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Looking, Talking, and Experiencing Art with Preschoolers

Shari Stoddard

One of the research areas I am involved in deals with preschoolers looking at, talking about, and experiencing art. I graduated with a B.F.A. degree from the University of Michigan in 1970 and since that time I have fluctuated between working with preschoolers, making art and giving art lessons. Between the time of my graduation from the University of Michigan and completion of my master's degree and teaching certification in Art Education from Indiana University in 1987, I spent a total of ten years as a teacher and director in various day care facilities and nursery schools. These experiences, my knowledge of preschoolers, and my interest in art brought about my decision to combine the three in my doctoral research.

Conclusions of studies by Taunton (1982, 1983), Feeney and Moravick (1987), and Bowker and Sawyer (1988) indicate that preschoolers can talk about works of art. Unfortunately, most preschoolers are not given opportunities to discuss works of art. In a study by Bowker and Sawyer (1988), in which they held subject matter constant and color was not a factor, preschoolers appeared to respond primarily to style. The authors, however, stated that these preschool children lacked ability to verbalize their reasons related to style.

In a study by Dixon and Tarr (undated), these researchers found that three and four-year-olds came to preschool with enough vocabulary for brief discussions of art work. After a four month program involving discussions of art, Dixon and Tarr observed an increase in descriptive words of all kinds as well as more spontaneous discussions of art by preschoolers.

Sharp (1976), observing one preschool classroom, found that a great deal of talk went on in the art area but that very little had anything to do with aesthetic qualities related to the art work. Rosenstiel, Morrison, Silverman and Gardner (1978) also found that children are handicapped by a limited vocabulary for discussing aesthetic topics.

The following lessons were part of a study I implemented at the Campus Children's Center. The center offers a full-day preschool and kindergarten program. The majority of the parents whose children attend the center are either Indiana University faculty or staff. I chose to do this project in the four and five-year-old classroom which housed eighteen children, a lead teacher, and an assistant teacher. Each lesson was approximately one hour long and included a group of approximately eight children.

The main objective for the project was to combine my ten years of preschool teaching experience with my interest in developing an art curriculum for preschoolers, including looking and talking about art as well as art making. I wanted to discover whether or not I could motivate **preschoolers** to talk about works of art using Broudy's Aesthetic Perception Training in the Visual Arts, adapted by Gilbert Clark (1988). The scanning topics are as follows:

Subject Matter: Description

Sensory Properties: Description (Design elements)

- a) Color; hue, value, intensity
- b) Line; descriptive qualities
- c) Shape; geometric or organic
- d) texture; actual and illusionary
- e) Space; two or three dimensional, actual or illusionary
- f) Value; light and dark

Formal Properties: Analysis (Design principles)

- a) Balance; symmetrical or asymmetrical, relative weight (visual)
- b) Theme; dominant characteristics
- c) Thematic variation; repetition and variety
- d) Rhythm; quality of movement
- e) Harmony; interrelationships of discrete parts
- f) Unity; overall relationships of elements and principles

Expressive Properties: Interpretation

- a) Mood Language; simple adjectives (e.g. sad)
- b) Dynamic States; complex states of being (e.g. conflicting)
- c) Ideal Language; cultural and social meaning (e.g. horror of war)

Technical Properties: Description

- a) Media; materials used
- b) Technique; methods of construction, tools used, aspects of style

The above was used as a guideline in my discussion with the children. It was not followed sequentially although I usually did begin talking about the subject matter of the art work.

I made a conscious effort to include not only reproductions or photographs of famous art works but also actual works of art in the same medium. Most of these were my own works. The children seemed extremely interested when they knew I was the artist. To strengthen the idea of making art more tangible to the children, I not only brought in my art work but the materials and tools I used to make my art work. I believe one cannot expect children to find relevance in talking about an "oil" painting if they have never smelled oil paints or had the pleasure of mixing oil paints with a palette knife.

In most of the lessons comparisons were made between at least two works of art. Similar and different characteristics were discussed. I found this to be an appropriate method to employ in introducing elements of art to preschoolers.

Portrait Lesson

Study for the Banjo Lesson - Mary Cassatt

The Torn Hat - Thomas Sully

Children and Bicycles - Shari S. Stoddard

Because I believe young children need reassurance with familiar information when beginning something different with relatively unfamiliar people, I began this lesson, the first in the series, with a game the children already knew. The children located body parts during the game of "Simon Says". I wanted the children to make a gradual transition of feelings with their hands to looking with their eyes so I had them switch from finding and touching textural parts on their own bodies to finding, by looking, similar parts on their partners. This was also a way of introducing a comparison of similarities and differences which the children would use when looking and talking about art.

Some particularly interesting points that came out of this lesson included the following:

*The children discussed the colored shadows on the children's faces in the Cassatt and Sully paintings. By having the children actually look for colors on the faces of other children in the group, they could better relate to the many colors used in the paintings.

*The children easily picked up on the differences between colors. They had no problem in deciding if the orange in a certain place was a red-orange or a yellow-orange. One child even described a color as "peachy-yellow".

*I knew the children had worked with tempera paint and chalk previously, but I was somewhat amazed at how easily they pointed out which painting was done with chalk and which one was done with paint.

*The vocabulary the children already possessed was impressive. They were also quick to incorporate the new words I mentioned during the lesson.

The looking and talking activity lasted for over an hour and could have continued had I not felt compelled to complete an art making activity. The children created portraits of their partners with crayons on paper. Some of the art work showed detail and variations of color not usually seen in work done by children this age.

Van Gogh's Bedroom Lesson

Bedroom in Arles (1889) - Vincent Van Gogh

The Dining Room (1980) - Shari S. Stoddard

This lesson began with a discussion of oil paints and artists' supplies. The children were introduced to new art words in conjunction with the objects the words represented. When possible I tried to connect new information to the children's existing knowledge. For example, when showing the children a partially used tube of oil paint, I asked them what they had at home that they rolled up like that. They answered "Crest, toothpaste".

We mixed paint with a palette knife on a palette board to match the color of the children's clothes. The children really enjoyed this activity and it led to many interesting topics being discussed. When trying to achieve the correct match of paint to clothing color the children knew when to add more blue or red pigment to the mixture to match the color of the clothing.

The first painting we discussed was my painting, **The Dining Room**. The subject matter is more prominent than color in this work. We talked about the size of the chairs in the painting in relation to matching chairs in the children's dining rooms at home. I then had one of the children move one of the chairs in the classroom closer to us and one far away. We talked about how they appeared and how in reality they were the same size, and related this to the painting.

Next I showed the children a reproduction of Van Gogh's **Bedroom in Arles**. We discussed what objects were in the painting, some of the colors, and the lines of the floor boards showing perspective. I then gave the children jobs of building Van Gogh's bedroom in their large block area. The children eagerly got to work. Two children became angry at the three who were to build the bed because they could not start building their table until they knew where the bed would be located. I stayed on the sideline and watched in amazement. The children never questioned how they were to make a three-dimensional room from a two-dimensional picture. When the children were finished they joined me to compare their work with the painting.

I told the children to look at the reproduction and compare it to the room they had built. I asked one girl what she had built. She started to answer "I made", then "wait a minute" and she ran over to the table she had built and moved the stacked up blocks over about three inches closer to the bed. She returned to the group and said "I built the table". She had looked at the painting and in comparing the painting to the block room realized that her table needed to be closer to the bed. I was impressed with her ability to correct herself when she was given the opportunity.

This lesson contained tangible, physical objects and materials the children could manipulate, as well as giving the children the opportunity to communicate their feelings verbally.

The product was not something the children would take home to show their parents and most likely discard. The product was the beginning of art knowledge related to art materials, art vocabulary, fine art works, etc. which could be attached to existing knowledge such as playing and building in the large block area, thereby establishing a foundation on which further art knowledge could be built.

Mask Lesson

Masks (1987) - Christos Kondeatis

- Tutankhamen
- Carnival Mask
- American Indian Spirit Mask
- Kabuki Character
- African Mask
- The Minotaur
- Gargoyle
- Medusa
- Chinese Dragon Mask

Masks, Face Coverings and Headgear (1973) - N. Laliberte and A. Mogelon

I initiated this lesson with questions. "Why do people wear masks? Can you think of any special kind of people who wear masks? Why do these people wear masks?" The children talked about and answered these questions. I told the children I had brought in some masks for them to talk about, look at, and try on. These three-dimensional masks came from the book **Masks**. The book included information about each mask and I relayed the information I thought was relevant to these children. We talked about what each mask represented, its color, form, line, texture, balance, unity, technical properties, and how the masks made them feel when looking at them and when wearing them.

Again the children put the information about the masks into their own knowledge base. One girl, when seeing the carnival mask, said she had seen that one before. When I asked her where, she replied "On Star Trek". I said I had seen the mask there too now that she mentioned it. Each mask brought special delight to the children and although they might be frightened by the Medusa mask, they couldn't wait to try on the mask with the snakes.

The looking and talking about the masks and trying them on lasted over an hour so the art making project of making masks was postponed to the following day. The art making portion of the lesson began with a discussion of the masks in **Masks, Face Coverings and Headgear**. The children were then told to make masks which had a specific purpose. I wrote the purposes, which could be changed at any time during the art making activity, on a piece

of paper. Talk about the art making activity reflected the looking and talking portion of the lesson held the previous day. A discussion of the purpose of each mask followed the art making activity.

Sculpted Clay Animal Lesson

Ceramic Creations (1971) by Robert L. Fournier
The Sculpture of Picasso (1967) by Roland Penrose
Animals in Clay (1971) by Shay Rieger

This lesson began with my showing a group of eight children photographs in the three books listed above. The children and I talked and looked at the way the artists represented animals in these books. We discussed the subject matter, the properties of the animals, how the art works made them feel, and what the art works were made out of. I brought in some three-dimensional clay and wood animals for the children to feel and talk about. We discussed form, texture, and color.

The children were excited about the opportunity to work in clay. Before I could get all the balls of clay handed out, Thomas shouted out, "Shari, look at the goat head that I made". In all Thomas made eleven objects - a goat head, a duck, a bull, two turtles, an owl, a water bird, a camera, a dinosaur, a seal, and an elephant. None of these are the usual preschool type of clay object - snake, pancake, donut, or snowman. Other children in the group made bears, a dove, a giant, turtles, and elephant, a rabbit, a duck, just to name some of the items.

The animals were placed on trays to dry. I explained the drying and firing process. After the animals were fired the children painted them and put them on a table we designated as an art museum. The children wrote their names and the name of the objects they made on paper beside their animals. They were proud of their creations and their museum.

Journal Writing Lesson

One of the last lessons of this project included a group of eight children making art journals. Constructing the books took one session. During the following session and several thereafter, the children chose art reproduction postcards to glue into their books. They were then encouraged to write about their particular art postcards following the same aesthetic scanning guideline employed to discuss larger reproductions in the group discussions.

The following is an example of one child's reaction to a fine art reproduction postcard. In case whole language is not your second language a transcription of the writing has been included.



HAIAR PINGRAST LAIDIC
FIELD HAY AND HORSES
IALOUGAS
BLUHAT AND ORANGE HAT
AND AIALOULHAT
CUL SAI
IT WAS A LONG TIME

THEY ARE PICKING GRASS 3 LADIES
FIELD HAY AND HORSES
I SEE YELLOW GRASS
BLUE HAT AND ORANGE HAT
AND A YELLOW HAT
COOL SKY
IT WAS A LONG TIME

ADU OIL PAINTING
I MAC IGMIHARI
HARAR TARD
BATHAIROL MOC
IHT

AGO OIL PAINTING
IT MAKES ME HAPPY
THEY ARE TIRED
BUT THEY ARE ALMOST
FINISHED

The Art Club

The Bobby Bear's Red Raft lesson, drawing a live model lesson, and object drawing lesson were done when I was a teacher at the Campus Children Center. I established an art club in the four and five-year-old classroom. Once a week for an hour a group of children and I would meet to do art activities. I include these three lessons and the following Sleeping Beauty lesson because, although they were done earlier than the project, their content is relevant to the theme of this paper.

Bobby Bear's Red Raft Lesson

During the session the children's art work was done while the children listened to one of their classmates describe a book illustration. The children never saw the actual picture while they were drawing. The children sat or laid on the floor with wooden boards, paper, markers and crayons. One child stood in front of the group with me and described the picture he/she was looking at.

The children were encouraged to ask the child describing the picture questions. For example, if the describer said the bear was on the raft, a child might ask if the bear was sitting or standing. The children grew quite proficient in asking questions before drawing.

The children's work was remarkable when compared to the actual book illustration. The children took words they heard and visualized how those words might be represented visually on a piece of paper. The biggest difficulty for the children arose when the describer told them to draw a squid.

Drawing a Live Model Lesson

The children drew me as a model in this lesson. First we talked about the parts of the body and how an artist often looks at a model when he/she paints or draws. Research on children's art seldom talks about children drawing from observation. I believe this lesson and the following object drawing lesson show how young children can draw objects from observation if they are given guidelines in what to look for and think about when drawing.

In this lesson, while the children drew, I spoke in general terms, saying such things as "remember people have necks, shoulders, knees, etc." I never specifically addressed any of the children's work while they were working. The children's work included many parts of the human figure and details such as buttons, earrings, and pockets which children age four and five do not usually include.

Object Drawing Lesson

Continuing my interest in children drawing from observation, during another session I presented four objects for the children in the art club to draw. I spoke to the children about each object; where it came from, why I owned it, what it meant to me, and so on. The children were encouraged to handle each object and to talk about the physical properties of the objects.

The objects were then placed on the table and the children were asked to draw and/or paint those objects they wanted to. The only requirement I made was for the children not to have the objects float in space, the objects needed to be sitting or standing someplace.

It was interesting to observe that the proportions of the objects in the children's art work were basically correct. This element was never discussed, but by careful observation and discussion of the details, texture, and colors these four and five-year-old children were able to accomplish some very fine observational art work.

Sleeping Beauty

While I was a teacher in the four and five-year-old classroom at Campus Children's Center I discovered the children were very interested in how filmstrips were made. Although we did not actually make a filmstrip, the children's interest did lead to a very exciting project. We decided to represent a story on overhead transparencies.

The first step was to choose a story. The children decided to portray a familiar story, made suggestions, and then voted. The story of Sleeping Beauty was chosen.

I read the children three different versions of the story, showing and discussing the visuals as I read. One boy who was particularly interested, helped me divide the story into the correct number of parts so that each student could illustrate one segment of the story. I read the parts to the entire group and then each child chose one which he/she wanted to draw. Campus Children's Center employs whole language so that after the children finished drawing, they wrote at the bottom of their pictures what was happening. I took the drawings and using a permanent black marker transferred the drawings to transparencies. Next I gave the children permanent colored markers and they colored in and elaborated their drawings. After all the transparencies were completed and the children had an opportunity to view their work in sequential order, we decided to present a program for their parents. I tape recorded each child reading his/her own writing. The tape was then played when the parents viewed the transparencies. The entire project was a great success.

Conclusion

The lessons included in this paper reflect the practical aspect of applying a combination of preschool and art research. My interest in seeing if I could personally lead children in discussions of works of art guided the research and its application. I have always found that most children love to talk, that they love to feel grown up and do grown up types of activities, and that they love to have adults take the time to listen to what they have to say. Looking at, talking about, and experiencing art with preschoolers is a way of accomplishing all of these passions.

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