

Academic Books, the Best Theory for a Good Practice. A Story about Two Teaching Experiences

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Abstract

Teaching Painting, Volume ... to art students, at the faculties of Fine Arts, it has a clear purpose: to train artists. Teaching Didactics of Painting, Volume ... to teachers in training, at the faculties of Education, may present a problem about the purpose: do we train plain teachers, or should they be artists-teachers? Should they practice the arts they will teach, or it is enough for them to know the theory? We teach them the phases of artistic development, from doodle to realism, and we know they lived them too in their childhood, but now in this degree, should they immerse themselves into that way of doing, or “at the university we must only think, investigate, read, write...”? In this paper we present two cases of teaching Didactics of Visual Arts by “immersion” in books, with practical results.

Keywords: Didactics, Visual Arts, teachers training, books, immersion.

Experience 1

Sometimes my students get annoyed with me because in my class I don't give them a conference or show them slides. I send them papers through the virtual university campus, and tell them to criticize them or just read them before going to class. Thereby we discuss, and talk about our experience related to the paper, and we don't always finish the discussion thinking the same things, not even the same things the author told us. Sometimes my students also complain because I don't give them enough theory! They are used to receiving theory in all the other subjects; they think that without theory they won't be able to support the activities I tell them to do in class.

When I started this job in the University of Extremadura, ten years ago already, I had to read Lowenfeld and Lambert's book about development of intellectual and creative capacity (1950). I was told to explain it to my students and afterwards, ask them in a written test if they had understood it. The most common practice, But I couldn't. The book was too interesting. It is an active book, full of stories, I couldn't summarize it and show it reduced, digested, mutilated. On the contrary, it suggested so many stories. I could have expanded it, instead of summarizing it. And I thought it could have also happened to my students.

So I told them to read it. I told them to remember their childhood memories, to create their own stories about school, artistic education, teachers, families, drawings, their artistic interests of their classmates, adult's reactions about being an artist... All the kind of things that the book tells us about children drawings researching, more than fifty years ago, so different from present children but so similar in many cases. And of course, I rejected the written test as a way to know if students had learnt anything. Instead of that, I suggested to enact a theater. We would invent stories, could you imagine a better way to tell stories than theater? So in groups, they read the book, they shared their memories and their ideas about the artistic education they received for so many years of schooling, they thought about their own artistic tendencies, their rejections and their fears. They imagined themselves teaching something you don't always know how to teach. First they imagined and then they played like pupils in a visual arts class. They drew doodles, the teachers encouraged them to improve their lines, they motivated them with music, they grew up and they drew the base line, adults understood that children had reached the logical thinking stage, and they went on growing up and developing themselves, and they showed their life with lines, colors, drawing their families... Some groups used puppets because they were too shy, but their voices told us they were, enthusiastically, in the story. Others made us laugh, with their parodies about some teachers that didn't understand that children's drawings talk about their life rather than other things.

One of the groups that were specializing in Physical Education amazed us with a very clever connection between doodles and dancing or rhythmic gymnastics with stripes. They moved to solitary dancing when the child goes through the egocentric period, and moving step by step into dancing with their friends when the child socializes and sees the world full of people. That drama was so interesting that we took it to a congress about corporal expression and education. Another group didn't want to talk only about nursery education, and they started their story from the moment of birth, provoking and stimulating discussion about that eternal human question: Is an artist born, or made?

We had all kinds of stories, and we assessed them all together in order to check that the ideas they showed were following theories from the book, to support them or to reject them, according to the opinions and the experiences of those who represented them and those who watched them. A few years later we initiated the Secondary Education Teachers Master Degree, so I had to adapt my classes for generalist primary school teachers, into lessons for specialist teachers of secondary school level, all of them artists, with interests in teaching. So I turned drama into class simulation, a situation that my artistic students had never experimented, and they would need it in their teaching training. And Lowenfeld and Lambert's book turned into other books about art in teenager-hood. I miss School Theater as a way of learning theoretical knowledge. Knowledge that my students proved to embrace through drama. As the years go by and if they are lucky enough to become teachers, this knowledge will probably prove valuable, in spite of the changes happening to the "*children of technology*".

Experience 2

Now I use books about arts and education in a not so usual way. Instead of summarizing, dictating or explaining them to my students, I tell them to choose a book from the bibliographic reference from the subject program and to read it. An action that they are not used to. At the beginning they say it's boring, but when they start they cannot stop. By reading those kind of books they connect with academic language and contemporary authors of educational research, as the other students did by reading Lowenfeld and Lambert in the first place, with no intermediary but only the translation to their language. They learnt to search for the information from the original source, forgetting about this "*lazy corner*" so visited on the internet.

As they must read their own book, they can't copy the abstract from a friend, and the learning they get from the book will be individual and personal, which is the way knowledge becomes significant and long-lasting. And what about assessment? They must write their own abstract and conclusions, and design a Teaching Unit for their future students' level of education, (primary or secondary).

There are no wrong answers, they don't have to choose between true or false, there's no limit of papers, only time, they have two hours for writing as much as they wish. Afterwards it's hard to evaluate, but I learn from their reflections as well, from their constructive criticism, and from their teaching proposals to take to schools, sometimes they are innocent, but always enthusiastic.

Conclusions

Between books and theater you wouldn't think I'm talking about Visual Arts Education, or Artistic Education, or whatever they finally call it if they decide to exile it from school. But it's true, artists read too, they also think, research, write, they even help to learn useful things for life. And if artists work is not read, then others won't learn. To dedicate your life to art is not only to paint or sculpt but to observe, analyze, register, reflect, calculate, correct, teach, learn, enjoy... This profession is a way of living, and by my experience, a fantastic way of living.