

The Hermeneutic Circle: Shaping the Aesthetic Experience

“When it is told, it is, to the one to whom it is told, another given fact, not an idea. The communication may stimulate the other person to realize the question for himself and to think out a like idea, or it may smother his intellectual interest and suppress his dawning effort at thought. But what he directly gets cannot be an idea. Only by wrestling with the conditions of the problem at first hand, seeking and finding his own way out, does he think. In such shared activity, the teacher is a learner, and the learner is, without knowing it, a teacher -- and upon the whole, the less consciousness there is, on either side, of either giving or receiving instruction, the better.” – John Dewey (1916) *Democracy and Education*. New York: The MacMillan Company.

Within *Curriculum Development in the Postmodern Era* (2nd ed.) (2006), Slattery summarizes Dewey’s understanding of education as a process of aesthetic experience and social activity. In the quotation above Dewey describes the importance of an interactive relationship between the teacher and the student, one that allows for dialogue and conversation in place of an authorial hierarchical relationship. I have yet to read the entire text of *Democracy and Education*, however, it seems that Dewey’s thoughts of the teacher-learner relationship are akin to Slattery’s description of the hermeneutic circle and the proleptic experience that can occur through postmodern curriculum. Throughout Slattery’s text he repeatedly calls for a holistic model of curriculum in the postmodern era that allows for natural processes and self-reflective perspective. He proposes the need for an aesthetic awareness in shaping the learning environment and educational experience, placing particular emphasis on the circle as an important structure. This paper acknowledges the significance of the circle in theory and practice as experienced within the studio classroom critique of visual artworks.

Slattery quotes David Orr (1992) in stating that “landscape shapes mindscapes” and attests to the significance of the seminar circle in facilitating discourse, contrasting the rigid arrangement of rows of desks. I too have found the classroom set-up to be integral to the overall learning experience and the critical discourse that emerges. Along with the circle, another form common to the studio classroom is the U-shape as it allows for group conversation and collective experience throughout the making of artwork. These formations also occur during critique situations in which the instructor and students view and discuss completed art projects. The circle or the U-shape allows for all participants to simultaneously view the artwork and each other. The nature of the studio critique is very much what Slattery calls for with his vision of curriculum in the postmodern era – a process of hermeneutic interpretation that ultimately leads to self-reflection and critical inquiry. The teacher can in no way predict or plan for the discussion that emerges, thus it is the perfect situation for the teacher to relinquish control and allow for a more organic and non-linear method of discourse. Students usually feel quite comfortable expressing personal opinions related to the artwork, which often connects to issues of cultural critique. Individual teachers, however, conduct studio critiques in many different ways, some choosing to do all of the talking while other teachers operate as facilitators of critical discourse.

Conversation within studio art courses is key to the learning process. Slattery describes interpretation as something that should emphasize possibility and becoming since human consciousness can never be static (p. 282). The critiquing process in the studio classroom operates in a circular manner in which participants each build upon each other’s comments, one idea triggering another and so on. In further describing the process of interpretation, Slattery states: “...each new experience adds to the accumulated meaning of experience for each individual and sets the stage for present and future possibilities....the “proleptic experience” or the “synthetical moment”...a gestalt or heightened consciousness.” (p. 282) A similar kind of circular process was described by McCutcheon in *Developing the Curriculum* (2002) when she connected the act of deliberation in curriculum-making to Senge’s theory of systems thinking (1990). Senge argues that reality is made up of circles and when we limit our thinking to linear systems we misunderstand reality (p. 155). He also believed it important to help people see the whole rather than the individual pieces, similar to the gestaltist nature of Slattery’s postmodern curriculum. I see the process of deliberation very similar to the studio critique and I often need to remind myself that the overall experience, the process itself, is more significant to the student’s learning than following my lesson plan. The interpretive process described within Slattery’s vision of curriculum in a postmodern era aligns itself with Dewey’s view of education as a process of interactive experience, and embraces non-linear structures that favour the form of the circle.