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The Sociological Implications of Arts Education Being Offered by Outside Influences: A Case Study of an Arts Advocacy Group and its Educational Efforts

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The Sociological Implications of Arts Education Being Offered by Outside Influences

A Case Study of an Arts Advocacy Group and its Educational Efforts

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Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore the concept of “outside influences” to Arts[†] education as a legitimate and important area of research in Arts education. In this study “outside influences” is defined, generally, as those groups that choose to contribute to public school Arts education, but are not a part of the institutional system of public schooling. Specifically, this study focuses on one community Arts advocacy group, Arts Collaborators, Inc. (ACI, a pseudonym—as are all names in this paper), which has as part of its mission statement a focus and desire to contribute to Arts education in the schools.

ACI will focus its efforts in the following areas:

- 1) To work in collaboration with educational systems in developing programs and methodologies that incorporate creative efforts and abilities into the school curricula; and to assist in obtaining resources for this important initiative.*
- 2) To serve as the convener, information resource, and synthesizer for arts programs and activities in River City.* (Excerpt from ACI formal case statement)

Theoretical Framework

Outside influences and Arts education

Abeles, Hafeli, Horowitz and Burton (2002) wrote about arts partnerships, emphasizing the need for asking critical questions about educational processes that include ‘outsider’ participation—“Does the partnership have a means of ensuring that a

[†] For this study the term “Arts” will be used to mean music, drama, dance, and visual art.

well-designed curriculum will be delivered by fully prepared artists and/or teachers?” (p. 938). Discussing the ramifications of similar questioning, Eisner (2002) offers five general principles to guide those who direct and influence Arts education—principles that encompass broad questions for administrators and teachers to ask about Arts education efforts:

- Principle One. In justifying its case, art education should give pride of place to what is distinctive about the arts.
 - Principle Two. Art education programs should try to foster the growth of artistic intelligence.
 - Principle Three. Art education programs should help students learn how to create satisfying visual images, how to see and respond to what we call the arts and other visual forms, and how to understand the role the arts play in culture.
 - Principle Four. Art education should help students recognize what is personal, distinctive, and even unique about themselves and their work.
 - Principle Five. Art education programs should make special efforts to enable students to secure aesthetic forms of experience in everyday life.
- (p.42-45)

While the interpretation of these principles may vary from context to context, they can be useful in analyzing the actions of any group whose purpose is to offer Arts education activities. I will return to these principles later, as I analyze the actions of ACI.

The sociological implications of studying ACI, and groups like it, are many. Zolberg (1990) in writing about the sociology of art, audiences and the social uses of art states, “Since art is loaded with multiple significance (political, economic, psychological, symbolic), explanations for artistic choices, both by artists and their supporters need to be examined” (p. 137). Zolberg looks specifically at the artist vs. support structures, which she calls “audiences” or “support structures.” It may help, then, to consider ACI as a “support structures,” or an “Arts Parent” to the “audience” (in this case, River City).

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Zolberg categorizes the audiences as to the degree to which they allow the artists freedom to create.

Support structures apply sanctions, positive and negative, ranging in force from severe to mild. These include material and symbolic rewards and deprivations, and may be monopolized by a single structure or distributed by a plurality of sources. As the midwives of art they may ease artistic production or, conversely, abort its creations (p. 138-139). Others, such as Beyer (2000) look at “outside influences,” such as ACI, as worthy of study for how they may influence schools. “We need, instead, to understand how the “external” influences on the school—the economic pressures, political priorities, dominant cultural currents, and ideological perspectives—affect and often shape curricula and teaching practices” (p. 61-62). In this discussion, Beyer’s plea can be applied to River City as audience, asking if ACI’s efforts are helping to shape curricula and the preferences of River City as Arts consumer. Zolberg’s discussion can help analyze the actions of ACI, for the sociological implications of such actions on the community and school. Although ACI is not the artist, they do advocate for and in some cases monetarily or programmatically support artists and the Arts in the area. By their efforts, which are limited by time and the size of the board, are they supporting one type of Art and sending a message of which Art is the best Art, simply by their choices?

Beyer (2000) suggests that the tendency for those with wealth and power to create a ‘privileged class’ within which is decided what is ‘proper’ Art. “Because the fine arts tend to be ‘lifted above the stream of life,’ they have become the almost exclusive domain of those with appreciable wealth, power, and status. Indeed, the appreciation of aesthetic productions then becomes itself a mark of social status and privilege” (p. 102). Beyer suggests several ways to avoid this kind of elitism through the way the Arts are taught and viewed within the school system. Primary to Beyer’s suggestions is the elimination of the distinction between ‘Fine Arts’ and ‘Popular Arts’ and ‘Crafts’ (p. 103).

For Adorno (2000/1968) there is an interrelationship between people within a society that is defined by what he terms as “exchange” (p. 31). In defining society, Adorno places this exchange concept at the center of his view. This exchange concept does not only apply to concrete objects or money, but can be abstracted to other intangibles that (like ideas and services) that are given a value by society.

With the above theorists in mind, I hope to provide a critical look at ACI from the standpoint of Arts education pedagogy and its sociological implications. It is important to study organizations like ACI, for several reasons:

- 1) As a community-organized and funded group they have the potential to influence the population of the community.
- 2) As a non-educationally based organization, their methods should be studied critically for educational value.

Introduction to ACI

ACI is a non-profit (501-c-3), Arts advocacy group in a medium-sized, Midwestern city. Formed in 1998, the group achieved non-profit status in 2000, one year before this study began. In December of 2000 ACI hired a full-time executive director to carry out the mission and plans of ACI’s board of directors, who up until this time, were burdened with the committee work themselves.

I conducted this study during the months of February, March, April and May of 2001, with some follow-up data being collected during the summer of 2001. I interviewed 16 of the then 22-member board of directors. I attended and observed four board meetings during the months of the study, was a non-board member of the Legislative committee, and attended several other committee meetings in order to obtain a multi-faceted picture of the work and relationships of ACI. The interviews were semi-structured, one to two hours long, and were audio-taped. In addition, the President of ACI gave me a three-inch binder, which contained paperwork (board meeting minutes, letters to city council members, actions pursued and completed by ACI, budgets, etc.) from the beginning of ACI up until the time I commenced my study. I also developed a

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close, working relationship with the executive director, as we frequently met to talk about her work with ACI.

ACI was born out of the labors of community and education leaders, who wanted a more active group than the existing Arts and Science Council. By more active, I mean that ACI's founders wanted to be visibly active in promoting and participating in Arts groups and Arts experiences in the area. They wanted to be an organization that could not only advocate for the Arts in the community and in education, but also a group that could work with smaller Arts groups to teach them business sense, including the marketing of their Art to the community. Additionally, the founders of ACI wanted to help Arts groups work together (hence the "collaborator" part of ACI's name), combining resources, facilities, and marketing efforts.

Arts Education Activities Initiated by ACI

Using Eisner's (2002) principles to assess ACI's actions, I can offer a critical evaluation, not as a negative portrayal, but in order to help society become more aware of the influences at work within and outside of institutions. As Giroux (1998) states, there is already a "cultural pedagogy" at work, which needs to be examined critically, if we are to create and sustain a viable democracy (p. 150-153). The cultural pedagogy at work in River City with regards to the Arts and Arts education seems to be that 'Fine Art' is preferable to 'Popular Art;' and that 'exposure Arts education' is as good as, and easier to come by than 'content Arts education,' or other forms of Arts education. As Eisner (2002) stresses, it's not about which method of Arts education is best or which rationale is going to get the most money for Arts education. But, rather that a critique of actions pressed upon the educational society (schools, teachers, children) is allowed to ensure what is best and appropriate for the context in which the education occurs:

We can also learn that it is unlikely that there will be a consensus that there is only one enduring function for arts in the schools. What matters most in any field of study depends on context, and the context is influenced by the economics and politics of the time. (p. 41)

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ACI—Board members' beliefs vs. ACI's Arts Education

Activities

What in fact do board members think about Arts education? What is their view of the impact outside organizations such as theirs can have on schools? I categorized board members' views under six general categories. In this section I will juxtapose board members' beliefs with three Arts education activities, chosen from research of organizational documents and through conversations with board members. I will then analyze these actions against Eisner's five principles.

Board Members' View: Involvement in the Arts—Most ACI board members believed that “involvement in the Arts” was the most important facet of public school Arts education. They felt that opportunities should be available for students to participate in Arts activities. Reasons given for this are varied, and range from “making students more well-rounded individuals,” to “training future audiences.”

Matt: I think it [Arts education in public schools] is very important. I think that it broadens and gives individuals opportunity to be involved in something that could be important to them individually, either from whether they participate or they learn. I just think that it makes individuals better individuals, more well rounded.

Skip: I think being able to participate in the arts as I was growing up helped me out in other things. Music provided complements, gave me a very comforting and comfortable setting in which to do things other than academic subjects.

Greg: I think it's very important to have public school Arts education, because a lot of children are not exposed to the arts in their family environment. By exposure, I mean participation. Like music lessons for instance, or acting opportunities.

Emily: Art is in everyone and in anything. By that I mean that everyone has art in them, and we can find art in mundane things like a couch or a lamp. It's important for students to be involved in the Arts because it opens up a whole 'nother part of a child's being. It affects different areas

of the brain. If you don't include the arts, you're missing a whole component of the person.

Board Members' Views: Expressing yourself—Other responses fell into a second category, which represents a smaller percentage of the ACI board members (with some crossover from the first category of 'Involvement.' I placed board members into this category who expressed that traditional academics did not allow for self-expression, but that the Arts can create this outlet for students in school. Some felt that only "artists" would be able to do this, while others believed that all were capable, and just needed the opportunity, and that the Arts in schools could provide this opportunity. No mention was made of specific skills being needed to perform this expression; rather, it was implied that students could avail themselves of all the Art forms, if they felt the need to express themselves.

Callie: Art is expressing yourself. I think artists are so much their own people. I think everyone has it in them, . . . but there is that group of people that are non-conformist. There's a difference between a craft project and a creative art project, because the art project means you have to be creative in it.

Maria: Art is self-expression in different mediums. It is essential to train potential artists and potential audience members. Also, art education provides a positive activity for students. I know one art teacher, and anything you make is *not* wrong—it could be atrocious, but it's *not* wrong.

Sylvia: Art is a vehicle through which we as human beings can express ourselves.

Amy: Art is a medium that shows what creativity can do.

Jill: Artists are a 'personality type.' There are people who 'see' art in everything around them.

Board Members' Views: Expression of our culture—A third category of responses was an extension of the second. Many ACI board members said the Arts provided for an

“expression of our culture,” implying a two-way relationship between the artist and culture. The Arts in schools provides a means for the student-artists to express themselves, and all self-expression represents portions of our culture. Again, no mention was made by these respondents of the need for particular skills in order to make use of various Art forms.

Board Members’ Views: Learning to Appreciate the Arts—The fourth category of responses represented the second largest, after “Involvement in the Arts.” Respondents talked in more detail about what was necessary for a comprehensive Arts Education, and that the purpose of Arts education was to learn to appreciate the product that “real” artists made or performed. Some respondents said that this was necessary in order to perpetuate the audiences of tomorrow. Others talked about the separation between the artist and the common person, and that we needed to learn to understand how artists communicated through various mediums.

Delores: I think art is in everybody’s life. The challenge is to recognize and appreciate it. Arts education is teaching kids to recognize art at an early age. They need a teacher who can open up their imagination and teach you to find art in everyday life, and that encourages you to delve back into the masters.

Luke: Arts education involvement makes a person more refined. They are able to cope with life. Good arts education would involve exposure to good music, theatre history, etc.

Colleen: Art is life, so good Arts education would be exposure to all forms of Art. It doesn’t need to be formal or concentrated, but just a taste of different Arts and artists.

Board Members’ Views: Basic and part of the core curriculum—In the fifth category of responses, most respondents were educators, such as the two area-prominent Arts educators who sit on the ACI board. But, this category also included the voices of two other community members who studied one form of the Arts intensively during their school years. All respondents in this category spoke of the ‘discipline’ needed to study

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an Art form, meaning there is a body of knowledge, and a body of skills needed to practice Art, participate in Art, and to understand and appreciate Art.

Sylvia: In public schools, I want a program that will involve all students, that would be a part of the core curriculum from the youngest grades, and then the older they get they would be able to separate and go their individual ways. Start at the very beginning. Art is as basic as reading.

Bob: I think there is not enough Art education now. Ideally, there should be exposure to the Arts in the early grades, and then we should begin training in the elements of Art in 4th to 5th grade. The high schools should have multiple opportunities for performing through various outlets [choir, band, Art class, dance, drama], with less emphasis on the elements of the Arts, but this would still be there also.

Misty: I strongly believe that all people need a comprehensive art education in order to be a well-rounded human being and in order to give one's life meaning. It should be on an equal footing with other academic subjects, with graded levels of learning subject matter and skills.

Melinda: All students need Arts education. Young children need to learn what the elements of Art are. Art is part of your life, and we need to teach children how to develop a relationship with the Art.

Board Members' Views: Self-confidence builder—Finally, a few respondents talked about Art education's ability to boost the self-confidence of the academically poor student, or the economically disadvantaged student. For some it was a matter of the Arts being a different focus from the academic subjects. For others it was clear that the Arts were thought of as 'easier' than math or science, and therefore it would be easier for a student to achieve success in Art, which might transfer over to other subjects due to increased self-confidence.

Amy: I think Arts ability develops from five years old. Arts education can pull out talent that other subjects don't, and when they learn they can do Art, then they get confidence all across the board. I think that if they aren't particularly good in math, they feel like they're not any good.

For the economically disadvantaged student, one member spoke of how the Arts can offer opportunities that might be unavailable to that student otherwise, such as “participation” or “exposure.”

ACI designs Arts Education Activities

The three initiatives examined here illustrate a minority opinion present on the board. Yet, they were chosen and presented as representative of the board. The three specific initiatives examined here are A) a jazz curriculum written by ACI education committee members in conjunction with music educators of the largest district in ACI’s advocacy area, B) a trip to the opera, organized and funded by ACI and, C) an Arts guide—a listing of the Arts groups in the area, and their availability for Arts education opportunities—to be distributed to teachers in the tri-county area. I will describe each activity, then analyze with Eisner’s principles.

Jazz Curriculum: According to ACI documents, the jazz curriculum was initiated by Misty, the chair of the education committee. Although I interviewed Misty early in my study, by the time I discovered the jazz curriculum in the organizational documents, Misty had moved out of the area, and off the board of ACI. At the time of this study, however, Misty was a music educator with a specialty in jazz. She directed a jazz ensemble in the area. The curriculum was targeted to high school students, and the writers included (according to documents, and a conversation with another board member) Misty, members of the education committee, and several community music educators. Since Misty worked for the largest school district in the area, the curriculum was to be used in her district, where she had the most influence. No other district in the tri-county area overseen by ACI was slated to receive this curriculum, although this could have occurred without my knowledge. This curriculum was also never discussed at any board meeting during my study or in the past, according to two years of board meeting minutes.

A Trip to the Opera: This activity was conceived and born before I began my study. I discovered its presence through my analysis of the historical documents given to me by

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the President of ACI. I talked with the Misty, the education chair, and with Theresa, the executive director, about this particular action. I was told that the opera company, which was performing *Porgy and Bess*, agreed to do some weekday matinees for children in the area. The education committee created a teachers' discussion guide, to be used in the classroom prior to and following attendance at the opera. The study guide prompted the children to be prepared for plot, characters, and the conventions of the opera genre. Children were taught about the singing style of opera. ACI subsidized the purchase of tickets for schools that wished to participate. This activity was open to all schools in the area, although from attendance records, it appears the largest school district in the town in which the opera was performing, was the primary attendee at this event.

Educator's Guide to the Arts: The creation of this booklet was another initiative of the education committee. The purpose of the booklet (according to conversations and documents), which contained the names and contact numbers of all Arts groups who wished to participate, was to provide classroom teachers with a resource guide from which to draw exposure experiences in the Arts in which children could attend. Of the three initiatives, this was the only one discussed openly at board meetings.

The discussions at board meetings centered on which Arts organizations to include, and how to encourage them to participate, and also on how the book was to be distributed. The booklet includes the state education standards for learning in the Arts, printed at the beginning of the booklet. The ACI logo features prominently on the front of the booklet, and on every page of the booklet. The ACI mission appears on the first page underneath the title. The board members are listed on the table of contents page, along with ACI's address. Although this might appear to be a promotional tool for ACI, still ACI was willing to share the spotlight, as thirty-five Arts organizations are included in the booklet, some with pictures.

Board minutes, committee communications and conversations with the executive director confirm that copious efforts were made by Theresa and the education committee to include as many Arts organizations as possible. Mailings were sent to Arts

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organizations, phone calls were made, and reminders were sent to try and get a high level of participation. Organizations include local museums and their educational programs to an area storyteller's guild, to local colleges and their educational Arts offerings. One college's listing includes their entire Arts calendar for the school year 2001-2002.

Discussion of these activities with Eisner's principles

The Jazz Curriculum

Principle one: "...Pride of place to what's distinctive..." A jazz curriculum offers a truly distinctive American experience. Considered by some to be the first American music invention. River City is home to several well-known jazz artists, three of whom are also college instructors. The Fine Arts coordinator of the largest school district is also a jazz musician, and directs a high school jazz ensemble that has received high honors from critics. One might be tempted to say of a district that is 50% African-American, having a jazz curriculum will appeal to the cultural roots of its population. But, a closer look reveals that in River City jazz is removed from the 'popular music genre' and is associated with the 'Fine Arts' genre, of which most of their audiences are middle and upper class, educated people. Teachers encourage jazz students to continue on to prestigious jazz schools, such as Berklee College of Music in Massachusetts. Juxtapose this with River City's school population distribution being 85% at or below the poverty level.

How many of River City's students are represented in the audiences or in the jazz student population of this district and those surrounding it? It could be said that a jazz curriculum might allow more participation from under-represented student populations. Or, it could be said that a jazz curriculum would further marginalize those who have no access to this genre of music.

How many students are being offered this potentially distinctive experience? A closer look at this activity reveals that few teachers, if any, in the largest district of River City are even aware of the curriculum. I polled music teachers from junior high and high school that are of my acquaintance, and none had even heard of this curriculum. In

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addition, I was unable to secure a copy of the curriculum, as the head of the education committee moved out of district by the time I discovered this activity in the organizational documents.

Principle two: "...Foster the growth of artistic intelligence..." and principle three: "...Help students learn how to create satisfying visual images (etc.)..." (This third principle would involve allowing students time to create and compose). These two principles, along with principle four present problems for me, as critical analysis of the curriculum is unavailable. Principle four: "...Recognize what is personal, distinctive, and even unique about themselves and their work..." Does the curriculum help students find jazz elements in the music of their everyday lives? I am unable to discuss this, as the curriculum is unavailable.

Principle five: "...enable students to secure aesthetic forms of experience in everyday life..." Jazz music as most often seen and heard in River City, belongs more to the educated classes than to the population most represented by the students of River City. Even if these students were to be educated in jazz methods, how often would they be able to partake of jazz opportunities as audiences, where venues run \$15-\$20 per ticket and more?

A Trip to the Opera

Principle one: A "trip to the opera" for grade school students can give students a feeling for what is distinctive about the Arts. The question might be, rather, can students who have never been exposed to this Art form gain knowledge, understanding, a sense of possibility about themselves becoming artists? A part of the teachers' guide for this activity included information on how to be a good audience member. The motivation here, then, would be to create future audience members over creating a participatory Arts community.

The sociological viewpoint for this activity might emphasize that, indeed, we need future audience members, due largely to the relationship between audience and Artist. But, the value of targeting an activity like this at middle elementary-age students merely

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for audience building is unclear. Students are too far removed from the time when they will be able to make audience choices. Students in this district are primarily below the income level needed to attend such activities on a regular basis outside of schooling, if they chose to do so. There is a debate amongst sociologists about the strata of audiences for various Art forms. Zolberg (1990) insists that it is naïve to assume “that people freely choose to be members of art audiences solely because of the pleasure they expect to derive from art works” (p. 142). Instead, social critics discuss “how art forms a ranked and why” (p. 142) within social classes, and what the consequences are for the Artist because of this ranking.

Principle Two asks of the Art education will foster the growth of Artistic intelligence. A trip to the opera accompanied by a thoughtfully fashioned teachers’ guide in which questions are posed for reflection both before and after the excursion has the most possibility for fostering the intelligence Eisner (2002) speaks of. “...As John Dewey pointed out in the William James Lectures he gave at Harvard in 1932, intelligent reflection is a fundamental condition in the creation of art” (p. 43). Students were questioned both before and after the performance, allowing them time for guided critical reflection.

Principle Three is not applicable, as students are not asked to create in this situation. Principle Four asks that students learn to recognize what is personal, distinctive, and even unique about themselves and their work. Again, this principle as applied to this activity questions the motives for the activity. Students who are rarely involved in or an audience member of opera might be hard-pressed to learn what is distinctive about themselves, due to their unfamiliarity with the art form. Will the art form be visited again in the music classroom? Will students have the chance to further their understanding of this art form and how it may or may not communicate to them?

Principle Five is not applicable, as it asks students to be able to recognize aesthetic experiences in their everyday life. Opera is an Art form that does not occur in everyday life. Will the experiences they have in the theatre transfer to their everyday life? How

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can students make the connection from a rarely seen Art form to their everyday life, and the aesthetic qualities present in both that can be paralleled?

The Educator's Guide to the Arts

This activity was designed to be a help to the classroom teacher in planning field trips and special events in the school. The executive director did an extensive search to include as many Arts groups as possible. When the guide was near completion (which was during my study), I was asked by the education committee to offer my comments and suggestions for the guide. I suggested they include at least some comments about the importance of the Arts, since I knew the guide was going to classroom teachers, and not Arts specialists. In the end it was decided to include the State Arts goals, which were modeled after the Federal guidelines for the Arts. These goals appear early in the booklet, as part of the introduction.

Principle one: Because of the executive director's diligence, this activity fulfills this principle the best—that of emphasizing what is distinctive about the arts. The volume of groups listed is great, and covers many genres of the Arts from storytelling to community theatre, from jazz to symphonic music, from fine art to contemporary art, from ballet to jazz dance. Principle two, which encourages the development of artistic intelligence, would depend greatly on how the guide was used to encourage discussion and imitation of the groups that were visited by the schoolchildren. Observation without discussion, imitation, or practice would have limited effect on the advancement of students' artistic intelligence.

Principle three, helping students learn to create, is a distinct possibility, with groups that encourage participation from the audience. Several of the groups listed in the guide do encourage participation, whether in the audience of a theatre production or storytelling group, or in the art center.

Principle four and five, recognizing what is personal, distinctive, and unique about themselves and their work and securing aesthetic forms of experience are both possible through the use of the teachers' guide. Again, this leaves the development of the activity

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to the teacher, in many cases the classroom teacher, instead of the specialist, who is trained in how to use experiences to draw out students' potential and offer aesthetic experiences.

Discussion

I look at these actions because of uncertainties that I and other Arts education researchers have about the motivations behind groups like ACI acting, ostensibly, to benefit Arts education. Hope (1992) suggests that . . . Arts advocacy groups that make policy for Arts education “fail to have a significant foundation in either artistic content or overall cultural analysis” (259). Smith (1992) also muses over collaborative efforts of outside groups towards Arts education, commenting that even though many of the groups were highly regarded in their efforts to promote the arts, in regards to Arts education these groups often confused “humane intentions and good will with substance and excellence” (147).

ACI's “exchange value” to River City

One potential motivation might be the “exchange value” Adorno (2000/1968) speaks of and referred to earlier in this paper. That is ACI's effort to make Arts and Artists part of the exchange within the society of River City—not only an economic one, although that seems to have high value to ACI and to the city council. But, also, the Arts contribute an intangible quality of life. Many board members of ACI are willing to advocate for this idea through their monetary and time commitments to ACI.

This emphasis on the “exchange value” of the Arts is evidenced in ACI's courting of the city council. In studying the organizational documents and in conversations with board members I found that ACI is very concerned with its relationship to the city council, as well as its relationship to the artists and the community the organization serves. In the situation between the city council, ACI's funding comes from the city council through the Hotel/Restaurant tax of River City. Board meeting discussions revealed a constant desire to appeal to the city council, bolster their position to various council-members individually, and a desire to show the economic advantages, or the “exchange value” of supporting the Arts in the area.

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The exchange for ACI's efforts to promote the Arts for the city was hoped to be a higher economic value placed on the 'standard of living' for the River City area. The executive director and other board members were very proud of a study they commissioned, which showed the economic benefit that the Arts brought to the area over the preceding years. The study surveyed Arts organizations, and other businesses and organizations with direct or indirect monetary benefit from Arts events, whether it is ticket sales or restaurant and hotel dollars. There seemed to be a fear that if ACI could not show that the Arts improved the economic development of River City, then the city council might look elsewhere to spend the thousands of dollars allocated to ACI.

ACI and the development of taste

Another motivation apparent in ACI's activities is how they use their planned activities to help build current and future audiences for the Arts. Whether consciously planned as audience-building actions, or sub-consciously as a nice "by-product" of educational behaviors, socio-political theory argues against value-neutral curriculum (see for example, Beyer, L. E., 2000; Adorno, T., 2000/1968). Beyer states that for the Arts, "we must view these not as removed from everyday life through the insertion of some form or another . . . but as part of the material, productive forces of people's lives and social experience."

My interviews with board members revealed a variety of "taste" preferences for the Arts. Bourdieu sees "taste preferences as cultural signs that help perpetuate social inequality, so that those of the dominant classes . . . imbibe taste and facility in its display from birth to adulthood so thoroughly that their entire demeanor exudes their superiority" (1984, as quoted in Zolberg, 1990, p. 156). If the board members of ACI view their preferences in such a way (their taste as the best), then their subconscious intentions, via their choice of which educational activities to promote, could perpetuate this class relationship throughout the audiences of River City. Development of audience "taste" through these chosen activities will perpetuate the class relationship that may be existent

as evidenced in their tastes. From interviewees responses I developed several categories related to “taste” and the Arts consumer.

Taste is developed or educated

Some board members stated that “appropriate” artistic sense is developed only through education and/or exposure to appropriate art. In other words, there is an artistic value that cannot be learned unless one is exposed to specific Arts, and educated in these Arts. Members expressed this in varying degrees of specificity—meaning that some understood what they were saying to mean that there is a class of Art above everyday life; and some did not. These others expressed their beliefs as more of a feeling or an intangible understanding of how Art was separate from life.

Skip: Art is a concept that starts when an artist gives it physical presence . . . how it’s interpreted, or how it’s made. . . . Being able to see as an artist.

Melinda: Kids need to be gotten to when they’re young (in order to affect their learning in the Arts).

Greg: I think it’s important . . . that people of all economic backgrounds have an opportunity to experience the arts, the culture . . . [I want to] provide some programs enabling some individuals from low-income families to experience the arts and culture, and get that exposure to all segments of the community.

Emily: There’s always a quality level [to Art]. Because I’m trained, and I know, and I have a highly developed aesthetic, I know it’s not good art, it’s not fine art, it’s not good quality art, but it is their expression. . . . [it is from here] that you can begin the process of educating, . . . and bring them out and expose them and help them.

Taste can lift us above our ordinary life

Others on the board expressed an interesting belief about the value of Art—that it had a quality or ability to relieve our suffering by perhaps being a higher calling or an elevated aspiration.

Delores: Isn’t there a way for a non-traditionally motivated student to be turned on by a teacher. . . by bringing arts and music to them . . . by trying to find art in every day life so that it encourages you to delve back into the

masters. . . or because it is everywhere, and it is an uplifting thing that will take you out of your everyday misery.

Sylvia: Art provides us . . . with survival skills that prepare us to deal with cultural, social and economic challenges. Art is a lifeline.

Luke: [Art] makes a person more refined—able to cope with life.

Taste is inborn-inherited

Still others expressed the belief that “good” taste was something inborn or inherited—that there were those who were destined to be artists, and those who could appreciate the art, and then, there are the rest of us. “Callie: I think artists are so much their own people. There is that group of people that are non-conformist....Those are the people that make it their lifelong career.”

Taste rises above entertainment

A fourth category defines Art as something beyond entertainment. Some even went so far as to express the belief that if you were entertained, it might not be true Art. You have good taste, if you can see beyond the entertainment, or if you gravitate towards Art that is non-entertaining. Wondering what defines entertainment, I pressed some members further about this question. Some had no answer. One member amended his definition to include “entertainment-oriented” Art as also, potentially, being true Art. It seemed that Art was difficult to define in any sense, but that many had a feeling that one would recognize it, if one saw it, if one had enough education, or developed taste.

Summary

In this paper I presented an argument for a sociological examination of the actions of ACI, the relationships between Artist and audience, and examined ACI’s educative actions within this framework. I’ve also analyzed the actions of ACI from Eisner’s principles of Arts education, looking for a broad Arts education purpose. I’ve examined the idea of audience development, and what the definition of “taste” might have to do with ACI’s actions.

I offer these analyses because of a belief that schooling, specifically Arts education, is highly contextual—that is, Arts education as enacted is dependent upon many outside influences, who may shape and or contribute to the curriculum as designed and enacted in the classroom.

It is worth reemphasizing that neither schools nor curriculum are “things,” that is, separable objects or entities that can be understood and evaluated independently of other institutions and practices. Rather, they are to be understood within the context of other social realities and cultural patterns which involve complex processes, meanings, and activities that are relatively fluid, changeable, and filled with contradictory tendencies. (Beyer, 2000, p. 63)

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