Revisiting the Conceptual Domain: Educational Knowledge and the Visual Arts

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Abstract

In modern Western education, the visual arts have come to hold a problematic position in the school curriculum. Art is often classified by school leaders, students, parents and even teachers as different from other subjects; sometimes viewed as almost magical, enabling students to explore and develop an innate creativity; sometimes simply unimportant, a therapeutic respite from the more demanding academic subjects. In this article, I trace the problematic relationship between visual arts and educational knowledge. I propose that this dynamic prevents the function of robust assessment systems and constrains equal access. I investigate how my subject has been thus marginalised, with reference to curriculum and policy documents that influence my immediate situation, and turn to the work of educational sociologist Basil Bernstein and his followers, to define the problem and plot a possible future for art education. Bernstein's model of the pedagogic device, his work on the recontextualisation of knowledge and his concept of pedagogic rights assist me in formulating a case for an articulated conceptual grammar in visual arts education.

Keywords
knowledge, visual arts, concept-based, curriculum, Basil Bernstein

Introduction

Arts practice generates knowledge about the world, about social issues, the human condition and knowledge about art itself. Artists draw on personal experience and on the work of colleagues and predecessors and make creative decisions based on
a wealth of expertise and conceptual understanding. However, art education in schools has become divorced from this knowledge-rich tradition and tends to emphasise practical skills over declarative knowledge in ways that mystify practice, maintain misconceptions and exclude many students from accessing this realm. McLean et al. (2017, 7) explain that knowledge ‘creates specific relationships between the inner worlds of individuals (broadly, what and how they think and feel) and the enablement and constraints in the outer world of systems and structures’. Arts practice, like education, occupies a liminal space. It involves both being and becoming; exploring and imagining identities; recording, celebrating and also challenging existing definitions. It is the challenge of art education not only to train novices in the skills of the craft but also to induct them into the community of practice, to enable them to participate in the conversation.

Policy and practice in educational assessment represent a meeting point between the world of the student with their internal sense of competence and agency and the outer worlds of both disciplinary knowledge and the social structures of school. As a subject leader and a teacher of art in an independent international school, it is my responsibility to enable an integration of these worlds through the transmission of disciplinary knowledge to the students in my care. Hugo (2006, 68) describes how Basil Bernstein’s pedagogic device regulates ‘the hierarchical shift downwards from [knowledge] creation to transmission to acquisition, from inspired production to reflective simplification to reproductive acquirement’. In this article I argue that the knowledge-rich practices of the visual arts (practices of sense-making and meaning-making) are altered by curriculum designs that prioritise practical skills over conceptual knowledge (DfE 2016; UCLES 2017); by pedagogic practices that reinforce this knowledge-lean curriculum (Cunliffe 2011); and by assessment that focuses exclusively on context-specific performances of technical accomplishment.

Moore (2013, 155) reports how the primary concern of Bernstein’s pedagogic device is, ‘official educational knowledge and the structuring of educational pedagogic discourse’. In designing an art curriculum, educators are both supported and constrained by the requirements and expectations of curriculum and qualification authorities. In my current school, the visual arts curriculum is influenced by three main distributive sources: the National Curriculum in England (NCE), Cambridge International General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) and the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IBDP). Each of these systems plays its part in filtering and altering what it means to be knowledgeable in the visual arts, because, as Bernstein (2000, 32) explains, ‘every time a discourse moves from one place to another, there is a space in which ideology can play’.

I maintain that in order to counter the knowledge dilution that occurs with this recontextualisation process, art educators need to design curricula and assessment systems with access to knowledge as the central organising factor. We must identify the basic knowledge of our practice; the technical and cognitive processes that need to be assimilated in long-term memory (Willingham 2009) in order for developing learners to engage with secondary-process decision-making and problem-solving (Cunliffe 2008). We need to recognise the potency of threshold concepts (Erickson 2007; Meyer & Land 2003) that provide perspective and enable learners to process and organise their thoughts and experiences (Winch 2013). Bernstein (2000) identifies three interrelated pedagogic rights: individual enhancement, social inclusion and political participation. I argue that realisation of these rights is dependent on the effective transmission of appropriate knowledge.
Educators in the field of visual arts need to find ways to make knowledge visible, to inform stakeholders at every level, but above all to give students access to the powerful knowledge that is their entitlement (Young 2009).

What is educational progress?

What constitutes educational progress is a concern for many stakeholders, from governments and school leaders to teachers, students and parents. Each is invested in some form of educational progress, but different interests result in different definitions and discourses. The policies and practices of independent schools, like the one in which I work, are influenced by international examples and trends, and it is the responsibility of school leaders at all levels to articulate and communicate a clear vision of what constitutes educational progress in their specific context. It is the purpose of educational assessment to ascertain what students know and to recognise what they can do to demonstrate this accomplishment. Wiliam (2011, 45) uses a geographical metaphor, equating educational progress with a journey, and identifying formative assessment as the process whereby a student’s current location on this learning journey is ascertained, and the next steps towards a specified destination negotiated. Kirschner et al. (2006) suggest that learning entails a change in long-term memory and advocate the deliberate and spaced practice of basic knowledge until the explicit content becomes tacit knowledge which can be accessed without reliance on working memory. However, these pragmatic descriptions can fail to acknowledge the structured and purposeful nature of knowledge acquisition.

Progression from novicehood to expertise in any given domain is a complex process of qualitative change as well as cumulative acquisition. Muller (2006, 26) suggests that ‘there is not only one set of steps per discipline, nor need we assume that these steps are always to be traversed in the same order’. Stobart (2008, 9) describes learning as ‘a process of making meaning, which is then incorporated into what is known already’, and Gipps (1994, 9) cites Glaser’s argument that ‘as competence in a domain grows, evidence of a knowledge base that is increasingly coherent, principled, useful and goal-oriented is displayed’. Although the pragmatists may recommend potent strategies to facilitate knowledge acquisition, it is the task of curriculum designers to select and sequence the knowledge for transmission; to, ‘specify the formal minimal grammatical steps to be acquired in order for sense to be made at all’ (Muller 2006, 26). Winch (2013, 134) concludes that ‘expertise in a subject involves practical knowledge concerning the management of and exploration of propositional relations, acquaintance with key objects, events, states and processes and, not least, acquaintance with practical procedures for gaining and validating new knowledge’.

In order to develop genuinely empowering curricula and robust assessment systems, educators need to organise learning around a clear understanding not only of subject content but also of the structure of knowledge progression in their chosen fields. According to Turner (2016, 119–20), ‘you must use the ideas and principles of your curriculum to inform your assessment and you must ensure that the format of the assessment is true to your understanding of the construct of your subject’.

The need for clarity in this area is highlighted by a recent UK government white paper entitled Educational Excellence Everywhere (DfE 2016). This paper
reflects popular international trends in educational policy and is aligned with the stated vision of the British International school in which I teach by the notion of twenty-first century schooling. Recent popular interest in neuroscience and a growing sense that the UK is not performing as well as it should on the world stage have prompted a swing in education policy towards the knowledge-based approaches advocated in the 2016 white paper. Authors cite Willingham (2009) and state: “Cognitive science has shed fresh light on long-running debates about whether a school curriculum should focus more on “knowledge” or “skills”. It shows that knowledge and skills are partners … and that attempts to teach skills without knowledge fail because they run counter to the way our brains work” (DfE 2016, 89).

However, as Young & Muller (2016, 91–2) point out: “A knowledge-based curriculum is fine as a slogan, it tells us something about what to avoid but very little about this knowledge and how it might be paced, selected and sequenced if it is to really extend access’. Leaders in independent schools have some freedom to interpret what constitutes twenty-first century education and to choose how closely they align themselves with UK policy. It is my challenge to address and communicate what constitutes a knowledge-based curriculum in the visual arts.

Knowledge progression and the visual arts

The visual arts make a particularly intriguing example in the ongoing debate about knowledge, curriculum and assessment in schools. As a subject it is frequently marginalised, seen as different from other subjects; distinctly practical, personal, subjective, even irrational. Szpakowski (2018, 13) proposes that ‘the kind of knowledge art in general gives us is something that might be called “knowledge-with” and is aligned with ‘things like empathy, imagination, experience, wisdom, discrimination, judgement, affect’. In his thorough exploration of knowledge in education, even Winch (2013, 134) raises the possibility that some areas ‘may properly be held to be practical in nature in the sense that mastery is primarily associated with practical abilities other than grasp of a systematically organised conceptual field’. However, designers of school curricula cannot rely on knowledge or dispositions that just develop ‘naturally’ and certainly cannot give up on more explicit knowledge just because some forms of knowledge are acquired through experience. On the contrary, I propose we should be using explicitly articulated knowledge to help students process and assimilate their practical and intuitive experiences.

UK government advisors (DfE 2016, 93) declare that ‘as more pupils study an academic core, arts subjects are also becoming more popular’, betraying a common tendency to see the arts as non-academic. It remains a popular belief that the judgement of quality in the arts is either hopelessly subjective or utterly cryptic and obscure. Mason & Steers (2006) record how even academic researchers and professional bodies have struggled to identify consistent and reliable assessment systems. However, this reputation for being somehow unknowable represents a significant constraint on arts education. Because of its special status, it is both harder and more urgent to define the role of knowledge in relation to the arts.

It is possible to trace how historical association with certain specific ideologies has created a troublesome tension between art and knowledge. Londesborough (2018) explores how knowledge has become a dirty word in art education. He
argues: ‘It’s not the knowledge-based curriculum that’s at fault, but the relegation of procedural and contextual knowledge.’ Cunliffe’s (2008) argument is more complex. He traces how a rift was opened between knowledge and creativity with the Romantics’ rejection of Enlightenment rationalism, which was widened by Modernist artists who sought creative expression in the non-intellectual, primary processes of the unconscious and the (superficial) emulation of primitive art from non-Western traditions. Cunliffe (2008, 309) observes how this thinking is enshrined in the work of the American psychologist, Abraham Maslow. Maslow saw self-actualization as involving an authentic creativity, characterised by a ‘lack of wilful trying, a lack of effortful striving or straining, a lack of interference with the flow of the impulse and the free ‘radioactive’ expression of the deep person (Maslow, 1976)’.

The notion of creativity as an innate psychological need nests comfortably into the ideology of progressive education, criticised by Bernstein and described by Moore (2013, 174): ‘the child is constructed as a natural, active learner driven by innate curiosity shaped by a desire to realize an internal, authentic and unique self’. The inertia of thought created by this confluence of ideologies remains influential in arts education today. This child-centred approach is evident in the NCE aims to ‘develop their creativity … record their observations … exploring their ideas’ (DfE, 2013). Thus, art education has been rendered invisible; its knowledge structures hidden behind a myth of natural growth and personal expression; ‘learning is a tacit, invisible act’ (Bernstein 1990, 69).

However, the idea that the arts form a knowledge-free domain has never been true. The Surrealist movement aspired to produce work through ‘Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express … the actual functioning of thought … in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern’ (Breton 1969). However, it also produced a whole series of written manifestoes explaining the political and artistic aims of its members. Abstract Expressionism, the ultimate flourishing of the Modernist movement, is exemplified by the action painting of Jackson Pollock, that emphasises the supremacy of the physical act of painting itself, and the colour field paintings of Mark Rothko, who compared his own work to the art of young children. Although the aim of these artists was to avoid certain cognitive processes, this was, in both cases, a deliberate and calculated decision, based on extensive training and experience. The critical theory of formalism, of art for its own sake, runs parallel to this artistic tradition. It also seeks to record non-intellectual experiences; to appreciate and evaluate artwork without reference to social, moral or political interpretation. However, Roger Fry’s attempt to define what characterises the ‘special orientation of the consciousness’ that constitutes the ‘aesthetic experience’ (Mortensen 1997, 27) was, in itself, a supremely intellectual task. The aesthetic formalism of Modernist art criticism represents one of the most systematic, if controversial, attempts to articulate an overarching theory of art. Thus, although as Cunliffe (2011) has demonstrated, certain periods and movements in the history of art have emphasised primary-process thinking over more systematic and structured decision-making, and even represented knowledge as directly constraining creative processes, visual arts practice has always involved a dynamic relationship to theory and therefore declarative knowledge.

I am particularly interested in the move to ‘equip schools to embed a knowledge-based curriculum as the cornerstone of an excellent, academically rigorous education’ (DfE 2016, 88), because I am persuaded by the arguments of Michael Young who proposes that the distinct purpose of schools as institutions is the
transmission and acquisition of knowledge (Young 2009). Significantly influenced by the work of Bernstein, he advocates for a curriculum of powerful knowledge (Young 2008). This is defined as domain-specific, specialist knowledge, distinctive in important ways: it is conceptual in its nature; it is distinct from everyday knowledge that people acquire through personal experience; and it is the democratic entitlement of all students. My primary concern is what constitutes educational progress in the field of visual arts, how this is represented in curriculum and assessment, and the implications this carries for students and teachers in the field.

Adopting Young’s stance, I propose that arts educators have a responsibility to consider what specialist art knowledge sets the school curriculum apart from the learning that can take place in informal, everyday contexts; to articulate what knowledge is the entitlement of our students.

The conceptual nature of powerful knowledge

The practical processes of art making, the manipulation of media and the physical outcomes produced are characteristic but not definitive of arts practice. As Szpakowski (2018, 10) asserts, ‘the notion that art exists simply to provide a playground for experimentation with its own materials simply does not chime with the actual importance of artistic practices in our own and every other society’. All art making is based on some prior knowledge, however unarticulated this remains, and expert arts practice is based on extensive theoretical as well as technical knowledge. Mason & Steers (2006) record how early planning of GCSE programmes identified three knowledge domains in art and design education: a conceptual domain, a productive domain and a critical and contextual domain. However, subject leaders in schools have often prioritised the productive domain and organised school curricula around the acquisition of practical skills. Teaching has tended towards a toolkit approach. The NCE (DfE, 2013) stresses the need for pupils to ‘use a range of techniques . . . [and] increase their proficiency in the handling of different materials’. In this model, media and techniques are taught on the assumption that, as their competence develops, students will be able to apply them creatively to more personal projects. As Londesborough (2018) suggests, ‘arts subjects are knowledge based and skill in the arts derives from deep and well-rehearsed knowledge of form, materials, technique, context etc.’. However, the decision-making strategies and the concepts on which they depend are not stipulated. In the words of Young & Lambert (2014, 99), ‘concepts have specific purposes in that they enable us to make reliable generalizations from particular cases and test our generalizations. Theoretical concepts are systematically related to each other (in subjects and disciplines) and are acquired consciously and voluntarily through pedagogy.’

Without the perspective afforded by concepts such as ‘purpose’ and ‘audience’ novice artists will struggle to make the kind of quality judgements required for genuine creativity (Robinson 2011). Young & Lambert (2014, 97) assert that ‘intellectual development is a concept-based not a content-based or skill-based process’. Thus, a skills-oriented curriculum constitutes a reproductive model of knowledge, where students are able to mimic arts practice by following instructions and applying techniques but are not empowered to make independent, critical decisions.

Given this history, it may seem convenient to adopt what Young & Muller (2016, 167) call skills-talk, ‘stipulating what you should be able to do rather than...
what you should know. However, the term ‘skills’ is not unproblematic. Londesborough (2018) points out that skills can refer to ‘both tightly defined, domain-specific skills and generalised (e.g. 21st Century competencies and personal attributes’. He notes that one of the dangers of being classified as a skills-based subject is that the arts are frequently represented as valuable not in their own right, but as enabling the development of dispositions and transferable skills (for example communication and teamwork). Bernstein specifically criticises the emptiness of a curriculum focused on generic skills rather than domain specific knowledge. According to Young & Muller (2016, 166), it denotes ‘a weakening of classification of knowledge boundaries; a new receptiveness to instrumental concerns that aim not at specialisation but at “trainability”’. Without being fused to a body of disciplinary knowledge, art education risks falling prey to ‘the perceived need to functionalize education for a world in which futures are held to be increasingly unpredictable and where the capacity to react rapidly and appropriately to changing market demands is at a premium’ (Beck 2002, 623).

The UK Department for Education claims that ‘The best possible education for adult life in 21st century Britain is one that equips children and young people with the knowledge, skills, values, character traits and experiences that will help them to navigate a rapidly changing world with confidence’ (DfE 2016, 88). However, it is not for select subjects to provide the knowledge and others to provide generic skills. It has been suggested that ‘All knowledge can be articulated, either in context-independent terms (i.e. it can be codified) or in context-dependent terms’ (Gascoigne & Thornton 2013, 5). Teaching, learning and assessment of progress in visual art education has traditionally focused predominantly on demonstrable skills and therefore context-specific performances of understanding. However, Bernstein (2000, xxi) points out that ‘distribution of different knowledges and possibilities is not based on neutral differences in knowledge but on a distribution of knowledge which carries unequal value, power and potential’. Visual arts practice depends on engagement with theoretical concepts, but visual arts education seldom signals their importance. To be afforded equal status in the school curriculum it is essential for visual art education to assert its knowledge-rich heritage.

The distinction between powerful knowledge and everyday knowledge

Bernstein suggests that ‘educational knowledge is uncommonsense knowledge . . . freed from the particular, the local through the various languages of the sciences and forms of reflexiveness of the arts which make possible either the creation or the discovery of new realities’ (Arnot & Reay 2006, 770). Drawing, painting and making things are everyday activities for many people, especially young children. One need only look at the number of creative toys and activity products available for sale, the proliferation of art and craft clubs and camps or the number of how-to videos available on Youtube, to see how popular everyday art is. It could be argued that many of the aspects of the subject can be learned, informally, out of school. However, everyday experience does not provide access to powerful knowledge. Academic art education is distinguished from the practices of the hobbyists by the well-defined, specific goals of the curriculum and the practices of formative assessment with which ‘a teacher or coach will develop a plan for making a series of small changes that will add up to the desired, larger change’ (Ericsson & Pool...
When Robinson (2011, 151) defines creativity as 'the process of having original ideas that have value' he highlights the critical evaluation that is an essential aspect of creative processes. Expert support models and makes explicit the quality judgements that enable systematic reflection and expert problem-solving; according to Cunliffe (2008, 309), 'forms of knowledge necessary for strategic intelligence and sustainable creativity'. Furthermore, the idea that art activities should be fun can make the pursuit of complex conceptual understanding harder to commend. This expectation can prevent students acquiring what Cunliffe (2011, 4) calls secondary-process thinking and 'cultivating and maintaining a range of cognitive strategies and dispositions to sustain a demanding work load and the ability to identify, tackle, and resolve complex problems'.

I propose it should be possible to establish a curriculum model in which technical skills and basic concepts are supported by critical secondary processes (see Table 1) and overarching concepts (see Table 2). These models are indicative and by no means exhaustive. I simply hope to illustrate the conceptual realm that often remains invisible in visual arts curricula and raise the profile of the threshold concepts such as context, meaning and purpose all of which are the persistent preoccupations of practising artists. Thus, the practical, everyday sub-concepts (like the popular line, tone, colour and so on of the formal elements of art) that have dominated much current art education come to occupy the foundation level of a more ambitious structure. Arts practice specifically entails purposeful decision-making and not simply demonstrating skill. Considerations of form and function constitute a middle level because even the very practical decision to apply a certain medium or technique in a given situation is a matter of deliberation, judgement and selection; the application of what Cunliffe (2008, 312) describes as 'cognitive resources'. Winch (2013, 133) suggests that 'Such activities as planning, communicating, assessing and co-ordinating depend on the prior grasp of skill because they are ways of carrying out various kinds of activities that themselves require skill.' Art making processes need to be understood through explicit concepts that enable practitioners to take a conscious stance, formulate a purpose, analyse and evaluate the function of their own work. Sayer (1992, 24) points out that 'In common sense, we think with our beliefs and concepts but not about them.' It is these generalising concepts, seldom encountered in informal education, that need to be articulated, explicitly taught and systematically assessed, at the heart of the school curriculum.

Conclusion

Bernstein (2000, 86) declares that 'The principles of the market and its managers are more and more the managers of the policy and practices of education.' A global culture of what Ball (2012) describes as performativity has narrowed definitions of educational achievement to a range of behaviours or performances of learning. Young & Muller (2016, 166) comment on how this pragmatism has dominated recent debates in education:

the focus on learners and what they can do [has] licensed a swing away from what learners were entitled to learn, focusing instead on what kind of skills they should be able to exercise, a focus which [has] legitimised and continues to legitimate the stipulation of the curriculum in skill – and outcome-based terms.
**TABLE 1** Secondary process concepts in the visual arts

These concepts enable novice and expert practitioners to engage with issues of *how* art is made.

| Overarching Concepts | Process | Source | Form | Function |
|-----------------------|---------|--------|------|----------|
| **Mid-level Concepts** | Reflection Mistakes Problem solving Originality Resolution Divergent thinking Discrimination Judgement Academic honesty Technology | Visual research Primary source Secondary source Non visual source Appropriation ‘Inspiration’ | Composition Medium Materials Technique | Representation Communication Empathy Affect Visual language Analysis Effects |
| **Sub-concepts** | Review Refine Select Adjust Modify Resolve Finish | Observation Experience Imagination Problem/need Literature Fiction/non-fiction Abstract concepts Senses (other than sight) | Colour Tone Texture Space Size Line Pattern Shape/Form Scale ‘Style’ Etc. | Content Theme Proportion Harmony Contrast Emphasis Balance Rhythm Movement Symbolism Illusion Narrative Expression Abstraction Etc. |

**TABLE 2** Overarching concepts in the visual arts

These concepts enable novice and expert practitioners to engage with issues of *why* art is made.

| Overarching Concepts | Context | Purpose | Meaning |
|-----------------------|---------|---------|---------|
| **Mid-level Concepts** | Tradition Innovation Genre Culture Society Role of the artist | Benefit Celebration Influence Ritual Connection Discovery | Interpretation Audience Intention Accessibility Visual literacy |
| **Sub-concepts** | Time Place Location Fashion Subject Continuity Change | Raise awareness Patronage Value Share Power Question Challenge | Values Opinions Statements Questions Puzzles Contradictions Validity |
In this ideological environment, that emphasises individual performance and competitive achievement, we ‘cling to the idea that success is a simple function of individual merit’ (Gladwell 2008, 33) and reinforce the romantic, but problematic, view of artists as exceptional individuals. Moore (2013, 45) recognises two orders of knowledge: ‘that which is immediately given in the subjectivity of the individual consciousness … and that which is produced collectively … that looks beyond and behind the given and opens the space of the yet to be’. If art students, too, are to stand on the shoulders of giants, they must have access to the reservoir of knowledge that organises their discipline. This kind of organised knowledge cannot be acquired piecemeal by, for example, browsing the Internet, it requires a structure like a school curriculum. Although Szpakowski (2018, 16) demonstrates that art and declarative knowledge are not ‘unproblematically connected’ I maintain that the connections can be revealing. Foregrounding conceptual knowledge in the visual arts curriculum allows for a new approach which would ‘shift the unit of analysis away from “expressive individualism” … toward a sociocultural understanding of individual accomplishment; a recognition that “the phenomenon of creativity … is as much a cultural and social as it is a psychological event”’ (Cunliffe 2011, 4). As in Bernstein’s model of pedagogic rights where ‘enhancement involves a continuous, collective process of knowledge production, a contribution to the development of collective intelligence’ (Frandji & Vitale 2016, 21), individual achievement in art is activated and made meaningful by social inclusion. It is specialist conceptual knowledge that provides the connection between productive arts practice and the critical and contextual domain of cultural studies.

Young & Muller (2016, 93) suggest that ‘We have much taken-for-granted knowledge of subjects, but … actually we know rather little about subject knowledge especially if we are serious about the claim that it is, at least potentially, “knowledge for all”’. Maton (2006, 48) records how ‘Proponents of science claimed that anyone could enter the sacred.’ The paradigmaticity of knowledge made scientific culture ‘a democratic and meritocratic endeavour … blind to colour, race, creed’. There has been little examination of the question of what it means to be knowledgeable in the visual arts, but if we agree with Winch about the centrality of conceptual knowledge and with Bernstein and Young about entitlement in a democratic society, then the sacred knowledge of the arts cannot remain invisible in schools, accessible only to a fortunate elite.

Although Cunliffe (2005, 2008, 2011) has identified several knowledge issues associated with art education, more work is needed if knowledge is to be structured and shared in ways that support pedagogic rights. Boden (2011) maintains that knowledge is fundamental in processes leading to transformational creativity as ‘producing something that is surprising, intelligible, and of lasting cultural significance requires extensive understanding of a knowledge domain’ (Cunliffe 2011, 5). However, how best to enable this knowledge transmission and acquisition requires further research. In its progress towards a concept-based curriculum, the IBDP for Visual Arts has made some significant advances (IBO 2014). However, if students are deemed to be entitled to such powerful concepts, they need to be explicitly integrated into curriculum and assessment from the students’ first encounters with the discipline. Art education has to shed the spurious notion that knowledge will spoil or constrain natural creativity. As Londesborough (2018) points out, ‘school is not interested in preserving the child’s ability to express herself in the way she already can, but in providing the dexterity, the vocabulary, the knowledge with
which she might go beyond instinct, accident and play and be expressive in ways that can resonate more deeply with others.

I concur with Cunliffe’s (2011, 3) claim that ‘knowledge-lean practices cannot adequately serve the needs of a future art educator who wishes to sustain forms of educational flourishing structured by the more complex, knowledge-rich grammar of accretion’. Looking back on the long history of struggle for purpose and direction in art education (Steers 2004), we do not need to return to child-centred approaches or commit to a rigid curriculum of skills and techniques. As educators we need to induct our students into the practices of art making and critical appreciation by engaging them with the concepts that enable them to understand that things might be otherwise. I propose that a revisiting of the conceptual domain can enable a review and enrichment of existing visual arts curricula and deepen student engagement with this challenging subject.

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