Comment and Response

Now About These "M's" and the Realities of Art Education: A Comment on Geoffrey Hodder*

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Geoffrey Hodder's "New Basic Assumption for Art Educators of the Future" (1980) must be addressed with scrutiny. Rejecting traditional approaches to art education, Hodder advocates the philosophy and practices of Paulo Freire. The problem is not Freire's approach but Hodder's interpretation and his attendant proposals and prophecy.

To begin, Hodder examines Lanier's (1977) characterizations of art educators, namely that there are five roles: Magicians, Mechanics, Merchants, Muckrakers, and Mosaicists. One by one Hodder dismisses these except the Muckraker who at least "questions the world in a similar manner to Freire" (Hodder, 1980, p. 13). Hodder retains some hope for this practitioner but stresses Freire's approach. However, it is the designation "Muckraker," albeit Lanier's, which puzzles me. The word often conjures up images and charges of political scandal, the type often associated with certain kinds of hard-hitting journalism. By creating problems of inference and connotation, "Muckraker" accentuates a matter about which Freire is most sensitive. Freire is deeply concerned with the words and images people use to critically know and understand their social world.

I begin my criticism of Hodder's position with the above reference because his language of explanation indicates a general misreading (misunderstanding?) of Freire. It also suggests an unrealistic view of the field of art education. Before turning to this it is important to note other matters of interpretation and explanation.

First, the ideas of Freire are often reduced to cliché status. Words like praxis, dialogical, and conscientization flow heavily and not surprisingly. Translation and what might be called the Freire conversation do give

* This comment is made on a previously published article by Geoffrey Hodder, "Human Praxis: A New Basic Assumption for Art Educators," *Canadian Journal of Education*, 1980, 5(2), 5-14.

these words an undue potency. Yet to be meaningful and have meaning they have to be constantly situated in the real-life experiences they are supposed to elucidate. At least this is what Freire attempts to do. Sexist language is also evident and hopefully not of the intentional variety. Hodder uses "he" to qualify persons. This is inconsistent with Freire's view of social reality. Note the English edition of Freire's *Education for Critical Consciousness* (1973) to which Hodder refers. There are no sexist inferences in Freire's own work and the introduction and preface repeatedly use the s/he qualification. I cannot emphasize enough the importance of this point. In educational contexts especially, we must begin with an understanding of how and why we name and represent each other. And if one's intention is to apply Freire's ideas in such contexts, there is nothing more basic to critical education and social action than a realization of the roles and power relationships historically ascribed to women and men.

Finally, on the matter of language and explanation, I take issue with Hodder's repeated use of the term "methodology" to account for Freire's approach. The approach is decidedly not methodological. This is its strength and its passion. To render it as a methodolgy negates it as a critical method of educating. It acquires the trappings and modes of investigation and application commonly identified with the social sciences. It can be argued that much of methodology is an invention of such disciplines as psychology, economics, political science, and sociology to give them a scientific framework and legitimacy. Indeed, the study and practice of education has long caught what might be called the methodological syndrome.

I am by no means dismissing methodological concerns; it is the excesses of methodology that require criticism and alternatives. This brings me to the field of art education, which is now a specialized and established domain in the educational milieu. Essentially, it is a Platonic field which deals with artistic productivity and aesthetic feeling and judgment, all within the larger framework of liberal education. As part of teacher education and school curricula, art education often ensures its legitimacy by relying on methodology as opposed to method.

The question then arises whether Freire's approach is applicable at all to art education as it now stands as a constituent and conventional field. Hodder thinks so. He lists several aspects of Freire's "methodology" followed by "a restatement of Freire's basic methodological elements (that) will serve to show the potential contribution to art education" (1980, p. 12). To illustrate:

Freire (1973):

1. Participant observation of educators "tuning in" to the vocabular universe of the people.

4. The decodification of the words by a "culture circle" (participants in the

learning process) under the self-effacing stimulus of a coordinator who is no "teacher" in the conventional sense, but who has become an educator-educatee in dialogue with educatee-educators. . . . (p. viii)

Hodder (1980):

1. Participant observation of art educators "tuning in" to the actual interests, activities, and vocabulary of the students.

4. The decoding of the visual images in a dialogical relationship between the "teacher" who has now become the teacher-student, and the "students" who have now become student-teachers, for the purpose of learning together and teaching each other. (p. 12)

Unfortunately, Hodder's substitutions either in whole or in part do not provide new and basic assumptions for art educators. This is because art education itself is not addressed. It is not enough to change the pedagogical process. It is necessary to consider the forms of knowledge and the actual content assigned to the field. To illustrate, Hodder places importance on the decoding of visual images. Yet what is meant by the complex term "image"? Are its multiple associations and frames of reference to be grasped by teacher/students because the educational process is dialogical in character? Not necessarily, especially when the subject is images. Any process of educating is image-making and thus capable of mystification. Must a "true" Freire approach always include a discussion of the educational process itself?

Another contention. Consider the following restatements of Freire's approach by Hodder (1980): Note that "these" refers to ideas formulated by art educators and "their" refers to students.

3. A first coding of "these" generative ideas into visual images which stimulate students to realize the potential impact of art on their lives and also to realize that they are capable of becoming makers of their own culture.

4. The decoding process involves the discussion of, and reflection on, the aesthetic content of the visual image as it relates specifically to "their" own interests in life.

5. The culmination is the development of some aesthetic action that results in a change in the real world. . . . (p. 12)

Hodder claims to focus on the feelings, needs, and actions of students. Yet the preoccupation with specific goals, i.e., realizing "aesthetic content," stems from several prevailing objectives of art education. Art education and what is deemed aesthetic are consigned and assigned to each other. Moreover, "art" itself is relegated to a special place. It is also assumed that "culture" is something that we haven't necessarily participated in making and that perhaps art education is the context for such new-found creation. To insist then on these goals and distinctions is to work against Freire's critical approach. To use Freire's (1973) characterization, art education remains another "extension" of curricula and an educational system that is marked by specialization not connection:

It appears that the act of extension, in whatever sector it takes place, means that those carrying it out need to go to "another part of the world" to "normalize it," according to their way of viewing reality: to make it resemble their world. Thus, in its "field of association" the term extension has a significant relation to transmission, handing over, giving, messianism, mechanical transfer, cultural invasion, manipulation, etc. All these terms imply actions which transform people into "things" and negate their existence as beings who transform the world. (p. 95)

Hodder's applications seem to have their limitations unless we reconsider the field of art education. If we do so we have to demystify concepts and categories in terms of our life experiences and as elements of an existing social order. There are none more rudimentary than art, education, and culture, as well as image, which I noted earlier.

There is one additional consideration, that of tone. Rereading Hodder I am reminded of Susan Sontag's (1963) essay, The Anthropologist as Hero, which commented on the emergence of Claude Lévi-Strauss as an intellectual hero. Sontag described how Lévi-Strauss's work transcends anthropology, breaks down academic boundaries, and ties together several fibres of history, culture, and knowledge. But in the essay, and I suspect more so today, her admiration is not without criticism. "Any serious critique of Lévi-Strauss, however, must deal with the fact that, ultimately, his extreme formalism is a moral choice and (more surprisingly) a vision of social perfection" (p. 80). Hodder extols Freire as an educational hero but he does not temper his enthusiasm with criticism. He "extends" Freire as a Messiah and well beyond Lanier's "M" cast of art educators. Hodder (1980): "The day is not far off when art educators will step out of the role of the *Mancipator*, the oppressor and join with the students to become *Manumitter*, the liberator" (p. 14). My Messiah designation is a comment on the oppressive tone of many current manifestos of liberation. But in Freire's own case it is also to re-emphasize that such appointment is ultimately counter-productive.

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