

INSPECTING MAGIC WORDS



Figure 1: Magritte, R. (1929).
The Treachery of Images. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Purchased with funds provided by the Mr. and Mrs. William Preston Harrison Collection. © 1998 C. Herscovici, Brussels / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Art educators often pause to consider the merits of novel educational initiatives before implementation. Such deliberations between traditional and emerging educational theory might benefit from the use of a theoretical framework, such as neopragmatism¹, to assess the value of a particular idea or artifact. Just as Magritte in his painting, *The Treachery of Images*, asks us to pause before the world of images, earlier in this century the pragmatist philosopher William James (1907/1951) cautioned readers not to attribute unwarranted power to verbal terms.

You know how men have always hankered after unlawful magic, and you know what a great part in magic words have always played... That word names the universal's principle, and to possess it is after a fashion to possess the universe itself. "God," "Matter," "Reason," "the Absolute," "Energy," are so many solving names. You can rest when you have them. You are at the end of your metaphysical quest... But if you follow the pragmatic method, you cannot look on any such word as closing your quest... It appears less as a solution, than as a program for more work, and more particularly as an indication of the ways in which existing realities may be *changed*. (1907/1951, p. 131 [italics in original])

James's caution is applicable to terms and images consecrated by art educators such as "DBAE," "studio inquiry," "critical inquiry," and the word "art" itself.

This paper will consider neopragmatism's use-value for educators as they inspect the magic words, images, and practices that influence curriculum and instruction. Without such a philosophical framework, even within a specific approach like DBAE, antithetical images, texts, and practices can be used without considering their historical and functional relationships. Discipline-based art education can contribute, perhaps unwittingly, to dysfunctional classrooms, in which methods are not integrated in meaningful ways (Wilson, 1988; Efland, 1996) with students assuming roles as critically disconnected workers. For instance, art history lectures, taught as art-in-the-dark and without a critical component, can implicitly imply moral and aesthetic progress. At the same time, art critical methods can privilege aesthetic and ethical detachment through an insistence upon objective descriptions rather than subjective responses. In the art studio students can be exploring unique, subjective expressions that value emotional response but may eventually be evaluated through formalist aesthetic conventions. Classroom practices that use divergent approaches can be confusing for both teachers and students. As a result, art educators trusting in the "unlawful magic" of the disciplines can still struggle with the inconsistencies of

divergent political and philosophical solutions to problems in teaching.

One response to the problem is to employ a contextualized philosophy in the practice of engaging students in art. The philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre (1993) suggests that valuable classroom practices raise relevant responses to questions about the world, questions such as: Does free speech supersede other values? What is the best way to prepare our children for an evolving and unknowable future? Can art heal? One criterion of a neopragmatic approach is to ask whether schooling represents the questions and stories of our citizens (Bolin, 1996).

Pragmatists contend that artworks embody our beliefs and generate changes in the world that constitute their meanings as signs. James (1907/1951) states, "our beliefs are really rules for action... to develop a thought's meaning, we need only determine what conduct it is fitting to produce; that conduct is for us its sole significance" (p. 129).² A pragmatist sees the worlds informed by a Kim Dingle installation, a Claude Monet painting, an African effigy figure, or an episode of ER as representing worlds that value different rules for action. Under the aesthetics of visuality perpetuated by Monet, the ironic inferences of Kim Dingle's installation might seem confused, cluttered and indirect. Through stories, images, rituals, arguments or questions, people develop cultural values that are qualitatively distinguishable from each other, other cultures, and other time periods. The

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meanings of all terms—students, teachers, texts, classrooms, works of art—are dependent upon the practices they perpetuate. In academic contexts the term “art” has a history which has valued certain artifacts (paintings and sculptures) over others (decorative arts, folk art) and these values affect what is taught in schools. To develop complex understandings of these contexts, neopragmatism offers art educators three concepts—contingency, demystification and recontextualization—as tools to interpret educational beliefs and classroom practices.³

CASE I—CONTINGENT WHOLES: GROUNDING DISCOURSE

Pragmatic art educators recognize that people’s views are paradoxically integrated (holistic) yet subject to

change and chance (contingent). Students are no exception. The stories and questions that students exchange, based on family, community, peer and academic, and community traditions, constitute a network of beliefs that influence future learning. These pre-existent and complex world views may differ from practices valued by academic institutions. McLaren (1986) advocates a radical integration of home and neighborhood life into instructional practices because they constitute the phenomenal world (contingent whole) known by the student. Pragmatic art educators interpret curriculum and instruction in relationship to the ideational, emotional, and practical dimensions of a student’s experience.

One location where student beliefs are an important consideration is Raub Middle School, a public school in Allentown, Pennsylvania. Raub’s art

teacher, Patricia Tinsman-Schaffer, in a presentation to preservice teachers, spoke of transience, diversity, lack of adequate school funding, poverty, and violence as forces that affect the learning environment of her students. Most intrusive was transience, a condition often associated with issues of class.

Tinsman-Schaffer noted that teaching cannot always continue sequentially when the real problems of the students come into the classroom. “How,” Tinsman-Schaffer rhetorically asked, “can I talk about color, shape, and form or aesthetics, art history, art criticism and studio inquiry if I have not addressed the immediate concerns of the class first” (personal communication, October, 1993).

Such concerns highlight the need for art education to address the experi-



Opposite page, figure 2: Dingle, K. (1995). *Priss' Room*. Dolls: porcelain, china, paint, painted steel wool; dart boards: oil on wood with darts; wall paper panels, linoleum floor, cribs, power tools, debris. Collection of Eileen and Peter Norton, Santa Monica. Courtesy Blum & Poe, Santa Monica.

Left, figure 3: Lacy, S., Jacoby, A., & Johnson with 220 Oakland teenagers. (1994). *The Roof is on Fire*. Performance. Photo credit: Gary Nakamoto. Note: This performance was held on a rooftop parking lot. Audience members silently observed as teenagers in cars engaged in conversations about issues pertinent to their lives.

ential world that students bring to their classes and to which they will return when the school day is over. Formal structures found in the methods of all disciplines may minimize meaningful aesthetic relationships connected to the social realities of students. A neo-pragmatic art educator might ask how understanding students in relation to their social contexts would affect instruction. An alternative to methods that revere formal structures for their own sake is the view that the folk, street, family, and ethnic histories that students bring with them to instruction, can supply a dense network of knowledge and skills that will engage their learning.

Works of art can provide opportunities for students to consider allegorical



connections with their own lives. Teachers may find that grounding classroom practices around art works that relate to issues that affect them, such as diversity (e.g., Suzanne Lacy's *The Roof is on Fire*), transience (e.g., Dorothea Lange's portraits of rural migrant workers), poverty (e.g., Beverly Buchanan's reverence for the lives of poor southerners), and violence (e.g., Richard Misrach's photo essays on bombing sites in the American desert), provide rich opportunities for students to connect abstract images with lived experiences. Teaching strategies that see students as holistic-yet-contingent-beings value the experiences and interpretive strategies students bring to the classroom.

CASE II—DEMISTIFICATION: RECONSIDERING INTERPRETIVE POSITIONS

While pragmatic approaches to education aim to ground understanding in the beliefs and traditions students bring to situations, they also consider such beliefs to be fallible (Peirce, 1878/1955), in that they are open to change in the future, and contingent (Rorty, 1989), in that they are limited by the student's personal and historical context. Both philosophers see people's understanding of the world as dependent upon symbolic reference. Peirce's pragmatism sees interpretation as moving toward a more truthful account of the way the world functions while Rorty's neopragmatism sees new accounts as more useful ways of working in a changing world. In both cases, demystification occurs as people recon-

Above, figure 4: Lacy, S., Jacoby, A., & Johnson with 220 Oakland teenagers. (1994). *The Roof is on Fire*. Performance. Photo credit: Ruben Guzman.

Opposite page, figure 5: Shimomura, R. (1994). *Beacon Hill Boy*. Acrylic on canvas, diptych, (58 x 56 in.). Collection of the St. Paul Companies, Inc. © 1994 Roger Shimomura. Courtesy Steinbaum Krauss Gallery, New York.

sider the value of their own initial responses. This questioning can be revealed through images such as *Beacon Hill Boy*, a painting that alludes to the complexity of Roger Shimomura's Japanese-American history. In this work, Shimomura acts out his psychic divisions by opposing an



American barbecue grill and a pair of Japanese sandals. Viewers are provoked to place their own interpretive mental impressions alongside of Shimomura's work. Greene (1995) speaks about the benefits of an education in which traditional and personal beliefs move into a dialectical relationship with alternative ways to interpret a situation. Neopragmatists propose that sorting through alternative interpretations assists students in understanding complexity. Over time, some interpretations will become more useful than others in resolving the doubts that emerge from within student, neighborhood, and academic communities. Effective interpretations provide inclusive explanations and serve as new contingent wholes for students as they

enter into their futures.

Neopragmatic theories can be useful when educators consider questions relating to cultural and ethnic studies, as in the 1993 Penn State Summer Seminar in Theory and Practice, *Multiculturalism in the United States: Putting Theory into Practice*.

Discussions among the participants and the six invited speakers centered on what to include in their curriculum. Paul Lauter (1993) stated:

Americans are in a period of recovery from a culture that made a virtue of a blindness to the lived traditions and beliefs of many citizens. The disclosure of this blindness and the disclosure of those beliefs is the

purpose which multiculturalism embraces.

One approach was to ask what knowledge was important to answer the question, "What is an American?" Educators need to attend to the stories and questions that constitute the lives of the people in their communities and to question the methods used to identify meaningful works.

It is appropriate to hesitate before embracing the assumption that all images and stories are equally useful in education merely because they exist. Nor would art education be well served by following a democratic preference poll such as the one conducted by Komar and Melamid for *The Nation* (Melamid, 1994). That poll revealed that Americans (and in fact most people

around the world) prefer paintings that, among other things, are predominantly blue. Democracy may be the best means of establishing political leadership but it fails when majority preferences override minority concerns. Art education requires the hard work needed to establish an inclusive forum so that mainstream interests do not override the qualitative dimensions of minority contributions. Minority aesthetic values have an efficacy in their own right because they represent the perspectives of individuals and cultural groups. They also contribute to an American identity, the dynamics of which are constituted by interdependent relationships between mainstream and minority values.

Neopragmatic instruction values an explicit identification and examination of the underlying assumptions which professionals, students, and teachers bring to classrooms and art works. Demystification occurs as art educators accommodate the interrelationship of divergent and relevant beliefs. Through demystification pragmatic artists, historians, critics, educators, students, philosophers, and others seek to inspect implicit assumptions that aesthetic conventions have perpetuated. Through demystification students will confront the limits of their own strategies for understanding the world. Neopragmatic art educators value the emergent emotions, ideas, and actions that take place within students as a result of this juxtaposition of alternative perspectives.

Figure 6: Artist unknown. *Enthroned Madonna and Child*. Gift of Mrs. Otto Kahn. ©1997 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. 13th century, tempera on panel, 1.311 x .768 (51 5/8 x 30 1/4).

Artworks may be considered holistic metaphors that embody emergent cultural beliefs.

CASE III— RECONTEXTUALIZATION: CHANGE IN OURSELVES AND THE WORLD


The third component of a neopragmatist's perspective involves Rorty's (1991) conception of recontextualization. Rorty's ideas rework Dewey's assertion that authentic involvement with the world requires that we surrender ourselves to the possibilities that might emerge out of new and psychically complex contexts. People live in a world of chance where the significant ways the world can affect viewers cannot always be predicted from past experiences. Community-based art by activist artists such as Suzanne Lacy and ceremonial art developed by religious devotees invoke art's capacity to alter and/or deepen viewers' perspectives, provided that the viewer can surrender to the experiential opportunity.

Interpretation-as-recontextualization is not a process of finding the world so much as it is a matter of reshaping those ways of being (contingent wholes) that students bring to an encounter. For neopragmatists, cognition can be compared to a web of interrelated histories which include bodily and intellectual interactions with the world (on cognition, see Maturana & Varela, 1987). Rorty feels that this conception is more useful than one which

regards cognition as a distanced acquisition of new knowledge by an objective observer. Rorty (1989) states, "Viewing inquiry as recontextualization makes it impossible to take seriously the notion of some contexts being intrinsically privileged, as opposed to being useful for some particular purpose" (p. 79). All inquiry is connected to the identity of the interpreter. New interpretive strategies constitute new individual identities. Let's look at one way distancing takes place.

I was watching a lesson that was a part of an ongoing exploration of the color wheel. It culminated in a radial design resembling a kaleidoscope. This assignment had little to do with either artworks or the lived experiences of these students. Neopragmatists might ask what view of cognition produces a lesson in which the color wheel, as a system to structure knowledge, is the only image seen by the students? What view of cognition sees the construction of a kaleidoscope as the only assessment tool? Neopragmatists might ask where, either in the material studied or in the students' work, did the students ever come across what the class was about: art.

While it is possible to speak of color theory in relation to artworks, design fundamentals could hardly be construed as the foundation of art, if by "foundation" we mean the knowledge and skills required to proceed to more complex levels of understanding. Long



before color theory was formalized, people made, viewed, and used works of art. For example, Byzantine icons function as co-constituents of Byzantine culture. These icons differed from the profane world of artifacts not in the materials used or in the colors employed, but in their ability to perpetuate and construct the culture that constitutes the Byzantine order of things (Danto, 1992). Byzantine culture valued icons as representations of the divine. To think of the science of color as a foundation for these images is to apply 19th-century Western beliefs about empirical knowledge, embodied in its art, to Byzantine beliefs.

Conversely, by Byzantine standards the swatches constructed by these students were hardly useful images. Such classroom practices carry implicit values that privilege measure and analysis over empathy or inspiration. Measure and analysis may be the dominant values perpetuated by some artists but they do not constitute the foundation of art.

Artworks may be considered holistic metaphors that embody emergent cultural beliefs. Art education takes place through students' interpretive practices (visual or verbal) carried out in relation to these metaphors. Art educators might consider classroom practices that facilitate a student's reinterpretation of identity as a function of historical and post-historical public images.

Artworks, when viewed as complex and open-ended manifestations of culture capable of altering the ways we interpret the world, present students with opportunities for developing complex responses to a world of chance and change. Neopragmatists who value recontextualization see that growth takes place as students

enter open-ended relationships with a public world of images and ideas. This growth has as its ends students who are comfortable negotiating complexity and contingency. Those students may in turn contribute to the ability of others to negotiate changes that take place in their lifetimes. Interpretation-as-recontextualization, when subsequently applied to new contexts, such as artmaking, art viewing, neighborhood life, or academic studies, makes art education relevant and useful to public education.

THE BENEFITS OF A PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS TO STUDENTS

Contingent wholes, demystification, and recontextualization, as part of a neopragmatic pedagogy, provide conceptual reference points for art educators. Art educators can use these concepts when approaching issues related to general education, curricula, and classroom practices.

Applying these concepts to a specific context, such as students-as-interpreters of art, clarifies how classroom practice might proceed. Interpretation starts with the wide range of understandings—academic, folk, popular, ethnic, experiential—that students bring to art works. Rather than cultivating disinterest or distance, a pedagogy influenced by pragmatism would contingently value the interpretive ground from which students develop subsequent, more complex responses. Second, students compare individual responses to the interpretive stances of others—classmates, teachers and outside knowledge sources. This practice requires students to consider divergent associations and strategies put forth by others as functional components of their interpretations. Third, through recontextualization, students' unconscious

and conscious interpretive strategies make way for more inclusive and complex relationships between the art work, themselves, and the worlds they inhabit. Students are asked to

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transfer understandings gained from a holistic engagement with art works to new contexts, new images, other subjects, and their neighborhood communities.

These processes can be applied by art educators to the interpretation of the educational initiatives they encounter throughout their careers. Neopragmatic art educators provisionally accept many aspects of the magic words of art education, such as

DBAE, studio inquiry, philosophical inquiry, critical inquiry, and historical inquiry. However, they caution that adherence to methods can inhibit more complex interpretive practices. They value classrooms that contribute to their students' respect for the complex ways that works of art and other symbolic artifacts construct people's lives. And they value classrooms that contribute to their students' respect for the complex ways that people's lives, histories, and conversations are central to the production of artworks.

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NOTES

¹According to Diggins (1994), "Pragmatism proposed a philosophy that could dispense with not only classical philosophy but with history as well...that modern man could somehow study the world scientifically but live it spiritually...Neopragmatism, which emerged in the early 1980s due in large part to the searching, profoundly provocative writings of Richard Rorty, offers a different promise: that we study the world historically and live it conversationally" (pp. 10-11).

²Pragmatists are mindful that the time frame for determining such differences may stretch into the indeterminate future.

³Richard Rorty's (1989) "contingency," "irony," and "solidarity" have provided a foundation for the categories presented in this paper. Pragmatists will be cautious in accepting these terms as much as any others but would judge

