

Dr. Christine Davis, Editor

The Status of Art and Art History in the Secondary School Curriculum: A Rationale for Change

Dr. Norma Coret, Educator, Artist, Woodbine, Iowa

Art is for everyone. Art education is limited because of its elective status—a status coupled with a description that implies “lesser” and academically less challenging—persisting since Colonial days. Once the history of the elective status is understood, what can be done to change it?

The founders of Colonial colleges, and later, elementary and secondary schools, patterned early concepts after European traditions they brought to this country. As a model, Europe’s educational system was tried and true. However, in America the motivational needs and goals of the people were different. Europe’s basic educational tenets did not necessarily fully transfer to a new venue.

By the eighteenth century, the need for change in curriculum was voiced by many, including Ben Franklin, who said that the existing curriculum was too heavily Classical. Change was needed horizontally as well as vertically, i.e., curriculum offerings needed to be broader with more variety. Basic aims of education were questioned. Should education be only for the aristocratic and the elite?

German influence on American education has been strong from the beginning. The history of higher education credits Germany for the elective system. Brubacher and Rudy believed the fight over the elective system was the “central educational battle of nineteenth-century America” (Brubacher & Rudy, 1976, p. 96).

Thomas Jefferson was one of the earliest advocates of electives. He worked to have the state of Virginia charter The University of Virginia, which it did, in 1825. Additions to the traditional curriculum Jefferson wanted to add, such as Law and Moral Philosophy and Science, do not match our present-day image of “electives.” Still, in the Yale report of 1828, American students were said to not be able to handle the German elective system, as they were not as mature. However, to acknowledge “the rapidly expanding body of subject matter” (Brubacher & Rudy, 1976, p. 105), both Harvard and Yale established Scientific Schools. These schools required only a common-school or elementary school education for admission. Thus they were immediately set apart as lesser schools because of lesser (elective) courses that were not as demanding academically.

The stigma of an elective status continues today. This is an exposition for changing the status of art and art history in the secondary school curriculum from elective to required courses. Elective courses are coupled with serious problems, not just budgetary, but with staffing, scheduling, number of offerings, and yes, survival.

Educational reforms in the 60s and 70s were given a push with the Back to Basics Movement. Art educators panicked but, undeniably, art curricula were in need of major revisions. In 1966, Manuel Barkan took a hard look at art education saying, “Too many people perceive the study of art as child’s play, hardly worthy of the time it takes. Far too many students, guidance officers, school administrators, and parents, perceive art courses as places where easy credits are earned” (Eisner & Ecker, 1966, p. 422).

National Art Education
Association
1916 Association Drive
Reston, VA 20191-1590

703•860•8000

naea@dgs.dgsys.com

www.naea-reston.org

The National Art Education Association (NAEA) and art educator members, have encouraged states to require art for graduation. From a 1984-85 NAEA survey, we could be encouraged with the conclusion that 26 states "...now require art credits for high school graduation." Dunn, Jewell, Luftig-Clifton, Skinner & Sullivan (1987) referred to the same survey citing it as evidence that we were reaping the benefits of Advocacy, Public Relations, and Marketing (Dunn, et al., 1987, p. 28). In actuality, 9 states required art and "Arts." Seventeen of the 26 states broadly defined "Arts" to include vocational education, performing arts only, foreign language, creative writing, and the humanities. For some of the 17 states, "Arts" credits were required but only for the college-bound or for honor students.

In Iowa, no school requires art for graduation. Even though Iowa has a professional organization for art educators (AEI), the task of making art a statewide graduation requirement may seem overwhelming to already over-worked art teachers. But the task is not to be ignored. Students, indeed all of society, must have art education. As Dunn, et al. (1987) stated, "(we)...must never lose sight of the fact that the major reason these programs exist is not to produce the visual artists of tomorrow, but rather to produce increasingly more sophisticated consumers of visual imagery" (Dunn, et al., 1987, pp. 8-9).

Who are the curriculum-shapers? They are curriculum specialists working with school administrators. In small school districts, curriculum responsibilities may be added to those of the guidance counselor or the elementary principal, who in collaboration with other administrators, makes recommendations to the school board.

Dunn, et al., (1987) said that administrators have so little experience in the arts that they really are neutral, not negatively biased toward such courses of study (Dunn, et al., 1987, p. 5). Not all art teachers agree! "It should come as no surprise that the graduate course work and training that comprise the background of a school administrator emphasizes things like school law to the exclusion of such things as school art" (Dunn, et al., 1987, p. 18). Consequently, an art teacher should seriously consider offering an art evaluation document, as administrators required to evaluate all school programs also have little or no training here.

To change the status of art and art history in the secondary school curriculum now has clear direction. For Advocacy, Public Relations, and Marketing there is now a focal point—the curriculum-shapers! If, as Dunn et al., (1987) believe, administrators are not negatively biased toward the arts, it is evident that art teachers must help them become advocates. An advocate feels ownership in a program. Ownership happens when the potential advocate is consulted and informed, helps make decisions as to curriculum inclusions and deletions, helps decide how the arts can best serve not only students and the school but also the community and society.

If art were a graduation requirement, teachers would be free to create excellence in the classroom with programs that serve all students and, hence "...produce increasingly more sophisticated consumers of visual imagery" (Dunn et al., (1987), pp. 8-9).

References

- Brubacher, J.S. & Rudy, W. (1976). *Higher Education in Transition An American History: 1636-1956*. NY: Harper & Row, Publishers.
- Dunn, P., Jewell, R., Luftig-Clifton, M., Skinner, C. & Sullivan, D. (1987). *Promoting School Art: A Practical Approach*. Reston, VA: National Art Education Association.
- Eisner, E.W. & Ecker, D. (1966). *Readings in Art Education*. Lexington, MA: Xerox College Publishing.