

Towards a Sustainable Aesthetic – A Primary Teacher’s Response to the Australian Curriculum

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Abstract

Sustainability, one of the three perspectives to be represented in the Australian Curriculum, has a great contribution to make to Visual Arts and as a legacy for our community. The Visual Arts is well placed to respond to this perspective. The benefits of this perspective for primary generalist teachers, in particular, is that they will be encouraged to replace the neat predictability of packaged, coloured squares and embrace the found, the old, the second-hand, the dirty or the damaged in making artworks. This emphasis has many benefits for primary students and schools and the kinds of artworks students make and value.

This reflection was written after reviewing The Arts: Initial Advice Paper (ACARA, 2010) with a group of teachers. These are some preliminary responses, neither comprehensive nor fully developed, to the description of the Visual Arts curriculum and its organisation. They are outlined as potential directions in applying a sustainable perspective to the Visual Arts curriculum. My contention is this perspective could enrich and broaden teaching and curriculum, and influence practice.

I will consider sustainability from several perspectives. Firstly, I will cover artists and their practice. There is a long tradition of artists engaging with the environment, using natural, found or reused materials. Secondly, I will consider ACARA’s perspective of sustainability, one of three perspectives intended to underpin all subjects in the Australian Curriculum. Thirdly, there is a symbiotic relationship between sustainable considerations and art that brings a resonance to both artworks and the issues surrounding sustainability. Finally, I will contextualise this

relationship in a primary school setting, considering art making, materials, process and product.

Artists and their practice

Well-known Sydney artist, Shona Wilson’s work involves intricate tapestries of fish scales, bark, feathers etc. On her website, Wilson (2010) states, “Nature is not the subject of my work, but the source of it”. This is not a statement about sustainability per se but it is clear her practice and point of view are in sympathy with a sustainable aesthetic. My contention is that, as many artists are inspired, driven, or just grounded by ideas of sustainability, so our Visual Arts curriculum can be enhanced by this perspective. Cultivating and adopting a sustainable aesthetic has potential benefits for the environment. Cultivating and adopting a sustainable aesthetic could provide teachers with a readily identifiable aesthetic and perspective on Visual Arts and students would be introduced to more interesting and varied materials and processes.

Shona Wilson is not alone. Many artists see nature as either the subject or source or both. Landscape art, at least, has a long, proud tradition. Others artists come to mind: Andy Goldsworthy’s ephemeral art is made of natural materials and usually constructed in the natural environment. Richard Long considers his landscape sculptures inhabit the territory between ‘that of making ‘monuments’ and that of ‘leaving only footprints’ (Long, 2000). Sydney artist Janet Laurence has been ‘exploring the properties of the natural world’ within her art for decades (Janet Kent, Sherman Galleries, 2000). Artists have been invited to the arctic and the antarctic to respond to these endangered environments. The environment becomes both the subject and source of their work. They often respond with wonder at the beauty, on a macro and micro scale. And of course, they explore ice and snow as mediums. Scientists, also, wonder at the beauty and regret its demise but present their findings in a very different way. Interacting with nature intimately, as do artists when attempting to capture our response to it or use its elements to communicate with others, often increases our capacity to care for and appreciate the natural environment.

It is not only professional artists who respond this way. As a primary teacher with responsibilities for Visual Arts education, I have taken many children to Arthur Boyd's Bundanon for a few days of workshops. I have observed their increased connection with the landscape after drawing it, painting it and creating ephemeral art pieces and sculptures within it, and a growing capacity to care, treasure and appreciate it. The depth of connection is produced by the students' artistic engagement with the landscape. Seeing Arthur Boyd's own love of the Shoalhaven River and its surrounds expressed in his art, validates the students' experiences.

The Three Perspectives

The three cross-curriculum perspectives intended to underpin the Australian Curriculum are:

- *Indigenous perspectives, so all young Australians have the opportunity to learn about, acknowledge and respect the history and culture of Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders*
- *A commitment to sustainable patterns of living, reflected in curriculum documents*
- *Skills, knowledge and understandings related to Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia*. (National Curriculum Board, 2009: 13).

All are worthy, but it is clear that the Visual Arts gain from an interest in the environment, which, in turn, connects art makers, ensuring they care, respect and treasure the natural. That's why the National Science Foundation sponsors Arctic and Antarctic programs. Using this perspective to underpin primary visual art education has the power to transform teaching from something formulaic and predictable to a more mindful and reflective practice. This would enhance both the students' appreciation of art works and the natural environment, as well as a more considered development and conception of their own work. A close observation and connection with the natural environment is only part of the sustainability perspective.

Artists reuse materials sometimes for an environmental reason and sometimes out of pure necessity. Artists also choose materials that have already had a life

because they contain meaning and interest. *Waste not*, the beautiful work by Song Dong that occupied the second floor of MOMA last Summer (2009) was a collection of everything from his mother's house. It was amazing on many levels, as a comment on our wasteful society, as a shrine to his mother and for its order and respect of menial objects. His title reveals his respect for his mother's attitude to material possessions. Rosalie Gascoigne also transformed found objects. Her landscapes constructed with damaged road signs changed the way we view both the landscape and road signs.

Primary perspective

How does this affect primary Visual Arts? Primary teachers are enthusiastic about Visual Arts (children enjoy it) and are under-equipped to teach it. Often they favour uniformity and neatness over expression and creativity. Collages are laminated to make them smooth and shiny. All students are issued the same materials and the same instructions. Materials are standard; paper, glue, pencils, pastels, charcoal, maybe paint. I am generalising, of course, and am without judgement. Teachers who have not been empowered to teach Visual Arts will struggle and many have expressed to me their feelings of inadequacy.

An emphasis on sustainability affords a new outlook on materials, processes and products, an outlook that could broaden or loosen up teachers' ideas and expectations and better connect with the students' worlds. Instead of using lifeless materials, simplistic processes and predictable products, students could use materials with great interest and significance to them and develop processes requiring thought and expertise and produce work with vibrancy and conceptual integrity.

Materials

Looking at Visual Arts materials from a sustainable perspective, reusing discarded or found materials should be considered. Imagine how much more interesting lessons would be if teachers used paper from the recycling bin instead of A4 or A3 standard litho or cartridge. When students are asked to work on newspaper or pieces of cardboard or old pieces of their own artwork, their work becomes more interesting, more layered with meaning. The material becomes part of the work,

not a white blank. These materials help teachers let go of neat expectations, for something individual and expressive. Often, the second-hand materials suggest a subject or idea. Holes in a box become a meaningful part of the work; words on the newspaper become a pattern or message, corrugations offer a structure and found objects give an idea life and humour.

I have often witnessed this thoughtful engagement with materials. Once, students were talking about paper coming from trees and decided to represent trees on newspaper using charcoal (like bark or wood) and old paintings that they had torn or cut up. These simple pictures were more eloquent, poetic and personal than if they had attempted to communicate the same ideas on the standard issue paper. Teachers also felt they were doing something meaningful.

On another occasion, students were encouraged to collect rubbish for an artwork. They chose a type that appealed for some reason: straws for their soft pastel colours and linear qualities; screwed up pieces of foil for their silvery colour and cloudlike shapes; plastic cutlery, poppers, ring pulls or plastic bottle tops because of their particular qualities of shape, colour, pattern or because they signified something to the student. All objects related to the students' worlds and had a meaning I, perhaps, was not privy to. Collecting appealed to students as they enjoyed their everyday accessibility. Some were not so keen on 'dirty rubbish', but they soon got to know who was collecting what and collected for one another. When they had collected enough materials, some glued their pieces on a cardboard base, paying attention to the features of the material that they collected. Others used staples, wire and sewing. We referred to the work of Rosalie Gascgoine and Shona Wilson for inspiration. Some students worked large and some worked very small, depending on materials and their patience. The resulting work was individual and students were very connected.

If this idea of broadening the definition of materials was incorporated into the new curriculum, what a difference it could make to art in our schools, empowering teachers by giving them new definition and yet freedom. As teachers considered alternate materials and processes, we would witness students involved in an

art process that was more student centred and more materials and process conscious. A wider variety of styles of art making would emerge, involving processes beyond paint and paste, resulting in larger and three-dimensional works that are more meaningful to the student. Students would become more aware of the art-making process and the thinking behind it.

The art making process

Sustainability and process is related to materials and tools and is another plus for the primary school setting. Because recycled or reused materials usually have little monetary value, both students and teachers are released from the pressures that purchased materials create – the pressure not to waste the material through mistakes. Often teachers complain that they do not have the budget to purchase the best or even basic materials. Working with wonderful materials with children often does produce great results as they respond, but waste materials give teachers freedom from budgetary concerns. Work becomes immediately more ephemeral. Teachers and students relax because they don't have to worry about brushes being damaged, paper being wasted or expensive three-dimensional material being stretched among thirty students. Work made from waste or discarded materials becomes less serious. Not that it is less; it just free from the perils of perfection. Bayles and Orland (1994) give a delightful example:

The ceramics teacher announced on opening day that he was dividing the class into two groups. All those on the left side of the studio, he said, would be graded solely on the quantity of work they produced, all those on the right solely on its quality. His procedure was simple: on the final day of class he would bring in his bathroom scales and weigh the work of the "quantity" group: fifty pounds of pots rated an "A", forty pounds a "B", and so on. Those being graded on "quality", however, needed to produce only one pot – albeit a perfect one – to get an "A". Well, came grading time and a curious fact emerged: the works of the highest quality were all produced by the group being graded for quantity. It seems that while the "quantity group was busily churning out piles of work – and learning from their mistakes – the "quality" group

had sat theorising about perfection, and in the end had little more to show for their efforts than grandiose theories and a dead pile of clay (p. 29).

This is helpful only to a point, but the freedom of material that allow mistakes or risk-taking are more likely to elicit satisfying art experiences. In fact, Bales and Orland's main contention is that fear kills art making. The availability and disposable nature of waste or found materials allows both students and teachers a licence to experiment with both materials and ideas, and produce many works.

The artwork

The artworks produced develop in students an aesthetic that involves looking more closely at the environment; an aesthetic that disrupts society's love of the 'new' or the expensive and encourages an appreciation of the old, the damaged and the used, giving students a way of valuing things beyond commonplace expectations. Our school has two display boards opposite one another. One was covered with paper that comes in rolls and trimmed with a coloured corrugated card. This was to be our "Environmental Board". The board opposite needed repairs and the general assistant covered it with natural hessian. This board too, was to be covered with coloured paper. It became clear that the hessian board made an environmental statement. It was attractive. Developing a sustainable aesthetic starts in simple actions such as encouraging a mindful attitude to materials, using less and reusing materials in displays, as well as in practices.

I have only hinted at how this perspective could affect Visual Arts. I hope, when the consultation process begins for the Arts in the Australian Curriculum, ACARA's sustainability perspective is promoted and encouraged, leading to a better Visual Arts curriculum and students who leave a smaller carbon footprint. I would like to think this important way of thinking will evolve from this new curriculum, though I saw no evidence in the framing paper. Visual Arts is well placed to respond to the sustainability perspective. I would like to think we are attuned to all things sustainable when the consultation process begins and are working towards an aesthetic that embraces the found, the old, the second-hand, the natural, the dirty

and the damaged and recognises their intrinsic value and function. In the words of Leonard Cohen's song *Anthem*: 'There's a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in.'

References

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