

The Effectiveness of a Studio-Based Art Humanities Curriculum

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THE EFFECTIVENESS OF A STUDIO-BASED ART HUMANITIES CURRICULUM

Susan Atkins

There is little debate that most art teachers genuinely want their students to be involved in the appreciative aspects of art. Gene Mittler writes, "It is a tragedy that many simply do not know how to go about it" (Mittler, 1980, p. 17).

When I first became a high school art teacher, I tried using the traditional slide-lecture approach I had used successfully, I thought, in my history classes. To my surprise my art students resisted my efforts to enlighten them. Puzzled by the students' reactions, I became interested in investigating how art appreciation might be included in the art curriculum in ways that would not be viewed by the students as an interruption of precious studio time and of little value but as an essential part of the creative process.

As a result of my study, I developed a humanities based studio curriculum. In the development of my curriculum, I am particularly indebted to the work of art educators, Edmund Feldman, Vincent Lanier, Irwin Child and Gene Mittler. The curriculum is based on the following hypotheses:

Art appreciation and studio activities are supportive of each other. June McFee in analyzing why students need both studio experience, art history and criticism states:

"Whatever reasons students have for creating art, they have some needs in common. First, they need to be motivated to create. They must have, or have searched for ideas for expression and to which they can give form. Second, they need symbols, visual images, and designs or compositions that express these feelings and ideas. Third, they need skills to manipulate the media so their ideas or feelings can be brought out. And, fourth, they need skills to criticize what they can continue to develop" (McFee, 1977, p. 155).

The things students see as artistic and which interest them can provide a meaningful base for an art appreciation study if students are taught the techniques and vocabulary needed for art criticism. Irwin Child writes:

The art educator may think of his task as partly that of leading students toward aesthetic appreciation of art in the way experts appreciate it, believing that only thus can art come to make the fullest possible contribution to their lives. Or he may think of his task as that of making more accessible to each student the art the student seems to prefer and enjoy most. In the first instance, the art educator should understand the student's original approach to art, the better to be able to induce him to change; in the latter instance, he needs to know the student's original approach to art in order to encourage and nourish it (Child, 1966).

Vincent Lanier, in an article entitled "Talking About Art: An Experimental

Course in High School Art Appreciation," argues for "a collective verbal examination of the nature of the participant's personal response to what he takes to be art." He proposes a curriculum which begins with the student's ideas about what he likes but which encourage him to "take what he sees as the arts and teach him why and how he enjoys what he already appreciates" (Lanier, 1968, p. 38).

Talking about art produces a positive impact on student interest in art in general and in producing art in general and in producing art in particular. Nancy MacGregor after describing a program she taught which emphasized talk about art by having the students learn to look at and talk about the art of artists and of students along with producing art, concludes that her students' attitudes toward art appeared to have changed. "They no longer think of art merely as objects which they produce; they now see it as an area of inquiry as well." (MacGregor, 1968, p. 17) In addition to the attitude change, she believed that the art products of her students were influenced positively.

When students are asked to be creative in their dealings with art through methods such as creative writing and game playing, positive attitudes toward art develop. Jim Cromer in describing a program designed to teach visual literacy in a language arts class maintains that through the "interaction of visual and verbal language acquisition and usage, knowledge becomes more apparent and greater impact on learning is acquired" (Cromer, 1984, p. 2).

The implementation and evaluation of a humanities based studio course bounded on the preceding hypotheses forms the core of my dissertation research. Accepting the notion that studio activities are enhanced by art appreciation and vice versa, the course is characterized by one week in the art appreciation classroom followed by one week in the art studio. The starting point of the course is student discussion about what they feel to be artistic and meaningful to them. Emphasis is placed on teaching techniques of critical evaluation and on requiring students to be creative in their responses to art through creative writing, music and game playing. The formal discussion of art is followed by studio projects based on the themes dealt with in the art appreciation classroom. The studio projects are formally presented by the students to the entire class at the end of each studio project. Students are asked to use the techniques of critical evaluation in dealing with their own and each other's projects.

Assessment of the effectiveness of the curriculum is based on ethnographic analysis and quantitative research. The course has been taught four times over a period of a year and a half.

The Eisner Art Information and Art Attitudes Inventory and Brent Wilson's Test of Aspective Perception to Studio classes and the humanities based studio classes are being used to provide qualitative measure of both cognitive and affective impact of the course.

Ethnographic analysis is from the perspective of a participant observer. Observation schedules show much of out-of class time students spend on their studio assignments for their humanities based studio course, as compared

to assignments for courses where they are given only studio instruction. Twenty students are followed who have two art classes per day to determine which class receives priority according to in-class time spent, their studio class or their humanities based studio class.

Analysis of tapes of student presentations, class discussions, and of course critiques written by the students, student interviews, and notes of continuing observations of student reactions to differing components of the course form the core of the remaining qualitative analysis.

Although the research is continuing and the quantitative data is yet to be compiled, several items are emerging from the qualitative data. Students like to talk about art; they like to personalize it. The more opportunities students are given to do this, the greater their responses. The lack of interest in art on an academic level, i.e., learning dates, styles, artists names, does not preclude students from liking to look at and talk about artworks and to use art as an inspiration for their own creativity. Although not all students have claimed to like the art appreciation segment of the curriculum, more have claimed to like it than not like it. What they seem to like most is discussion and activities designed to promote creative thinking about art. Talking about art appears to hold much more interest to high school students than being lectured to about art. By talking, the students seem to make the artwork theirs and thus their liking for it increases.

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