

Authenticity and Everydayness

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AUTHENTICITY AND EVERYDAYNESS

Christine Thompson

Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I am,
Stands amused, complacent, compassionating, idle, uni-
tary,
Looks down, is erect, bends an arm on an impalpable
certain rest,
Looks with its sidecurved head curious what will come
next,
Both in and out of the game, and watching and wondering
at it.

(Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass)

It is possible that everydayness has presented a problem to human beings since the second day followed the first. In the sixth century B.C., the philosopher Heraclitus recognized the paradox of the everyday: "We are estranged from that with which are most familiar" (Olson, 1970, p. 3). The everyday is as convenient and comfortable as a well-worn pair of blue jeans, and as unlikely to merit our attention.

The term "everydayness" refers to the mode of being, the attitude toward reality, which typifies our "normal" participation in the life-world. Much of daily life is bound to the routine and the habitual, the customary and the obligatory. We live unreflectively in the everyday, easily and complacently conforming to those canons of behavior deemed suitable by popular consensus. We accept the validity and reliability of habit, convention, folk wisdom. People and events seem self-evident, perfectly clear, absolutely unremarkable in their predictability. We lose the inclination to wonder: "the power," as Bertrand Russell wrote, "of asking questions which increase the interest of the world, and show the strangeness and wonder lying just below the surface even in the commonest things of daily life" (Matthews, 1980, p. 2). Yet it is alongside and within this mundane reality that those experiences which define human possibility become available to us. The life-world is the milieu in which we have our lives, the place in which we meet others and find ourselves through simple acts which modify the world.

The precarious nature of our relation to the familiar has preoccupied twentieth-century thinkers. Everydayness has been interpreted positively as the ground of being, as source and sustenance, and negatively as the trivialization of our being-in-the-world. Among those who have considered the everyday and the possibility of finding meaning in lived experience are the sociologist, Alfred Schutz, and the philosopher, Martin Heidegger. Set in juxtaposition, their phenomenologies illuminate the essential ambiguity of our tenure in the life-world and the necessary dialectic which exists between the everyday realities and

the authentic possibilities of existence.

According to Schutz (1970), we find ourselves in a complex, socially mediated and biographically determined situation, both common to all and unique to each. Our "stock of knowledge," which functions as our scheme of interpretation, is largely socially derived; only a minor portion of what we know has come to us through direct experience. This combined communal and personal knowledge results in a "sedimentation" of meanings, deposited like geological strata, which determines our resources for dealing with the present and our anticipations for the future. This pool of knowledge is limited and pragmatic: incoherent, amorphous and inconsistent, yet sufficient for most purposes.

The same limitations obtained to the social heritage of the group, the folk-ways and system of knowledge by which the group defines its situation. For the group, as for the individual, the communal stock of knowledge assumes the appearance of sufficiency and clarity and functions as a guide. This "cultural pattern" of "thinking as usual" provides recipes or typifications, behavioral norms, which absolve members of the need to examine the world or to search for truth. It eases life by reducing its complexity. This "relatively natural conception of the world" (Schutz, 1970, p. 81) remains in force as long as the assumptions which support the system remain in equilibrium: as long it appears stable, reliable, sufficient, and shared.

Natanson (1973) has pointed out that Schutz, in his concern for the structures of the social world, practiced a form of phenomenology firmly implanted in the natural attitude, close to the preoccupations and predispositions of "ordinary" life. Schutz considered the typifications, which control so many of our acts, not only inevitable but enabling, the necessary and essentially benign residue of socialization. In some sense, Schutz seems to have regarded typifications as sedimented interpretations, i.e., intuitions of the essential characteristics of phenomena, grown dusty with time and neglect. Our ability to recognize essences, to see the universal qualities in the particular case, is fundamental to our ability to make sense of the world: nothing is knowable, after all, in a "world in which things . . . appear to be absolutely incomparable" (Vandenberg, 1974, p. 201). The typifications made available to us through our everydayness constitute our frame of reference, the perspective through which the world appears to us.

Heidegger portrayed everydayness in a more subdued light, as the less-than-ideal consequence of our placement in a world inhabited by others. There is no contradiction of Schutz's characterization of the natural attitude in Heidegger's contention that we have "grown up in and into a traditional way of interpreting" (1962, p. 41) ourselves, an understanding of being which discloses and regulates our possibilities. Yet Heidegger viewed everydayness primarily as a limitation of being, an inauthentic or fallen state in which the individual abdicates responsibility for choice in all but the most trivial matters, seeking refuge in the anonymous "they." Heidegger's descriptions of our insatiable appetites

for distraction, our craving for the novel and the bizarre, and our fascination with idle talk resonate in many of the most unforgiving critiques of popular culture. For Heidegger, everydayness is omnivorous and oppressive, a barrier between human beings and their realization of self and world.

Both Schutz and Heidegger trace the possibility of meaningful knowing to the gap between everydayness and authenticity; both acknowledge the existence of a jumping-off place where our recipes for living simply fail. Our questions arise as we confront impediments to our thinking-as-usual: contradiction, strangeness, violation of expectations. We are invited to interpret, to reflect upon what we ordinarily would accept without hesitation, by our encounter with negativity, our experience of doubt. We are led to examine the everydayness, in order to recover or discover the authentic nature of men and situations. Heidegger considered such authentic contact with the "things themselves" the most essential and elusive goal of human existence, a "disclosure" of Being, "always accomplished as a clearing-away of concealments and obscurities, as a breaking up of the disguises with which Dasein bars its own way" (Heidegger, 1962, p. 167). For Schutz, the boundary between authenticity and everydayness seems less impenetrable; "Meaning," he maintained, "is a certain way of directing one's gaze at an item of one's own experience" (1967, p. 42).

The everyday may be considered the inversion of the authentic rather than its opposite. Our experience and thinking fluctuate between the two. Everydayness may provide the assumptions which make meaning possible for us, yet the experience which originally prompted our convictions tends to be obscured and diminished by time. Our everyday being-in-the-world necessitates continual recovery of contact with the things themselves, accomplished through reflection on our lived experience and in dialogue with others who share our life-world.

In my research, I am concerned with the everydayness of beginning art teachers and with the reflection on experience which may lead them to an authentic understanding of art education and of themselves as art educators. Burkhart and Neil note that "The first step in becoming a teacher is making the choice to think of oneself as a teacher" (1968, p. 9). The undergraduate students who enroll in the Methods: Art class at The University of Iowa plan and teach nine-week courses to area children in the Saturday art workshop program. For some of these students, the Saturday classes provide their first opportunity to think of themselves as teachers.

Art students in the process of becoming art teachers encounter a situation in which their interpretive schemes are simultaneously called forth and confronted. The "personal" histories of art and of education which they bring to their experiences are fundamentally intersubjective, derived from social attitudes and opinions collected in the process of growing up in this culture. The typifications and idealizations familiar to beginning art teachers often prove to be inadequate guides to the problems they confront as they assume responsibility for others' learning. In particular, their socialization as students and as artists seems to

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complicate the expansion of identity required by their decision to teach. Faced with situations for which they can summon no facile response, they are forced to experience their marginality, their "otherness."

It is such moments of uncanniness and displacement which may, if we heed them, lead to those questions which Burkhart and Neil call "life sources" (1968, p. 3). As Schutz and Heidegger demonstrated, experience becomes meaningful only in retrospect, through our reflection on and interpretation of what has transpired. In asking beginning teachers to keep journals in response to their teaching experiences, I am asking them to take the reflective turn toward their experience which will allow their own meanings to emerge: to describe, interpret, and come to understand what they otherwise might simply live.

Among the most essential acts of teaching, according to Buber (1965), are the teacher's presentation of self as a person authentically attuned to life and its requirements, wholly alive in the vivid present, and the selection of the effective world, of that portion of human thought which the teacher values, embodies, and strives to share. Reflection on the everydayness of teaching plays a crucial role in the development of personal authenticity and the understanding of the meaning of the project of art education. The concerns expressed by beginning art teachers in the journals kept during the nine weeks of their teaching in the Saturday children's classes provide concrete instances of the attempt to find meaning and significance in lived experience. The recurrent themes which emerge in these journals are especially important, for these insistent questions about art, education and identity indicate the structure of the intensely personal and intersubjective process of becoming an art teacher.

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