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The Contribution of the Art of Photography in an interdisciplinary program. From the superficial use of visual forms to their essential understanding

Abstract

In this work we take issue and set forth a proposal as to how we can integrate artistic activities within the frame of cross curricular thematic approach (CCTA) programs. When we take into consideration current academic practice it appears that the common view, i.e. adaptation of various artistic activities to suit CCTA courses is used as a supplement to promote or simply as a dressing to make any given subject more appealing. In such a case true artistic work is restricted to superficial levels, produced through unproductive school work.

Yet, the fact that art education is provided within a new organizational scheme of academic education doesn't mean that we relinquish art's goals or change its intellectual content. Fixed reference demonstrating our concerns is a cross curricular program designed, implemented and presented with the support of OMEP Patras. The object of the program, directed towards kids in preschool and early school ages, was to put the kids behind a camera and allow them to explore their surroundings through the camera lens, i.e. to offer to the kids new perspectives of approaching the natural and manmade environments of their neighborhood and city through the possibilities provided by the art of photography. At the same time special attention has been given to help the youngsters understand the operation and special characteristics of this art form.

In this concept the use of photography as an art form, wasn't dealt as simple supplement to a cross curricular program but as an integral part of a wider program, designed to take into consideration the purpose, principles, values and preconditions of art education.

This work refines the experiences gained from a CCTA program designed, implemented and presented with the support of OMEP, Patras branch[113]. The

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The academic year long pilot projects were implemented with the participation of various school classes. They also included select implementations by the Visual Art Laboratory of Rio

principal aim of this program for preschoolers, first and second graders is to encourage kids to explore their native surroundings, natural and manmade, through the lens of a photo camera and, further more, to assist them in understanding the art of photography and what it has to offer. The whole process was the result of close cooperation between participants and at the same time led to the culmination of a wider concern for the use of art elements in designing and implementing cross curricular programs. This paper deals only with program activities relative to the above issue.

In general academic practice the consensus agrees that integration of artistic elements into cross curricular programs serves as minor supplement. It's being used principally to either promote the project or dress up various aspects of the subject at hand. In such cases artistic tasks are restricted to a superficial level resulting in school works that may be anything but creative. Yet, the fact that art education is provided within a new context of academic knowledge doesn't mean that we have to abandon art's principal scope or transform its cognitive context.

In this context use of photography, as art form, wasn't used as simple dressing for a CCTA program but rather as an integral part of a wider scheme that takes into consideration the scope, principles and preconditions of art education. Search for these preconditions, which are not always obvious, is the reason behind this presentation.

General context of artistic tasks within the program

Within the art of photography, as in art in general, we discern the components which lead to the process used for the creation and the process with which the work of art is being perceived, rated and evaluated (Barcer, 12, 24). It was thus necessary to take into consideration, at the planning stage, practices that were relative to both art creation as well as art presentation. The kids were asked not only to create visual forms but to give them context and meaning, to look for similar forms in their own environments, distinguish form elements, qualities and meanings within these forms and integrate them into a wider frame of reference. Each individual artistic task was seen as an opportunity to comprehend essential artistic meanings and promote the functionality of all these elements in other areas of learning as well as other aspects and situations of daily life within the context of CCTA.

Towards this goal the program was split into two distinct but linked stages, associated with individual aims. Individual aims were set as follows: a) help students comprehend the special (unique) expressional and communicational powers of artistic photography, b) search for and process ideas c) familiarize themselves with the tools and techniques in the implementation of their ideas and be able to adapt them to the unique character of this art form d) be able to comment and intervene in the final product of their work and e) present their work to others.

During the various stages the organizers included activities in the familiar surroundings of the classroom as well as visits to other familiar or unfamiliar locales. The highest value of the program was placed in helping kids to get acquainted with a general method (of art photography) instead of producing 'art works'. From this point of view kids' participation in photographic shoots wasn't seen as the final object of

this project but rather as a fixed point of reference allowing them to gradually grasp a total and comprehensive view of art photography.

In search of suitable teaching conditions

The fact that kids were involved in photography sessions doesn't mean that the whole process was deemed from the start (de facto) as participatory. There is always risk that kids may act out artistically and yet remain passive and depend for direction from their instructors. Art education depends on participation and team work when it really sets forth the circumstances and conditions encouraging personal research, initiative, communication and cooperation. In this context organizers looked for an educational approach that was investigative on how it dealt with various issues, participatory as students were concerned and able to coordinate with artistic processes in order to reveal it in depth.

Attempts to show the proportional relation of processes involving kids with those of artists is a necessary condition in art education (Ardouin, 192, 193; Robinson, 1008; Chapman, 10). Artistic process presumes and coexists with a series of intellectual and form shaping (forming) processes: desire for artistic expression, coming up with an idea, process it intellectually and implement it in visual presentation are all interlinked as well as distinct stages of the entire process. Distinguishing these stages is compatible with the stages of a research based method of teaching: preparation, exploration (or enrichment), suggestions, execution, and appraisal. Similar suggestions, with minor deviations, have been proposed in the majority of modern views in art education (see Gaillot; Epstein – Trimis; Salla).

Identifying the above mentioned steps is not an attempt to standardize, and thus limit the complex and unrestricted artistic behaviour, but a necessary convention for teaching. Revealing this course introduces kids into a new way of thinking; i.e., to achieve artistic results every action is a setup for actions ahead. The contents of the entire program have been organized and presented here based on this course.

1. Preparation (Desire for artistic expression, sources of inspiration, coming up with a general idea):

This is a broad based and at the same time very significant step. Students can and should participate in the selection of the subject they wish to create, realizing that their subject correlates with their own needs, their wishes and skills. It's not only important to get them involved in artistic activities but to help them realize what motivates it. There is a general sense of purpose at the beginning of an artistic endeavour. At first it may be a somewhat vague conscientious state but it gradually turns into intent, a need to create. If we set the subject and working method with strict and inflexible rules we prevent participants from understanding the deeper reasons leading to the creation of visual forms. Searching for a suitable idea is an essential structural element for artistic creation, no less important than others. The intent in this project wasn't to impose a particular action but to encourage desire for effective contact with this area of art.

There is always a dimension of the real world, an inner resonance of reality that acts, directly or indirectly, as an obvious or concealed starting point for artistic creation. A precondition for children involvement in authentic artistic endeavour is to make them feel that it relates with their own reality and that they desire to share it with others. It is important for children to understand that, via an act they're asked to

do, they have been given an opportunity to make their mark and present it to others. That's the source of the deep satisfaction coming from participating in artistic endeavours and thus the strongest motivation behind artistic creation and the reason they may succeed. This is the context where organizers tried to motivate interest in relation to the necessity to use the art of photography in this project.

At first kids were asked to bring school their favorite family photos in order to, through pointed discussions, understand that these photos reveal glimpses of themselves and the fact that each kid is a unique individual but at the same time a member of a social group and resident of a specific environment. After that they were given photo magazines and were asked to pick photographs and commend. Through discussions they came to realize that photography as an art form presents unique opportunities to document and showcase all kinds of events and situations and that various artists can see a given subject quite differently. Each person can choose different aspects of reality and point out them in different ways. Equally, a person can comment about a photograph in a unique way, applying their own meanings and significance.

Kids were encouraged to imagine themselves in the shoes of the artist and name favorite subjects they would like to take pictures of. In their effort to find subjects they realized that searching for an idea/topic is a fundamental step in artistic process. Talking about it they found out that they turn to the same sources of inspiration as real artists are. They understood that they can look into various directions for inspiration, such as personal experiences from celebrations or events in their immediate environments and attempt small photographic reports or use their creativity to set up imaginary events. In this context the kids themselves proposed field trips to various locales in their towns and neighborhoods to take pictures. The need to clarify original ideas led the whole project towards the next step.

2. Research (*Process and enhancement of the original idea, topic definition and* proposals):

The work needed to elucidate the original ideas is a structural element for both the artistic as well as the teaching act. The student, the same as the artist, processes the original idea trying to understand its various aspects and take a stand relative to it. Further process of the original idea requires gathering of materials from various sources and thus specify a research area. Presentation of new elements, research, comparisons and experimentation lead to better familiarization, heighten curiosity, strengthen skills and enhance the entire effort for new knowledge (Epstein – Trimis, 178, 179).

Kids live in a world of ready made products and structures and have to be helped to understand that a piece of art is the product of human labor and that it reflects human *ability to share experiences and ideas* (Eaton – Moore, 16, 17; Tritten, p. 23). An art photographer is not a cold observer documenting visual events but a person who can be moved, think, imagine, penetrate, someone who reveals meanings and implications.

Photography as art is based on selective vision, the ability of the artist to isolate views of reality for a given frame in time and underline their importance. Different people may choose different views and present them in different ways. Furthermore, different people may view a picture differently, applying their own meanings and significance. Each person may have a different reaction and/or give different interpretation and significance on any given subject. The truth is that there may be

views very different from one another and yet all them perfectly acceptable. The aim was to have students understand the difference between personal view and critique, as well as the fact that artistic creation has various layers of significance that can be experienced in various ways. There is always need for interaction with the viewer (Parsons, 26, 27). It may be possible for viewers to "discover" artistic intentions in the image but equally they could give their own meanings as they immerse themselves into it.

Since the kids asked to take pictures and in general examine areas in their neighborhood and town, a number of new and old pictures of the area were brought in the classrooms and the kids were prompted to present their comments and make comparisons. At this stage the effort to familiarize them with the art of photography interfaced with other aspects of the cross curricular program for the study of their neighborhood and town. The material presented; street maps, information about street names and historical monuments or general data for various area characteristics, social make up, commercial activities, the overall placement in city life etc, fueled and enhanced the planning of photo shooting trips.

Towards better familiarization with the art of photography, classroom work focused at preparing kids to use elementary means and simple techniques and thus allow them from this point forward to act independently. They were instructed on how to operate a simple point and shoot camera, flash operation and were shown films and negatives, both color and black and white. They were also informed about the differences and similarities between conventional film and modern digital cameras. During discussions special effort was made by the instructors to use proper photography terms and teach kids the basic concepts and terminology used normally by adult photographers, such as framing, lighting, angle of view, foreground, cropping etc.

Visual experience was deemed absolutely necessary. Conscious observation, a fundamental prerequisite in art photography, is a creative function requiring effort. The layers of visual comprehension are defined as the passage from a superficial look to penetrating observation (Preble, v 1, p. 18). In this context the kids were taken to a very familiar place, their own school yard or nearby playground and were motivated to observe their surroundings with a "photographic" frame of mind. This task, similar to other program activities, was given only a short time allowing kids ample time for free play, since it was necessary to maintain the playground character of the location. Kids were also asked to explore visually a play area through creative play. Young children, as all people, use familiar things as foundation for their art. They were encouraged to examine the site and locate interesting points and views. They thus became aware that even a familiar place holds aspects that are more or less apparent (visible). This discovery came about in an out of the ordinary way, as they began to observe their surroundings in artistic terms "extracting" images while they tried to associate these images with personal experiences.

Anything can be a source of inspiration. Choosing their favorite school corners kids were helped in identifying and isolating subjects using cardboard frames with small holes cut and painted to look like photo cameras. At this stage it was important to understand the difference of the subject when seen by naked eye and the camera lens. Through play they were able to observe, explore, discover and experiment. Playing the game "1,2,3 ready pose" they gained familiarity with the expressive possibilities of their bodies and were encouraged to take unusual poses and expressions in front to the camera lens.

Discussions at the end of this preparatory stage were much more poignant and more intense in comparison to their initial explorations. Ideas and suggestions were put forth in great numbers making clear that the program could incorporate many alternative as well as interesting approaches. The kids were told though that, the same as adults, they should take a definite and final artistic decision, jointly, as to what they will work on. There were various decisions, coming from different children teams. Some proposed to take pictures of their school and schoolmates after they had painted their faces, others suggested taking pictures of neighborhood shops, farm work in a nearby olive grove and olive press, the horses of a local stable and the city castle.

3. Implementation (creating visual forms – familiarization with expressive means)

At this step the ideas processed earlier were presented in a visual way, through the art of photography. This doesn't mean that photo sessions were decided in advance. As in all artistic work an idea can remain somewhat unclear and keep on changing even as work progresses. The final work of art is the result of constant search that reveals itself gradually. Coming up and working with an idea is not completed prior to execution, they are all done together. Kids were well informed in the previous preparatory steps and started out with their disposable cameras for the places where their ideas would take visual form. They were encouraged to observe the locations with a critical eye, to pick and choose details they considered interesting and discover various aspects of their objects as they were shooting from different angles. Some kids, organized in small teams, prepared small photo essays, others staged others not. Particular attention was paid by the instructors to involve all the kids in the various activities.

During photography sessions children had to face a number of issues, as they were exploring the possibilities provided by photography when used as a tool for expression, and saw that results may vary. In fact during this process kids were faced with a number of artistic dilemmas; what aspects of the subject can we use photographically and why is that? Why is photography, as an art form, suitable for a given subject or situation? How can this art form emphasize situations, sentiments and aspects of daily life? They realized thus that a lot of problems arise during artistic endeavors, problems requiring solutions and that an important artistic skill is to be able to adapt an idea to the peculiarities of various means of expression.

All of the above questions gave cause and sparked teaching intervention. Creation of visual forms is connected with a wide and multifaceted intellectual background. Knowledge is the tool used to liberate individual handling methods, to facilitate personal expression. Participating in photo shoots was the revealing instrument, the channel for kids to see and overcome a number of obstacles as well as many stereotypes and fixations.

During commentary of the first pictures taken they discovered weaknesses and thought they could overcome them in next sessions. Furthermore, kids decided to edit their photos and improve them visually using cropping techniques. They also used their photographs as material for various classroom decorating projects. In one instance they made a cardboard train and used small pictures glued in the windows to make it look like passengers. In another they made a collage in the shape of a tree with pictures taken in the olive grove and built a "magic carpet" which, they thought, would transport them to imaginary lands and all together had their picture taken onboard it.

Through active participation in a pleasant process that felt more like a game kids

found out that artistic skill in art photography includes choosing a subject, framing the image, picking the right moment and proper conditions to trigger the shutter, printing process, selecting, evaluating and cropping. Photography, the same as other art forms, offers a unique chance to compose and present a perspective of real life aspects and situations. Finally, they made small albums where each kid put a number of photographs creating their own personal collection. Discussions on what they created, through commentary on the works, as well as the search for appropriate titles helped kids find new and unexpected meanings for various objects or various situations represented.

Kids enriched their experiences learning to look into simple or more complex environments in a reflective and exploratory mind-set, not as simple observers but looking for their own relation with them, discovering aspects more or less obvious and gradually composing their own point of view. They mustered the powers needed to understand themselves, to gain productive contact with the reality surrounding them and were able to form a point of view of this reality in visual terms. Classroom talks and kid enthusiasm led to the joint decision to conclude the project in the standard fashion for artistic works, to meet the public.

Presentation, the process for final evaluation.

For art classes, same as with other areas used for expression, evaluation is a very delicate process consisting of numerous variables. Superficial evaluation based solely on the artistic merits of the final product is unsuited for artistic education, it will lead to a dead end and ultimately harms the values is meant to serve. The organizers looked for an evaluation method suitable for art education as well as with the characteristic nature of aesthetic experience.

As far as art education is concerned evaluation is relative to the experiences gained by students, in other words with all they gained in cognitive, perceptive and methodological levels, concerning the entire creative process instead of the final result (Ardouin, 76; Gaillot, 87). From this point of view evaluation owes primarily to offer an opportunity where the student, reflecting all that transpired, is motivated to use his cognitive skills, to analyze and understand the project. The point being, to comprehend what transpired and what was revealed during class and all those a student is able to do (Gaillot, 197, 183).

It should be mentioned at this point that the entire process was documented by educator in class journals and in case files by students. The journals documented all the activities including educator commentary, notes, impressions as well as positive and negative experiences thereby documenting the entire process (Gialourides, 123). Despite this, project organizers felt it was important to present an opportunity for a final discussion, a critical assessment of aims, means and results. It was thus decided that the final presentation would be the opportunity for an overall assessment of the educational project.

There were major concerns as to the character and nature of the final presentation. These types of events are certainly very common but they have become very superficial in nature, being nothing but small school shows focusing only on the final result. Transforming the nature of the event into something more substantial was another challenge for the organizers of the project. The challenge was to make the presentation another aspect of the teaching process instead of a simple exhibit showing works hanging from walls as decorations. It should be clear here that this event is not seen as a competition. Prices and honors for artistic creativity had no

place here. What was important was to promote cohesively all the material used and created; photographs, drafts, texts, mock-ups, structures and in general everything that could be used to trace the artistic process, from conception and intellectual process all the way to final implementation.

Presentation was based on the feelings of the kids who wanted to publicize their works and celebrate the event. The aim being to offer a visual memory of everything that happened, an account of the entire process with valuable teaching significance *(Gaillot, 180; Robinson, 156)*. An important art venue was chosen (Millennium Art Hall) used by grown up artists for art shows. During the presentation, as it was done during the entire process, the organizers underscored a sense of communication and collaboration and the fact that even when kids worked alone they were all part of a larger team. And yet, even within the context of collaboration each kid was seen as a unique and special individual who perceived and worked on their subject with a unique and special way. Thus they presented their own separate albums as well as all *together in a joint exhibit*. The works shown were selected by the kids themselves (each kid submitted three photos explaining why) which helped each kid to form their own criteria and preferences. The kids were also in charge of guiding visitors around the exhibits.

En guise de conclusion

We think that the project we presented above is an important attempt to underline the terms and define the context with which art related activities can be incorporated in a cross curricular program maintaining the scope (purpose) and principles of art education. Every action, cross curricular or otherwise, using art owes to aim for effective interaction with this unique aspect of civilization, promoting the nature of the processes used for artistic creation. Contact with art may or may not be a premeditated activity but in nay case it has to be an open activity, one that includes *knowledge but is also able to enrich it effortlessly* (Kazemi - Veisari, 23).

With their participation in authentic artistic practices the kids discovered that photography, same as other art forms, is connected with a series of intellectual (cognitive) processes and offers a special way to represent and interpret an idea or a situation. They also found out that artistic skill in art photography depends on substantial knowledge; picking the right subject, proper framing, choosing the appropriate moment and suitable conditions to snap the picture, understanding the techniques, learning printing fundamentals, selecting the best print through final assessment. They gained valuable experiences learning to look into simple of more complex environments with an exploratory state of mind, mustering the tools necessary to develop a more productive relation with the reality that surrounds them. The ultimate aim in the project was to help kids pass from being simple observers and passive consumers of imagery, into a state where they have gained critical attitude and can reflect on issues and furthermore to motivate their curiosity towards action and creation.

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