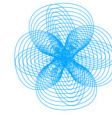


FOR READING AT LEISURE Working in a Field of Tensions 4: Exclusions Engendered by Forms of Open Learning

"In this way, certain ways of seeing art are [...] taken for granted and unconsciously recognized, commended and encouraged in those who have already mastered them. The knowledge that is often necessary for this comprehension and the means and techniques through which that knowledge is acquired are not transmitted, and the people who have not already unconsciously mastered them, and for precisely that reason usually do not dare to ask about them, are disadvantaged in the educational process." (Sternfeld 2005)

In contemporary educational psychology, learning is defined as modifying and acquiring new modes of behaviour and attitudes through experience and/or practice. This concept of learning is broader than the typical notion of school instruction and the targeted transmission of content. Unless it is the result of physical change, illness or something similar, every long-term modification of behaviour or attitude is seen as learning-based. "We are also talking about learning fear and security, of acquiring likes and dislikes, of the formation of habits, acquiring the capacity for planned action and thinking in terms of problem-solving." (Edelmann 1993, p. 5).

Today, the prevailing understanding of learning processes is anchored in the constructivist theory of learning (Reich 2006; Harms, Krombass 2008). In the constructivist view, learning is less a result of instruction than a self-directed process of meaning construction. The acquisition of knowledge and skills is seen as inextricably linked to the production of meaning. This process is circular and based on agency: a specific experience leads to the analysis and the development of abstract concepts. The application of the concepts generates further experience, causing the cycle to begin again (Kolb, Fry 1975).¹ This occurs both in individuals on their own and through interaction (co-constructivist learning) with others. Social relationships and emotions are seen as important factors in the learning process. John Howard Falk and Lynn Dierking, scholars specialising in learning, see learning as an individual's dialogue with the environment for the purpose of orientation. This dialogue is influenced by the interactions among the individual's personal, sociocultural and physical contexts and by their temporalities (contextual learning). Thus, learning, knowledge and experience are always tied to a place, i.e. situated. Learning-process outcomes vary according to the circumstances and conditions under which they take place. From this perspective, the creation of environments allowing multi-layered experiences and ties takes on greater weight relative to the question of what contents mediators intend to convey. The knowledge that learners bring to a situation is deemed just as relevant as the knowledge teachers plan to transfer. This means that the learning situation is based on collective determination and



participation. The teachers see themselves more as guides than as instructors and are always learners as well as teachers. The criteria for “right” or “wrong” blur – failure to achieve targets and unexpected outcomes are no longer considered negative or gratuitous, but instead as experiences which can lead to new movements of learning (Spychiger 2008).

This approach to learning sees cultural mediation, its stakeholders, settings and contents as having special potential. Falk and Dierking, for example, describe the museum as an ideal setting for open learning arrangements, emphasizing exploration, self-direction and independent actions (Falk, Dierking 2000). The psychologist, Howard Gardner, who developed the concept of multiple intelligences (Gardner 2002), a highly influential concept in the field of cultural mediation, sees engagement with art as offering an opportunity to support multiple ways of learning, including ways not focused on linguistic and mathematical intelligence (see also → [Project Zero](#) at Harvard University, which has been researching learning in the arts since 1967). More recent research has looked at the logics associated with the agency of artists involved in cultural mediation and their self-images (→ [Pringle 2002](#), → [2009](#)). These studies reveal correspondences between constructivist learning concepts and the attitudes and approaches of contemporary artistic production. Artists work as “reflective practitioners” (Schoen 1983), in tentative, explorative ways, drawing on their experience. They seldom aspire to have their work be universal. Instead, they usually see it as situated and context-dependent. Artists’ work question ostensibly fixed notions of right and wrong and view failure and unexpected outcomes as productive events, sometimes also as conditions for the creative process (Schmücker 2003). In a 2006 text based on their own experiences, artists Seraphina Lenz and Stella Geppert attempt to systematize the differences between artistic processes and school learning in a model project on arts mediation (Geppert, Lenz 2006):²

→ [Project Zero](#) <http://www.pz.harvard.edu> [30.11.2012]

→ [Pringle 2002](#) http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/publication_archive/we-did-stir-things-up-the-role-of-artists-in-sites-for-learning [30.11.2012]; see Resource Pool MFV0401.pdf

→ [Pringle 2009](#) <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/artist-educator-examining-relationships-between-art-practice-and> [30.11.2012];

An artistic process

Learning processes in arts mediation

An artistic process unfolds independently and in a self-motivated manner.

Learning processes in arts mediation are initiated by the teacher.

Artistic processes can have an exploratory quality and may therefore include detours and cul-de-sacs. A predefined objective cannot usually be pursued linearly.

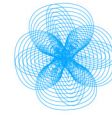
The structure put in place by the school requires an efficient use of time.

Artistic processes involve their own time structures, which are appropriate to the process.

Responsibility for the learning process lies with the teacher. That teacher provides the ideas, the material, the expertise and the time structure.

Artistic processes require communication with oneself and others as well as sensitivity in perception of oneself and others.

Feedback on the work takes the form of an assessment by the teacher in the form of marks.



Juxtapositions such as these, though highly illustrative, function only at the cost of enormous reduction with respect to content. To provide some examples, one might point to the economic and temporal restrictions of artistic project work and contrast them with the long-term nature and continuity of learning in schools, which might better support the initiation of open search processes. Moreover, one ought to note that project work and “self-organized learning” have taken a permanent place in the repertoire of many schools, and in fact now sometimes on the list of required formats and methods (→ [Patzner et al. 2008](#)). Moreover, the claim that artistic work necessarily engenders greater sensitivity in artists’ perception of themselves and others appears somewhat romanticized in view of the tough selection mechanisms, the pressure exerted on artists to assert themselves and cultivate their public images and the level of competition in the artistic field. In addition, it is quite possible that highly product-oriented artists would be less flexible in their approach to learners than would a teacher with a more process-oriented attitude. Thus it is not the professional background, but primarily an “artist”-oriented attitude (as described by Pringle, see above) which is important in the creation of learning situations. This has also been recognized by researchers in education and social sciences. That field has undergone a “performative shift” in the last twenty years: increasingly, artistic methods are included in methodological array and are being studied with a view to their potential for pedagogical activities (→ [Mackenzie 2011](#); Springay 2007; → [Wulf, Zirfas 2007](#), p. 7 ff.). On the other side of the coin, the arts have been taking an “educational turn”: one which is manifested in the increasing numbers of interdisciplinary projects using pedagogic methods, analysing the conditions of knowledge production with artistic means and interacting with participants from the widest variety of groups and individuals (→ [Podesva 2007](#)). Given these overlaps, maintaining a rigid separation between “art” on the one side and “learning” on the other no longer seems appropriate. It is difficult to draw a clear boundary between cultural mediation, art and general education. Drama education can serve as one illustrative example here: as an occupational field it has its own history as a discipline and is constantly evolving. In its more sophisticated varieties, such as those oriented toward → [post-dramatic theatre](#), it is difficult or impossible to distinguish between it and theatrical arts, which for its part has appropriated pedagogic and participative processes for its own uses (see for example the projects of Vienna group → [Wenn es soweit ist](#)).

In some cases, funding-level institutions and organizations have reacted to the interferences among “cultural mediation”, “art” and formal education. One example is the → [Projektfond Kulturelle Bildung](#) [Cultural Mediation Project Fund], created in 2008 by the Berlin Senate and coordinated by an independent office organizationally situated between city-state’s departments of cultural affairs and education and social affairs.

→ [Patzner et al. 2008](#) <http://www.schulheft.at/fileadmin/1PDF/schulheft-130.pdf> [21.2.2013]; see Resource Pool MFV0403.pdf

→ [Mackenzie 2011](#) <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1437> [21.2.2013]; see Resource Pool MFV0404.pdf

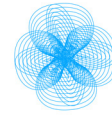
→ [Wulf, Zirfas 2007](#) <http://www.beltz.de/fileadmin/beltz/leseproben/9783407320742.pdf> [21.2.2013]; see Resource Pool MFV0407.pdf

→ [Podesva 2007](#) <http://fillip.ca/content/a-pedagogical-turn> [14.10.2012]; see Resource Pool MFV0405.pdf

→ [post-dramatic theatre](#) see Glossary

→ [Wenn es soweit ist](#) <http://www.wennessoweitist.com> [13.9.2012]

→ [Projekt fund Cultural mediation](#) <http://www.kulturprojekte-berlin.de/en/cultural-education.html> [16.4.2014]

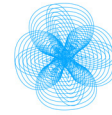


Other examples are the offices set up by Swiss cantons to coordinate co-operation between schools, artists and cultural institutions, which are situated partially in the cantonal education departments and partially in the cultural services.³

→ *Freie Kunstschulen* <http://www.bjke.de> [12.9.2012]

Education drawing on the arts and about them is described repeatedly as holding out hope because of the potential, described above, that it is thought to have. This takes place against the backdrop of crises in the education system and the related challenges questioning its modernity and above all its inclusiveness and whether it serves different learning types. Germany's → *Freie Kunstschulen* [Free Art Schools], for instance, emerged as a reaction to the "education catastrophe" diagnosed in that country in the 1960s (Picht 1964). The Free Art Schools offered (and still do) unaccredited, extra-curricular "free" activities for children and young people in all artistic domains, though in the early days dance, music and theatre were the main emphases. One of the key justifications for the schools' existence was the critique of an insufficiently artistic orientation, excessive pressure to achieve and lack of opportunities for "self-development and creative activity" in regular schools, for which the art schools were intended to compensate (Erhart et al. 1980, p. 15).

Presumably, programmes identifying themselves as "free" and which are designed to promote personal development would have great appeal to a wide variety of users. In fact, however, the free art schools have never really succeeded consistently in living up to their stated aim of being open to all classes and age groups (they are certainly not alone in this respect). Generally, their programmes are used by people belonging to the middle class. This contradiction was recognized early on, for instance, in a study written back in 1980 (Kathen 1980). Looking at the Königsborn district of the city of Unna in Germany's North Rhein-Westphalia, the study describes the infighting and clashing interests associated with the establishment of an art school. At the beginning, young people who had previously spent most of their free time in the streets worked with cultural workers to renovate a building to house a free art school. After this collective process, though, conflict erupted. The ideas about art mediation held by the people giving the courses proved to be incompatible with the interests of the young people involved. This led to the school's closure, and an official protest by the young people. The study's author, herself an instructor at the school, undertook an evaluation of this conflict-ridden experience. To place it in context, she also looked at twelve other art schools in the study. Von Kathen's conclusion is extremely critical: work in the art schools for young people draws heavily on elitist concepts associated with a bourgeois definition of culture rather than attempting to develop alternatives. The schools produce exclusion because their programme structures are unable to retain the interests of children and young people from a variety of classes. Despite its age, this study has lost almost none of its relevance.



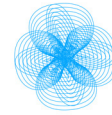
These days, one hears ever more criticism of an unreservedly positive assessment of open forms of learning and “self-directed learning”, which are typical of participative-oriented cultural mediation – the same forms of learning which have been described as constituting its great potential. Michael Sertl, for instance, demonstrates that such forms of learning are based on middle-class parenting practices. They build on abilities and linguistic and behavioural codes which middle class children have already acquired at home. For that reason these forms are most effective for those children in particular and benefit primarily their “self development” (→ [Sertl 2007](#), p. 2). To assert that these forms of learning will be beneficial for everyone is to take the lifestyles and learning styles of the middle class as a universal standard, to → [naturalize](#) them. While Sertl’s remarks are primarily concerned with regular schools, similar objections have been raised in the context of cultural mediation by the arts mediator and theorist Nora Sternfeld (Sternfeld 2005). Sternfeld focuses on the correlations frequently found in cultural mediation between the “call for independent exploration and creative autonomy” and the idea of “natural talent”, which should be developed in each individual separately. This approach is viewed in cultural mediation circles as particularly un-elitist (Sternfeld 2005, p. 22). Referring to Bourdieu (Bourdieu 2001), Sternfeld points out that “talent” itself is a social construct. Researchers have shown that people who are considered “spontaneous”, “creative” and “imaginative” are those whose childhood and socialization took place in middle-class environments. However, both the transfer of specialized knowledge and exercises for practicing techniques of knowledge acquisition tend to be seen in the progressive part of the professional field of cultural mediation as authoritarian, uncreative and out-dated.

It appears, then, that working in open, explorative learning settings is also fraught with contradictions for cultural mediation (again, for those who see cultural mediation as a critical practice aspiring to equality of access). On the one hand, the special potential of cultural mediation lies in developing this kind of learning setting. Correspondences exist between the arts, cultural mediation’s central subject matters, and the pedagogical methods based on open learning settings. They do not involve formalized performance assessment, which potentially promotes process-orientation and openness with respect to outcome. On the other hand though, open learning settings run a risk of producing precisely the types of exclusions which cultural mediation is intended and committed to combating. The study written by Dagmar von Kathen in 1980 provided an answer to the question of how to deal with this contradiction when she criticized the relatively uncritical mode and manner of engaging with art in the free schools. The children and young adults were set exercises to train them in the → [love of art](#) there.

→ [Sertl 2007](#) <http://homepage.univie.ac.at/michael.sertl/OffenesLernen.pdf> [21.2.2013]; see Resource Pool MFV0406.pdf

→ [naturalize](#) see Glossary

→ [love of art](#) see Glossary

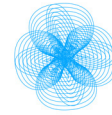


“Yet engagement with art must take the form of critical analysis of art in order for it to be productive in terms of emancipatory aesthetic education. Not every artistic statement is automatically positive [...]. Part of relating to art is understanding and integrating into oneself its societal function, the social position of artists, their high degree of individualization etc. [...]” (Kathen 1980, p. 155).

→ [transformative function](#)
see Text 5.5

Von Kathen also suggests that cultural mediation should have the analysis of the societal function of art as part of its subject matter. That corresponds to the approach advocated by Sternfeld, which requires that institutional exclusions be openly discussed in cultural mediation. Covering them up, she argues, has the effect of legitimizing them, particularly when working with marginalized groups (Sternfeld 2005, p. 31). This is undoubtedly an important component of cultural mediation as a critical practice, and it is feasible in any situation, at least to some degree, given an interest and willingness to do so on the mediator's part. Merely raising the issue of exclusions verbally will not counteract them however. The critique of open forms of learning itself is a matter of privileges. For that reason, critics like Sertl (Sertl 2007, p. 1) are not calling for the elimination of open forms of learning, but rather, insisting that cultural mediators maintain an awareness of the potential of these forms to produce exclusion while using them pedagogically rather than simply taking them on board with euphoric naivety. For cultural mediation aiming at this type of reflexivity, one would first have to develop a sceptical distance from one's own pedagogical “truths”. For instance, cultural mediation for an exhibition which, in the belief that it is fundamentally anti-elitist and democratic, has participants seek out their “favourite picture” and “free associate” with it, might scrutinize this practice to see what can be “freely associated” and expressed in a group situation in a museum without violating the unwritten rules of conduct – or whose associations the mediator finds “interesting”. Knowledge acquisition techniques can themselves be made the subject of education in any branch, instead of placing one's faith in the pedagogical “intuition” of education staff and relying too heavily on the self-direction of learners. This assumes however, that the people providing the cultural mediation are professional enough to have the ability to make their knowledge about methods available to participants – i.e. to present it in a systematic fashion and make it accessible both verbally and through exercises.⁴

Sternfeld also calls on mediators and ultimately cultural institutions to actively express solidarity for the groups and their concerns: “this cultural mediation would see itself as also involving opening up the institutions for political practice and organization” (Sternfeld 2005, p. 32). Serious attempts to combat institutional exclusions would therefore lead to cultural mediation with a → [transformative function](#) for the institutions.



- 1 Other authors have criticized various aspects of the learning circle model put forth by Kolb and Fry and developed their own, more complex models. Due to its introductory nature, this text can offer only a brief sketch of the complex field of learning theories and the conflicting positions within it.
- 2 KLiP ("Kunst und Lernen im Prozess" [Art and learning in the process] took place over the course of three years in various different schools in Berlin).
- 3 A list of all of these coordination offices is available at → <http://www.kulturvermittlung.ch/fr/infotheque/liens/suisse/services-de-coordination.html> [25.1.2013].
- 4 In the postcolonial view, the devaluation of forms of learning like imitation, copying, or learning by memorization supports the colonial claim of Western superiority over non-Western learning approaches (Spivak 2012, p. 46).

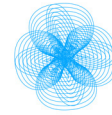
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