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THE MEANING OF ART ENVIRONMENTS FOR ART STUDENTS

Joan Yochim

As an elementary art consultant, I pulled my art cart into some 70 classrooms. Although I was a new teacher, I noticed the differences in these rooms: what they looked like, the reception I was given by the teachers and students, and the kinds of art projects I was encouraged to do with the children. These three factors were related. The classrooms which looked neat, which were decorated with colored dittoes and holiday cut-outs, were usually the ones in which child-centered creativity with plaster was discouraged by the teacher. Art related discussions were difficult to conduct with the children. On the other hand, in the rooms where children's paintings and constructions covered every surface, and in which the teachers encouraged me to experiment with new ideas and materials, the children were eager to talk about and make art. As I changed schools, and moved upward through the grades, I became increasingly aware of how my art room looked as a reflection of what we were making and learning, and how the organization hindered or encouraged efficiency and discipline.

The importance of art room appearances was emphasized by the opportunity to serve on two evaluation committees. In one high school, I realized that my visual impressions of the differences between two art rooms – the kinds and arrangements of things and the activity levels – were influencing my evaluation. Two questions came to mind. Did the appearance really reflect what was being taught and learned? Were visitors and new students coming into the room affected in the same way that I was?

More recently, during a seminar in which we wrote a number of short papers, a consistent theme emerged: my concern with objects and places and the meanings these have had in my life. While reflecting on an object which had transformed in meaning, I wrote:

During the early 70s I moved into an apartment with a small dining area. A friend gave me an inexpensive, wood-finish, round table. To liven up the area I decorated with plants and painted the table red.

This table became the center of my life for five years. I not only ate there, I used the table to study German, to write letters and to pay bills, to prepare litho and collograph plates, and to entertain. I spent many hours sitting at the table asking the gods, in the guise of my friends, why life had become so depressing.

Because the table was the center of so much social and personal interaction, it became the center of my paintings and prints. When I view those now, I can relive the mundane and the soul-searching of that time. The feelings of loneliness come through in the facelessness of the work.

I did give the table away. That may have been appropriate as now the table of my mind and the real table might have conflicting meanings.

Another assignment was to search for recurring themes in all the papers and to discuss those themes. One section of this paper mentions the classroom.

I found myself spending time with the students who were already artists in the sense that they had thought through their lives. They and their art work merged: their work looked like them. The objects they made became cherished in the same way that all memory-filled objects are. Process, product, and life were inseparable. Most of these students spent so much time in the art room that they became family.

Because of my own change of approach to art and life, and because of my observations of my students, I began to question the atmosphere in which art became real, not just a school subject. I looked around our eight rooms. What I saw was several lifetimes of collected objects. The other teacher and I had brought in toys, bikes, clothes, household items, and other things which we all save because they have played some role in our lives. Students started contributing to the store. Years of student projects, often picturing these items, hung on the walls and display boards like personal collections. Art majors' cubicles contained art things and daily necessities: gym clothes, subject books, magazine clippings, early art work, and evidences of lunches and snacks, often spilling out into the general areas. DO NOT TOUCH signs hung on large, plastic-covered clay projects. Just started canvases sat on easels in front of still lifes. Piles of wood, boxes, chicken wire, and old, clay-filled barrels were pushed into sculpture room corners. Lists of assignments hung on boards and doors along with critique schedules and darkroom and wheel-throwing schedules. Gallery posters and contest fliers hung in other areas.

We created an art world for our students. We attempted to convey what art is and looks like as a way of life.

I question if this environment is not to some extent responsible for the number of students who continue in art and are successful. And, if it does not account for the medical and philosophy majors who come back and tell us how much we contributed to their ability to see, think, and feel.

At the same time that I was reflecting on my own experiences, I was reading about the research experiences of others using photo methods. With the guidance of such researchers as John Collier, Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead, and Jon Wagner, I concluded that photography would be the most efficient and interesting way to discover similarities and differences in art room inventories, categories of objects and spaces, and organization of these. This approach did not account for what the students were reacting to and what they might be

learning about and from it. This could be done by talking to the students.

Following the lead of James Spradley, I established a general outline of questions, both descriptive and comparative, to interview the students. These were used in connection with colored slides of the room to elicit talk about the uses of places and objects, the structure of activities, and the student themselves. Through analysis of the pictorial and verbal data, I may identify the meanings learned by the students in a particular setting. By comparing the student talk and photos from several settings, I may better understand the variety of culturally determined meanings.

As a final method, I asked the students to view photos of classrooms other than their own. The comments elicited by these photos emphasized the meanings of their own environment in contrast to others.

MEANINGS AT CHS

The art area of CHS is made up of eight rooms. My study to discover the meanings of the physical environment for the students was conducted in six of these rooms, the province of one teacher. The students interviewed called these rooms the Hall, the Classroom, the Office, the Print Room, the Darkroom, and the Art 10 Cubicle Room. In general the students responded to the slides of the different areas by identifying the activities occurring there and the various groups of art students using them. The older students also responded with their feelings about the places and the objects. Several themes emerged which I continued to hear throughout the interviews.

The themes of FREEDOM and INDEPENDENCE emerged in a discussion by two students while simultaneously viewing slides of the print room and the classroom.

S: These are the working areas used by different students. One is where we do the printing; mostly just the seniors.

S: Everybody works in the other one. It's an open area, the classroom. But it has a real studio atmosphere.

I: That's an interesting comparison. What's the difference between a studio and a classroom?

S: In a classroom you just come in and sit down in assigned seats.

S: The teacher stands in front of the room. The chairs are in five lines. You have to raise your hand to ask a question.

S: Here it's more relaxed. You have to have the freedom to move around to get supplies. And you can't sit and paint from the same chair. The furniture is always different.

I: Are there any other major differences?

S: Here it's more independent.

To the themes of freedom and independence other slides have elicited talk revolving around the importance of PERSONAL ATMOSPHERE, RESPONSIBILITY, and SHARING.

The Art 10 Cubicle Room houses seven small spaces built with homosote. Two majors are assigned to each. About this area students make comments such as:

S: This is the Art 10 Cubicle Room. It's set off from the rest of the students. It's not even really like a class. It's almost never clean and it's very, very personal. Each cubicle shows how the individual thinks. We're getting the opportunity to experience working on our own.

I: Are there any other activities that go on here besides individual work?

S: It's like home. Everything goes on here. We work, talk, fool around; you feel safe. I feel safer than I do at home.

I: Why is that?

S: I'm with people that are like me. People that do what I want to do.

I: That sounds to me like you feel that you're accepted here.

S: Yes. When you first come in here, everybody's their own person, everybody's really different. At the end you pick up things from each other and you're like a family.

I: Is sharing how most of the learning happens?

S: It's a big part of it.

Another interview elicited similar talk from a different student:

I: I get the feeling that the teacher has given you fellows the responsibility for the area.

S: Yeah, it's our room. It's our responsibility to maintain it. We can do what we want up to certain limits.

S: I have carpeting, an extra chair and desk, a coffee machine, plants and curtains. You can make it nice and homey, but don't make it so that you start paying property tax. It's a cubicle. If you take it to the extreme, it becomes a toy. You lose all sense of professional pride.

I: Do students share cubicles?

S: Mostly a junior and a senior share.

I: Is there a reason for a junior and a senior to share?

S: If you're a junior, the senior has a year on you. He knows exactly what happened last year. He offers you help, information. You can always talk about your work; get a critique if you want. It's sort of like a junior teacher. It's more personal than a teacher and a student.

The teacher-built environment has become meaningful for the students through personal involvement and social interaction. The Art 10s feel a sense of responsibility for their own learning and that of their fellow students. The fact that they have been given the opportunity to maintain, make decisions about, and organize personal and group work and display spaces instills in them the seriousness of the art process and allows them to discover their own roles as artists.

In response to viewing the photos of other classrooms, the students continued the themes discussed in the slide interviews.

S: It's clean. We don't have a clean room. Looks like a formal classroom. An art room is not a classroom. In an art room you learn more on your own. It's more independent than a classroom.

S: It looks a little organized.

S: The thing about the organization is that I just don't feel that the students are in it.

S: There's not much work hanging up around the room.

S: It doesn't have a personal atmosphere.

S: It doesn't seem like there could be much personal interaction between the

students.

S: Yeah, I know. It's just like they come in here, do work, and then they leave.

S: It's probably not as intense as we're used to.

S: Both rooms seem more utilitarian than personal.

S: Yeah, more technical than giving you a chance to pour forth your personality.

S: Exactly. They seem to be dealing with how to learn and how to draw rather than dealing with how the person grows with the experience.

Reflecting back, I have discovered that the process of deciding upon a research question, for me, has been one of identifying themes in personal experience and refining those themes through interaction in a particular setting with others.