

[*Note to readers: this is an excerpt from Why Art Cannot Be Taught: A Handbook for Art Students. More information [here](#).*]

## Chapter 6 Conclusions

Sense is something that has to be made. It does not exist naturally, and it is especially hard to find in art teaching. At several places in this book I have said that I do not think that we can make too much progress in understanding what is done in art classes, no matter how much we try. I called that attitude both skeptical and pessimistic, and I drew three provisional conclusions. Here they are, as I set them out in chapter 3:

1. The idea of teaching art is irreparably irrational. We do not teach because we do not know when or how we teach.
2. The project of teaching art is confused because we behave as if we were doing something more than teaching technique.
3. It does not make sense to propose programmatic changes in the ways art is taught.

The first of those conclusions is the one that answers the title of the book. The second points to the principal reason why art instruction is irredeemably irrational. The idea of the third is that if a practice is so far from rational, then it doesn't make too much sense to plan major revisions in the practice: that would be like letting a child operate on a patient. (It could work, but the child's simple ideas probably won't correspond with the patient's complicated anatomy.)

There are still grounds for optimism, I said, because we can always try to learn more about what we do, and we can always hope that what we learn might be of some benefit. Even if most of what happens in art classes is irrational, it still makes sense to think about them. But there is another way of looking at that. One can also ask if it is a good idea to keep trying to make rational sense out of art teaching. The unexamined assumption—or perhaps, the axiom—behind the three numbered claims is that the pursuit of rational knowledge is a good thing. But can we ever know whether it makes sense to try to make sense? That question, though it sounds silly, may be the most disruptive question that can be asked in this context. The more I understand about what happens in

art classes, the more I want to understand; but I also know that what I understand does not provide evidence that understanding improves teaching or learning, or even that it makes them more interesting. Indeed, there is some evidence that it makes teaching *less* interesting.

For example, say you're a student, and you go into your next critique listening for descriptive from prescriptive commentary. You will probably pick up on some teachers who make descriptive comments, and you will be able to distinguish them from judicative comments. Your critique may well appear in a new light: it may seem to be split down the middle, going in two directions at once. There is a measure of clarity in that observation. But is it better than the confusion that existed originally?

In most subjects clarity and sense are ultimate goals, and it is not sensible to criticize them. To “get clear” or “achieve clarity” about a troublesome issue is to understand it thoroughly, to grasp it, to know it perfectly. The principles of physics are best when they are clear (even if they are about uncertainty or probability), and the principles of car mechanics are best when they make sense, so that theoretical mechanics applies to everyday repair problems. But is the same true of art classes? Teaching in an art department or an art school is the most interesting activity that I know, because it is the furthest from anything that makes sense—short of psychosis. Even though I have written this entire book on the assumption that it is a good idea to try for some measure of clarity, I am not sure that is ultimately such a good idea. There is no way to know if it is a good idea to understand something that works by not being understood. This could be put as a formal claim, the last one in my list:

4. It does not make sense to try to understand how art is taught.

There is a cave chamber in Sarawak so large that it could hold five football fields—the largest single subterranean chamber in the world. When it was first discovered, the spelunkers had no idea what to expect. They were walking up an underground stream when the walls diverged and left them staring into darkness. The room is so large that their headlamps could not pick out the ceiling or the walls, and they spent the next sixteen hours working their way around the room, keeping close to the right-hand wall, intending to keep going until they got back to the entrance. At times they were fooled by “house-size” boulders that they mistook for walls of the chamber, only to

find that they were giant boulders fallen from the ceiling. At one point one of the cavers panicked, but eventually they all got out. Pictures taken on later surveying expeditions show the spelunkers' lights like little fireflies against a measureless darkness.

I think of this book in the same way. Like the people on that first exploration, we are not about to figure out very much of what takes place in art classes. There is still a good probability that we will get badly lost thinking about art instruction—and I think parts of this book do get lost. Perhaps that's the best way for things to be. The cave will certainly be less interesting when it has electric lights and ramps for tourists. Isn't the cave best as it is—nearly inaccessible, unlit, dangerous, and utterly seductive?

Perhaps some of the things I have written in this book will shed some light on what happens in art classes—but even now, having finished the book, it is not apparent to me how my rational analyses bear on the irrationalities of art teaching. In addition I am fairly certain that the ideas in this book do not make what we do more interesting, except in the negative, limited sense that they show how intricate it is. My evidence for that is this book itself, which I think is ultimately less interesting than an actual critique. In the end, if it were possible to produce a full account of how art is taught it might be a boring, irrelevant, pernicious document, something that should be locked away.