

The Neo-Liberalist Impact on Art Education & Cultural Capital

Within her book *The Gendering of Art Education: Modernism, Identity, and Critical Feminism* (2001), Pen Dalton discusses the paradoxical relationship between art teachers' pedagogies (informed by pluralistic approaches of feminist art criticism) and the structures within the larger educational system – a system that she metaphorically describes as “hidden patriarchal power.” Dalton points to a divided sense of personal identity experienced by those who teach in higher education art institutions that administer nationally organized curricula, describing them as cooperative subjects who comply with the explicit demands of the institution and curriculum without internalizing their values (p. 135). The “values” she refers to are based on capitalist principles, ultimately preparing students to work for corporations controlled by patriarchal authorities. Placing gender ideology aside for now, the assigned books by Michael Apple (2004) and Mike Cole (2005) have led me to analyze the social classes (administration and faculty primarily) that operate within these institutions, hegemonic relations that exist, and underlying ideological beliefs of those not in power. Referring both to Foucault's understanding of power as a “multiform production of relations of domination and the neo-marxist belief of power not being limited to a specific class or state, but something that saturates the social field. Curriculum design of art education has been impacted by neo-liberalist attitudes and strategies in similar ways to other academic disciplines, however, considering the role it plays in producing cultural capital, a neo-marxist examination of existing power/knowledge beliefs in this field would provide insight into the larger dialectical relationship between culture and economics.

Speaking from personal experience, art educators teaching in higher education institutions experience different levels of autonomy depending on the institution of which they are employed. As Dalton illustrates, the structures that control art education are hidden, thus the role that these institutions, or academic departments, play within society is unclear even to those that teach within them. The authorities that make final decisions relating to economics and curriculum like to create an aura of hegemony within the community of the institution, and although this approach seems anti-capitalistic it could definitely be considered as a neo-liberalist tactic that ultimately responds to affects of globalization.

Confusion surrounding the goals of art education increases when one considers the many departments within the field and particularly the categories of “art” and “design.” When these categories are each defined on their own, one can easily see how “design” curriculum could be adapted to corporate culture, becoming what Apple defined as high status or technical knowledge. In fact, some design schools are quite clear about their connections to the “industry” within our capitalist society, promoting this relationship as a major benefit to potential students. When both “art” and “design” exist within the same educational institution, however, things get complicated, especially if interdisciplinary approaches have been incorporated into the curriculum.

The Emily Carr University of Art and Design is one of these institutions I describe above. Recently the school was given \$4.5 million from the BC government to fund an Industrial Design Chair to “aid in the growth of the creative industries and the future economy of the province,” following recognition of its formal change in status to a university two months prior. It is interesting to compare the tone of the two media announcements from the Premier's Technology Council (PTC) – one from the school and the other from the government (<http://www.ecuad.ca/node/2149>). The former emphasizes the creative venture while the latter describes industrial design as “an effective means for companies to gain a competitive advantage...a driver of the innovation and commercialization of technologies.” It will be interesting to see how this economic endorsement to one department will affect the institution as a whole, and if it will initiate a multi-tier “class” system within the school. ECU is an internationally respected institution yet it operates as a small community, and one that now faces the development of a completely new structure in light of its recent change in status. Over the years there has consistently been division between the workers and management (faculty currently consists of 150 with approximately 95 of those being sessionals or “non-regulars” hired on three month contracts) and this further complicates the institution's role in producing cultural capital. I will end, for now, by posing this question; If a large portion of ECU teachers are struggling within the current economy, what does that say to their students of art and design?