

EURASIAN JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

<http://www.eurasianpublications.com>

‘WEB-ISM’: A NEW ART MOVEMENT FOR E-GENERATION CHILDREN

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Abstract

If we as educators want to make a change, it's high time we take the bull by the horns and realistically address and debate current issues related not only to art context but to art pedagogy. In this new information age, an innovative e-collaborative project focusing on education *in* and *through* arts, designed, continually supported and revised by the associated university departments, can work as a medium for developing cognitive skills that carry over into other areas. Among the main aims of such a project, one could name a few general ones in the abstract, which will be expanded and explained in the full paper: It will offer participants the abilities to reflect, to link information from diverse subjects and sources, to generate ideas; to honour various traditions, to recognize historical achievements and enjoy new technologies via arts, to respect different cultures and accept various points of view; to testify and connect opinions, to develop higher-order thinking skills in students, to work and communicate creatively outside the boundaries of a single class, a single school, a single country; to draw reasoned conclusions and grasp the connections that lead to creative solutions. This special @rt-platform, that we intend to 'build', can act as a kind of unifying force, as a 'cultural bridge', with arts being the key to accept and respect the 'other', to understand the world's cultures and civilization's legacies. This alone can be the main aim, the reason, in a general attempt of working together in establishing world's peace.

Keywords: Education through Art, Multicultural Education, Online Education, Life-Long Learning, Art and Culture, Teacher Training, Collective Pedagogy

1. Introduction

The 21st century brought with it unexpected and immense social changes. European countries struggle to renovate their aging schooling systems. However, undergoing reformation in order to prepare children to lead productive lives seems to be moving slowly compared to the galloping rhythms of the socio-economic changes. At the same time, "we are witnessing the offer of a wider range of 'educational' services for the general public, varying from open lectures", special seminars, continue & online education, publications, cultural activities etc., "all of which go beyond mere entertainment towards a free choice learning and shaping of cultural identities" (Xanthoudaki, 2002, p.6)¹. Due to the current climate of austerity, growth in cultural education is

¹ M. Xanthoudaki has opened widely the 'discussion' between various experts and sciences, through her role as a project scientific coordinator in Fondazione Museo Nazionale della Scienza e della Tecnologia 'Leonardo da Vinci' (Milano, Italy), on how we can make museums important teaching centers (pp. 1-15). See Xanthoudaki (ed), 2002.

threatened and all alternative learning methods that promote the general expansion of the curricula (including *education through art* and *special education*) lose ground.

2. Education through Art

Although we seem to step backwards and return in acquiring the basics of life, I believe we would all agree that the old wisdom “man cannot live on bread alone” remains in effect. People deprived of any economic power or social advantages continue to create achingly beautiful ‘appeals for something better’ by any means available.

Far from being merely an adornment, arts and culture in general are rightly claimed and accepted -at least in theory- as an essential factor in a complete and round education. Arts offer a ‘natural’, diverse and global vocabulary of symbols, images and cues. *Education in arts* contributes in learning to convey ideas, feelings and emotions by creating and performing, while *education through art* -an insufficiently used and developed, but highly acclaimed discipline with roots in the fields of pedagogy, anthropology, psychology, sociology, museology and communication- can enhance learning in other fields.

The myriad reasons why arts and culture matter are vast, multifaceted and substantiated with convincing arguments over the last decades (Bell, 2011)². Art is not meant only to be used in order to get an aesthetic high. It is necessary to push boundaries, incite or resist social prejudice, conceal or unmask social anxieties, encourage new ways of thinking ourselves and the others, communicate and respect, celebrate or lament every human condition. It provokes general knowledge, inspires, motivates, sparks changes and critical thinking or even disturbs and certainly opens our eyes to worlds other than our own.

As a form of visual representation art can be more individualistic, less constrained by rules and regulations than the verbal, and thus more allied to man’s natural state as a gatherer of sensory information. The catalytic role of technology and the growing interest and demand for web-based learning, along with the ever-growing presence of social networks and the instantaneous spread of information and images, necessitates art as a fundamental visual and theoretical counterpart to everyday life. Art yields communicative effectiveness and cultural resonance is one major criterion for it.

3. ‘Web-ism’³ Using the @rt-platform: Aims and Scope

Traditional learning processes, influenced by social-economic changes, are in a crisis, and societies are aware of their defaults. Changes in communication as well as in learning theories allow fortunately for more effective and joyful collaborative work.

The proposed innovative @rt-platform is conceived and materialized through the new communication modality of the WorldWideWeb. It goes beyond the linear transmission of knowledge towards an interactive user oriented teaching and learning. The idea was not born ‘out of the blue’. It has been tested and designed over the past few years and is based mainly on non verbal source of information. Not intended for a handful of experts, the variably organised target groups are quite open: individual adult learners, educators, pupils, university students, parents etc. The internet will be used as both the communicative bridge and a distance learning tool, while visual arts will stay in conjunction with the verbal and literary ones, as well as with other sciences, in order to achieve the opening of multidisciplinary functions and to build bridges of knowledge in between the various fields.

The users are considered as citizens and community members of their local culture and at the same time of the global one. As a matter of fact, a core aim of the project will enhance users’ awareness of cultural heritage and to help them establish a regular relationship in between themselves and various cultures. Diversity should rather be seen positively as plurality of contents

² Among the relevant essays on the subject, the article entitled “*One conversation and seven questions for talking about art in early childhood settings*” is particularly interesting. See (Bell, 2011).

³ To avoid misinterpretations, by using the term ‘web-ism’ I don’t wish to refer to the art movement of digitally created artworks shared through the internet (Cyberculture).

that can be used by educators as well as individual learners, who wish to exploit and utilize local and worldwide available resources, especially through opportunities for developing synergies.

Obviously, the scope will not merely be to showcase important artworks, pieces of music, literature museum collections and getting users to know them and learn *through* them. The @rt-platform is intended to act as a kind of unifying force, as a 'cultural bridge', with the arts being the key to accept and respect the 'other'; to understand the world's cultures and civilization's legacies. This alone can be an important reason for the project's existence, fitting into a more general attempt of working together in upholding world's peace.

'Web-ism' matches tradition and innovation, a challenge the results of which are already in many ways obvious and evident from the wide use of internet and other educational portals. Following a non linear learning process that minimizes the risks of a passive absorption of information, the @rt-platform will seek to activate the user's own knowledge and skills. Rightly argued by Hooper-Greenhill, "the concept of 'education' has been deepened and widened, as it has been acknowledged that teaching and learning is not limited to formal institutions but takes place throughout life, in countless informal locations. Formal educational processes are only a small, and not always very effective, part of those learning processes that are necessary throughout life, and which involve both the acquisition of knowledge and experience, and also the use of existing skills and knowledge" (Hooper Greenhill, 2002, p.2; Lucas, 1987).

E-educational portals, along with virtual museums and art-collections gain importance quietly, but steadily, over the 'real' thing in the sense that they provide a level of comfort, free or low cost accessibility, that due to austerity, long distances, age, physical and other limitations can hardly be reached by any other medium. In creating and setting the goals and scopes of the proposed project, the difficulties and inflexibilities, deadlocks and finite that traditional educational institutions are facing in their educational role were thoroughly discussed and taken into account. Moreover, special attention was given in solving common practical issues, like difficulties in enrollment, age or other physical limits, social restrictions, certification, online assistance etc. Computers allow a personalised process of research and self-organised education, adjusted to various needs and to different levels of understanding and sophistication. Naturally, this enables higher grade of participation and interaction. In the assured personal environment one feels safer and more confident to share ideas, discuss experiences, ask questions and take part in discussions or even add information.

Among the advantages are free choice and use of diverse sources, personalised pace, learning according to the individual's prerequisites, ability to interpret cultural phenomena in a multiethnic, multi-linguistic environment and to extend one's interests and curiosity beyond the obvious; the immediate reality. Users can make their own evaluation and choices of what they want to regard in more or less depth.

To sum up some of the main general objectives, the @rt-platform will:

- Improve training practice and trace the quality of school teaching and *learning through the arts*.
- Become a regular teaching aid, encouraging systematic school collaborations through the development of mutual experiences with the help of familiar cultural institutions (i.e. museums)
- Increase the realisation of cross-curriculum, cross-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary learning; encourage common educational projects; identify the already acquired knowledge and experience and stimulate interaction by adding information or commenting via personal experiences; discuss familiarities or differences in meaning between various traditions and cultures; motivate social interaction within other members-users.
- Aid in developing skills for self-identification within social groups, for critical participation and respect of social differences as well as of cultural solidarity.
- Raise and strengthen awareness of our shared cultural heritage. Help people understand the real meaning of the famous cultural 'mantra': "*to care means to share*". In order to care, one needs to learn the 'other'. In that case the big stranger is our own civilisation. It's really oxymoron that, although the spread of information has risen enormously due to

mass and social media, the worldwide web etc., many people still don't know how and where to find, use and communicate information and ideas about art and culture.

- Promote cultural friendships without barriers and expand global consciousness by encouraging collaboration between cultural and educational institutions.

Finally, an unspoken wish is to increase the number of visitors in museums other cultural institutions or events as well as to encourage access and use of their 'virtual profiles'. Consequently, this can reinforce museums' and arts' educational policy, which will be improved through e.g. the systematic presentation of thematic areas or special subjects as an answer to the users' (adults, students, teachers etc.) demanded interactive answers, reactions and additions.

4. A special Portal: Educators and Pupils

Children in the 21st century are already facing a diverse mixture of people in the classroom, a phenomenon which will continue at their future life and is well accepted by them on worldwide social networks. Cultural activities and the arts are especially strong among the young (through videogames, music, painting, etc.). Young learners are strongly motivated and easily convinced of the immediate usefulness of culture as extra-curricular resource that helps facilitating learning. In that context, the increasing 'use' of arts, museums, traditions etc. in formal education emphasizes the need for developing a closer relationship in between the various cultures and for considering them as a fundamental resource for teaching and learning (Figure 1). The @rt-platform can make this relationship more close, effective, easily and individually adapted to the needs and prerequisites of an individual pupil, a team of students or a whole class.



Figure 1. Third graders with iPads in the European Painting Galleries at The Metropolitan Museum of Art (Photo courtesy S. Brudnick).

A single historical and cultural dimension hardly finds consensus within the audiences anymore, the young ones in particular. Art as learning resource operates differently, compared to those traditionally used at school, and is a magnificent enrichment, that most young people are not aware of and are happily to find out. Starting points are the cultural objects, phenomena and questions on which the pupil builds his personalised itinerary of investigating and understanding, opening his/her former knowledge. The informal character of the learning process as well as the

available opportunities for encountering original objects have an impact on cognitive and affective development of students, who are freed of restrictions and rules and find the environment engaging and stimulating to learn and at the same time to add, share and argue. Art offers them visual and not only stimuli and arouses interest for further study and investigation. Functioning as motivation an image of an artwork, for example, counts a thousand words and pupils gain fast and more effectively, compared to traditional educational methods, knowledge on various issues.

Careful viewing, asking about and responding to artworks, cultural objects or phenomena encourage sensory engagement, meaning-making learning and acculturation. Furthermore, "communication becomes the central medium through which teachers and children extend their art encounters from the enjoyable, sociable and playful into ways of making sense of their cultural worlds" (Hooper Greenhill, 2002, p.150).



Figure 2. Teacher Kim Blackmur (at left) from Ithaca's South Hill Elementary works with her third grade students in the Museum's visible storage gallery, using the HFJArtGuide app on their classroom iPads as part of the OMNI Africa unit.

When a new topic is introduced in class, the @rt-platform can motivate pupils to search in various directions and attempt multi-disciplinary connections, while indirectly can conduct them in obtaining knowledge in other issues too (social, economic, linguistic etc.). With the aid of technology and intriguing stimuli it aims to raise curiosity, helping students to develop questions and search for answers. (Figure 2) They are encouraged to use their already acquired general and specific-discipline based knowledge in order to interpret cultural phenomena in and out their

own physical, geographical and cultural environment. Thus, multicultural education is reinforced and young learners understand that there is not only one truth, but various interpretations and options of viewing and 'experiencing culture are possible and welcome.

Teachers and pupils are regarded as a particularly important user and a critical factor for the creation and enrichment of web based projects. To name just a few reasons for this special interaction, one has to specify that the @rt-platform will:

- Offer a specialized database and solutions related to understanding of concepts, objects etc. and propose new learning methods, not formerly adopted in class.
- Reinforce the quality of the existing interactive workshops, devise and realise new ones on a regular basis.
- Increase and strengthen collaborations between universities and schools, as well as between schools and cultural organisations (e.g. Museums).
- Become a centre for professional development, offering important suggestions to teachers for the adequate preparation in the delivery of a subject in a competent and confident way that can encourage the creative development of their pupils. Through the @rt-platform they can seek information (i.e. advise concerning the scientific content, specialized material etc.) and support with practical issues when deciding to visit a museum with their class, take part in or organize an event. Due to socio-economic reasons major changes have taken place in teacher vocational training. The @rt-platform intends to form a positive and 'culminating' ground for active participation, offering educators a regular chance to keep their knowledge and methodology updated.
- Disseminate at all levels (local, national, international) the cultural experience and initiate common projects.
- Work with special groups on themes of common, multicultural interest, using various resources (the arts, tradition, literature etc.) as well as new technologies.

The research team will focus towards the development of activities for schools, taking in consideration the curricula, the cultural environment and the inter-cultural components. These suggestions can be carried out also in collaboration with museums, cultural sites and institutions in their locality. The content will remain "open" so that all users along with the trained educators will keep on adding equivalent information, experiences, ideas, local traditions, related objects, links or information in various languages etc. The material will be used as a basis for various educational projects by any teacher interested in working on those topics. A part of the worksheets and ideas will be based on curricula requirements (various countries & languages) and will be easily accessible, so that in collaborative projects or when visiting other countries pupils and teachers will be able to communicate effectively.

After all, as it has already been said, a major scope is to build an international school network, that will engage informally on common topics, aiding thus in the exchange of experience and knowledge regarding the cultural phenomena. Dissemination of these collaborative projects between schools, cultural institutions and universities will be promoted not only in order to make such work known to the territory, but mainly to encourage wider participation from groups and individuals worldwide (cultural interaction and sharing) and to offer its results for use by other realities.

5. Continuing Research

This project should be seen as a way for widening and enriching our already long experience with educational programmes for museums and schools and sets the ground for exchanging expertise between institutions and scholars working in the field. Our research goal is to exploit the unique pedagogical potential and aid of the cultural phenomena and their use as a teaching and learning resource. Moreover, the @rt-platform represents a tool through which we can contribute reinforcing the importance of museums, art and culture as educational resources for pupil learning and teachers' professional development as well as parents' awareness in that field; We intend to build an interactive relationship between the various 'users' of culture and research reveals that this potential increases when opportunities are offered for linking the users' cultural

experiences with their everyday lives, work etc. Meanwhile, emphasis will be given on the role of Faculties of Education as important sectors in teacher training, in proposing new innovative methods and learning theories, as well as in offering opportunities for life-long, online, multicultural education.

The research committee and the operating teams will consist of persons from different countries, an asset allowing the examination of issues from various perspectives that will form later suggestions to be used in different realities. The @rt-platform will be constantly evaluated and improved through open dialogue between all users and educators in order to achieve a more creative and personified use. Opportunities for online discussions and sharing of experiences between the research committee and the users will be offered, contributing thus to the setting of new standards by which to operate more effectively.

6. Conclusion

Humankind lives in a vastly altered, modern, super modern or even post modern- world or indeed in multiple worlds: the virtual and the real one simultaneously. Culture forms a huge 'chain' keeping all eras and all humans, without doubt, constantly in contact. Those who ignore the past are doomed to repeat its mistakes. In these dangerous and difficult days we are more than ever in need of arts that help us understand who we are in all levels, where we come from and where we are going. Jonathan Day in his book *Robert Frank's 'The Americans': The Art of Documentary Photography* (Day, 2011) argues that this might have always been the point of art.

The @rt-platform, in the context of 'web-ism', is intended to become a stimulating space. It will enhance our understanding of artistic and cultural variety and promote as fundamental teaching curricula *through* the arts. It will offer participants the abilities to reflect, to link information from diverse subjects and sources and enjoy new technologies via arts, to generate ideas and accept various points of view; to testify and connect opinions, to develop higher-order thinking skills in students, to honour various traditions, to recognize historical achievements and respect different cultures, to work and communicate creatively outside the boundaries of a single class, a single school, a single country; to draw reasoned conclusions and grasp the connections that lead to creative solutions.

If we as educators want to make a change, it's high time we take the bull by the horns and realistically address and debate current issues related not only to art context but to art pedagogy. In this new information age, an innovative e-collaborative project focusing on education *in* and *through* art, designed, continually supported and revised by associated university departments, can work as a medium for developing cognitive skills that carry over into other areas. The challenge will be how to initiate, inform or negotiate pathways that can empower these kinds of experience and dissemination of expertise effectively. All these seem easier to say than to do, but *hope dies last*.

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