

#### 4. THE PLACE OF VISUAL ART IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF CRITICAL DIMENSIONS OF THINKING

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**Abstract:** *The present study aims to describe the ways in which art education impacts community life through art products. The sample consists of 32 teachers/creators in various fields of work such as fine arts, composition, literature, musical interpretation, choreography and acting. Categorical content analysis is used for data analysis. The highest-ranking emerging theme is related to the means of educational intervention in the community through art. Artistic education leads to empowerment and emancipation by provoking people to think differently while the exposure to artistic creations has a therapeutic effect and contributes to identifying new ways of action. Artists in the role of teachers feel a responsibility both for the educational process and also for the emotional message that their creative product transmits to the audience.*

**Key words:** *“Dialectics”, “Phenomenology of Design” “Meta–design” “Interdisciplinarity” and “collaborative” approaches, “Design paradigms” “Autopoiesis and Allopoiesis”*

### 1. Introduction

It is generally accepted that critical thinking and the development of the required necessary skill represent a broadly accepted educational goal. The definitions of critical thinking are often challenged, but competing definitions can be seen as different perspectives over the same concept. In general, critical thinking definitions emphasize the attentive thinking aspect, directed towards a specific purpose. Critical thinking perspectives differ in terms of purpose, criteria, and rules of thinking that they focus on. Establishing critical thinking as an educational purpose has been recommended mainly due to its effects in terms of increasing students' autonomy and preparing them as active citizens in a democratic society. Well-Developed critical thinking provides the necessary skills and dispositions that make individuals think critically in various situations. Generally, educational interventions for developing critical thinking skills include dialogue, specific training and mentoring (Hitchcock, 2018).

One of the first personalities that used the term "critical thinking" to describe an educational goal is the American philosopher John Dewey (1910), who most commonly used the form of "reflective thinking". He defined it as an active, persevering and attentive analysis of any belief or presumed forms of knowledge in the light of the reasons that support it and of the subsequent conclusions to which it tends (Dewey, 1910). He emphasized that such considerations are the main characteristics of scientific thinking. He, therefore,

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proposed the development of a scientific attitude as an educational goal.

Furthermore, the socio-political version of critical thinking, namely critical consciousness is being defined as a state of mind that allows critical thinking to emerge (Watts & Abdul-Adil, 1998). Critical consciousness is needed to reach authentic knowledge (Freire, 1970). As a complex process that allows people to become aware of the socio-economic and cultural context that influence their life, critical consciousness encourages individuals to transform their reality (Freire, 1970). Critical consciousness represents a form of critical thinking, applied in the context of nowadays society. Current formulations of critical consciousness concepts are mainly grounded in Freirean thought and refer to three central elements: critical reflection, critical motivation (or efficacy), and critical action. The process of developing reflection and action represent core elements of critical consciousness, since this concept implies a process of learning to easily identify social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of social reality. Critical reflection refers to a process of learning to put under scrutiny the social conditions and structures that lead to marginalising groups of people.

In the scientific literature, theories and conceptualizations of critical consciousness usually describe a combination of critical social analysis, collective social identity, political self-efficacy, and actions designed to promote social justice (Watts, Diemer & Voight, 2011). Therefore, critical consciousness has been considered as an antidote to injustice mainly because it advances awareness, motivation, and agency to identify, challenge and change social and structural constraints (Diemer, Rapa, Voight & McWhirter, 2016).

## **2. The importance of critical thinking and critical consciousness**

Critical thinking and critical consciousness share common concerns. Both speak of a general population in society who manifest, to some extent, issues in terms of abilities or skills that would allow them to discern between certain types of inaccuracies, distortions and even false information. Both share a concern about how these inaccuracies, distortions, and misinformation limit individual freedom. This concern is especially more articulated in the tradition of critical consciousness, which sees society as fundamentally divided by unequal power relations. Critical educators are especially concerned with educational influences and cultural formations, which perpetuate or justify an unfair status quo. Developing critical capacity among individuals is a way of protecting against these powerful effects. It speaks in particular of those social groups that are socially, economically or politically disadvantaged. Many authors in the field of critical thinking would have similar concerns but would consider them to be the result of analysing and evaluating the validity of certain assumptions. For critical thinking advocates, all individuals need to be more critical, and the implicit idea is that improving critical thinking could have a general humanized effect manifested in all social groups and classes. In this sense, both critical thinking and

critical consciousness argue that by helping people become more critical in thinking and action, teachers can help individuals to perceive the world as it is.

Critical education can increase individual freedom and broaden the scope of human possibilities (Burbules & Beck, 1999). However, the practices of critical thinking and critical consciousness inherently imply bringing social conditions into question. Nevertheless, from a critical consciousness perspective, the effort to teach others to think critically is less a matter of fostering skills and individual dispositions and more the consequence of the pedagogical relations, between teachers and students, as well as among the students who promote it. Finally, the object of critical thinking, in general, is not only against false beliefs but also against deceptive, partisan or those involved in maintaining an unfair status quo. Therefore, the primary concern of both forms of critical thinking is to replace unconditional or distorted thinking with thinking based on reliable investigative procedures.

### **3. Visual art as a facilitator in the development of critical dimensions of thinking**

Today's society is highly visually integrating images everywhere which means that visual proficiency is gradually becoming very crucial. A lot of information is transmitted and received via the visual channel and visual art provides a distinctive way of material presentation, which can enable its better storage in the long-term memory (Vittuli & Santoli, 2013). Referring to the studies that integrate art in the development of critical thinking skills, we aim to debate why visual arts can become dominant in enhancing skills of critical thinking. When using visual arts, students get the possibility of analyzing and evaluating information, which are important skills, both for academics, and citizenship domains. Art viewing promotes critical thinking and artistic education plays a significant role in the development of both, critical thinking and critical consciousness. Especially because developing critical thinking in a vacuum, in the absence of an object of thought, upon which the subject must act it represents an extremely difficult task. Reasoning about art is an effective and attractive practice, which can provide help in seeking one of the most challenging goals in education, namely developing critical thinking. Visual art leads to unique experiences and it facilitates understanding human nature.

The subtle ways in which art can function as an appropriate way of developing critical thinking skills along with a proper pedagogical process might be disregarded. In this sense, Housen (2002) emphasized the unprecedented place of art in the development of critical thinking. To exercise thought, the art chosen for the development of critical thinking must include some specific characteristics. It must be noted that this method may be used with first encounters of art, several years of preparation, according to Housen (2002), are not mandatory since a work of art represents a self-contained world. It incorporates all the necessary information for any individual to begin its interpretation, and it

challenges the viewer to create new understandings. Art can find a way to speak to all viewers, children can read a painting long before they start reading words. Through art can be transmitted enduring issues. Art helps its viewer to reach his potential. Due to its ambiguous nature, art encourages speculation and the interpretative possibilities are unfolding the more one looks at it (Housen, 2002). Nonetheless, art helps fulfill the need for meaning, imagination, emotions or self-awareness (Russell & Zembylas, 2007).

Visual art offers the perfect opportunities for observation and dialogue. During the discussions triggered by the exposure to various artworks, individuals may have the chance to use past experiences and previous knowledge to reason out what an artwork means. Therefore, individuals may start creating different new meanings (Bruchenal & Grohe, 2007). Further to this idea, Richmond (2009) suggested that art education contributes to the emancipatory process of learners by encouraging independent views, upon which individuals can base their future life-shaping actions. By accomplishing these things, visual art contributes to the development of critical consciousness. Visual artwork elicits dialogue and provides the opportunity and the place where knowledge can be gradually constructed by the exchange of ideas, by taking a reflective stance toward each other's constructs, and by acknowledging the power of multiple perspectives for negotiating a better understanding of subject matter (Forman & Fyfe, 1998). When visual artworks are used for developing critical thinking the learner has the role of the researcher and teachers act as facilitators, inspiring them to develop their ideas (Hubard, 2011). Dewey emphasized that critical thinking may be promoted by any school subject if teachers base their teaching on critical reflection over various challenging issues presented for investigation. (Kokkidou, 2013).

Art-viewing that fosters guided dialogues about art can promote important skills in the development of critical thinking, such as observation, analyzing, reasoning, and openness to multiple perspectives. The process of making sense of an artwork implies some sort of logical reasoning. The main advantage visual artworks hold against written texts, is that visual artworks present themselves as physical entities that share the same space as we do. There is a certain sense of immediacy when viewers observe an artwork. Visual artwork is embodied in images and is being perceived as a material thing that can potentially be touched. All of these characteristics lead to a physical, sensorial, and often emotional engagement. Visual art uniquely acts in engaging and integrating various ways of understanding. Thus, being exposed to visual artwork may engage one's reason, feelings, emotions, and motor responses (Hubard, 2011).

Dialogue that artworks trigger, the one which questions the norms of the society, offer new perspectives to the students to connect with current beliefs, this perspective further expands critical thinking skills and reasoning (Lampert, 2006). Moreover, investigation of the components and principles of an artwork is a method of organizing visual information. Observing components like line, shape,

form, texture, space, color, and worth including the basics like balance, contrast, shifts, emphasis, pattern, proportion, and unity is highly beneficial in promoting long-lasting skills of deeply observing visual images, thus giving them a more thoughtful explanation. Understanding, responding and reasoning about visual arts heightens the engagement of students regarding critical thinking skills such as assessment, clarification, reflection, and use of perspective. Critical reasoning intensely focuses on thoughtful and skilled use of ideas, methods, and materials. Critiquing arts entails a close analysis of information and patterns, collecting proof, and using specific criteria for evaluation and decision-making (Cornett, 2011). Visual artworks used in critical thinking development teach learners that many aspects among which, the works of art, do not offer one unique and correct answer. Individuals can develop their conclusions by having the freedom to perceive in a personal way and make their investigations (Vitulli & Santoli, 2013).

Methodologies based on visual arts should lean towards collective and grass-roots engagement. Such a perspective is empowering since it offers the opportunity for people to come together and mutually develop critical consciousness by participating in problem-posing dialogues to determine underlying factors to their problems and organizing effective social actions (Freire 1970). Methods that have a visual basis promote learning processes and empowerment through collective visualization of ideas and feelings. Visual elements are powerful for self-expression elements in specific cultural contexts (Eisner & Day, 2004). Moreover, the dialogue exercises critical analysis and develops an in-depth understanding of individuals' relationships with their social realities.

Interventions that rely on arts can assist in changing social beliefs through heightened social awareness concerning a problem. According to Pavlidis (2015), arts offers alternative perspectives of the human condition that determine others to mobilize and transform their social actions. Moreover, Cranton (2006) suggests that critical consciousness happens through having various views and advocates art-based activities based to foster transformative learning and heighten consciousness. On the other side of the argument, having contact with an art event it may not trigger a transformative experience for all the people exposed. This may be due to their anterior level of consciousness or failure to fully comprehend the context because of several social and cultural factors. All of which will impact the experience and further interpretation of the art event (Madsen, 2018). According to Giroux et al. (1999), to help learners discover the power of arts, teachers can find effective to use a pedagogy that encourages reflective self-examination of attitudes, values, and beliefs within the historical and cultural critique.

#### **4. Conclusions**

For a long time, critical thinking represents one of the most aimed to educational goals. As a higher-order thinking skill, its influence overreaches the

academic field, being an extremely relevant skill in everyday life. Critical abilities or skills may help individuals to discern between various types of information, inaccuracies, distortions, and even false information. Without the capacity to analyze inaccuracies, distortions, and misinformation individual freedom might be limited. The main concern in the field of critical thinking is to find the most efficient manner for encouraging people to carefully analyse and evaluate assumptions validity. Therefore, critical thinking advocates emphasize that all individuals need to be more critical, and this could have a general humanized effect manifested in all social groups and classes. In general, critical thinking and critical consciousness suggest that by helping people become more critical in thinking and action, teachers can help individuals to perceive the world in a more objective way. Therefore, critical education can increase individual freedom and broaden the scope of human possibilities (Burbules & Beck, 1999).

The fact that visual art contributes to a profound understanding and appreciation of social aspects represents a widely held position (Leshnoff, 1995). Hence, visual art may play a particular role in developing critical thinking. Due to its richness in images, visual art that addresses social and historical issues may create the opportunity for learners to exercise dialogue and critical analysis. Visual art can include a considerable number of pieces that address current issues and may offer many possibilities for exploring social, historical, and political topics resulting in an in-depth understanding of individuals' relationships with their social realities. The visual stimulus may serve as an open-ended prompt that engages the learners in a genuine discussion about societal issues (Rawlinson, Wood, Osterman, & Sullivan, 2007). In order to stimulate critical thinking, teachers can greatly benefit from visual artworks which can generate many types of questions and various dilemmas. This will open the communication field for critical analysis and interpretations that may be based upon internal evidence and expressive content in the artwork itself.

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