Creative Intelligence, Creative Practice:
Lowenfeld Redux

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Volume 1, No. 2, of Studies in Art Education, appearing in spring 1960, included an article by Viktor Lowenfeld titled “Creative Intelligence.” Here, he highlighted his belief in the importance of creative intelligence to human functioning, linking it to creative practice as represented most purely in the artworks of children and untutored artists. The present article written with over 60 years of hindsight, offers a gentle critique of Lowenfeld’s theory of creative intelligence as exemplified within his concepts of developmental stages, growth components, and final outcomes. Yet, by paring away some of his outmoded surfaces, there lurks within Lowenfeld’s seminal offering to art education the enduring idea that creative practice offers ways of knowing and world-building that enliven knowledge through acts of personal generativity.

Viktor Lowenfeld contributed to the inaugural volume of Studies a short piece titled “Creative Intelligence” (1960). Here, expounding on an issue already given prominence in his widely published text, Creative and Mental Growth (1957), he argued for a new view of creative intelligence. Along with others of his time, he assumed that within cognitive functioning creativity stood apart from general intelligence operating with a set of traits of its own (Barron, 1955; Getzels & Jackson, 1962; Guilford, 1950; Wallach & Kogan, 1965; Torrance, 1962). Introspective accounts of artists and other highly creative individuals had indicated that creativity was intimately associated with an openness to individual experience and exhibited freedom, playfulness, and uniqueness relative to individual purposes—all traits that, unlike intelligence itself, were considered unmeasurable (Dewey, 1934, Read, 1943).

By the 1960s the issue of creativity, especially in education, had become a topic of urgent discussion in the light of the Russian launch of Sputnik. The need for new thinking in the areas of science and technology had sparked a debate that reached into all branches of intellectual endeavor including the arts—once thought to have priority in such matters. While reflecting thinking current in his time, Lowenfeld was less interested in what one might call the social purposes or pragmatic outcomes of creativity than he was in its quieter workings in how individuals functioned within, and made sense of, their worlds.

"Man and environment" do not change. What changes is our subjective relationship with man and environment. It is this subjective relation between the world and ourselves that has to be studied in order to know how to stimulate a child properly according to his age level (Lowenfeld, 1960, p. 81 [emphasis in original]).
For him, “creative intelligence” existed within everyone and acted to enlighten what he termed the search for “subjective truth” providing encounters with the world that were relational, distinctive, and unique (Lowenfeld, 1957, p. 25). Creative intelligence unfolded over time, could not be forced, and was encountered in its most pure form in the artworks of children and untutored artists: “Creativity on a naïve level is best seen in primitive folk art and also in the art of children” (p. 24). Thus for Lowenfeld, creative intelligence was exemplified in creative practice and his lifetime concern was to enlighten the conditions under which this occurred.

The Notion of Relationship: A Human Purpose for Art

Throughout all his writing, Lowenfeld was consistent in the emphasis he placed on relational-knowing at the heart of art practice, aesthetic experience, and as a reflection of creative intelligence.

A work of art is not the representation of the thing; it is rather the representation of the experiences which we have with the thing. These experiences change with our subjective relation to the environment as well as with the medium through which these relationships are expressed. This holds true for the design and execution of a chair as well as for the design and execution of a picture. (Lowenfeld, 1957, pp. 79-80)

The unifying theme in Lowenfeld’s work, and the underpinning of his conception of creative intelligence, is found in the brief statement above introduced into the 3rd edition of Creative and Mental Growth (CMG) in 1957. For Lowenfeld, all things were known relationally, and visual images existed in the world as expressions of that knowledge. To this end, he believed that creative practice functioned to integrate intellectual, emotional, social, aesthetic, physical, and perceptual life, or what he termed “growth components.” He argued that creative practice contributed to the development of a harmonious personality at the heart of which was a flexible mind able to empathize with and be sensitive to the needs of others. Seen in the context of his time, Lowenfeld’s vision was, at root, a prescription for repairing the world. Looking back in time and extrapolating from his own early experiences and those of his compatriots, Lowenfeld explained how they:

learned to use all of their senses to become more sensitive to nature, for only a person who uses all the refinements of his sensitivities will grow up a refined human being in a world of peace. (quoted in Ranuft, 2001, p. 6)

Perhaps by drawing on these earlier experiences and having survived two bruising world wars, Lowenfeld (1957) later wrote:

Our one-sided education with the emphasis on knowledge has neglected those attributes of growth which are responsible for the development of the individual’s sensibilities, for his spiritual life, as well as for his ability to live cooperatively in a society. The growing number of emotional and mental illnesses in this nation, the largest in any nation, as well as our inability to accept human beings first of all as human beings regardless of nationality, religion, race, creed or color, is a frightening sign and
vividly points out that education so far has failed in one of its significant aims.... Art Education, introduced in the early years of childhood may well mean the difference between a flexible creative human being and one who, in spite of all learning, will not be able to apply it and will remain an individual who lacks inner resources and has difficulty in his relationship to the environment. (p. 2)

Lowenfeld was not alone, of course, in claiming that art education could exert a powerful influence on repairing a fragmented world by providing the resources for creative practice, and mental integration. Both of his near contemporaries, John Dewey and Sir Herbert Read, had made similar claims in their ground-breaking works, *Art as Experience* (1934) and *Education Through Art* (1943).

More than 60 years on, and even a cursory glance at the world today, reveals that years of art education practice under the influence of Lowenfeld, Read, Dewey, and others, have produced neither a noticeably better world nor more balanced and harmonious personalities. Given what we now know, we can hardly argue that artists of the past such as Michelangelo, Rembrandt, Van Gogh, Goya, Picasso, and Bacon were models of integrated or harmonious personalities, nor menders of their worlds. Yet these artists produced great art in their time—art that had undeniably powerful effects on their contemporary and future audiences. For they created new forms of thinking and feeling in paint and stone that not only enriched the emotional texture of life but also opened to view new depths of human relationships. In short, they gave birth to forms of meaning that enriched human experience, expanded cultural reach, and often, challenged prevailing aesthetic and social norms.

While perhaps Lowenfeld’s position on the role of art in the creation of a more harmonious world seems overstated, even naïve, to us today, he nonetheless framed an issue of contemporary relevance. For if artistic activity in the lives of children and adolescents is not about saving the world, then what ultimate end does it serve? A contemporary re-casting of Lowenfeld’s work might offer us a newer kind of answer. For by paring away a number of his outmoded surfaces, and at a deeper level, we find Lowenfeld is consistently preoccupied with a more hospitable claim: that artistry, both creating and responding, is about making the world personally meaningful and endowing the outcomes with social and aesthetic significance. Aesthetic growth, fostered in art education, Lowenfeld (1957) writes, is the task of education in which:

The individual’s sensitivity toward perceptual, intellectual, and emotional experiences is deepened and integrated into a harmoniously organized whole, so that his senses are brought into harmonious and habitual relationship with the external world. However, in this education process art can play a major role inasmuch as no art expression is possible without a heightened sensibility toward the external world and our ability to bring our inward senses in harmonious relationship to it. (p. 9)

It is important to recognize that Lowenfeld was proposing a humanizing purpose for art rather than charting the growth and development of the talented or specially gifted individual. He appears to have thought that, with insightful
teaching, all young people would grow in their abilities and that creative intelligence and talent would blossom. For him, thus, creative intelligence enlivened and integrated the operations of thought while creative practice drew upon experience of life as subject matter, and in doing so, helped children and adolescents to situate themselves empathetically within the network of relationships that composed their worlds.

**Development and Instruction**

Children’s creative products have enchanted adults of all walks of life for well over 100 years. The work of Lowenfeld offered a theory and description of stages that, from the first publication of CMG, came to dominate school art practice. His influence did much to free teachers and children from the aesthetic and conceptual straight-jacket based in “imitation” and “telling” that dominated much school practice at mid-century. Theoretically, however, as his critics have noted, his work was less invested in artistic development per se, than in creative intelligence as it related to the formation of self-identity, personality, and human relationship. He was not alone in his time in believing that a consciousness of self would emerge through an empathetic ability to identify with others; an ability made possible through creative practice. Through recalling memory experiences as sources for creative action, Lowenfeld, like Read and Dewey, believed that children and adolescents would become insightful about the purposes and problems of others.

I think this is the great contribution of art to man: art embraces not only physical skills and abilities, not only the mind, but also the emotions and many aspects of growth which we otherwise would leave untouched even in our present educational system. I would like to become more poignant and clear about this so that we all understand it. (quoted in Michael, 1982, p. 5)

**Stages and Phases**

Lowenfeld’s thinking about the subject matter and purposes of creative practice in the lives of children and adolescents was encapsulated by his theory that creative and mental growth took place in stages. He was among the first to set forth what, in his time, was a comprehensive view of development distinguished by its continuity from childhood through late adolescence. He delineated stages of artistic development, moving in predictable order and at designated ages from what he called the scribbling stage of infancy to the crisis of adolescence. Lowenfeld’s view of development was complex and assumed an interweaving of intellectual, emotional, social, perceptual, physical, aesthetic, and creative components of growth.

His stages began with the very young child as an active agent in the acquisition of concepts of lines, marks, forms, and their relationships. This pre-representational development, Lowenfeld argued, derived from an innate creativity that required very modest environmental guidance. From this point onwards, he envisioned a sequence of stages in which skills accumulated in the construction of visual images that built on each other in hierarchical fashion becoming increasingly dependent on the knowledgeable intervention of teachers. Within
the forward movement of creative development, young people revisited and elaborated on images of objects and events, constructing ever more complex relationships with them.

For Lowenfeld, stages were distinct and unified structures. Children and adolescents passed through the same stages in the same way and at more or less the same ages. Pictorial and graphic skills were not so much accumulated stage by stage, but involved important changes in their organization over time. Their very names: Scribbling, First Stage of Self Expression, First Representational Attempts, Achievement of a Form Concept, Dawning Realism, Pseudo Realistic Stage, The Period of Decision, and Adolescent Art, capture the significant achievements that characterized the flow of development over time. Stages were composed of the “growth components” and it was the achievements of each stage to ensure both development and also balance among components. Development itself occurred in response to the changing experiences of everyday life which, Lowenfeld believed, mobilized natural interests and curiosity and inspired creative action. While stages dictated what was experientially salient at any given time, they were continually challenged by new events in children's lives that provoked imbalance in the structural organization of the growth components. The compulsion of young people to create paintings, drawings, collages, and clay works was part and parcel of their drive to organize everyday experiences and, in consequence, achieve balance and harmony in their thinking.

Lowenfeld, like his near contemporary Jean Piaget (1929), believed that creative growth and development occurred as a process of natural unfolding, each stage coming into being one after the other in a linear fashion. This trajectory of development was conceived by both Piaget and Lowenfeld as largely unaided by external social forces. While it is true that Lowenfeld situated the subject matter interests of children and adolescents in the context of their self-world relationships, he did not make a place in this for the artistic influences of the surrounding culture. In fact, he envisioned a disunity between education and the environment that was “clearly expressed by an art expression which because of its extreme individual character almost loses its communicative meaning” (Lowenfeld, 1957, p. 39). Against this, he urged teachers to help youngsters identify with their own subjective experiences and believed that the pictorial devices that they acquired were their own inventions coming into being to meet their own expressive purposes.

The complete integration of content and organization, of design and its meaning, is one of the intrinsic qualities of creative work. Any artificial influence on the part of the teacher would only cause confusion in the child. Such unity has to come from the child as a sign of his state of mind and should help the teacher only to gain more insight into the child's growth. (Lowenfeld, 1957, p. 67)

It was not until adolescence and the emergence of visual and haptic interests that Lowenfeld acknowledged the role that social influences, embedded in the study of the history of art and crafts, played in determining forms of creative practice.
This strictly linear view of growth and development has been much criticized over the years, and the notion of structurally unified stages seriously questioned. Research, inspired by the work of Vygotsky (1962), and later by Bruner (1990, 1996), Kegan (1994) and Egan (1999), has made it clear that, from the first, all facets of children's development are not only situated within the culture of which they are a part but also shaped by the practices, skills, and expectations of that culture. From infancy onwards the actions and outcomes of human endeavor are molded by culture, parents, and teachers who challenge and nurture development and its forms. If parents have created an environment in their home where infants can explore and play with materials, if children have then been encouraged to expand and enrich their learning in materials in pre-school, then they will likely be ahead of those youngsters who have been less fortunate. If, later in schools, children have been offered constructive learning experiences in the visual arts that respect their subject matter interests, they are more likely to continue in their creative development than those who have not. Learning how to learn, to pay attention and concentrate draws upon the intervention of an adult or teacher, and are themselves skills of the culture that shape development. Creative growth is, thus, heavily conditioned by experiences with materials, visual ideas, and ways of learning that children encounter during the course of their lives both inside and outside school.

The culture shades development in two additional ways: via the commitments of the art teacher and via the preoccupations and practices of the art world itself. For example, usually teachers have been trained in art school and likely are sympathetic to one or other style of art that influences their own creative practice. These sympathies inform their understanding of the discipline and help shape their instructional practices and expectations for their pupils' accomplishments. Of course, while most teachers adapt their own art commitment to their perceptions of pupils' interests and past experiences, this will vary considerably from teacher to teacher. Moreover, the teacher's understanding of difference and diversity also enter into how the discipline is portrayed to pupils. Class, race, ethnicity, and gender are all defining components of the socio-cultural world that we now understand have influential bearing on creative development and its outcomes. Children growing up in different circumstance and with diverse cultural backgrounds and experiences appear to follow a variety of developmental tracks. Nowadays, teachers who honor difference and diversity in their art classroom will introduce their pupils to the works of under-represented communities and cultures, thus offering a wider spectrum of models for inspiration than Lowenfeld could probably ever have imagined.

Growth Components
But in his time, the work of Lowenfeld challenged the supremacy of the cognitivist tradition of development. For Lowenfeld, as for Piaget and other developmentalists, early learning was situated in the very young child's physical action in the world and the feelings that accompanied those actions. Learning centered in the physical body was conceived to be fundamental to the reach of childhood creative growth and was accompanied by an emerging ability to reflect on the outcome of action and give it direction. However, Lowenfeld
parted company from traditional developmentalists such as Piaget by arguing that learning through body action, the senses and feelings, was not left behind in infancy, rather remained a potential source of knowledge and action throughout life. Indeed, it was the function of this embodied knowledge, Lowenfeld believed, to bring a sense of aliveness to drawings, paintings, collages, and clay works no matter how complex or formal they became. Throughout CMG, teachers were exhorted to offer children physical activities as part of their motivations for learning in order to keep this capacity alive.

Lowenfeld’s commitment to embodied experiences led him to modify the centrality usually attributed to intellectual growth in education by situating it as one component among several included in his conception of the human mind. By dividing the mind into seven components, he gave each a significant role to play in development: “Growth occurs simultaneously in its different components and affects the child in his totality” (1957, p. 48). He perceived that learning in the schools of his time was directed toward the nurturance of a narrow rational scientific mind neglecting the wider range of human abilities and needs. This led him to offer creative practice as the place where the thinking, feeling, and perceiving of the whole individual could be attended to and developed. His theory suggested that growth components changed and developed at each stage, and thus, each stage could be envisioned according to the designated accomplishments he set forth. As the drive to construct ever more adequate schemas for changing life experiences unfolded, Lowenfeld’s assumption was that there should be an accumulation of parallel skills in all growth components. When one or several growth components appeared to lag behind, a stage was thought to lack inner structural unity and balance; when this occurred, he assumed that inner mental integrations suffered from a lack of homogeneity. Here, art teachers were urged to make careful study of the growth components as they shaped each stage of development and take steps to help maintain “harmonious relationships” through their teaching (1957, p. 60).

It is clear that Lowenfeld envisioned his growth components as fundamental units of creative intelligence, or mental life. However, seen in retrospect, the strength of his theory for his time was to give a place and function to body-senses-feelings in the construction of knowledge. Philosophers of education such as Langer (1953), Reid (1954), Scheffler (1991), and later D’Amasio (2003) and Johnson (1987), argued for a close kinship between cognition and emotional life, but this had largely been ignored in education both before and after Lowenfeld’s time. As Louis Arnaud Reid (1973) pointed out:

It can be argued effectively that feeling has a crucial function to perform in coming to know and understand: it has a cognitive function and is not a mere subjective happening. This stands out very clearly in the development of aesthetic understanding, but it has a far wider application than this. (p. 175)

It is important to recognize that Lowenfeld’s theory called into play and dignified capacities of mind (or growth components) that were largely excluded from the education of his day. However, while we may now assume that children and adolescents do call upon a broad range of habits of mind in creative practice,
and elsewhere in their learning, these do not of necessity achieve or maintain parallel growth as Lowenfeld thought (Burton, Horowitz, & Abeles, 2000; Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Gardner, 1983). There are many determining factors impinging upon how habits of mind might develop and interact in creative endeavors, such as past experiences with materials and practices, individual interests and temperament, and influence of teachers and parents. Reid (1973) offers us a poignant glimpse of this.

Into all our awareness—perceptual, imaginative, conceptual, and aesthetic—there enter countless influences, influences of what may (but need not) have been once fully conscious, but are now consciously forgotten, taken for granted, having become part of our disposition to attend and apprehend. We 'see' the world in perspective as coloured, resonant, three-dimensional continuum, a world of nameable things and relations… We see it because of countless explorings, learnings, teachings, education—from babyhood onwards. Everyone comes to the arts with all this ordinary equipment. We come, too, as individual persons—with certain temperaments, dispositions, and gifts, with special personal associations which effect what is seen, with a particular cultural background in which the arts and aesthetic may or may not have played a part. (p. 183)

It is also highly probable that some components/habits of mind come to the fore at different times and for different purposes in development. We all know, for instance, children who are gifted in drawing or painting yet whose social and physical abilities are much more rudimentary, or the young child who shows little aesthetic interest, only to blossom in adolescence. We also know youngsters who, experiencing times of emotional distress, may either endow their creative practice with heightened feelings or withdraw from any such activity entirely.

Looked at from the perspective of today, a less rigid view of growth components raises questions about unified stages. The very concept of fixed unified stages is probably misleading, for in reality, most children’s creative practice includes evidence of several so-called stages co-existing harmoniously in any one work. We only have to think of the creative practices of early childhood, where first images of people are often accompanied by actions derived from Lowenfeld’s scribbling stage, called upon to depict the actions of wind, or fire, or movement; or think of later childhood in which a medley of different spatial views such as: bird’s eye, overlapping, and fold-over co-exist as they call upon a variety of ways of perceiving and acting in the real world of space; or of adolescence where scribbling or doodling often enters into more formal attempts to depict perspective or volume. Indeed, in the real world of today, it seems that both children and adolescents will call upon a great divergence of skills and practices as they meet a particular challenge, or make an imaginative leap into a new idea.
Phases and Transitions

A re-casting of Lowenfeld’s stage theory suggests that development occurs in smaller overlapping units or phases, wherein new behaviors emerge over time but are not necessarily structured in equal graphic complexity as Lowenfeld thought. The products of these phases include specific skills, practices, and accomplishments that can be called upon flexibly in the process of creative practice. New skills as they emerge enter into children’s and adolescents’ artistic repertoires widening and deepening their constructive and expressive potential. Thus, challenges prompted by youngsters’ expanding worldviews inspire subject matter ideas that call into being a range of graphic possibilities; these in turn, provide a reflective lens on the subject matter provoking new thoughts and feelings for expression. This kind of flip-flop interplay between experience and repertoire is made possible by the imagination which invites experimentation, testing, and play as possibilities are explored (Arnheim, 1974; Franklin, 1973; Green, 1995; Smith, 1983; Wener & Kaplan, 1963). Here, the imagination comes into play, as indeed Lowenfeld suggested, to inform creative intelligence and generate new meanings.

As we now envision it, development might be understood at one level in terms of phases rather than stages and as gradual transitions in creative behaviors as these are layered in complexity over time. At another level, development might also be seen in terms of what David Feldman (1994) has called crystallizations, or the integration of phases for increasingly complex constructive and expressive purposes. Here, a range of earlier (and later graphic) skills may be called forth in response to a youngster’s experience or idea and may crystallize as a constructive-expressive vehicle. While such crystallizations may often be temporary, they nonetheless introduce new skills and possibilities into the young person’s existing repertoire.

This conception of development would be a more adequate explanation for how children and adolescents quite naturally and happily appear to draw upon differently organized groups of creative behavior in single works, and how actions vary from material to material. For example, a 10-year-old may combine a complex feel for pattern and design in depicting a human figure, yet place the figure on a simple baseline more typical of a younger child. The same child working with clay may ignore pattern and design completely in favor of the spatial volume and action of the figure. It also explains how, from time to time, creative practice appears recursive, as if youngsters need to revisit past possibilities and explore their potential for further growth. Indeed, if we examined the works of mature artists through this lens of development we would find groupings of differently structured actions brought together for an infinite variety of expressive purposes. We have only to think of the play of formal precision and brushy texture in Hockney’s Bigger Splash, or Turner’s Rain Steam and Speed, or Rembrandt’s Girl Standing in a Pool, and myriad other such examples both historical and contemporary.

Seen from the perspective of contemporary thinking about human and artistic development, many of Lowenfeld’s ideas can be seen to foretell later advances in the field. His delineation of stages, however, now appears much
too inflexible, age determined, and rigidly linear. While Lowenfeld’s theory of creative and mental growth makes much of respecting children’s experiences, he tends to assume that all children and adolescents are likely to have had, or indeed should have had, the same kind of experiences occurring within the same time-frame. This makes very little room for youngsters from diverse backgrounds, with diverse cultural and gender experiences who grow richly in their difference. We know for example that feelings such as love, fear, and anger present different challenges to boys and girls based on socio-cultural expectations and this is reflected in the art they make (Cox, 1993; Feinberg, 1977; Flannery & Watson, 1994; Tumin, 1999). Moreover, if young children have had plentiful exploratory experiences with materials, they are likely to have more richly endowed repertoires than youngsters whose opportunities have been more limited. Adolescents who have benefited from continuous art experiences through their childhood are likely to weather the conflicts of adolescence and re-discover their expressive voices more easily than those who have not. We now know that human development does not proceed according to a smoothly flowing linear agenda, for young people progress according to individual and different rhythms. Some children quite naturally progress rapidly in development only to slow down from time to time, while others begin slowly and then speed up; still others follow a more even pace.

Thus, while development clearly takes place in creative intelligence, we now need to understand it differently as a constructive activity rather than as a spontaneous unfolding. We need to go beyond Lowenfeld’s theory of fixed-and age-assigned stages with clearly bounded growth components, experienced by all young people in the same way. Creative practice enables children and adolescents to structure their understandings of self and world in much more flexible ways than he envisioned. We need to be much more open to the realities of 21st-century youngsters living in a heterogeneous, complex, technological, challenging, and culturally diverse world. We need to do all this without losing Lowenfeld’s essential belief in the contribution of the visual arts to our human capacity to construct complex knowledge and make the world a meaningful place.

The Outcomes of Creative Growth

While often overlooked now, Lowenfeld’s commitment to the importance of relationship at the heart of creative practice makes his developmental theory quite distinctive: He envisioned creative practice as a vehicle for sensitizing children and adolescents both to their own needs and capacities as well as to those of others. In concert with other traditional developmental theorists he gave priority to individual development, believing that properly supported creative practice would lead to personal autonomy (Erikson, 1968; Piaget, 1951; Kohlberg, 1969). This kind of freedom carried with it a distancing of perception that allowed young people to stand back and critique their worlds, circumventing what Lowenfeld saw to be the corrosive conventions of the commercial culture. Unlike his contemporaries in cognitive psychology, however, Lowenfeld envisioned that personal autonomy, enhanced by richness of perception and well-
nurtured expressive abilities, would naturally offer possibilities for enlarging ideas about relationship rather than reinforcing self-other separation. He argued that creative practice offered an experience of responsiveness to others, a way of being present in the world, of reaching out and being seen and heard. He suggested that it was during the process of working with materials that young minds were able to reflect upon people and events of great salience to a sense of self and, through the agency of the imagination, to be empathetic to others they did not know and to situations they had not experienced.

It is well to remember that … one of the major concerns of art education is its effect on both the individual and society in general. To live cooperatively as well-adjusted human beings in this society and to contribute to it creatively have become most important objectives for education. It is impossible to live cooperatively and understand the needs of our neighbors without self-identification. As the child identifies himself with his own work, as he learns to appreciate and understand his environment by subordinating the self to it, he grows up in a spirit which necessarily will contribute to the understanding of the needs of his neighbors. As he creates in the spirit of incorporating the self into the problems of others, he learns to use his imagination in such a way that it will not be difficult for him to visualize the needs of others as if they were his own. (1957, p. 36)

His commitment to the centrality of relational thinking, perceiving, and feeling in creative growth has the theoretical hallmarks of his old colleague, the philosopher Martin Buber, and brings Lowenfeld more squarely into the camp of psychoanalytic theorists such as Donald Winnicott (1971) and Marion Milner (1971). In this aspect of his theory Lowenfeld was clearly ahead of his time. For it would be more than 20 years before feminist theorists would challenge traditional developmental views of the objective-rational mind, by re-situating it within a relational worldview centered on caring and justice much like Lowenfeld had proposed (Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 2007).

If Lowenfeld placed creative practice in service of the construction of ideas about self and world, the outcome, as we have seen, was not to be judged as an aesthetic object. His wariness of the prizing of intellectual ability over all other capacities of mind in education was also carried over into his perception of aesthetic education. Here, he was clearly fearful that criteria drawn from formal aesthetics were being used to evaluate the artwork of children and adolescents. Moreover, he was also concerned that learning to apply formal aesthetics in their own creative practice worked to divert and stultify youngsters’ own natural aesthetic inclinations.

Aesthetic growth is organic with no set standards; it may differ from individual to individual and from culture to culture… If we attempt to regiment aesthetics we arrive at dogmatic laws which have their expression in totalitarian rules… It implies that all set rules, rigidly applied to any creative expression are detrimental to aesthetic growth. (1957, p. 58)
Moreover:

Aesthetic growth, although very important, constitutes only one fraction of the total growth of the child. However, since art has traditionally been interpreted as being related mainly to aesthetics, this concept is greatly responsible for the neglect of other factors of growth. (1957, p. 49)

For this reason, perhaps, in his theory, aesthetic growth, like intellectual growth, was no more than one capacity of mind among several and did not have overarching sway over creative practice. Here, he parted company with many of his colleagues and would indeed be much criticized for this view in later years (Barkan, 1962; Lanier, 1969; Wilson, 1997). While he agreed that the creative practices of children were superficially like those of artists, he believed for most youngsters this was not a step on the road to adult artistry and could not be judged as such. Since his time, the ongoing debate about whether the work made by children and adolescents is art or not continues unabated and, to some extent, mirrors the larger confusion about the nature of art itself. There are still conflicting views about the location of the aesthetic experience, its meaning in development, and how it can be taught and evaluated. While most observers of children’s creative practice today do see in it the seeds of adult artistry, they also see it in terms of an aesthetic experience that serves youngsters’ own purposes of making their worlds meaningful (Burton, 2005, 2009; Franklin, 1973; Smith, 1983).

Possibly more contentious than the stages in Lowenfeld’s work is his view of the outcome of creative practice encapsulated in terms of two styles of art. Within his theory, creative practice originating from direct physical action on and with materials was characteristically expressionistic in the early years. The artistic path envisioned by Lowenfeld thereafter was composed of building blocks toward forms of pictorial realism. Artistically, this realism took two directions in development: one leading to visual realism, the other to a kind of expressive realism. The former was dominated by an interest in visual detail: the precisions of contour, identification of specific features, linearity, and was thought to be more distanced and objective; the latter drew upon multi-sensory responses captured in color with sweeping and free brushwork and was deemed to be more inner-directed and subjective. Both outcomes of creative practice were thought by Lowenfeld to reflect personality types, the visual and haptic, and both were instruments of mind enabling mental integration. It is interesting to note that throughout his text, Lowenfeld clearly prized the more expressive-haptic type and protested about teachers who over-emphasize the visual in youngsters’ creative practice.

It becomes evident that imaginative activity and even the ability to give objective form to the creations of the imagination by no means depend on the capacity to see and observe things. (1957, p. 276)

At this point in time it is difficult to sustain the notion that personality inhabits styles of art quite as Lowenfeld thought. Indeed, if the growth components and the stages they characterize must now be thought about more flexibly, this has implications for Lowenfeld’s ideas about personality. We now know
that any given self is expressed through myriad traits, motivations, projects, interests, and styles and that these change over time and with diverse experiences (Burton, 2005; Franklin & Kaplan, 1994; Gardner, 1982; Mathews, 1999). While Lowenfeld insisted that his two personality types emerged quite naturally in development, he failed to note that they did so in a cultural setting in which visual and expressive styles of art predominated. Looked at in hindsight, so powerful was Lowenfeld’s voice at mid-century that realistic and expressionistic styles were to dominate much school practice for years to come.

In the world today, however, contemporary practice offers a spectrum of styles that might have astonished Lowenfeld and challenged his rather narrow theory of personality linked to style. It now seems more reasonable to uncouple style and personality. While it is true that some children have interests in visual realism and some in more tactile and embodied uses of materials, most children and adolescents combine both interests. Beyond this, and depending upon how their teachers’ frame learning, young people will explore and experiment with a whole range of styles testing out their possibilities for personal creative outcomes.

Within Lowenfeld’s theory of creative and mental growth not all children and adolescents become professional artists, but they all develop flexible and free minds able to construct and express personal meaning. It is here, perhaps, at its deepest level that Lowenfeld’s work resonates most fully with more contemporary sensibilities. For he envisioned children and adolescents engaged in a process of creative practice which called for reflection that energized imagination and opened new worlds of understanding and meaning to them. The visual expression of meaning in lines, shapes, forms, and colors allowed for a whole network of influences, experiences, ideas, and feelings to interplay and be shaped into coherent wholes. Lowenfeld’s developmental theory is characterized by processes of creative practice exemplifying what he calls creative intelligence at work, rather than the aesthetic products of artistry. It is not that Lowenfeld was unmindful of outcomes or of the needs of the gifted and talented individual. But his emphasis is rather on the continuing need of all young people to make sense of a complex and confusing world, of the need to empower young minds with aliveness and flexibility, and to harness their inherent creative capacities to this end.

References


