

The classroom as a work of art¹

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ABSTRACT:

The “Philosophy for Children” program has different goals, one of them being to foster creative thinking among students. The educational approach of the program is designed to transform the classroom into an innovative and philosophical environment that encourages students to develop creative thinking. At the beginning of this article, I discuss a concept of art as a creative activity that requires strong active involvement by the person who creates the work of art as well as the person who perceives, observes or enjoys that work. Moreover, we also consider art not to be an activity exclusive of those we call artists, but rather we contend that all of us have the capacity to make works of art. In this light, one of the most important goals of our educational practice is to transform the class itself into a work of art in which all participants bring to bear the best of themselves, thereby making a valuable educational experience that demands from them and from the teacher the practice of complex and high-level thinking: a critical, creative, and caring way of thinking.

Key words: art, work of art, performance, creativity, community of philosophical inquiry

INTRODUCTION

The educational proposal of doing philosophy with children in the classroom, from kindergarten through primary school and high school, started in the early 1970s, in the USA, with the seminal work of Matthew Lipman and Anne Sharp in Montclair State College (currently Montclair State University). Since then, this endeavor has been successfully developed worldwide. At first, Lipman focused on the development of thinking skills, close to the critical-thinking movement. However, he later offered a richer concept: first, high-order thinking included critical and creative thinking, and a few years later, caring thinking; finally, in 2003 he moved to multidimensional thinking. Together with Ann Sharp, and in the mood of Dewey’s philosophy of education, they established a strong relationship between high-order thinking and the building of democratic societies. To foster these cognitive and affective dimensions, they deemed it necessary to introduce profound changes in compulsory schools and in education in general. Their priority was the practice of philosophical dialogue in school, transforming the classroom into a community of philosophical inquiry. In the Western philosophical tradition, disciplining the individual’s thinking process by the commitment to good reasoning is an essential way to achieve rigorous and critical thinking.

The heart of this innovative proposal was clear from the beginning; we do hope our current societies become truly democratic, for which we need persons able to think critically. For this, we need to bring about significant changes in our compulsory school system, making it a priority to introduce philosophical dialogue from childhood onward, because Western philosophy through the ages has developed processes to master rigorous and critical thinking. Starting with this initial pedagogical and philosophical core (a clear idea in the papers Lipman wrote at the end of the 1960s), the proposal grew in many ways. First, he started the practice of philosophy in kindergarten, when children three years old begin to have a fuller use of language. Next, the IAPC curriculum moved upward, to the high-school level. Some teachers implemented the community of philosophical inquiry in different educational environments, in non-formal and informal education. Then, Lipman and Sharp broadened the scope of critical thinking and included creative and caring thinking. Last, but not least, the program was translated into different languages and was disseminated all over the world, inspiring the emergence of different styles of doing philosophy in diverse educational settings.

Thus, the aim of this paper is to evaluate the traits of this program, and, more precisely, to assess the need to foster creative thinking. However, I am not focusing on creativity; my main interest is the “work of art”. The reason for this choice is that creativity is a basic and necessary characteristic of art, both in the process of creating the work as well as the aesthetic perception of the observer. Thus, the work of art is the joint creation of the artist and the observer, and both participate in the final aesthetic experience. Creativity can be a characteristic of any human activity, but only in the work of art does it become a necessary condition. Furthermore, each time anything is done or made with creativity, in any field, it can, and often is, considered a work of art.

Teaching, as interpreted in P4C, and more clearly philosophical dialogue, requires teachers to transform the classroom into a true work of art, which involves engendering creative activity. Teachers, of course, need to master didactic methods, well known by experts in the field and discovered during their own teaching experience. However, they should go further and transform their classes into a meaningful and relevant experience for their students and for teachers themselves. To gain a clear understanding of this proposal, we first need to clarify what we mean by a work of art, a problematic concept in current society.

Conceptual clarifications: art

One difficulty to overcome is that the current definition of art has become restricted. Usually, we think of art as a term we can use only for activities or objects of outstanding value, the kinds of things we find in special environments or moments. Museums are filled with works of art – according to experts of course – in the same way that we use the term “works of art” for certain emblematic buildings or civil-engineering works that are built with dazzling skill. A list of art works may include any number of the classical disciplines: painting, sculpture, architecture, music, literature, and the performing arts (theatre and dance). Also, we can add modern fine arts such as film, photography, video, or graphic design. When we go to a concert, or we watch a play or a film, we recognize them as works of art, whether or not there is a broad social consensus on this point.

Few people will dispute that *Guernica*, by Picasso, is a work of art, as almost everybody would admit that The Beatles were consummate artists of pop music. Designers such as Balenciaga or Armani, among other masters of *haute couture*, and chefs like Ferran Adria are also considered artists and their work deserves to be displayed in art museums and they can organize a performance in Art Biennale. These are clear examples of my thesis: on the one hand, the capacity of a museum as an institution of social prestige, to convert something into a work of art by the mere fact of exhibiting it. In fact, any object, even if it is far from being considered part of the classical fine arts, might be perceived as a work of art if it gains recognition from art experts.

Explaining this restricted use of the term “art” involves different disciplines, with a specific mention of the sociology of art, because it helps provide a better understanding of the complex web of interests and social struggles underlying the definition of any object as a work of art or as an artistic object. At this juncture, I do not explore this topic as I prefer to call our attention to the artificial distinction between works of art and the rest of human endeavors lacking those characteristics. In some respects, we establish a class difference with rigid criteria for including and excluding a certain object or activity as art. However, it would be more appropriate to mark only a difference in degree – that is, every human product has some artistic dimension, however small. An analogous artificiality appears in the distinction between art and craft, or between higher and lesser arts. Of course, all such distinctions are rooted in classical struggles for power, status, and social prestige.

This classical approach to art has a particularly negative consequence: it blinds us from perceiving the artistic dimension of ordinary human activity in everyday life. Faced with the monopoly on art claimed by certain sectors of the society, we fail to discover the artistic dimension in what each of us does. As a consequence, we also might accept that our daily actions need not be guided by artistic criteria. From this perspective, what we do every day loses intensity, crushed by perceived tedium, boredom, mediocrity, and inexpressiveness. This has a double implication. First, the mundane rules our lives and, second, we no longer aspire to anything but the mundane. We allow works of art to become the exclusive field for artists and only at very few moments of our life, and usually as merely passive spectators, do we approach the world of artistic creativity. Getting dressed every morning becomes a mechanical and repetitive activity in the same way as cooking. We stop being demanding of ourselves and refuse to face the challenge of choosing and combining clothing items to offer a personal look that becomes satisfying and meaningful. We dress without manners (I will discuss below about the importance of “manners” and “forms”) or, with no special care, we eat any food put on the table. We go about all these activities as if they were devoid of value, mere necessities.

Some movements in Modern art have struggled to overcome the above-mentioned rigid criteria, and they have made liberating contributions. For example, Surrealist art, in the early decades of the 20th century drew the attention of the audience to the fatuity of elitist criteria of art. Also, the Bauhaus movement in Germany considered fundamental to infuse art into the everyday life of the populace. The aim was to take art inside normal homes, and to give aesthetic appeal to the manufactured products that began to proliferate in all facets of everyday life. Later on, Pop Art provocatively strove to vindicate the artistic value of banal objects from daily life. For example, in America, the famous 32 Campbell’s soup cans produced by Andy Warhol in 1968 had a huge, liberating impact by elevating industrial mass production to an aesthetic statement of the times. The films of the Spanish director Almodóvar had a similar effect by breaking social mores by using styles, objects, and situations that had never before been accorded artistic value. Our understanding of art

has also been broadened by exhibitions dedicated to fashion (e.g. clothes, jewelry, and accoutrements) and vehicles (e.g. automobiles, motorcycles, boats), as well as industrial design (e.g. furniture, appliances, tools). Advertising is a world in expansion (e.g. television, Internet, cell phones) that is pushing back the boundaries of the artistic. Another example of blending art and life was the participation of Ferran Adrià in the 2007 Documenta 12 in Kassel, Germany, by leaving a table for two open at El Bulli every night for exhibition visitors.

Therefore, the crucial point to apprehend from the outset of our discussion is that art is present in everything done or made by human beings and that we should only concern ourselves with differences in degree of that artistic quality. Human life has an intrinsic artistic and creative dimension, and we should not accept less than that.

Another aspect that we should underline is the double dimension of art. We often apply the term “art” to the work of art as an end product, endowed with a set of characteristics that convert it into an artistic object. Alternatively, we see it as an activity such as a formal performance: a violinist playing Beethoven or a rhythmic gymnast or a figure skater. This view clearly distinguishes actors from spectators, with the former producing art and the latter contemplating it. This is not an arbitrary distinction, as the performer makes money while the spectator pays for attending the concert or exhibition. In addition, the efforts of the artists are usually greater in creating the work than that of the spectator in viewing it. As usual, this distinction between the artist and the viewer would be useful if it pointed to nothing more than two different ways of exploring or analyzing facts that never happen separately, but this is not the case. It is more usual to make a real distinction between active and passive behavior: an agent who actively makes something and a spectator who passively watches. This dichotomy carries negative implications, which I would like to highlight.

What really happens is a different process. Any person who embarks on creating something seeking to produce a work of art needs not only to act according to creative guidelines, which I explore below in more detail, but from time to time should stop, stand back, and examine the outcome to assess its artistic value. Difficult as this personal split may be, it is indispensable so that when it is almost impossible, as in a music performance, the dancer must rehearse over the days prior to the public concert to adopt this duality of roles. Then, in each new recital, the artist pays attention to the reaction of the audience to check the perceived artistic value of the performance. The work of art has a separate existence, independent even of its creator, and only the attentive and active perception of the spectator can find in the work, or performance, the traits that convert it into something with specific artistic value. The painter moves away from the painting to look at it from different angles and draws pertinent conclusions to resume the task. It is the same for the writer, who reads the text and changes words here and there, perhaps a sentence, to improve the text, to intensify its expressivity. This process continues until the creator considers the work of art finished—that is, that no new modification would improve it.

The same is true of spectators. They are not simply passive receptors whose empty minds are filled with the creative activity of the artist. First, any perception is the result of a complex perception and interpretation in the observer’s brain. Perception is something more than to register in the brain and mind a sensation coming from the outside world or from a person’s inside; it involves the organization, identification, and interpretation of sensory input. This process is, on the one hand, automatic for the brain, but on the other it is a more conscious activity by which we integrate what we perceive into a network of personal concepts and expectations. In the hermeneutic tradition, we

perceive the world from our specific situation, which at the same time enables but limits our understanding of what we perceive. We are not completely passive receivers.

We focus on events or objects that catch our attention in a selective approach that depends on our personal background, our interests, and our expectations at a given time. We concentrate more clearly on specific details that we consider relevant, and we maintain our attention as long as the object retains our interest and contributes meaning to our life. We bring into play our entire background, first including history, culture, social class, gender, and language, and then our personal system of attitudes, beliefs, and ways of thinking. This “reservoir” of personal ideas and beliefs makes it possible for our present experiences to be meaningful as a coherent unity, endowed with rhythm and harmony. This activity is guided by a sense of purpose that is fundamental to live a complete and meaningful life.

This progression is valid even when we pay attention to objects that at a first sight look trivial, such as a stone or the bark of a tree. Reality around us is complex enough to open a process of limitless interpretation. Similarly, our personal life is so rich in variation and nuances that at any moment an ordinary event can draw our interest and become part of our personal experience. Again, some trends and movements of contemporary art might clarify what I want to say. In the 1920s, the Bauhaus in Germany, broke the frontiers between craft and art and approached the mass-production of consumer goods as the process of making high-quality functional objects with artistic merit. Some years later, *art povera* recovered simple objects and unconventional materials, and converted them into meaningful works of art. Many contemporary artists have used materials collected from scrap yards and landfills to make their works and have endowed them with new life. Similarly, photographs by Chema Madoz show the expressivity that a staircase, a piano key or a clamp can have for the attentive eye of the photographer. We perceive that same depth in the gaze in the documentary photos of Sebastian Salgado when he becomes a witness to human exoduses.

As might be expected, the exigency of involving the spectator is even greater for a work of art. Only a superficial and inappropriate analysis leads to the conclusion that the impact of the perception of a work of art or an artistic performance has nothing to do with our active attitude. We can say that in very special circumstances, while attending a performance or looking at a painting, we might become so overwhelmed by its quality that we may even feel suspended for a long time. This deep connection with the artwork is the result of its expressive power, which requires our total involvement, bringing all our skills to bear and raising our level of consciousness. By contrast, a tedious or poor-quality television show triggers a very different mood: a situation almost without brain activity. In this situation of psychic atony, we can lose the limits of our identity, reaching a degree of pleasurable self-annihilation closer to the mineralization of existence.

By sharp contrast, our identity blurs during a high-level aesthetic experience and we melt into the reality around us. We are transported to levels of meaning and fulfillment that demand a degree of energy that we can hardly sustain for a long period. We do not get tired of gazing at a painting we intensely like, in the same way that we hardly perceive time passing when we read a good novel. In Spanish, it is said that we re-create ourselves when observing an object that we like very much. Rather than idle inactivity, we engage in just the opposite: we re-create ourselves by appropriating what we perceive while recreating in our mind the object that we contemplate. The recreational break is not time for inactivity, but time for total activity, although a selfless and playful one. These are the reasons why observers’ activity and involvement is so important in art, and thus we can state that any work becomes a work of art if, and only if, it is actively appropriated as such by an observer.

Works of art

Clearly, art is an activity with different degrees of intensity, and any human activity has an artistic ingredient. I would like to emphasize this point. It suffices to observe two of the most basic activities of human beings, sex and food. When humans learned to cook and left behind eating raw materials, a process started by which cooking evolved into a sophisticated activity and meals became a social, creative, and artistic performance. For its part, sex is much more than plain reproduction or pleasure; it leads to refined and delicate human relationships. Similarly, art requires two stages—one of preparation, execution, and recreation of the work and the second of mindful and enjoyable observation—and both stages involve a high-order activity. Therefore, the process of learning art is not reduced to becoming masters in the use of the techniques to render a perfect performance or to create an impeccable and beautiful painting. Learning art also means to develop a perceptual capacity, i.e. learning to watch, hear, perceive with all senses, because, if the education of the perception is neglected, people will fail to develop the faculty of grasping the relevance and meaning of art works. Having said this, I should describe certain characteristics that enable us to make an aesthetic assessment. This may be fuzzy territory, but we should not give up the search for criteria that, arguable as they are, have a certain level of general acceptance. Although we can agree on some universal criteria, disagreement grows when spectators or critics of art apply those criteria to specific works or performances. Frequently, for example, after a painting exhibition or musical performance that some people consider masterful, others reject outright and negate its aesthetic value.

Despite resembling an oxymoron, the first criterion is the absence of criteria. Artists must follow some rules and procedures in their specific artistic domain. Classical Greek sculptors used a canon of proportions to carve the perfect human body. Poetry has historically been governed by rules on rhyme and rhythm, with its accompanying technical vocabulary. We are familiar with the persistence of the Golden Ratio in the visual arts, and we know that many plastic surgeons use aesthetic canons to operate on those who wish to improve their “beauty”. Some of these canons might also be rules for the perception of beauty and for the education of aesthetic taste, because most of the people tend to perceive works as beautiful when they follow such rules. Nevertheless, in other domains it may not be so important to break the rules as in art and in creation in general. This is not a consequence of the urgent and pressing need to be an original and innovative artist, but something deeply related to the specific traits of any work of art.

A work of art is always a singular and unique work, even in times when the mechanical reproduction and the growth of industrial design has provoked, according to Benjamin’s analysis, the loss of that aura that was a fundamental trait of the original work of art. The democratization of design in furniture (Ikea, for example) or dress fashion (Zara, for example) diminishes the singularity of art, but the specific use that any person can make of those commodities opens the door to further creative possibilities. Each individual, group or family need to decide how to combine clothes or arrange furnishings to transform those objects, which have been reproduced and sold by the thousands, into personal and unique interpretations.

The users’ manual for the furniture that you buy for your home, offers you basic instructions only to assemble the kit. The result of the aesthetic value of that furniture depends on your own decision about how and where to position table or sofa. The same is true in the fine arts, such as music, poetry or painting. The poetic value of a poem is more the result of a strict implementation of

the technical rules you have learned. This idea would be useless even in the case of a musician as Bach, who allegedly stated that music consisted of playing the right note at the right moment and that his musical harmony followed a mathematic understanding of music, based on symmetry. When the artist sticks too much to the rules, the work often conveys cold academicism, i.e. perfect in the execution but lacking expressivity.

Considering my claim that art is part of our everyday life, we might think about family photos, as all of us have experience as photographers and as subjects of a photographer, usually an amateur. We can buy a good camera and carefully read the owner's manual to gain a working knowledge of how the camera works. However, this knowledge that goes further than just to shoot in Auto mode, offering other options of aperture settings or shutter speeds. You may also read a manual to find out the 10 best tips, hints, warnings, etc., to become a good photographer and you learn basic concepts such as depth of field, light temperature, contrast, and backlight compensation. Moreover, you assimilate some helpful norms about photocomposition and framing, and you become familiar with photographs by great photographers by visiting, for example, photo exhibitions.

All those rules, tips, and warnings will almost surely improve the technical quality of your photos, raising the artistic level. Nevertheless, if this is all we do, our snapshots might lack the strength and vigor that characterize photos that, taken with or without rules, capture the specific subject at a precise moment. Improvement of our capacity to make photos that give life to the final product requires cumulative experience based upon many examples that transcend the rules and norms of the manuals. This lack of rules can also characterize the reception of a work of art; this is almost the only rule that professor Keating shares with his students in order to become members of the Dead Poets Society and to discover the personal joy of reading poetry.

Thus, works of art fit fully within a context and it is the situation that imposes its demands, requiring of us a precise action at every moment. Works of art have a life of their own that demands their particular process of development and fullness, a process that is rarely decided in advance by the artist. When we start something with the intention of creating a product of some artistic value, we know how to start and have a more or less definite idea about our goal. Only if we are open to follow what the work requires at every moment of the process, will the result exhibit some artistic value. What I am writing right now can serve as an example; that is, even if it is not my intention to create a work of art but an expository text, the product should nonetheless have originality to deserve to be published in a philosophical journal. Yet, in fact, when I started to write this piece, I had in mind a definite project, but gradually, as my writing flowed, it found its own paths that I had not anticipated.

The Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno and some years later the Italian writer Luigi Pirandello called attention to the autonomy of the characters of a novel or a drama, characters who, as the plot of the story progresses, impose their own personality on the author who created them. The title of one of the major plays by Pirandello, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, is revealing: according to the plot, those are characters, who existed only in the fantasy of the writer, and they search for an author who brings them to life. Once creation begins, it imposes restrictions on our freedom as authors and requires us to follow certain rules. Automatic writing and aleatory music go hardly beyond being experimental proposals, which as experiments open new creative approaches.

A second trait of art is selflessness, which we can express in a positive way as the intrinsic value of the work of art. Many, if not all, activities are aimed at a result that has only an extrinsic relationship with the activity. We eat, for example, to feed ourselves, just as we dress so we do not get

cold or we make ceramic containers to store food or drinks. We thus follow a constant and uninterrupted chain of means and ends, in which everything can be an end of some action, but later becomes the means to achieve some other end. This is not true of works of art. They have intrinsic value, regardless of other concerns. It is important to emphasize that this is not a dualistic opposition, all-or-nothing, because the relation between the ends and means admits different degrees: rarely are ends or means pure. In the 16th century, the Italian sculptor Cellini created an elaborated saltcellar for King Francis I of France. The work involves sculpture, part in gold hammered by hand into delicate shapes, with a small vessel to hold salt. The result was a piece of art that was valuable in itself, regardless of its utility as a saltcellar. Like many other objects whose design and shape have been carefully worked, Cellini's piece of sculpture was originally no more than a thing to dispense salt, but it took on great intrinsic value.

People can use any work of art as a tool for purposes vastly different from those that guided its creation. The main aim of a Gothic cathedral was not to inspire an aesthetic experience, but a religious one. Patronage is a longstanding practice that professes interest in art among powerful people, who exploit the possibilities of art to exalt their power, often manifested in munificence and magnificence. Patrons can be helpful for artists and art, but as a patron's interest domineers, art disintegrates, its intrinsic value fades, and vulgarity grows. Stalinist and fascist art offer good examples of that degeneration, while Nazi leaders labeled Modern Art as "degenerate art". Nowadays, the powerful art market threatens art with billionaire auctions and massive competition between private and public clients, many guided not by artistic criteria, but by the desire of flaunting merchandise or by the need of money laundering. Works of art become simply one more commodity in a marketplace where exchange value overpowers the use value, depreciating the aesthetic value.

Something similar happens when three tenors get carried away by their media fame and give priority to the spectacle in which economic benefits are prioritized. Putting aside mercantile degradations, we can consider the so-called decorative arts. At some moments, the decorative component predominates at the expense of the artistic dimension, so that what begins as an integral part of a particular work becomes a superficial element that distracts us and invites us to turn our attention elsewhere. We can also contemplate the current abuse of aesthetic surgery; people surrender to the demands of imposed aesthetic canons or are deluded by a commercial strategy.

When I emphasize the selfless dimension of art, I do not mean that a work of art has no use at all. Our everyday life is enriched any time we add some aesthetic touch to what we do; this idea is a leitmotif of this commentary. However, the artistic dimension of any work or activity does not come from the outside, but from the inside. This awakens our interest and captures us full attention. When doing something artistic, we fully engage in the task, attending every detail to achieve the desired execution. We become aware of what the activity and its product impose as the creative process advances. The process demands such dedication that we remain absorbed and concentrated, forming a bond with what we are making without losing consciousness, since it is not a cathartic ritual but an activity where cognitive and emotional skills establish a productive link. This unselfishness in the work of art can be related to play. This also applies in competitive games, whose aesthetic quality is linked to fair play and an artistic expression in mastering the technique of the game.

A better understanding of the above is possible when we focus on another characteristic of the work of art, i.e., its noteworthy expressivity that imbues the work with intensity and fullness. We put the whole strength of our being into what we are making. This generates a tension in the creative process which keeps us striving to perfect our work or performance. In any work of art the formal

aspects are fundamental, making what we execute as important as how we execute it. The American philosopher John Dewey described art as “perfection in execution”. In any case, form cannot be separated from substance. That is, each specific substance demands an appropriate form. This close link between the two dimensions of the work of art becomes clear in the difficulties involved when a work made in a particular artistic domain is remade in a different one. For example, it is difficult to adapt a novel to the screen and it is almost impossible to express with words what the sculptor tried to express with three-dimensional materials. At best, form exhibits harmony, balance, and rhythm, which are classical fundamentals of artistic expression.

That intensity, translated as the expressive force that artworks must transmit does not imply any lack of serenity, equilibrium or calm inherent in the mastery of the technique. Rather, the aesthetic experience, both in execution and in perception, demand from the artist and the spectator an effort so that the complete creative process suffuses a unity that extends from its initial inception to its fulfillment. Art requires effort, often remarkable effort, but the whole process fosters a feeling of fullness, restfulness, and joy, which restores the energy spent and reinforces the aesthetic endeavor. Moreover, striking among those who excel in the execution of art is the apparent ease of their action. This results from a long process of learning, transforming technical skill into a habit that favors the execution and perception of the artistic work with ease and spontaneity.

Finally, a work of art is always open, according to the Italian author Umberto Eco. It is possible to make different interpretations of any work of art, without betraying it, although not all interpretations are equal. This reflects a deep feature of reality, its inexhaustibility. In a sense, this is its polysemy (different meanings) and polyphony (different voices) embodying the notion that reality has different facets to take into account if we wish to appreciate its intrinsic richness.

Art is an event that opens space and time to the emergence of novelty, which is possible because the artist reaches to the bottom of reality, to its deepest and most radical dimensions, and from these depths draws attention to the basic issues of human existence, opening fields of exploration, raising new questions without offering closed solutions. This, as I have already pointed out, prompts an active response by the spectators, who contribute their personal effort to complete the implicit or explicit meaning in the work of art, but each does so from personal experience, a biographical past pointing to future personal expectations.

Conclusion: The class as a work of art

The above tenets can and should be applied to every class. The world of education is filled with different approaches to teaching. Many of the most promising and fruitful current styles of teaching insist on the active role of students, on the need for fostering critical thinking and creativity, on proposing collaborative and cooperative learning projects, on promoting a dialogical attitude that emphasizes airing students’ ideas and thoughts, etc. All these educational approaches have a long history, even recalling Socratic dialogues or philosophical teaching in medieval universities or movements in the contemporary world such as “progressive pedagogy” with Locke and Rousseau as forerunners of ideas later developed by Dewey, Montessori, and many others.

The educational project, Philosophy for Children, launched by Matthew Lipman and Ann Sharp in the 1970s, and disseminated worldwide since then, is one of the current paramount programs in tune with progressive pedagogy. Transforming the classroom into a community of

philosophical inquiry, as the best way of fostering multidimensional thinking, is the core of the program, promoting high-order thinking, which includes three basic dimensions: critical, creative, and caring thought. This is the central thesis of this discussion: a community of philosophical inquiry amounts to a creative and artistic class, a setting whose most important traits are those we have just considered while exploring the concept of art and works of art. It is critical thinking based on sound reasoning and uses criteria to assess the argumentation process. It is creative because it is sensitive to the specific context, open to novelty, and guided by criteria, not confined to them. It is caring because it fosters consciousness of the social and aesthetic dimension of inquiry and creates true care for the process and its outcomes.

A philosophy teacher or any other teacher who wishes to implement the P4C Project needs to be familiar with certain pedagogic techniques that help to transform the class into a community of inquiry. All those techniques are, at first sight, rules to be followed, a set of criteria teachers use in order to assess their own teaching and the process of every class. Most of these rules are similar to those used by teachers following the progressive movement, and they learn such pedagogy in Teachers' Colleges. Nevertheless, philosophy for children involves a profound change of professional attitude, and therefore the project has developed a specific model of teacher training, where teachers discover what it means to become a facilitator guiding a community of inquiry. Those attending this workshop have the opportunity to become members of a community of philosophical inquiry and the conductor of the workshop models, in front and with the active cooperation of the attendants, the meaning of this deeply different style of teaching.

As in art, rules and norms for better teaching are only guides, not rigid norms that shut down children's and teachers' minds. At most, they are a set of do's and don'ts that guide teachers' practices. Therefore, the first rule is not to be entirely dominated by the rules, but rather to enter the class with an open mind, attentive to the nuances of each situation and context. You have some goals for which you prepare a work plan, with specific exercises, dialogue plans or activities. But first you observe the actual attitude of students, making sure that they are ready for cooperative inquiry and, once the dialogue starts, you can adapt your previous plan, first to the needs and wants of students, and then to the needs of the dialogue itself. This all requires metacognitive activity: as a facilitator of the dialogue, you have to stand back and observe how the class is proceeding in order to make the changes needed by each unique situation. Eventually, you reach the end of the class and, together with your students, you assess whether it was a meaningful experience. Sometimes, all of you – teacher and students – will agree that it was a powerful and meaningful experience.

The above effort is a particular work of art. Rather, it is not a “work” but an event, such as Mounier, Deleuze or Derrida have defined the event. It is a period of your life where you have the opportunity to experience novelty full of meaning, where you move away from the burden of past closure to make room for the hope to make possible what is impossible. According to basic ideas of modern art, art permeates everyday life, including the boring ruins of school life, and offers the opportunity for an artistic experience. The class becomes a performance, an ephemeral and genuine experience for performer and audience in an event that cannot be repeated, seized or purchased. It is at the same time a participative performance in which the teacher is not the only performing artist in the room, because the students themselves become more than an active audience; they become co-artists in the performance. It is a vivid example of participatory art in that it transcends its own limits and becomes a happening in which an open narrative and the active participation of the audience

makes a difference: the classroom as a work of art effaces the boundaries between the artist, the artwork, and the viewers.

Aiming to transform the class into an artistic performance constitutes a search for excellence in education. It transforms banal and empty ideas into working ideals. It is the opportunity for teachers and students to experience plenitude and meaning that will encourage them to gaze at the Confucian moon rather than gawk at the finger pointing heavenward. The following quote by Dewey conveys the essence of the above discussion:

“By making the present activity the expression of the full meaning of the case, that activity is, indeed, an end in itself not a mere means to something beyond itself; but, in being a totality, it is also the condition of all future integral action. It forms the habit of requiring that every act be an outlet of the whole self, and it provides the instruments of such complete functioning.”

No more, no less: just make of your life a work of art.

Endnotes

¹ In October 2010, I gave a lecture at the III Seminario internacional de filosofía para niños: pensamiento creativo y sociedad, Corporación Universitaria Minuto de Dios, Bogota. After the conference I wrote a paper that was published as a book chapter, “La clase como una obra de arte”, in Rojas, V.A.: *Filosofía para Niños. Práctica Educativa y contexto social*. Bogotá: Magisterio/Uniminuto, 2013. pp. 71-88. This new version has been updated and translated into English. I have written again the last section of the article. David Nesbitt edited the text, improving my English with some comments that helped me to be more precise and clarify my ideas. I appreciate his contribution.

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In order to write this article, I have relayed mainly in Dewey and Lipman’s books, and in other philosophers. The article is also based on my own experience as philosophy teacher in high school level for 35 years.

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