

Digital dilemmas in the Visual art teacher training programme

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ABSTRACT

The article discusses the dilemma between working with digital technology and the modernist traditions of an authentic artistic expression in the Visual art teachers training programme. Furthermore, the relation between education, technology and aesthetics are reflected on as well as its didactical implications. The potentiality of ICT in Visual art education might be to move focus from creating beautiful objects, to developing performative reflexivity about ourselves and the world around us.

KEY WORDS

Visual art education, digital technology, ICT, teacher training, aesthetics

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to reflect on the tension between working with digital technology (ICT and media) and the notion of an authentic (modernist) visual artist in the visual art teacher training programme. This is a dilemma I experience when teaching students at this programme in Stockholm. Many students express that they do not think that working by a computer can be creative or be a tool to express something artistic or authentic. Some of the students seem to consider the computer more a calculating machine rather than a tool. The paper reflects more deeply on the tension between a digital paradigm and the modernist view of art and art making, expressed in a visual art teachers training programme. In addition I will focus on the question about what function or meaning the school subject Visual art (*Bild* in Swedish) might have in a digital paradigm. More specifically, what do ICT do to the visual art school subject and its teacher training programme?

Background

Art education as a subject in the Swedish school has undergone many changes. During the first half of 19th century, technical drawing was considered important in vocational training in the areas of engineering and natural sciences, which were mainly male professions. With industrialization and the turn of the century, the focus moved to consumer qualification, educating the taste of the people, as consumer goods were mass-produced. Historically, the book *Education through Art* by Herbert Read influenced art education immensely with the idea of a free creative expression. According to Read, especially children should have the possibilities of expressing their emotions through creative work. This was a break with the tradition of linear drawing and depicting, which created a discourse still dominant in visual art education. The prominent features were not about depicting, but learning different techniques and materials in order to increase the possibilities of free expression (Lind, Hasselberg, &

Kühlhorn, 1992; Lind, 2010; Nordström, 1994; Wikberg, 2014; Åsén, 2006). Through this change the school subject Visual art can be said to gradually have turned towards expressionism and romantic, modernist ideals (Dalton, 2001). During the 1970s visual communication was emphasized in art education, and it meant working with popular culture and new media as well as the fine arts. In 1980 the subject name was changed from “Drawing” (*Teckning*) to “Picture” (*Bild*), focusing on art education as a means of communication and language. According to Åsén (2006) there are three main themes in the history of visual art and its education; drawing as depiction, drawing as a means of expressing inner emotions and art as a means of communicating. Furthermore, there are still traces from all the different traditions present in current Visual art education.

The tradition of visual art as a means to express inner feelings is so strong that even though there have been curricula reforms toward visual art as a means of communication, visual art teachers ignore the curricula and continues teaching in a modernist tradition, for an example giving pupils assignments like painting fruit baskets in expressive ways etc. It is possible to know this through the national evaluations of school subjects made in year nine of compulsory school (Marner, Örtégren & Segerholm, 2005). As before mentioned, the Swedish word for the school subject Visual art is *Bild*, a translation could be “Picture” or “Image” which means that the subject is not necessarily connected to the fine arts, but might as well focus on every day images such as mass media and visual culture.

An assumption in this paper is that the development of information- and communication technology, ICT, has changed the conditions for learning radically. This is especially true when it comes to “dissolving” the physical class room since students and teachers can meet in virtual spaces on line (Jonsson & Säljö, 2008). However, in this paper I am not focusing on distance learning or on line seminars, but ICT as a tool in visual art education and its teacher training programme. The ICT paradigm in learning might lead to rethinking the very conception of the school subject Visual art, bringing increasing complexity to an already tangled subject.

Education, technology and aesthetics

From a researchers and teachers point of view I can see that ICT in Visual art teacher training programme demonstrates how complex education, teaching and learning can be. The technological part of media and ICT seems to develop from its own logics and setting its own agenda, while visual art teachers and teacher’s training teachers discuss how it can be implemented into an existing tradition or conception of the subject. The activities we connect with teaching and learning and communication between students and teachers were developed by a common ground for how we think about expressing ourselves. For example the presentation of a lesson can easily be understood through the body by using eye contact, facial expressions and gestures. This has not been a very explicit knowledge but a taken-for granted knowledge that almost all share in our society (Buhl, 2006). Koehler & Mishra (2009) writes about technology in a similar way; analogue technologies like writing with a pen become commonplace and cease to be considered as a technology. On the other hand digital technologies present us with new challenges in education. Learning how to use digital

technologies is necessarily a question of integrating this new knowledge with existing pedagogical convictions (Koehler & Mishra, 2009). In the context of the described dilemma at the Visual art teacher training programme, I think that sometimes one needs to try a different way of thinking, rather than trying to integrate something new with the everyday ways of thinking. Buhl (2006) argues that information technology has pointed out the subtle communicative signs and meanings that are at play in all teaching situations. In other words ICT clarify and helps us articulate modes of communication, interaction and being in a society with certain ways of communicating and modes of organizing learning. In accordance with Buhl, I argue that what is new with ICT is the articulation of complexity, and in the context of this paper, trying to think differently about visual art as a school subject. From this point of view, the complexity of communication is what is really interesting when actualizing questions of *aesthetics*.

Aesthetics can be described as “*the reflexive framing of performative choice*” (Buhl, 2006, p. 209, italics in original). This means that aesthetics is being formulated in the process and development of *how* an idea is born and not the content of the idea itself. To me, this seems to be a relevant thought that can work in a late modern society and its educational system. It implies that aesthetics includes phenomena that are played out communicatively. An example would be a lecturer that uses computer mediated chat rooms or video recorded lectures accessible on line. This can be seen as a staged performance where both teachers and learners must regulate their own mode of communication in this specific constructed reality. Linking aesthetics to art, with Luhmann (1995) I see art as a system of communication that points toward what we otherwise would not catch sight of. Furthermore Luhmann states that aesthetics is the program that art uses as communication form (1995). That aesthetics is the program of art means that various relationships connected with art are reflected with the help of aesthetic categories. For example if I relate to a picture I use categories that have to do with aesthetics; what forms it consists of and what performative choices it develops and comments upon. By performative I mean what the picture *does* when I look at it, not what the intention of the artist/producer might have been. Art in this way will always outline new boundaries for what can be made observable, where aesthetics is art’s mode of cognition that formulate variations of reflexivity, the possible “otherness” (Buhl, 2006). One example of this is the artist Jens Haaning who participated in an international exhibition. His contribution consisted of exchanging the lamp bulb of a street lamp in Shanghai with one in Kassel. In this art work we cannot describe the art piece in a traditional sense, for an example composition, colour, and negative spaces etcetera. Instead, with the idea of aesthetics as a *reflective framing of ideas*, it is possible to search for new ways of looking at aesthetic modes and expressions.

With the emergence of advanced information and communication technologies, various aesthetic expressions are made available, furthermore these expressions are not fixed in categories like image, sound, text or performance. It means a complex form of possibilities that might be called *multiple literacy* (Masny, 2011), which demonstrates the complexity of communication in ways that might not have been clearly distinguished before the digital paradigm. Technology facilitates the ways that different categories, mentioned above, may work together in complex context. When working with multimedia and ICT, the categories,

for an example the visual and the aural, are reflected by relating to each other (Duncum, 2004), although it is also possible to mainly focus on one of the modes.

Mass media has been a part of the visual art teacher training programme since the 1970-ies, while visual culture can be seen as a more recent ingredient. Art and mass media has developed new possibilities for aesthetic formulations and framing; new ways that are performative. These expressions include the awareness of preconditions, or framings, as a part of the expression. For an example irony and humour is often used as meta-awareness when a TV-show is referencing to other tv-shows and so on. ICT and mass media actualise the aesthetic in two ways; one is that technical possibilities are provided for creating complex visual, textual and auditory forms of narratives and expressions. School work with aesthetical production and reflection in the subject visual art has strong traditions in analogue materials and techniques such as painting, drawing and sculpture. However this might not be very relevant in a late-modern society. Mass media and ICT are not only about the technical possibility; the big difference is that they establish a form of reality that forms the background for the way in which we construct reality (Buhl, 2006). In Luhmann's words information becomes a sort of: "background reality that we use to construct our view of reality" (Luhmann, 2000, p. 85). Thus, mass media provides us with versions of background reality against which individuals can actualise and express opinions in various ways. It involves the subject (individual) as a social construct which requires the ability of self-regulation. This ability has developed gradually, meaning that we have learnt to separate media narratives from reality and the ability to separate ourselves from a played character in a computer game.

Didactical implications for Visual art teacher training programme

I began by asking what digital technology like ICT and mass media do to the school subject Visual art and its teacher training. An answer is close in *how* media and ICT do something and are able to do something in an educational system. From reflecting on this question I think that what might be new about ICT, specifically in Visual art education and its teacher training programme, are the intensity of possible choices in communication and an awareness of the complexity in all communication, which is pointed out by the use of digital media and ICT. Koehler & Mishra (2009) brings forward the TPACK model that is based on Shulman's (1987) framework. In this model there are three main ingredients of teacher's knowledge: technology, pedagogy and content knowledge. In my point of view these categories seem rather fixated and from a naturalistic perspective. For an example the opinions of what content knowledge in the subject visual art can vary extremely, there is certainly an ongoing struggle to define its legitimacy. Furthermore Koehler & Mishra argue that education is ill structured and, as I understand it, TPACK is a way of creating a more efficient learning situation by organizing and integrating knowledge from various fields, that is, the TPACK knowledge. I think that all activity that includes people will have messiness about them, because there are constant micro-power struggles going on, different ways of positioning oneself and positioning others (Hellman, 2013). Where there is power (often a teacher's position) there is always resistance (often a pupil's position), but that relation can also be reversed. In other words the world is messy and changeable. Sometimes models such as TPACK serve well to simplify complex issues and thus make didactic points. However I feel

that simplifying by creating models also limits what is possible to think, and sometimes excludes very important entanglements. To put it simply, models make complex things appear simple. Instead I prefer to deal with the complexity and the movements of meaning making and how meaning is socially constructed and only temporally fixated.

In aesthetics there is a paradox developed over time, it is about being part of what is going on but rejecting the fact that what is going on is also a part of me (Escobar, 2000). This is what I hear when visual art teacher students express that “Yes, we might live in a digital era, but drawing and painting is still what you need to learn as a visual art teacher.” I think that if we choose to deal with ICT and media in visual art teachers training programme to a larger extent than today, it will be a learning potential that will move the focus from creating beautiful objects, to developing performative reflexivity about ourselves and the world around us.

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