

THE GENDERING OF ART EDUCATION

Modernism, identity and critical
feminism

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Series editors' preface

At the end of the twentieth century it is not a new idea to have a series on feminist educational thinking – feminist perspectives on educational theory, research, policy and practice have made a notable impact on these fields in the final decades of the century. But theory and practice have evolved, and educational and political contexts have changed. In contemporary educational policy debates, economic efficiency rather than social inequality is a key concern; what happens to boys is drawing more interest than what happens to girls; issues about cultural difference interrupt questions about gender; and new forms of theory challenge older frameworks of analysis. This series represents feminist educational thinking as it takes up these developments now.

Feminist educational thinking views the intersection of education and gender through a variety of lenses: it examines schools and universities as sites for the enacting of gender; it explores the ways in which conceptions of gender shape the provision of state-supported education; it highlights the resistances subordinated groups have developed around ideas of knowledge, power and learning; and it seeks to understand the relationship of education to gendered conceptions of citizenship, the family and the economy. Thus feminist educational thinking is fundamentally political; it fuses theory and practice in seeking to understand contemporary education with the aim of building a more just world for women and men. In so doing, it acknowledges the reality of multiple 'feminisms' and the intertwining of ethnicity, race and gender.

Feminist educational thinking is influenced both by developments in feminist theory more broadly and by the changing global educational landscape. In terms of theory, both post-structuralist and post-colonial theories have profoundly influenced what is conceived of as 'feminist'. As is true elsewhere, current feminist educational thinking takes as central the intersecting forces that shape the educational experiences of women and men. This emphasis on the construction and performances of gender through both

discourses and material practices leads to an attitude of openness and questioning of accepted assumptions – including the underlying assumptions of the various strands of feminism.

In terms of the sites in which we work, feminist educational thinking increasingly addresses the impact of 'globalization' – the impact of neo-laissez-faire theories on education. As each of us knows all too well, the schools and universities in which we work have been profoundly affected by the growing dominance of ideas of social efficiency, market choice, and competition. In a rapidly changing world in which an ideology of profit has come to define all relationships, the question of gender is often lost, but in fact it is central to the way power is enacted in education as in society as a whole.

The books in this series thus seek to explore the ways in which theory and practice are interrelated. They introduce a third wave of feminist thinking in education, one that takes account of both global changes to the economy and politics, and changes in theorizing about that world. It is important to emphasize that feminist educational thinking not only shapes how we think about education but what we do *in* education – as teachers, academics, and citizens. Thus books within the series not only address the impact of global, national and local changes of education but what specific space is available for feminists within education to mount a challenge to educational practices which encourage gendered and other forms of discriminatory practice.

*Kathleen Weiler
Gaby Weiner
Lyn Yates*

Introduction

The chapters in this book cover a wide range of issues that go beyond the usual themes of the histories of art education, yet at the same time they focus on a specific and localized concern: the art education of the 'average girl' in the specific context of modernization and modernity.

Although modernity is said to be 'over' and we are now in the cultural context of the postmodern, the residues of many unexamined traditions and habits of modernist practices are still evident in art education. This, I suggest, is not altogether pernicious. Although there are aspects that have been oppressive and discriminatory and which need to be rethought, challenged or discarded, for the generation of women who were subjected to a modernist art education, there has been much that was beneficial and transformative: more women than ever are active in the arts today and for the first time there are a significant number of women gaining international repute as artists. Girls do well in art, however, but adult working class women of all races and cultures in England are concentrated in low paid, low status feminized jobs: in textile related industries, light crafts, services, entertainment, cleaning, leisure, fashion and caring industries, as well as in domestic and consumer work in the home. These areas of employment find their educational precedents in the school subjects of Art, Design, Crafts, Home Economics (HE), Fashion and Textiles. Art education not only has been concerned with educating artists, but also, I contend, plays a part in shaping the identities of working class women as subordinate.

There are some aspects of modernism in art education that need to be rethought in the light of contemporary ideas. Postmodern debates in art practice, culture and aesthetics, postcolonial and feminist critiques of identity and subjectivity, and psychoanalytic interpretations of vision and creativity have all in recent years begun to undermine many of the assumptions about art and the child that are held in art educational discourse.

What this book sets out to do is to revisit modernist art education, to untangle its discursive themes and preoccupations. By taking on board these

postmodern insights, I aim to demonstrate that modernist art education is gendered through and through, and that it has played a part in constructing specifically modernist, feminine identities.

I aim to review critically contemporary trends and their gendered themes and at the same time argue for a continuation of some older modernist pedagogic practices and suggest a reactivation of some of modernity's lesser known discourses. Modernism in art education, I maintain, is an unfinished project and it, together with a critical postmodern approach, could be the means of imagining and constructing an art education that would be less complicit in producing feminine identities as subordinate.

Writing strategies

I am structuring the book as a chronological account of the changes that have taken place in art education over the hundred years or so between the late nineteenth and the late twentieth centuries: a period synchronous with a culture of late modernity in the West. I intend to trace Enlightened modernity's gendered thematic threads of discourse, demonstrating how these discourses persist today. They have changed their gender codes, they appear in different guises but are redeployed and reactivated in new forms in different historical contexts and continue to play a part in supporting and maintaining gender difference.

Constructing the past as a chronological narrative is problematic. It imposes a linear structure on what are complexly interrelating and overlapping events that are not progressive or logically forward moving. A narrative inevitably selects and privileges certain information while it excludes and overlooks others. It avoids contradiction and ambiguity. But, as I think most teachers are aware, the narrative form – with a beginning, a middle and an end – continues to be the most coherent way of introducing and organizing a large body of heterogeneous and complex material. This book has been written for those not familiar with new psychological and poststructuralist theory. It is meant to offer an easily read introduction to busy art teachers, educators and art education students and I have aimed to keep its arguments clear and accessible. What I assume is that readers will bring their own experience and knowledge to bear on this text. To aid this process of 'disturbing' the narrative and to enable the reader to question some of its assertions, I have provided a first chapter which outlines the background of ideas within which this particular account has been structured. Throughout the book I make extensive references to other texts where the reader can find fuller explanations of the issues as well as their counter-arguments. These strategies I hope will fill out what is inevitably, in so short a book, a schematic account.

The Gendering of Art Education does not claim to survey the whole field

of art education, but focuses on those themes that have received less attention in existing histories and which help to explain gender difference. It is a partial account, told from an interested feminist commitment.

The chapters

The chronology of the book focuses on three significant ‘moments’ in modernist art education’s past. I have chosen first to look at the late nineteenth century, which was the moment when art education began to be taught to working class girls in any significant numbers; then I survey mid-twentieth century art education, a period of ‘high modernity’ and of expansion and investment in art education; and lastly I look at international movements in art education since the 1980s, where it appears that art education has been embracing some aspects of ‘the feminine’. At each of the three moments I briefly survey the contingent social, economic and cultural events within which art education found its contemporary legitimizing meanings and values.

Historians of art education have shown how art education has been variously shaped by different ideas and interests: by Romantic and Classical traditions, by external economic and political forces as well as by the influence of specific personalities and their priorities.¹ While taking these influences into consideration, my account also takes in ‘non-legitimate’ and non-conscious discourses, such as habit, convention, fantasy and popular assumptions about art and artists expressed in magazines, films, novels and television. I look at the way family relationships have been patterned onto pedagogic relations and have shaped the behaviours and relationships between students and teachers. In doing so I argue that art education has been formed not only by the explicit, well-documented ‘big ideas’ of modernity or by rational forward moving developments, but as often by hidden, private or overlooked contingencies. It is mainly in these non-explicit, non-conscious pedagogic practices, I suggest, that gender difference is significantly produced.

Dealing with such a vast field of diverse influences inevitably raises the problem of incorporating and explaining the theoretical assumptions that inform this book. A common method in ethnography is to explain the theory first and then use a detailed case study to illustrate it ‘in action’. I will to some extent be following this practice by briefly introducing the theoretical background in Chapter 1 and the background in psychology in Chapter 3. But on the whole, the theory is scattered through the text, ‘enacted’ in the writing strategies.² Different theoretical notions are briefly introduced, but will be recalled, repeated, expanded and explained as the events of art education are described. Concepts such as ‘discourse’, ‘deconstruction’ and ‘ideology’ are briefly introduced, but their meanings emerge in use, and in

reference to other texts without the need for a separate theoretical explanation. Through this way of telling art education's history, I assume 'theory' to be understood as a process and in practice.

The subject of *The Gendering of Art Education*

I have focused on a very specific concern in this book: the modernist art education of the working class girl, mainly in England. This represents my own interest: part of the story I describe has been my own experience of art education. It has been through my modernist art education that my attitudes to art, my skills, tastes and ideas have been formed. However, this focus has wider implications and is not meant to be exclusive. Growing up in post-war London, the daughter of an Irish immigrant, my art education was shared by the many Jewish, West Indian, Irish, Cypriot and other immigrant families who inhabited South London at that time. The gendered and working class discourses of art education that shaped my identity to some extent, shaped theirs too, although no doubt the meanings they took from the same art lessons were understood and negotiated in different ways which only their own accounts can show. Many of the textbooks, theories and pedagogic practices that informed our art education were shared too by girls in North America, Australasia and Canada.³ But an English historical perspective is necessary in reviewing and understanding the past in that all English speaking art educational systems share a common history. British art education was exported to its colonies in the late nineteenth century through systems such as the South Kensington model. English culture and its fragmented, classed, gendered and colonial outlook became part of the structuring forms of art education for the United States, Canada and Australasia, as well as parts of Asia and Africa. Any postcolonial, economic or feminist critique of art education has to take into account the European Enlightenment values and the nineteenth-century context of modernization within which art education was formed. At the same time, influences from psychology in North America became absorbed into English art education; towards the mid- and late twentieth century, it has become increasingly shaped within economic contexts of global capitalism and international systems of media and communication. When dealing with these subjects I have not been nationally exclusive in my choice of examples and use of data. I have, in any case, had to extrapolate from empirical and quantitative studies, mainly from North American sources because there has been so little feminist and art educational research in Britain.

The theories which underpin my arguments – from film studies, literary theory, art history, art practice and criticism, psychology and psychoanalysis – have no national boundaries. New ideas that critique the gendered humanist subject,⁴ modernist creativity, and the perceptual tradition, have been

spearheaded by international contributions from postcolonial, poststructuralist and feminist scholars. Indeed, it has been possible to imagine and write about English art education as local and specific only by adopting a vantage point informed by other perspectives.

Chapter 2, then, will be a survey of the European Enlightenment discourses and an introduction to the Romantic/Classical, public/private and gendered divisions of labour that underpinned the emergence of English state-maintained art education in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Chapter 3 reviews the main themes of North American psychology that were structured into English art education at the moment of high modernity in the mid-twentieth century. I briefly introduce the dominant narratives of child development, creativity and perception that have been (and still are) saturated through art pedagogy, and then outline the main points of post-Lacanian, post-Foucauldian challenges to these older paradigms of the self.

Chapter 4 continues this focus on the period between the end of the Second World War and the early 1970s and introduces the cultural and economic contexts in which the aggressive introduction of psychological discourse and expansion in art education occurred, particularly in the new school subject of Design.

The relationship of 'Art' to 'Design' in education is complex and often contradictory. Sometimes Art is considered separately from Design, and sometimes they are combined.⁵ The relation between them and their naming is constantly shifting; the historical place of Crafts has been indeterminate. In this book, I include Design, Crafts and Technology as part of my description of the Art curriculum. Any description of the Art curriculum in schools has to take into account design education; since the two have been taught together, their practices overlap. They have explicitly been regarded as 'transferable' skills and they have borrowed their ideological meanings one from another. I have taken, as a paradigm topic, the practice of 'Textiles' education. Textiles is a subject that has been taught at different times across the Art and Craft, Design, Technology and Home Economics syllabus under the heading of 'Art'. It has taken up a considerable amount of time, and its pedagogic practices have been central to the construction of working class feminine identities.

Chapter 5 shifts the focus from England to a more global picture of the influences of corporate culture and a service oriented and consumer economy on art education. I review the expansion of multinational textile and craft production and examine in particular the gendered connotations of these influences in the teaching and management of art education. I contend that art education is assuming an increasingly feminized identification corresponding to increasingly feminized Western forms of culture and employment, that are not always advantageous to working class women and men.

In Chapter 6 I suggest some strategies and tactics for intervening in the economic circle of desire in feminized models of consumer led art education.

To do this I return to some of the theoretical issues raised earlier, and reintroduce some critical modern and critical postmodern tactics and strategies as alternative practices. These tactics and strategies, I suggest, could help to bring about changes in art education, changes which are less likely to produce feminine identities as subordinate.

The invisibility of art education in critical discourse

Art in schools has in many ways appeared to have been successful for girls. It is one area of the school curriculum that is apparently untroubled by gender inequality and lack of opportunity. Girls seem to succeed in Art: they choose it as an option more often than boys, girls outshine boys in art examinations and there is no shortage of girls going on to higher education in the arts. Art lessons, particularly Fine Art – painting, drawing and light crafts – are seen to be the place where girls can express themselves, develop their own interests unrestricted by the gender divisions and formal demands that characterize other academic subjects.⁶ Art is taught in relaxed, colourful, playful, creative environments sympathetic to traditional feminine interests and is often regarded, not least by social scientists and feminist educators, as a harmless leisure pursuit, an antidote to real work, and a creative outlet; a place where, with sensitive teaching, the authentic and transparent expression of girls' thoughts, feelings and experiences can be unproblematically encouraged.

While there are a large number of books, articles and feminist projects tackling gender inequality in other school subjects – Maths, Sports, Science, History – there are very few which have identified gender inequality in Art.⁷ There has been no drive for compensatory education, indeed, girls have often been discouraged from the traditional feminine arts subjects, towards the sciences, mathematics and technology, subjects which would seem to offer them marketable skills and better paid career prospects. Popular feminist educational propaganda illustrates girls claiming their rightful place in a man's world, handling heavy materials, working with sophisticated laboratory equipment or in machine workshops alongside boys, but there are few pictures of ideal female role models engaged in painting, drawing or sewing.

These subjects have taken up a considerable amount of time in the education of working class girls, and they must be having some effects; they deserve some scrutiny. But there has been little attempt to understand art education's place in relation to the wider social contexts of the family, productive work and consumption or to see how girls' art education relates to women's contemporary art practice.

Art education has been the place where children learn about 'things': about objects and how to create and construct them. They learn how to judge, to discriminate, to evaluate objects for their aesthetic and functional

meanings. In short, in art education children acquire meanings about production and consumption.

The invisible girl

One of the difficulties of establishing what art education has been doing to girls has been the lack of any explicit mention of them in art educational histories and textbooks. In art pedagogy 'the child' is always represented as male or as gender neutral. Looking at widely used textbooks, policy documents, government recommendations and popular treatises on art education up to the 1970s, the 'average' girl is absent.⁸ She has not always been deliberately excluded: no doubt the authors, who have been almost always men, believed that what applied to 'him' also applied to 'her' and that 'the child' who has been the subject of art education represents both male and female. But as Nicole Claude-Mathieu observed in her research, it is not always easy to include girls logically in the gender neutral discourses of social science:

Most theoretical or general descriptive writings . . . make no reference to sex categories. What is described in such studies is a human process in its generality, without regard to the sex of the individuals. This is perfectly justified from the methodological point of view, and indeed no-one would imagine that sex membership had anything whatever to do with the problem under review. Yet it often happens that in these works there suddenly appears a 'comment' (five lines after four pages of neutral description, a paragraph in small type, or a chapter added at the end of a book) that reorientates the whole problem in terms of sexual categorisation; 'we know less about how women are affected in this matter' . . . or; . . . 'it would be useful to examine in what ways women are affected . . .'. The reader, naturally enough, becomes perplexed as to the generality of what he has been reading up to that point.⁹

Modernist art education's textbooks and its histories have been written in this way. Each case is in itself trivial, but together they add up to a system of exclusion and omission. There are many examples: the influential Newsom Report, for example, written in 1959, marginalized girls in a mix of 'neutral' and exclusive language. In its main text, it referred throughout to the education of 'children', but when new Design education came under review, it suddenly switched without any explanation to writing about 'the boy'. No corresponding text was available for girls, and what exists is not easily translatable into girls' experience:

The boy with whom we are concerned is one who has pride in his skill of hand and a desire to use that skill to discover how things work, to

make them work and to make them work better. The tradition to which he aspires to belong is the modern one of the mechanical man whose fingers are the questioning instruments of thought and exploration . . . His is not a narrow vocational interest, but a broad scientific curiosity.¹⁰

Georgia Collins and Renée Sandell have amassed evidences of the many omissions and examples of this kind of sexism in art educational texts.¹¹

Another practice that hides the concerns of girls has been to assume that 'Art' means painting and drawing. Most psychological tests, critical judgements and philosophical ponderings on 'art' construct their arguments with reference to examples and evidences drawn from painting or drawing. Art pedagogy's terminology is vague; 'Art' has meant different things at different times. But education in the art lesson has usually involved a much wider range of practices than painting and drawing. It has included embroidery, weaving, soft toy making, pottery, fabric design, printing and dyeing, fashion, interior design, product design, batik, model making, and so on. Many pedagogic practices and evaluation procedures are, I suggest, fundamentally undermined and their gendered structures revealed when 'girls' subjects' such as textiles, fashion and consumer studies are properly included in discussions of the Art curriculum.

Through gendered textual and pedagogic practices, as well as through silences and omissions, girls' educational concerns, their skills, their modes of knowing and their responses are often hidden. In dismantling art education I attempt to uncover the hidden issues of gender and bring them into feminist discourse, relating them to the contemporary intellectual and artistic field, to social and economic contexts, and demonstrate that Art in schools has had an important part to play in constructing identities as feminine. My focus will be to argue that modernist art education has been and continues to be a complex of gendered discursive practices: saturated through with masculine and feminine divisions and hierarchies which in turn produce gendered identities as hierarchical and working class girls as subordinate, ready to assume subordinate positions in the wider social and economic culture.

