

# Thoughts About a Core Curriculum in Art

## Introduction

It appears to me as I visit schools that a great deal of the art teaching that I see is done intuitively as though those responsible do not have a plan of campaign. Of course, I might be quite wrong, but one of my *Associate Tutors* at the University of Bristol, a head of an art/design department in a large comprehensive school who also does some work in the Postgraduate Certificate in Education Division, is carrying out some research as an advanced student. He has been to a number of schools and his observations tend to show that many art teachers haven't rationalised their thoughts about *what* to teach and *why*. They think-up an idea, or pluck one from somewhere as they walk to school, and, 'bingo', things are supposed to happen.

What is their curriculum rationale? Do they take the easy way out by permitting their pupils to do what they like or by allowing them to copy photographs so that creativity and learning processes are minimised? Do they, indeed, subject their pupils to what can be a kind of art therapy, or what could be termed 'therapeutic knitting'? There appears to be quite a lot of evidence pointing this way and it is just not good enough. Secondary pupils ought to expect and be given something more. What do we say to a headteacher who asks, for instance: 'What is art teaching about? Why can't my pupils draw? Surely every artist can and should be able to depict things graphically'?

Twelve months ago I held a conference for secondary art specialists whose theme was *Should there be a Core Curriculum in Art?* A great deal of argument was generated both 'for' and 'against' this topic, and as a tutor I felt I had to keep a balanced viewpoint, a position that is increasingly difficult to maintain. Perhaps as I get older I begin to see the traditionalists's point of view a little clearer and this certainly conflicts with the views I held some years ago. In my earlier days as a teacher I wanted nothing but excitement in the art room, with experimentation being the 'core' of creative activities, and although I still hold the view that experiment is useful and right as an element in the

creative process and that it encourages originality of thinking and inventiveness on the part of young people, I feel it must be carefully controlled so that the art curriculum is not over balanced towards it. I ask myself increasingly: should more emphasis be placed on the teaching and acquiring of skills and techniques? Has the imaginative and widely-acclaimed aspect which tended to follow the Marion Richardson era had its day?

## A Core Curriculum?

Let us return to the idea of a core curriculum in art. We might even assume that, for instance, there ought to be *three* rigidly-restricted elements. If so, and I am not necessarily agreeing with this assumption, then this open diagram will give you food for thought and an opportunity to fill-in the blank spaces (see Figure 1).

You might feel, on the other hand, that this is much too restrictive and that there should be a large 'CORE' or what might be termed 'essential' aspects of art and design – leading no doubt to a deeper study in one or more areas of the subject – which should be considered. Figure 2 (again a blank diagram for your use) leaves room for six aspects which could be said to be basic to the creative experiences which we should be providing children in school. I know that many art teachers feel that such considerations are too simplistic and far too pragmatic while hiding behind highly jargonised terminology which might sound intelligent or even academically respectable. What I am after, and I make no excuses, is a down-to-earth simplicity and an honest approach to creative work in the art curriculum.

Figure 1

In the columns below please list a number of reasons 'for' and 'against' the inclusion of formal drawing lessons.	
Six reasons in support of drawing	Six reasons why we should not teach drawing
1.	1.
2.	2.
3.	3.
4.	4.
5.	5.
6.	6.

**Drawing**

I tend to get an increasing number of postgraduate students who say they can't draw, that it is unfashionable to be able to do so, and that they use cameras or other technological apparatus instead. But, with the decreasing budgets on offer today, photography is expensive in schools and I maintain that it is healthy to encourage young people 'to think' with drawing implements and also 'to express' themselves in graphic terms. This will help them to develop what Klee saw as 'thinking eyes'. Artists have used the medium of drawing for countless generations and I see it as a valuable aspect of the art curriculum. It gives children opportunities (i) to develop graphic skills, (ii) to explore the possibilities in a wide range of materials, (iii) to experiment with various 'found' or more sophisticated drawing implements, (iv) to develop 'seeing' and 'thinking' eyes in working from natural and man-made forms as well as manipulating abstract imagery. What is more, it is an invaluable springboard for developmental work in all manner of art activities and can, therefore, act as a form of five-finger exercises or scale practice, in the musical sense, before the children move into deeper activity.

In Figure 1 there are blank spaces for you to fill in and all I ask you to do is to consider the *pros* and *cons* of this topic.

If we assume that the majority of you supported the idea then a simple diagram in which DRAWING is the 'core' might look like Figure 2. The number of art aspects into which it feeds being an arbitrary one.

**Two balanced aspects**

A number of art educationists think that an art curriculum should be planned quite simply in *two* broadly balanced bands: *2D EXPERIENCES* and *3D EXPERIENCES*. The intention of such a simple concept is that these should provide (i) complementary design and making experiences, (ii) a developing knowledge and expertise in relevant skills and techniques, (iii) aesthetic and historically-related knowledge and experiences. Figure 3 is a diagrammatic depiction of such an approach and once again it is provided for you to consider.

At the same time it is important to remember that an increasing number of faculties of art and design in secondary schools are planned on interdisciplinary or team-teaching lines, employing schemes and project work to initiate creative responses which lead to developments in art and design. Should such faculties have a 'Core' curriculum incorporated in their planning or should theirs be an open curriculum?

Wooff has written that the art room provides a pupil with considerable opportunity 'to develop a means of identifying, synthesising, and communicating his feelings and ideas about things that are important for him'. If we believe this to be true then a 'core' curriculum might be a restricting influence. Wooff continues:

... art forms can offer what amounts to a language which is capable of articulating some of the most profound levels of human experience. The processes of this language, whether they are relatively direct, such as drawing, painting, modelling and carving, or involve a sophisticated technology such as photography, silkscreen, television, vacuum-forming or machine-tooling, may change in their significance

Figure 2

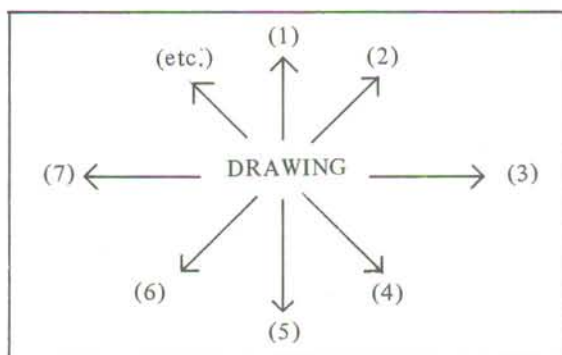


Figure 3.

In this broadly-based, two aspect curriculum you are asked to fill-in those aspects of art/design which you feel are relevant in maintaining <i>BALANCE</i>	
2D	3D
1.	1.
2.	2.
3.	3.
4.	4.
5.	5.
6.	6.
7.	7.
8.	8.
9.	9.
10.	10.
Aesthetic elements	Historical aspects



to the child at any time, and may well involve other areas of language such as word and number. The value of such media lies not in their forms, but in their ability to fulfil the child's changing needs. In the past at least, historically established views concerning the importance of literacy and numeracy have influenced those who determined the curriculum of the school to place the visual and plastic arts on a low level of priority. If, as has been suggested, art is a fundamental language in the experience of the child, then this situation is completely untenable. The Schools Council report on curricular bases for sixteen to nineteen year olds (Schools Council Publications 1975a) refers to the elements of a balanced curriculum, elements which it may be felt have a general as well as particular application. These include communication skills – which are defined as literacy, oracy, and numeracy; the cognitive elements – knowledge and understanding of man and his social and physical environment; the affective elements of a developing moral and aesthetic sensibility; the expressive elements of physical education in its widest sense; and the creative aspects of technology, which may be called the manipulation of materials to bring about desired ends. Through its concern with structures and materials, art is related to science, mathematics and technology, and in virtually all its forms involving light, shape, colour, space, texture, tone and movement, it can be relevant to environmental studies, the social studies, the humanities, and the performing arts of music, dance, drama and physical education.

(Wooff 1976, pp.96-197).

In a sense, then, Wooff might be arguing that Visual Art is at the very heart of all learning experiences. Does this mean that it is the 'core'? I shall not attempt to answer this question. Instead I intend to leave it to simmer.

In conclusion, I would like to list a number of questions which I believe to be pertinent to the issues raised here. They are:

Q: What are the objectives of art teaching?

Q: What do we believe should be taught in the art studios?

Q: Is there (or can there be) an acceptable philosophical justification for teaching the subject at all?

Q: Is the problem made difficult because of the various aspects of art and design and the many rationales about *what* to teach and *how* to teach it so that the art teacher's role is rather complex? (See Cross, 1977, Chap. 4).

Q: Are the following seven objectives in the teaching of art the important ones?

- (1) To develop art and craft skills.
- (2) To offer opportunities for individual self-expression to pupils.
- (3) To help talented pupils reach their full potential.
- (4) To assist as many as possible to pass 'O' and 'A' level examinations.

(5) To cultivate critical/appreciative values to art and culture.

(6) To incorporate technological knowledge and problem-solving methods in an examination of the environment, as in some form of basic-design course.

(7) To provide, in art departments, a relaxed and creative environment as a contrast to the more rigid atmosphere of a school. (Apologies to Cross, 1977, p.40).

As art teachers we must bear these questions in mind and be prepared to answer them. They probably fulfil our curriculum planning needs quite adequately but I fear they are so diverse as to confuse the idea of a 'core' art curriculum *per se*.

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