

Education and 'the artist'

Herbert Read (1893–1968) proposed that the aim of education should be conceived as 'the preparation of artists' ¹. He does not mean that all students should be trained and educated to be painters, sculptors, poets, dancers or musicians; rather he proposes that all education should have an artistic approach based on creativity, flexibility, craftsmanship and an openness to emergent outcomes. The curriculum theorist and arts educator Elliott Eisner (1933–2014), influenced by Read, contrasts this arts-based approach to education with what he sees as a more scientific form which values the measurement of outcomes and the ability to predict them, together with the associated testing and ranking of students and institutions and the desire for uniformity in the curriculum, teaching and learning.

Eisner proposed a number of ways by which education can learn from the arts – I will briefly consider two of them. Firstly, whereas much education is convergent and leads to previously known or 'correct' answers, judgement in the arts is made in the absence of rules, it is divergent and can offer a number of outcomes and possible solutions to problems. Whilst it is undeniable that much knowledge and learning requires the understanding and use of rules, procedures, formulas and methods, 'The arts teaches students to act and to judge in the absence of rule, to rely on feel, to pay attention to nuance, to act and appraise the consequences of one's choices and to revise and then make other choices'. Secondly, Eisner borrows from John Dewey the notion of 'flexible purposing' ². In essence, flexible purposing means that even though one might have a plan, it might not be appropriate to follow it in all circumstances. Flexible purposing is not tied to specific outcomes and predefined aims; it is opportunistic, it recognises and capitalises on emergent outcomes. Learning outcomes as stated in many modules and programmes do not always encourage, or allow for the assessment of, emergent or unplanned outcomes.

Eisner, believed that the best education echoes education in the arts, particularly in the development of judgement and divergent thinking. The following are three of his 'Ten Lessons the Arts Teach' ³:

- The arts teach [students] to make good judgements about qualitative relationships. Unlike much of the curriculum in which correct answers and rules prevail, in the arts, it is judgement rather than rules that prevail.
- The arts teach [students] that problems can have more than one solution and that questions can have more than one answer.
- The arts celebrate multiple perspectives. One of their large lessons is that there are many ways to see and interpret the world.

The notions of flexible purposing and judgement made in the absence of rules echo Donald Schön's 'knowing-in-action'⁴. Schön was one of the pioneers of reflective practice. His research

was, to a large extent, set in the context of 'minor' professions such as nursing, social work and teaching which have long grappled with aspects of their practice that could not be easily reduced to fixed and testable scientific theory. These 'minor' professions contrast with the 'learned' professions, such as medicine and law, in which technical rationalist procedures might be more rigidly followed. Schön characterised the 'learning' professions as inhabiting the 'high ground', whilst those in the minor professions work in the 'swampy lowlands of practice' where real problems are encountered. 'In the swamp' practitioners develop their knowledge through encountering and solving unexpected, complex problems. They learn to 'think on their feet' and be creative in response to the contingency of real practice. Thus, these workers develop, through their artistry, a stock of skills, knowledge and understanding, the 'know-how' that underpins their professional practice. (There are obvious links to employability here).

Much of our learning, and more importantly our understanding, in higher education occurs in 'liminal spaces' where students encounter new knowledge and ideas which, although they may initially be challenging, offer conceptual shifts in thinking and understanding (sometimes referred to as 'threshold concepts'). Schön's 'swamp' is a liminal space. It is a space for learning and transformation. Such spaces offer learning opportunities which, though they may be uncertain and risky, are potentially transformative. For students and teachers they are points on a journey to a different kind of educational practice. As Eisner suggests:

'What I think many of us want is not only a form of educational practice whose features, so to speak, 'design us', but a form of educational practice that enables students to learn how to design themselves. Thus, it might be said that at its best education is a process of learning how to become the architect of our own education.'

Given that the future of work is likely to be based on frequent career changes, lifelong learning and continual development, such a proposal deserves a central role in planning for teaching and learning.

¹ Read, H. (1944) *Education Through Art*. London: Pantheon

² Dewey, J. (1938) *Experience and Education*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan

³ Eisner, E. W. (2002) What can education learn from the arts about the practice of education? *The Encyclopedia of Informal Education*
www.infed.org/biblio/eisner_arts_and_the_practice_or_education.htm.

⁴ Schön, D. W. (1983) *The Reflective Practitioner* New York: Basic Books

⁵ Eisner, E. W. (2002) *The Arts and the Creation of Mind*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press