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Marilyn Zurmuehlen Working Papers in Art Education
ISSN: 2326-7070 (Print)
ISSN: 2326-7062 (Online)

Volume 11 | Issue 1 (1992) pps. 46-47

Mentor's Introduction

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Recommended Citation
Koroscik, Judith Smith. "Mentor's Introduction." *Marilyn Zurmuehlin Working Papers in Art Education* 11 (1992): 46-47.

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mentor's introduction

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Assessing student understandings of art is a multi-faceted research problem. At the very least, it requires that the researcher possess advanced knowledge of art, cognitive development, and research methods for evaluating evidence of learning. Each of these research areas is considerable in itself, particularly in light of shifting paradigms in contemporary scholarship. For instance, in this post-modern era of art history we find ourselves broadening definitions of art and questioning what we have long taken for granted as art. In educational psychology, we have opened up the "black box" that behaviorists dared not open and have worked aggressively to explain the nature of higher-order thinking. And in numerous fields of study, we have accepted the value of gathering quantitative **and** qualitative evidence to illuminate the nature of social phenomena.

It is both challenging and exciting to be a researcher today. It is no longer valid to follow "recipes" for conducting research. Although recipes can ensure successful outcomes for beginners, they limit the scope of outcomes when available recipes are incomplete or are inappropriately matched to the occasion. Having options to approach research questions through a variety of qualitative and quantitative methods is a good thing, and it is very exciting for knowledgeable and experienced researchers. However, having almost limitless options can seem overwhelming to novice researchers, including graduate students. After all, some level of expertise about each option is essential in order to make intelligent decisions about which one or more to choose.

Carol Stavropoulos responded to this research challenge with great enthusiasm. In the process of conducting a study with me and other members of an art education research methods course, Carol began to detect patterns in the data we gathered to suggest how students' verbal responses to works of art could be systematically compared. Her inventiveness led to the identification of several overlapping categories of learning outcomes. Carol set out to differentiate recall, low-order understandings from responses that reveal understandings of a higher-order. She was also intrigued with the occurrence of misunderstandings--responses that suggest a student is at a dead-end or off-track in his or her thinking about a work of art.

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After many long hours of analyzing each student's written remarks about a single painting and after comparing those data across students of different grade levels and academic abilities, Carol's systematic assessment instrument began to take form. Throughout the process, Carol set no limit on the number of categories that emerged from the data, but she was intent on finding clusters of responses that revealed something about either the student's knowledge base or use of knowledge-seeking strategies. To her credit, Carol did not invent a theoretical framework of her own, rather she drew heavily on my work with others and on cognitive learning research in general. Carol also relied on the scholarly literature in art history which provided a strong reference point for distinguishing novice interpretations of art from more sophisticated ones.

Carol recruited art teachers and evaluation experts to test the validity and reliability of her instrument, and she drew upon her own elementary, secondary, and college level art teaching experience. The end result is that Carol has constructed a useful tool for art teachers who wish to gauge the **quality** of their students' written responses to works of art.

The instrument is designed to use in its entirety or in an abbreviated form. For instance, if a teacher is interested in obtaining a comprehensive assessment of student understandings, the entire instrument could be used. If instead the teacher is interested in assessing the quality of student references to formal, descriptive, interpretive, **or** historical dimensions of artwork, then only relevant categories of the instrument can and should be employed.

Carol thinks an art teacher should decide what learning outcomes are most worth assessing and that assessment should correspond to the taught curriculum. Yet if teachers are at a loss in discerning a range of desirable outcomes, Carol can offer some concrete suggestions. She has become very astute in wrestling with a multiplicity of options.