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Justly, Truly, Lovely and Freely. On Thinking How to Teach Art

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Justa, verdadera, amorosa y libremente. Ideas sobre la enseñanza del arte

Resumen

Este texto describe algunas ideas de John Dewey que consideran acciones precisas aplicables a la educación artística al tiempo que describe experiencias en el mundo del arte de John Dewey. La conexión que John Dewey experimenta con el arte es esencial para comprender sus teorías sobre experiencia y educación artística.

Palabras claves

Educación artística, John Dewey, creatividad

Abstract

The present text describes some John Dewey's ideas that consider precise actions relevant to art education while describing some art experiences enjoyed by John Dewey. The connection Dewey experience with art is essential to understand his theories about experience and art education.

Key words

Art education, John Dewey, creativity

Introduction

To feel the meaning of what one is doing, and to rejoice
in that meaning; to unite in one concurrent fact the
unfolding of the inner life and the ordered development
of material conditions – that is art.

John Dewey (Jackson, 2002).

In 1934, the year of his 75th birthday, John Dewey published his first and only book about art: *Art as Experience*. The ideas Dewey enlightens in the book reflect his artistic mind. Dewey wrote with passion for the arts, as any artist would do. In reading him, one can say that he had a strong desire to create, to paint, and to write poems. For the last 70 years, *Art as Experience* has become a classic and an obliged text for the ones that want to learn thoughtfully about art and experience as well as about the relation between them.

John Dewey wrote *Art as Experience* to communicate his most inner ideas about art and its relation with humankind. In it, Dewey intends to demonstrate that art is a fundamental part of the society (Kaelin, 1989). Great scholars had seen *Art as Experience* as the book that fulfills the finest definition of experience and its relation with human activities (Jackson, 1998). Others confirm that “*Art as Experience* must be read as a central and crucial text” (Alexander, 1987, p. 184) in order to understand concepts developed by Dewey that appear obscure in other texts.

In trying to understand Dewey’s ideas about the way artists think (artistic theory) it is useful to go back and have an encounter with two important terms Dewey developed previously as a kind of rationale to understand the way we think when we are teaching (educative theory). These terms are ‘moral theory’ and ‘moral practice.’ This paper will draw upon a discussion

about these terms to capture a possible essence of artistic thinking and artistic educative theory.

Theories vs. Actions

“All communication is like art”

John Dewey. *Democracy and Education*.

Dewey's philosophical arguments are filled with familiar and domestic examples that make it a bit easier to understand his points of view. Some of the examples he uses are modest explanations of very deep thoughts: a scary noise in the window, the recipe of how to cook an egg, a walking baby that cannot understand locomotion, or a man that follows his moral when joining the union; are only a few examples of this. However, Dewey's conclusions are strong and convincing, as in the argument that stands against differences between moral theory and moral practice (Dewey, 1967, p.93).

Dewey based his argument on the vision of moral theory and moral practice given by other four theorists: Adler, Bosanquet, Salter and Sidwick (Dewey, 1967) who believed there were significant differences between both concepts. Dewey indicates that there is not such a difference and he assures moral theory is the same as moral practice, which he calls action in idea.

Moral theory is the genesis of our intended actions. Moral theory is the action in idea because it is the thought, the idea that we think morally. There are no precise rules to achieve what we *are going to* do in relation with what we are thinking. There is no book of explicit instructions to follow in order to connect our ideas to our acts; a book that tells us how to think morally (Dewey, 1967, p.94). **However, there are certain directives (laws) that rule our acts, and they were created by others who thought these directives are the right way to act.** And they certainly are if we consider that many people prefer to follow rules instead of thinking what to do; people that do not have criteria to think, or to develop a moral theory.

In relation to moral theory, Dewey tells us that the duty of a man is:

Never to obey rules for the sake of the rules, but out of conviction. Conviction formed by previous moral experiences that helped him to form a moral theory. With this moral theory he has to evaluate if the certain rules existing are good enough for him to follow.

To respond to the nature of actual demands made upon him, demands from the concrete relations to men and things in which he finds himself. His relation with the world makes him a member of society, where he would find different stances of interaction that may contradict his expectative but will give him the opportunity to act.

To do justly, to pay an impartial respect to each member of this situation. Dewey tells us that in order to be moral to others; man must be an active member of the society, where also different strata of humanity could interact in one's vital experiences and to whom one should show respect.

To do truly, to observe the situation. The moral man is prepared to understand, by means of experience (recognize) any social changes and to be authentic, true to his intents.

And to do lovely, to make the whole situation one's own. The moral man is prepared to comprehend any new and unprecedented situation, by putting himself in the most desperate hypothetical place (Dewey, 1967, pp.106-107).

These characteristics in the conduct of the moral man assimilated the idea John Dewey which had of the thinkers whom, in my opinion, he perceives as moralists too in the sense that they are

interested in good and bad things in their connection with human conduct, thinkers are concerned to mitigate the instability of life, to introduce moderation, temper and economy, and when worst comes to worst to suggest consolations and compensations. They are concerned with rendering more stable good things (McDermott, 1981, p. 285).

This definition sounds like doing justly, truly and lovely.

Educational Theory

If we are to compare moral theory with educative theory, in order to see if moral action in idea (or action in idea) and educative action in idea can be parallel ways of approaching their theories, we must define educational theory first. According to Dewey, moral theory cannot exist in a book (Dewey, 1967). However, we may think that educational theory can exist in book. There would be no other way to learn from others what educative ideas have worked and which others have failed in the story of mankind. To achieve a better educational theory, then, we must learn, read and prepare ourselves to educate, at least in a particular way.

According to Dewey, education is formed by two components that make it function: social situation, social conditions (McDermott, 1981). This means that in order to achieve education, we must consider not only the mere individual, but the interaction between many, the society “as an organic union of individuals” (McDermott, 1981, p.445). The process of life in a community is also a fundamental part in the educational theory of Dewey (McDermott, 1981). This means that the child or pupil needs certain given information to be educated. If this information does “not become a part of the life experience of the child ... [it is]... not a truly educative” experience (McDermott, 1981, p.447). In the educational theory of Dewey, education is “conceived as a continuing reconstruction of experience” (McDermott, 1981, p.450) in which “the process and the goal of education are one and the same thing” (McDermott, 1981, p.450).

The profile of the educator in Dewey’s educational theory differs from the one of the thinker or moral man. Some patterns in the educator are the same that any moral man would follow, which gives us information about how much the educator has to be a thinker and a moral man. In addition to do justly, truly and lovely, the educator has to:

To follow certain rules (law, art, psychology, philosophy, hygiene, etc). The educator is forced by society to follow certain rules, even when he would not agree. Laws related to the profession or his relation with other members of the society can be very strict.

In responding to the demands he encounters, he must be aware that others would follow him in his responses (that is his pupils). Here, the educator must be very aware that he is never by himself. He is an example and he would find it difficult to accept that society moral is even more important than his own (Dewey, 1981).

Educators must help children to do, to act, to get acquainted with life “and trains each child of society into membership within...” (McDermott, 1981, p.467). In Dewey’s educational theory, a teacher is concerned with “inducing vital and personal experiencing” (McDermott, 1981, p.479).

I believe that even when Dewey argues that action needs the theory as much as the theory needs the action (Dewey, 1967), an educative action in idea would not only need theory, but also participants, methods, and results.

We already know that moral theory is not a collection of “rules of conduct” (Dewey, 1967, p. 94) and neither is that action in idea, because there are no rules that indicate how we must develop our actions in idea inside our mind. However, educational theory *can* be based in a series of rules of conduct. To develop a moral theory you do not need to have a deep knowledge about what you are going to do or the consequences, but to develop an educational theory you must know the world, and how this works in the level of action and reaction.

According to John Dewey, “moral theory is the analytic perception of the conditions and relation in hand in a given act” (Dewey, 1967, p. 95). For moral theory, the knowledge we have of the situation is limited (or not even necessary), and we chose it to be limited; we do not need to know anything else beyond the act. However, educational theory is not a perception, but a response of the already perceived conditions of a given act.

For Dewey, action in idea is the construction of the act in thought, not in its external construction (Dewey, 1967). It is the preparation of what we are going to do, and it can be formed with a limited understanding of the external situation, because we do not think of the consequences but in the action itself. On the other hand, educative action in idea would be a construction of the act in thought, only if we could prove that our act is an educative act, in relation to the external construction and its characteristics.

Moral theory in mind forms the action to be undertaken, as an action in idea because it is ready to come out in a “consummate” way, because it is already thought, planned.

Educational theory can form the actions to take place, but the taking place of an educative action in idea not only depends on the educator, or the one that thinks about educating, but in the process. There is not such a thing as educative action in idea, since to be educative there must be a response from the educated person. The moral action in idea will be constructed regardless the results, it would be moral anyhow. However, the educative action in idea would not be educative if it is not achieved as an action, with the final response from the learner.

Educative action is a process, but not a process in mind or in idea. It is a process of action. This process involves the community and, in several cases, an institution (the school), activities, directions and valuable results (Dewey, 1915). “For the child to realize his own impulse by recognizing the facts, materials and conditions involved, and then to regulate his impulse through that recognition, is educative” (Dewey, 1915, p. 56). Then, we can say there is not educative action in idea, because in order to be educative there must be a response. So, there is an educational theory, but not an educative action in idea.

We form theory of our actions by doing the actions. In addition, educational theory may also come from books, from the ideas of other educators and from our own responses to our experiences in educating people. We can learn how to be good, even in a reclusive situation (a world of limited relations); but we cannot learn how to teach well without the strong support of the society. This indicates how and why the educative process in Dewey’s theory is very much related to the society and communities as they form the basis for experience, knowledge and then education.

According to Dewey, “for any act there must be theory” (Dewey, 1967, p. 96). This tells us that even an educative act should be ruled by moral theory and not only by educational theory that would set certain acts, but not the main act or the act of educating itself. The difficulty in defining the “educative action in idea” comes from the fact that an idea cannot be educative if it is not educating at the same time. Here, we have another difference with the moral action in idea that according to Dewey would exist as soon as it would be a theory. On the other hand, to have an educative action in idea would mean that the idea is taking place as soon as it is thought, which will refer to an impulse if the act takes place without a moral theory (Dewey, 1967).

I also believe that there are some connections between action in idea and educative action in idea. When we talk about the theory behind the act, Dewey mentions that the wider the act, the more exigent the demand for theory (Dewey, 1967). And this is also true when talking about the notion of “educative act”. Here, the difference between educative action in idea and educative act is the educative act as a reality because it is acting, it is existing; it is educating someone, and in doing so, it requires a theory, perhaps not only educational, but moral too.

Once more, if an idea of what is to be done and moral theory are identical (Dewey, 1967); and only varied in degree if we take into account other elements as age, preparation, or experience, educational theory and educative action in idea are not even similar, because educative action in idea will not only varied in degree, but in the results after the action. This differentiation would also appear –due to equal arguments- when talking about artistic theory, artistic action in idea, artistic educative idea, and artistic educative action in idea.

Art that is Thought and Taught

“The history of human experience is a
history of the development of arts”
John Dewey. *Experience and Nature*.

Dewey does not look for beauty in Art, but for its utility in the world as a human creation and its relation with its origin: the mind. **The most interesting concept in *Art as Experience* (coming from a philosopher and man of science) is the idea that art is an important part of life, not only aesthetically but also existentially.** Art is no longer the elitist form of entertainment it was for some idealists in the 19 century. After Dewey, the position of art as a reflection of the society and culture changed the vision people had about the arts.

According to Dewey, the “arts [...] were part of the significant life of an organized community” (Dewey, 1934, p. 7). “Even in the caves, human habitations were adorned with colored pictures that kept alive to the senses experiences with the animals that were so closely bound with the lives of humans” (Dewey, 1934, p. 7). From this observation we understand that man needed art, he needed to complete his relation with the world by depicting or

observing it artistically. Man needed the animals' representations inside a cave perhaps as much as he probably needed the music coming from a flute in the cold winter to remember the birds that he listened to during the spring.

Art is not only important existentially and artistically, but also historically and anthropologically. Art is a powerful soil where the community shares what every member experiences individually in a particular moment in time, and art also extends this power over the life of the community in the years to come, showing future generations the utility of art. Art illustrates the relations between human beings and the world (Alexander, 1987).

For Dewey, "art also explicitly recognizes [...] the control of re-shaping natural conditions exercised by emotion, and the place of the imagination, under the influence of desire, in re-creating the world into a more orderly place" (Dewey, 1929, pp.66-67). Art is the experience of man re-creating previous experiences and at the same time, creating new experiences for others.

According to Dewey's biography by Thomas Dalton (2002) Dewey had such an artistic experience in Europe (ca.1926) where he spent some time visiting museums and talking with artists (mainly painters) that his ideas related to the visual arts changed completely. Dewey wrote:

The world we have experienced becomes an integral part of the self that acts and is acted upon in further experience. In their physical occurrence, things and events experienced pass and are gone. But something of their meaning and values is retained as an integral part of the self [...]. Art throws off the covers that hide the expressiveness of experienced things; it quickens us from the slackness of routine and enables us to forget ourselves by finding ourselves in the delight of experiencing the world about us in its varied qualities and forms (Dewey, 1934, p. 104).

In other words, art can help to explain the world, and it not only gives us the possibility to experience others people's reality, but it also reveals things that we already lived, encouraging our use of imagination (Jackson, 1998).

If we add to moral and educative theory the artistic element, we have to start by separating artistic theory and artistic educative theory. As in the case of educative theory, artistic educative theory will need results in order to become an artistic educative action in idea. But in case of artistic action in idea, everything is different, we still can apply the justly, truly and lovely, and because art is extraordinarily connected with imaginary possibilities, there is one element: freedom.

When the subject is imagining a creation, his mind triggers an imaginative creative process. The artistic theory becomes artistic action in idea, the sculpture, the painting, and the photographic composition, exist in the mind and can illuminate the artist spirit. The artist is free to create whatever he wants. Art gives him an extraordinary power to theorize the world.

Through art man is able to realize the potentiality for meaning and value to be directly embodied in the world. The moral taught by the arts is that when the self-conscious attitude of the artist towards his material has been extended to all experience, to the whole range of human life, then life itself is capable of becoming an art" (Alexander, 1987, pp. 184-185).

In his mind, the artist can create the most extraordinary materials, forms and combinations, and this can change the educative possibilities he has in mind. An art educator that exercises artistic theory and cultivates artistic actions in mind would be able to create an artistic educative theory and to plan artistic educative actions better.

Art can help to perceive the world imaginatively, creatively, and usefully to enrich any other experiences that we encounter in the daily living. For the artist, artistic theory is an instrument as important as the brush or the canvas, and artistic action in idea would help him to have a dialogue with his art product, long before it is started (McDemott, 1981).

The artist would think justly, truly, and lovely, and the nature of the artistic theory will allow him to think freely too. In teaching art, this can be the greatest gift that no many teachers of other subject matters can easily exercise. The artist-teacher can have the possibilities to

theorize about what he wants to create, and later about what he wants to teach about art, including his own creations. Later on, he has to understand that what he thinks is not educative *per se*. But there is no doubt that his thoughts are artistic and can lead him to a total enjoyable experience of his surrounding world, and that, according to John Dewey, that is not only life, but art itself.

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