whose classroom should general education take place? I wish to be very specific in my connotations here. By general education I mean specifically designed courses for non-majors, and not open courses for majors and non-majors alike. Obviously no pat answer to the previous question exists.

Every college or university has its own individual curricular, fiscal, or administrative qualities which influence how general education in the arts can be accommodated. I would like, however, to suggest a possibility which meets a number of philosophical and practical needs, and offers an additional option to the standard music, theatre, and art appreciation courses taught in the traditional single-disciplinary departments. It is very difficult in the current curricular state of affairs for a student to elect a full range of courses to broaden his
aesthetic horizons. For the past fifteen years The Pennsylvania State University has centered its efforts in general education in the arts in a separate program which offers interdisciplinary arts courses at beginning and advanced levels. Each course covers some aspect of the interrelationships of visual arts, music, theatre, opera, dance, film, architecture and landscape architecture. Each course is taught by a single instructor (as opposed to team teaching) so as to keep course goals unified and methodology of subject matter treatment consistent, as well as to handle problems in load distribution, etc. Graduate assistants and outside experts are used on occasion to help plug the holes in the instructor's expertise.

Without dealing with problems involving breadth versus depth of experience and generalists versus specialists, let me continue by stating that as a curricular option, this approach gives the student the opportunity to broaden his horizons in a three-unit course in subject areas which normally would require twenty-one or more units of credit.

What is most important pertaining to course development in general education in the arts is not specificity or superficiality, but rather the delineation of specific goals and the adoption of functional and productive methods of meeting those goals in order to introduce the general student to the arts. Concerning goals, it is most essential to note that general education should not try to make demi-artists out of non-majors. They are not artists, never will be artists, and if they were, they would be taking another approach to their education than that which brings them to a general education course. Taking a course in general medicine does not make one a physician or even a paramedic. It does, however, create a better understanding of the field of medicine, how medicine can relate to life, and how better health can be achieved. The key to avoiding the creation of over-confident, under-educated, know-it-alls is the careful articulation of sensible course objectives. Goals for general education in the arts should, first of all, focus on an attempt to solve a practical problem: That of packaging the best information possible relative to the arts into one or more college courses that somehow fit into that very brief 125 hours of the undergraduate curriculum, in which completion of a "major" leaves one little more than a "dabbler". In addition, these goals should focus on an attempt to take a student from the realm of a familiar experience over a bridge into the realm of the unfamiliar, that is, the arts and aesthetics, or from a cognitive world into a cognitive affective one. General education should try to open doors to life-long learning (if it does nothing more than that, it will have accomplished a good deal). One of my staff recently had a former student present him with a lovely, very expensive volume on architecture as a reward for the benefits the student received from his course. If I translate correctly, the student, who worked in the construction trades, found that, having had this general arts course, he looked at the world in a completely different way. His whole method of observation had changed because of the doors that were opened in that course. So to repeat, the attempt is not to try to make artists, but rather to make life-long students of and respondents to the arts, to make them want more, want to discover more, want to see more, want to get into the habit of the arts. Attending the theatre, attending concerts, and going to museums is habitual. It requires getting up and getting out to do it. Once one is in the habit, it comes naturally and requires little thought or effort. If individuals can be stimulated into the habit of going to the
arts and interested enough in the arts so that they want to learn more, then the total value of the arts will become apparent to them and they will give themselves, or seek out, the substantive kind of instruction that cannot be given in a broad survey.

It is difficult at this point to be specific about goals, because they must be related to specific courses, and to be worthwhile, specific courses should be related to curricula. Curricula, in turn relate to students, and the variety of backgrounds likely to be encountered at a large land-grant state university is considerably different from that of a small, private liberal arts college. Every course should have a clientele in mind, and a level of approach at its base. These factors are the stumbling blocks in most course development. While in traditional disciplines courses can spring from the specific interests and expertise of an individual professor, great difficulty can be avoided if those interests and expertise have curricular relationships. Most certainly, courses in general education in the arts must spring, not from pet theories and interests, but genuine understanding of the levels of aesthetic sophistication at which the graduate of a college or university can reasonably be expected to function.

To be specific, let me deal in what follows with the goals and methodology for an introductory-level course in general education in the arts, such as is taught at Penn State. The course referred to touches upon art as a process, product, and experience, but it does so only in terms of elements which lend themselves to classroom study. The goal of the course is to enhance aesthetic perception by examining works of art, by discerning what can be seen and heard in them, by understanding what those elements are called, and by determining how the artwork creates a response in the viewer or listener. The course is not a course in taste-making or connoisseurship. "Good" art and "bad" art or their characteristics are not discussed.

The methodology for the course is cognitive. We live in a cognitive world. The things with which we are most familiar and which we can grasp most easily are those things which are cognitive in nature. Some individuals are fond of referring to aesthetic education as "the education of half-wits." They refer, of course, to the fact that one hemisphere of the brain deals with cognitive information and the other, with affective response. The contention is that without the arts — affective experience — individuals are educated to utilize only half their cerebral potential. I could not agree more. However, an emphasis on feelings and emotions is a questionable tack when used as a pedagogic method for introducing individuals to the arts. If general education seeks to be the bridge from the world of the familiar into the world of the unfamiliar, then starting with those elements of the arts which can be handled with the tools of perception with which the uninitiated has been working all his life seems to be a more logical and productive means of introduction. This does not in any way deny the role, the importance, nor the desirability of affective response. If instruction is done properly, the affective and expressive layers of response will be enhanced and will complement the cognitive. Opening doors to areas of learning which are unfamiliar and in many cases unpopular, is not easy. Consequently, questions such as "Do you like it?" or "How does it make you feel?" are as absurd an introduction to a play as they would be to a new personal acquaintance. Such questions usually evoke only confusion, frustration, and resentment. A more reasonable question is "What can you see or hear in it?" From that point of departure the individual finds that he can recognize forms,
patterns, colors, and movement. He becomes comfortable in that knowledge and is willing to go on. When a student discovers that it is not difficult to recognize polyphony, homophony, and monophony, he then begins to acquire a taste for active listening and moves one step closer to full affective and informed participation in the art form. The value of the cognitive approach is that one can show the arts as vehicles of communication relevant to individuals who never have had any exposure to them. One can show that quality in the arts is not a remote, elitist utopia to be treated as one does a trip to the dentist. That is, you know it is supposed to be good for you, but you are frightened to death to go. Rather, the arts are a complex arrangement of levels of involvement and response. An enlightened experience in the arts can begin at the level of complete ignorance as well as at the level of thorough sophistication. The ability to count to three allows understanding of something. An MD degree is not required to understand how to take care of one’s health, and years of training or participation are not required to begin to understand what the arts are about and to love the arts and to respond to them. Cognition provides that bridge to the arts from a mechanized, familiar world.

In a course such as an introductory course in the arts for the general student, one needs to have a consistent approach as he moves from discipline to discipline. Terminology, frequently used as a tool for interrelating the arts, I find to be specious since the nuances and general, if not antithetical, differences among similar terms in separate disciplines tend to cause confusion for the beginner. I prefer to use Harry Broudy’s levels of aesthetic response: 1) What is it? 2) How is it put together? 3) How does it stimulate the senses? 4) What does it mean to me? The first three of these can be studied cognitively. The fourth I leave to the student's future development.

Finally, within the classroom setting any methodology is incomplete which does not deal with the difficult and perplexing problems of testing students' understanding. Such is the case with the testing in the arts. In the interest of brevity I simply would prefer to Warren Smith’s excellent article on “Testing in the Arts” (Warren S. Smith, “Testing in the Arts”, Interdisciplinary Perspectives, VIII, No. 2 (Winter, 1976-77), pp. 25-32.) in which the application of perceptual skills becomes the focal point of the examination. In the classroom the student studies specific works, learning to discern how the artist has used such qualities as line, form, mass, color, repetition and unity, and how these qualities are expressed in the artworks. The examination requires him to compare works he has studied in class to works which he has not seen before. The examination questions deal with true and false statements regarding which painting, for example, has a more dynamic use of line, or which sculpture makes a more significant use of negative space. This kind of testing, which lies somewhere between subjectivity and objectivity, has proven itself a valid instrument via the Kud-Richardson test of reliability.

These comparisons form roughly fifty-percent of the examination. The remainder is comprised of objective questions dealing with definitions and background material found in the textbook, a basic reference encompassing all the arts. The text is designed as a springboard for classroom analysis and discussion and provides the student with background information such as the characteristics of a symphony so that class time need not be devoted to presenting information which can be communicated more effectively and more quickly in written than in oral form.
It is clear that the place of general education in the arts in the academic curriculum is not easily determined. In addition to the attitudinal problems to which I have briefly referred, there are significant and sometimes overriding practical problems, problems of facilities, staff, and budgets. Certainly general education in the arts must be concerned with the larger questions of the relationship of the arts to society and the differences between artists and respondents vis a vis, artworks and aesthetics. Elitism, popularism, and democratism, "buzz" words currently in vogue, must be contended with, and must be handled sensitively. Finally, goals and methodology are critical to general education in the arts, and must account for the fact that in the United States, societal arts appreciation has a seminal influence on the future quality of all artistic endeavors. Whether or not federal subsidies are forthcoming or even desirable, societal understanding and support for the arts is a necessity.