

The Aesthetic Impulse

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TO MY MOTHER

“T’our bodies turn we then, and so
Weak men on love reveal’d may look,
Loves mysteries in souls do grow,
And yet the body is the book.”

JOHN DONNE, *The Ecstasy*

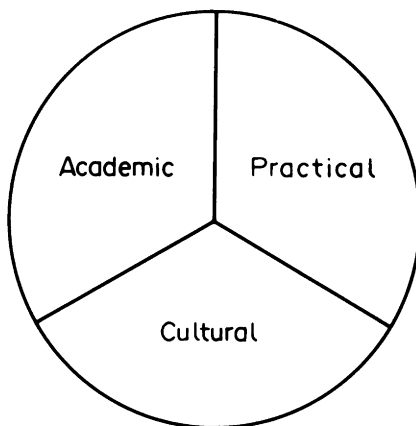
Preface

In this essay I want to try to give wider currency to the word “*aesthetic*” as describing a significant area of the school curriculum that would include but not be confined to the creative arts. In doing so I shall propose that the central value of the arts in education is aesthetic – in short that the aim of arts education is the *qualification of sensibility*. That the *arts* are primarily committed to the development of intelligent feeling. Art itself is what philosophers like to call a “contested” concept, and artists seek various, even contradictory goals in their own practice. I believe the central concern of arts education however, obvious though such a statement might seem, has to be with the arts rather than say with the child’s social or moral development. The arts are important to a child’s education because they are a way of knowing in their own right and offer unique access to certain dimensions of human experience.

I am not being merely pedantic here. I think I can perhaps clarify my position by distinguishing what I have in mind from two currently popular alternative views. Such views emphasize the “academic” and the “instrumental” value of education in or through the arts and are in my terms concerned with outcomes that are strictly extra-aesthetic. Their hope is to make the arts legitimate by aligning them with the so-called “core” curriculum. The stance of the arts educator is critical for it is projected into a particular kind of teaching and, of course, seeks and rewards certain kinds of educational outcomes rather than others. For my own part I shall want to insist that the “poetic” or “cultural” experience of art has to be the basis of any statement about the nature and purpose of a general arts education.

The school curriculum is constituted of three principal fields of learning – or, to put it another way, is directed towards three complementary kinds of outcome: the academic, the practical or instrumental and the cultural. The academic curriculum introduces children to the world of “pure” knowledge and to the rewards of scholarship. The practical curriculum is designed to equip children with the technical skills and know-how that will fit them for employment and for their role in society: its criteria are essentially economic, as are its intended rewards. The cultural curriculum, by no means as readily identifiable in most schools, seeks to help children grow as persons, as individuals within society. Its rewards are intrinsic and immediate rather

than, as with the other two areas already alluded to, deferred. The individual child learns about himself or herself, develops what we might call “personal knowledge”, acquires a sense of values and the ability to cope with the experience of “being in the world”.



If such an analysis applies to the curriculum as a whole – it can also be applied to any particular subject area within it. For instance it is usual to distinguish between the pure and the applied fields of mathematics and science. I would maintain that the aesthetic area is no exception. My point is that under the present extreme economic circumstances that we are experiencing it is possible to discern noticeable tendencies to pull arts education back from too close an identification with the more nebulous dimension of “culture” and to negotiate a new legitimacy as an aspect either of the academic (pure) or the practical (applied) core.

In a recent article (see Ross, 1982) Gavin Bolton writing about drama in education exemplifies what I call the instrumental approach to arts education. He is, of course, by no means a lone voice. I sense for instance that an instrumental view of arts education informs a good deal in the Gulbenkian Foundation Report “The Arts in Schools”. Writing about drama as learning Bolton is not especially concerned that much of what goes on in drama lessons could not be categorised as art. Drama can be a “fine education” nevertheless and he gives two reasons:

“One is that dramatic method is potentially so educationally rich that experience falling short of art can still be hugely beneficial. And secondly, linked with the first, it is possible that pupils even at secondary level may not acquire the necessary skills to create a group artistic product and yet still have a worthwhile course.” (p. 145).