Maxine Greene: Imagining a New Age

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Abstract

This paper takes a look at the philosophies of Maxine Greene and how her work has influenced art education as well as the education of teachers. It breaks down Greene’s ideas into three constant themes: freedom, imagination, and aesthetic education. The paper explores an interpretation of these themes and how each of them apply to us as humans as well as learners and as art educators. It attempts to draw attention to the need for a shift in educational methods based on the ideas of Maxine Greene. It compares the expected role of a teacher in today’s classroom with the somewhat visionary example of what the role of a teacher should look like according to Greene. The paper is self reflective as well and talks about how the study of Maxine Greene and her system of ideas has influenced and will continue to influence me and my future as I step into that role as an art educator.
Maxine Greene: Imagining a New Age

Maxine Greene is an American philosopher and educator who’s work has greatly influenced the education of teachers. After her formal education, which included a master’s degree and a Ph. D. in Philosophy of Education from New York University, she went on to become a professor of literature at Montclair College and then an Associate Professor in Foundations of Education and Philosophy at Brooklyn College. She began her work at the Teachers College at Columbia University in 1965 (Greiner & Dosamantes, 2013)

The philosophies of Maxine Greene, which shaped her whole life’s work, career and role as an influential entity in this world are centered around the central theme of freedom. Freedom is the goal. It is the pathway toward the goal and it is the initial stimulus that prods us to start our journey down that pathway toward that goal. Freedom is the base and the theme that unites all of Greene’s written literature as well as her lectures and interviews. In an effort to draw attention to the need to “awaken people to their freedom” she quotes Henry David Thoreau in her essay on “wide-awakeness” that was published during her tenure at the Teacher’s College, Columbia University (Greene, 1977). Thoreau says:

Moral reform is the effort to throw off sleep. Why is it that men give so poor an account of their day if they have not been slumbering? They are not such poor calculators. If they had not been overcome with drowsiness they would have performed something. The millions are awake enough for physical labor; but only one in a million is awake enough for effective intellectual exertion, only one in a hundred million to a poetic or divine life. To be awake is to be alive. I have never yet met a man who was quite awake. How could I have looked him in the face?
This desire for moral reform through the mere act of being 'awake' is a call to arms that dates all the way back to 1846 with Thoreau’s *Walden*. There is an even greater need now, for those who are able, to stand out among the slumberers. Maxine Greene spent much of her life as a proponent for this vision and continues to do so still. There are many themes that Greene discusses in her work but there are three that are constant throughout. Freedom, imagination, and aesthetic education. I believe that these themes are tiered as well as cyclical and are influenced and shaped on a personal level by one another. Freedom, to Greene, is defined as breaking from “automatization and the bland routinization of life” (Greene, 1977). In order to achieve this personal and individual freedom we must first know that there is something beyond the banality. This is where imagination comes in. Greene talks about imagination on the personal level and also what she calls ‘social imagination’ which is using imagination to picture the world as better than it is and imagining the steps that we can take to change it (Greene, 1993). Through these themes, Greene has inspired so many people to facilitate change. She was influential in movements like civil rights, women’s liberation and education reform.

Her philosophy on education and aesthetic education is the third theme throughout her work. Greene’s ideas and lectures on education are directed at educating and reforming teachers and inspiring them to alter the systematic formula of standardized education. Her ideas of what a teacher is and the role that they should play in education is inspiring to me. We spend so much time learning systems and templates and general educational psychology that we forget what the goal of education really is and what our youth can accomplish if we as teachers give them the tools to imagine a world out there, better than it is right now. In her book *Releasing the Imagination* (1993), Green writes: “I hope to connect my own seeking with the striving of other teachers and teacher educators who are weary of being clerks or technocrats and equally weary
of that sad opaqueness of a private life centered about nothing but itself.” Greene argues that teaching is a dialogue with students, not just the spewing of information. She calls us, as educators, to teach from our own experience and use our unique perspective as a resource for personalized education. She implores us to create this dialogue with students to establish an environment where they can take responsibility for their own learning by the discovery and cultivation of their own unique interests (Blanchard, 1988). I want to raise up a youth that realizes that their individuality is the most effective tool they have to facilitate change in a world that is in such desperate need. I want my classroom to be a haven for this exploration. How can I expect them to learn this, however, while teaching from a systematic standardized curriculum with state required performance goals and assessments? I believe that our current system of education has been gradually put in place, not to create a uniform ‘army of learners’ but to assist educators, who have not been awakened to their freedom and responsibility, of creating this dialogue with their students. From this necessity, I think, has sprung the national and global test score comparison which has moved us even farther away from the original goal of education. According to Greene, science and philosophy cannot answer the questions that we have today. In fact it is literature and the arts that require a personal, reflective interaction that equally cannot answer today’s questions but enable us to ask better questions. (Boss, 2008)

Maxine Greene’s philosophies on art and aesthetic education specifically, are personally motivating to me as a future art educator. She lays out the importance of art education as a tool to “developing critical as well as creative thinking” (Greene, 1984) in works like Releasing the Imagination (1993), and The Art of Being Present: Educating for Aesthetic Encounters (1984). Greene states that:
Empowering someone to make a work of art meaningful is what aesthetic education is all about. It's about the space between the picture on the wall and you. Something happens there that's never happened in the world before because no one else is exactly like you. ("Variations," 2002)

Teaching our students how to create and how to begin to think about creating is important to the existential exploration of the individual. Creative education is a way to exercise the imagination which Greene determined is necessary to achieving freedom from the routine and bring about change. Imagination is what brings us the capabilities to experience another’s point of view. Not wholly and completely but it acts as a bridge, or a rope swing at least, out of our own restrictive consciousness. It is through teaching students how to view art and how to combine their own perspectives with the perspectives of other artists that sparks the imagination to envision a world outside of what they are used to. As an art educator, I can transport my students and aide in their awareness of different cultures and different viewpoints by studying the work of other artists. Rather than simply teaching the basic elements of art and how to apply them, I wish to be this mode of transportation for my students. I want them to learn how to ask questions and how to bring their own individuality to the creation of their art and to the critique of others’. I wish to create an environment where the students strive to act, to “embark on a new beginning” (Greene, 1984) rather than react within the guidelines of an already established world.

Maxine Greene continues to influence people and educators and the pedagogic structure of our school systems. She founded The Maxine Greene Center for Aesthetic Education and Social Imagination which provides instruction, resources and support for art educators and anyone striving to promote the importance of social imagination (Greene, 2013). For the last 37
years she has been the Philosopher-in-Residence at the Lincoln Center for the Arts in Education where she continues to give lectures and lead workshops. In 2001 she published a book of these lectures on aesthetic education titled Variations on a Blue Guitar. Maxine Greene has accomplished so much in her lifetime and at 95 years old, she doesn’t show any sign of slowing down. In an interview with Greene published by the Teachers College at Columbia University, she spoke about retirement by saying “I am what I am not yet” (“Flunking Retirement,” 2001). She is not just passing along her theories to porous learners but is continually practicing what she teaches. Mrs. Greene goes on to say about retirement that:

You are always striving for completion, for a kind of wholeness, that, if ever you achieved it, you’d really be dead. But a lot of it is to say that I absolutely couldn’t live if I didn’t think there were so many things that I hadn’t done, so many books I haven’t read, so many papers I hadn’t written, or so many risks I hadn’t taken.

(“Flunking Retirement,” 2001)

Maxine Greene is a clear voice in a muddled world. She is a brilliant thinker, who unlike most of her colleagues, asks us that we don’t blindly adopt her system of ideas but that we go out into the world and create our own. She gives me hope for a struggling field that is crying out for change and reform.
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