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(Doing) art as an interdisciplinary didactic principle

Works of art are introduced during lessons in school usually in order to mediate ideas and theories about subjective realities. Pictures, sculptures, installations are then meant to be representations of insights or illustrations of learners’ imaginations. In this paper we will interpret works of art as translations of theories in special settings of experience. Art installations, performance art, context art, and other artistic efforts and styles that thematise the character of a work of art can be interpreted in this manner. On the basis of such art works or artistic action ways to deal with certain experiences can be traced and revealed. This could serve to generate theories that can be displayed by including all five of the bodily senses. Such references to art in school could principally be possible every time interdependencies and contexts are to be learnt.

The recent displacement of knowledge transfer as the ultimate aim of education by competencies represents a fundamental change in the diverse systems of education. Consequently, the attainment of content knowledge for its own sake has been superseded by the acquisition of skills that can be used in practice in which unpredictability plays a major role. (BÖHLE, PFEIFFER, SEVSAY-TEGETHOFF 2004) Competencies help to facilitate active, open-minded, exploratory, dialogical and empathical approaches to situational challenges in society, in school, and in private life. The competence regarded as most important in this regard is the ability and willingness to learn from one’s own experiences. This presupposes awareness of oneself, and it requires the ability and sensitivity to be guided by events and occurrences that arise individually in one’s personal experience.

Fritz BÖHLE et al. comment that the development of competencies shows certain parallels to artistic practices. (BÖHLE, PFEIFFER, SEVSAY-TEGETHOFF 2004, S.67) We suppose that the paradigm shift in the diverse systems of education concerning learning goals entails not only a revision of instructional practices but also a revision of the means of instruction. Here a kind of iconic paradigm shift is to be carried out. Accordingly, no longer needed are the imaging or illustrating of subjects to be learnt and keeping them abstract; rather, in place of these abstractions the contexts and settings of learning are foregrounded and made concrete. Considering this, we draft our hypotheses: contexts of learning based on art works or based on artistic principles can be used to emphasize the ambiguous, open-ended and contingent aspects of individual experiences.
Scientists and practitioners agree that learning requires learners to recognize their abilities to adequately engage with the subjects they are learning (that is, their self-efficacy) and yet subjects must make sense for them. Sense is never articulated by an isolated element. It always happens among two or more instances deriving from a lateral linkage between circumstances and signs. Meaning is founded through alliances formed between different elements. According to Bernhard WALDENFELS (2002), differences, contrasts and borders are particularly effective serving as sense making moments. Among other things, such moments can be definitions of words. To explain this we follow the phenomenological concept that cognitive experiences of sense in the modus of a “Eureka!” moment cannot be abstracted from experiences in the real world. The experience of sense is thus a complex mesh of borders, contrasts, metonymies characterised by ambiguities and simulations that derive from an abundance of colour, sound, light, space, language, etc. (WALDENFELS 2002, S.165) Gernot BOEHME describes this as follows (translated by the author): “Our eyes are not opposite to the things, they are not only scanning them with the eyeshot, but our eyes are in the things as well as the things are in them. Images not only sketch a world of objects in distance, but also a world in which the emerging of reality becomes visible; defining itself as a kind of subject. [...] We live in the world and not before the world” (BOEHME 1986, S.293). The measures, meanings, coherences, as well as qualities and values of given facts, derive from coordinations of internal and external realities. If a perception makes sense to an individual cognitive elements are thus always included as diverse aspects of this perception itself.

Within classroom lessons teachers use works of art usually in order to mediate ideas and theories about subjective realities. Pictures, sculptures, installations are meant to be representations of insights or illustrations of certain imaginations in general. Here we will interpret works of art as translations of theories in special settings of experience. We generally concentrate on such art installations, performances or other artistic efforts and styles that depend on the spectator to complete them; that is, it is up to the spectator to make them visible or discernable in general. (ECO 1977) At the same we have to take into account that works of art themselves can make something appear. Martin SEEL (2002) describes this as the “staging” character of art works as not only condensing real things, topics, and constellations, but also producing visibility. These processes are invoking an apprenticeship by corporal means of understanding and at the same time they are provoking theories.

In school such references to the appealing qualities of works of art could principally be used every time interdependencies and contexts are to be learnt. Certain subjects in school may even be more easily learnt by this way. Beside the stimulating aspects of art
described above there is another aspect that cannot be ignored. It is the interpretative function that includes a certain, sometimes only slight effect of alienation. Taking “Land Art” as a starting point and on the basis of the principle of a reciprocal interpretation of the work of art and situational contexts, Christiane BROHL (2003) develops the didactic strategy of “displacement”. With this strategy, which is at the same time a teaching principle, BROHL (2003) shows that art interferes and intervenes in actual discourses and current semantic fields. The “displacement” as a method can reveal these effects that cannot always be articulated as certain figures. As a method “displacement” is thus a possibility to allow novelties to merge into familiarities, in reference to WALDENFELS the “extraordinary” seeps into the “orderly”, (WALDENFELS 1999, S.167). WALDENFELS also speaks of an “iconic epoché” (WALDENFELS 2004, S.226), Thus, linkages between facts that did not exist before become possible.

I would suggest that the strategy of “displacement” could be generally implemented for the application of art works for interdisciplinary projects in school. I will give two examples: First, Sensible Schwelle (translated: Sensitive Threshold) developed by the author, makes it possible to outline the didactic use of art in nearly all its respects as they are described here. Second, the film Rasender Stillstand (translated: Restless Stagnation) by the artist Mariana VASSILEVA (Berlin) is a completed work that has a defined area of application.

The idea of Sensible Schwelle (fig. I) refers on one hand to the idea of a radio drama or to the idea of an audio-guide used in a museum to make topics such as history, politics, culture, and sports, audible by the means of spoken texts and sounds. On the other hand, it refers to the fact that one can move in virtual realities, causing effects by walking or putting the hands up. Both aspects (audio-guides and virtuality) merge into the concept of a sound installation. A camera assesses six areas near the entrance of a school. When a person steps into one of these areas a sound file is activated, by stepping into another area another sound file is activated. By the combination of different sound files activated by different persons a kind of audio-guide is generated (strictly speaking, on display is the work of art itself). Moving their bodies and “touching” sounds learners can pick up the presented topic in emotional, imaginative, or cognitive ways. In the frame of a project that could be used in nearly all subjects in school learners produce their own audio-guides by choosing a subject, finding a way to make it audible and collecting the sounds by using the Internet or an MP3-Player. Since July 2007 the project has been implemented at different schools to evaluate it scientifically.

The Öhrchens-Installation (translated: Auricle-Installation, fig. II) (see Kraus 2007a) and the Farbige Hand (translated: Coloured Hand, fig. III) (see Kraus 2007b) are other artistic means adapted by the author to meet the demands of different subjects in school.
How is it possible to adapt works of art, especially art installations, performances, context art or other efforts and styles that thematise the character of a work of art, to trace and to find experiences in order to generate theories?

Mariana VASSILEVA’S black and white film Rasender Stillstand (fig. IV) depicts a person walking into the middle of a congested street. One can see hastily moving lower legs and one hears loud traffic noise. The white median strips are quickly passing by. They seem to be absorbed by the quick walk. The cars or other means of transportation passing by are invisible, but at the same time very present. The fact that the fast and monotone movements filmed probably belong to the cameraperson reveals a self-reflexive dimension: Which role plays a spectator of everyday life as an artist in society? Where do the measures of an autonomous cameraperson come from? Thus, the topics traffic and spectatorship as a complex mix of different movements, tempos, and interests are communicated.

In contrast, in primary school safety education textbooks, photographs typically illustrate scenes of traffic simplistically (fig. V). Typically they suggest the possibility of an overview of the traffic-situation. For example, a traffic light showing green is along with smiling children crossing the street. The meaning conveyed is: Safety is guaranteed by following the rules. In reality, traffic is much more complex. Situations cannot always be overviewed, sometimes individuals drive too fast, parked cars can block one’s view of the street, a ball may roll or a dog may run into traffic, and individuals may act carelessly. The desires and drives of individuals certainly form a part of the origin of traffic itself. Especially children usually tend to follow their instantaneous subjective interests. Competencies to be acquired in the frame of safety education in primary school are thus dependent on referring to one’s own manifold experiences and to different feelings, making it important to have different ways to react circumspectly at one’s disposal.

Based on VASSILEVA’S film one may discuss questions as: What constitutes “traffic” (cars, bicycles, pedestrians, animals, noise etc.)? Why these things and not others? Are in the streets zones that are very seldom touched by somebody or something? How to walk in a safe way as a pedestrian, (how to drive a car in a safe way), how to act as a cyclist? Why are there traffic signs? Are there other kinds of signs such as gestures, glances etc. that may cause attention?

These are the outlines of my proposal to facilitate active, open-minded, exploratory, dialogical, and empathatical approaches to situational challenges in society, in school, and in private life, using art works. It is expected that this approach will facilitate the ability and willingness to learn from one’s own experiences.

References:

Illustrations:
Fig. I “Öhrchen” (translated: Auricle) by Anja Kraus, 2006
Fig. II „Blaue Hand“ (translated: Blue Hand) by Anja Kraus, 2005
Fig. III Filmstill „Sensible Schwelle“ (translated: Sensible Treshold) by Anja Kraus, 2007
Fig. IV Filmstill: „Rasender Stillstand“ (translated: Restless Stagnation) by Mariana Vassileva, 1999
Fig. V Illustration in the frame of the road safety education

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