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HOW YOUNG CHILDREN CONSTRUCT MEANING
IN EVERYDAY SITUATIONS

Priscilla Fenton

This investigation attempts to understand how meaning is constructed by young children in everyday situations. Young children between the ages of three and six generate constructions of meaning through their conversations, movements, play and selections. These meaningful constructions may surface through young children's encounters with art materials and experiences. Art experiences allow meaning to become active, processual, inventive, contextual and expressive. As an artist who employs yarns, threads and fabric, I feel that encounters with fiber materials offer a special focus through which insights into how meaning is constructed by young children may be revealed.

Meaning is constructed by individuals in social environments. Martin Buber (1970) presented ideas concerning uniqueness, relatedness and dialogue that suggest an approach to the nature of meaning and how it is constructed by young children. The phenomenological stance of Alfred Schutz (1967) contributed to the way meaning is constructed through the act of reflection. George Herbert Mead's (1974) theoretical insights implied that meaning is a mobile construction within a contextually elaborate social interaction. The phenomenological method as conceived by Schutz and Maurice Natanson (1973) introduced a special participant observer that reflected aspects of anthropology and social psychology. Intersubjectivity as developed by Schutz suggested that meaning can be shared, therefore insights are accessible to a participant observer. Kenneth R. Beittel (1973) described anthropological immersion, phenomenological bracketing and observer-actor reciprocity as characteristics of a special participant observer who constructs microethnographies.

I am interested in collecting microethnographic evidence about individual young children and how they construct meaning. In my relationships with young children, I became intrigued with their intense commitment to making sense of their environments and of their interactions with adults and other children. These attempts at making encounters meaningful to themselves created some differences between adult expectations and the children's intentions. Hans Peter Dreitzel (1973) and Robert Mackay (1973) approached similar concerns regarding childhood socialization from a phenomenological position.

Robert Coles (1964) interpreted participant observation in a way that seemed to respect aspects of individual children and their specific environments while encouraging reciprocity of feelings and ideas. The depth of these relationships provided a guide to gain access to the importance of specific persons, places, things and events. Sometimes the importance is revealing and unexpected. I

was washing dishes at my mother's house when I accidentally allowed a "good" spoon to fall into the garbage disposal. Moments later my niece, Stephanie, called on the telephone. I told her about the accident. She seemed sympathetic, but alarmed when she lamented "...not the tweety-bird spoon!" I assured her that the tweety-bird spoon was safe and intact, as I realized that our notions of a good spoon differed, but they were consistent with our individual biographies.

When our lives run parallel, we share experiences. What happens between us provides the life matter, the stuff of living. I record the encounters in a journal and when I reread the descriptions and re-examine the documents, a reflective stance allows recollective editing to commence. Connections surface and insights reveal themselves. Sometimes an event, thing or person will spring the recollective editing spontaneously. The good spoon incident made me halt and flip back through my relationship with Stephanie to search for verifying evidence in our past together that indicated the spoon's importance.

As an artist, I am concerned with meaning as an expressive construction that is a residue of my lived life. Beittel provided an approach to meaning within an art making and viewing context. He suggested that the participant observer assumes the role of a nurturant teacher. This mentorship seemed to accommodate the materials, experiences and environments that I explored within the context of the lives of young children.

As an artist-researcher, I found a dialogue emerging when I encountered young children and art materials simultaneously. As the dialogue developed between the children and me, our individual dialogues with the art materials evolved as well. The nature of the children's encounter with the materials was not the same as mine, but a dialogue was emerging that engaged the special presence of the fiber materials. The relationship assumed a reciprocity of thoughts, images and feelings. The three participants were fully active in the shared triad, since the materials were transformed from it into You by the children and me. Although we were individuals and unique, we seemed able to reciprocate and understand each other within the many layered conversation.

The dialogues and encounters were recorded in a journal that begins the attempt at understanding how meaning is constructed in everyday relationships with people and things. The journal assumes an autobiographical and literary form that implies a documentary. Wassily Kandinsky (1964) recalled the relationship with his aunt and how art was important for them when he was young. He remembered his fascination with art materials at 14.

Thus these sensations of colors on the palette (and also inside the tubes, which resemble humans, spiritually powerful but unassuming in appearance, who suddenly in time of need reveal and bring to bear

hitherto concealed powers) became experiences of the soul. (p. 35)

Reflection on the past events brings meaning to present conditions. As we share individual recollections among ourselves our lives come together rather than contradict and separate. Mary Catherine Bateson (1983) explained that understanding of our worlds is enlightened by a myriad of personal contributions.

We know now that any society is seen differently by those in different positions within it, and that presidents, shahs and talking chiefs are all cocooned in their incomplete versions of the wider experience. (p. 16)

The children in my study share life experiences with me. They see things from the advantage of childhood which is different from my present condition. So we bring our views together in an attempt to understand each other. Perhaps as these children grow older, they will write about our time together and new insights will elaborate my impressions.

The materials that I bring to the children focus on a collection of fiber items. These items seem to organize themselves into three groups. The linear materials consist of threads, yarns, strings and ropes. Sheets of fabric, plastic, paper form the planular group, whereas paper tubes, chunks of fiber fill, wool batting and foam have three dimensional qualities in common. Sheets of drawing paper (18" x 24") and a plastic tackle box filled with crayons, tape, markers, scissors, pens, pencils and glue are available during the encounters.

I ground myself into the everyday condition of their lives. I temporarily set aside or forget what I have been told about children and open my eyes very wide to their conduct, talk, interests, values, possessions, struggles and desires. I become part of their life-worlds. I wait for that which is to be presented to me. The encounter has the appearance of a babysitting episode, but that is only the thinnest description of what happens between us. The thick description (Geertz, 1973) is an account of the We-relationship, the social act and the intensity of relatedness. Robert Coles seemed to know about this intensity of relatedness.

By direct observation, I mean talking to people, listening to them, watching them - and being watched by them. By sustained observation, I mean taking a long time; enough time to be confused, then absolutely certain and confident, then not so sure but a little more aware of why one or another conclusion seems the best that can be argued, or at least better than any other available. (p. 4)

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