

Anxiety and Art Learning

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ANXIETY AND ART LEARNING

Amy Phillips

CBS news recently reported the latest case of "chemical anxiety." A popular mail-order catalog has the answer to "fear of sewing machines." Articles on stress and anxiety are ubiquitous. Even the medical profession is beginning to agree that anxiety, "the prime characteristic of Western civilization" (Willoughby in May, 1977) can even make us sick.

Anxiety also has been important in educational research. Study has ranged from the anxious person's performance and attitudes in school settings, to specific anxieties arising under one or another condition (such as Math, Performance, Computer, Text, or Flight "Anxiety"), to education for chronic stress.

What next? One phrase we have not heard is "art anxiety." It may be a blessing that art educators have not hitched up to the fad-anxiety bandwagon. Still, the relation between anxiety and art has a long and distinguished history, has been of direct and indirect concern to twentieth century art education, and is well worth understanding for teachers and students alike. In this brief paper I will discuss theories about anxiety in the context of art; often issues such as these are neglected in educational anxiety research.

First, then, what is anxiety? The sort of 'anxiety' we hear so much about today is only one form, a kind of stress-response brought on by a stressful environment and ineffective habits of coping with its threat. It is possible, and even useful, to see the art classroom and school setting as potentially stressful (e.g., lack of privacy, too little time, unfamiliar demands). My emphasis is not on this sort of "art stress," but on anxiety as a complex affective and cognitive state with many faces, serving many functions, and resulting in many ends.

Anxiety means an uneasy disquiet (I am anxious about), but also an eager desire (I am anxious to). Apprehension means both taking in a perceiving and fear and distrust (another kind of art anxiety, I suggest, is "apprehension apprehension"). Anxiety is like a collection of two-edged swords. For anxieties, including those we may feel when studying art, can be debilitating or facilitative -- unnecessary, as well as normal and inevitable.

Often, both the creative and destructive sides of anxiety operate at one and the same time. For example, in art study one needs to learn one's own patterns of anxiety response to the threat and promise of art's challenges. Debilitating anxiety about art can have many causes, not the least of which is a misunderstanding about the normal presence of creative anxiety at various stages of the creative process. This creative anxiety can range from an aroused, poised, imaginative curiosity to 'those endless hours where beauty was born out of despair' as W. B. Yeats said.

How one interprets this anxiety often determines whether it will be facilitating or debilitating. As Gaitskell and Hurwitz say (after Dewey's *How We Think*), there are normal periods of "hesitation and doubt" in any art project (Gaitskell, 1975). This can be interpreted as a signal to a oid (a common anxiety defense) rather than to push on. The experienced recognize this hesitation as a signal that one's interest is engaged. Even the physiological signs of creative arousal are very similar to anxiety states, and may well be mistaken by the inexperienced for them (May, 1977).

Another two-edged sword in anxiety and art making is the challenge and threat of using stuff from the often avoided 'preconscious,' or 'unconscious,' or realm of the 'mythopoetic imagination' (Jung). As Goethe said: "Now let me dare to open wide the gate/ Past which men's steps have ever flinching trod."

We can learn to trust encounters with these sources of imagination, in part, through arts education. There is then less "dread in the face of freedom" (Kierkegaard's definition of anxiety). One may be more anxious to do art than anxious to avoid it.

However, one also learns to respect the depth and power of the mind and to understand that anxiety has a place in the process of growing more aware. Anxiety about art may, in part, be a response to "invasions from the unconscious and the archetype" - Jung's definition of anxiety (May, 1977). In the art class, anxiety may result from assignments that call for some encounter with this realm.

I will just mention a few other important areas in anxiety theory and art. The lives and working styles of artists offer teachers and students insights into coping with art anxiety with, so to speak, the novice-effect removed. Art therapists hold that doing art can assuage personal anxiety: "Had I left those images hidden in the emotions I might have been torn to pieces by them" (Jung, 1963). Art is also a cultural and personal response to the anxiety of existence, a way to make marks we can control and own in the face of fate.

What about anxiety in art education? Anxiety has been both an acknowledged and silent partner in modern art education. Some of our concern for appropriate curriculum, teaching, and self-expression has been so that the anguish of Walter Smith's proverbial little girl "who simply turns and thrashes me when I point out a faulty line" might be a thing of the past. In Lowenfeld's little book, "Your Child and His Art," sections such as "Shall I Correct Wrong Proportions" and "My Child is Afraid to Put Pressure on His Crayon, or to Paint Freely" encouraged parents to understand their children's art so they would not be worried by what and how their children painted, and children would not be disturbed by their parents' misconceptions.

Anxiety even accompanies development and artistic development. The child Lowenfeld wanted us to respect, says Klein, develops powerful attachments to his or her symbolic productions (as seen in play and art). She says inappropriate interpretation of these (still not uncommon), can lead

to serious anxiety, both for the child, and about the symbolic expressions. Proper interpretation and support helps children develop healthy attitudes about themselves and their work (Klein, 1960).

Kierkegaard's cogent phrase, that "anxiety precedes a leap into a higher stage of life" suggests that anxiety is normal and even necessary in development (e.g., of artistic sophistication). It can also handicap us -- transitions are by no means always smooth and inevitable; anxiety can even short-circuit further growth.

Sullivan said that anxiety develops due to the "apprehension of disapproval" from significant others. He says this anxiety restricts the growth of "interests and inclinations" that oppose these other's opinions (May, 1977). We might then ask about the effect of youngster's peer-groups, often uninterested in art, and the lack of support for art in many of our culture's schools and homes. Is this an additional explanation for the tendency to stop doing art during late childhood?

Even in curriculum, anxiety stands in the shadow of design. There is a well-known distinction between two types of curriculum, the technically-centered and expressivity-centered (the dichotomy goes back as far as Appollo and Dionysus). In art education of late, we recognize these as a dynamic pair in creativity itself: Spontaneity can be a technique, techniques becomes spontaneous. Yet, as the experienced teacher knows, students may well feel anxious if a curriculum style is emphasized at the wrong time, or with the wrong students. I recall my own mis-step of fingerpainting with adolescent girls (on the over- Dionysian side), as well as Walter Smith's agitated three-year-old told to draw "correctly" (on the over-Appolonian side).

But in another of anxiety's two-edged swords, proper choice of curriculum also helps students deal with anxiety about art. Many high school teachers insist youngsters learn technique. As one pointed out, this enables them to face the fear of that "blank page," of that uncharted territory. Some curriculum, based on the seminal work of Nicolaides (such as gesture and contour, drawing without looking and without worrying about the result, etcetera) are said to help people who have blocks and rigidly inadequate drawing styles (see Edwards, 1979). Whether or not they tap the right side of the brain, these exercises are naturals for relaxation and anxiety reduction.

In my own work I discuss how educators can prevent students from developing debilitating anxiety about art, can teach them to recognize normal and inevitable anxieties that are part of the creative process, and can even encourage students to welcome some of this anxiety, perhaps by reinterpreting it as creative arousal. Field quotes a conversation between William Blake and Samuel Palmer about Blake's Dante designs:

He (Blake) said he began them with fear and trembling, I said, "O, I have enough of fear and trembling." "Then," he said, "you'll do." (Field, 1983).

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