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Dissertation Abstract
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Classroom Art Talk: How Discourse Shapes Teaching and Learning in a High School Art Classroom

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Summary of the Problem

This study of classroom art talk, *CAT*, responds to curricular reform mandates for art education that have gained increasing acceptance over the last thirty years. These mandates recommend that art teachers include the language-based domains of art, namely, art criticism, art history, and aesthetics, in studio arts curriculum. Today, arts curricula at national, state, and local levels call for instruction in art criticism, art history, aesthetics, and studio practice.[1] The language-based domains of art present new challenges to art teachers and their students, who have traditionally focused on studio practices.

To date, high school art teachers, in comparison to junior high school and elementary teachers, have participated very little in professional development training in teaching the language-based domains of art (Wilson, 1997, pp. 166-67). Currently, little is known about the extent to which high school art teachers teach in the language-based domains of art, nor about the role talk plays in teaching and learning in the language-based and studio domains of art. This is an alarming deficit given that as of 1998 in the United States, 32 states recommend visual arts as a requirement for high school graduation (*NAEA News*, April, 1998).

Aims of the Study

The overarching aim of this study is to examine *CAT* in order to better understand what high school teachers and students have to say in matters related to art criticism, art history, aesthetics, and studio practice as a part of art classroom pedagogy; and by inference, to flesh out how *CAT* shapes teaching and learning in art. The three aims of this study are:

1. To describe and analyze the contexts in which *CAT* occurs.
2. To describe and analyze the patterns of speech and the terminology of *CAT*.
3. To describe and analyze how the social and curricular levels of *CAT* shape teaching and learning.

The first aim invites description and analysis of the character, including frequency and duration, of talk under typical circumstances in a high school art classroom. I identify three contexts of *CAT*:

1. teacher-student whole class
2. teacher-student one-on-one (and impromptu small groups)
3. student-student one-on-one (and impromptu small groups).

In each context of *CAT*, teacher and students attend to ideas that are relevant to the four domains. Therefore, *CAT* can be thought of as, *Talking Art Criticism* (*C*), *Talking Art History* (*H*), *Talking Aesthetics* (*A*), and *Talking Studio Practice* (*S*).[2] *Talking Art Criticism* refers to talk that pertains

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[1] Eisner, E. (1988). *The role of discipline-based art education in America's schools*. Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Trust; *National Standards for Arts Education: What Every Young American Should Know and Be Able to Do in the Arts* (1994) Reston, VA Music Educators National Conference; *Visual and Performing Arts Framework for California Public Schools: Kindergarten Through Grade Twelve* (1996) Sacramento, California Department of Education.

[2] In this paper, I use the terms Criticism, History, Aesthetics, and Studio (CHAS) for purposes of brevity and clarity. The *Visual and Performing Arts Frameworks for California Public Schools • Kindergarten Through Grade Twelve*, (1996) uses Artistic Perception, Historical and Cultural Context, Aesthetic Valuing, and Creative

to perception, the ability to synthesize and assess sensory information in art such as light, color, texture and composition. *Talking Art History* is to speak of the cultural and historical contexts of art including biographical information about artists and about the situatedness of the style of a particular work of art comparatively and chronologically with other art styles. *Talking Aesthetics* is a philosophical discourse about art that analyzes the very nature of art and the characteristics of aesthetic experience. Aesthetics is defined in the Random House College Dictionary (1982) as "the study of the qualities perceived in works of art, with a view to the abstraction of principles; and the study of the mind and emotions in relation to the sense of beauty" (p.22). *Talking Studio Practices* refers to talk about creative expression through various techniques and procedures using arts media.

My second aim invites description and analysis of the unique qualities of the language used to talk about art in the art classroom—*CAT* as dialectic or vernacular. Notably, Lemke's study of high school *science* discourse, *Talking Science* (1990) helped focus my attention on the patterns and specialized terminology of *CAT*. Lemke suggests that specialists—including teachers —use language in ways that are particularly well suited to their discipline, be it music or physics. The assumption here is that to the extent to which people use the same patterns and specialized terminology—in a subject discipline and in culture or society—they are likely to understand each other's intended meanings. A related and equally important assumption of mine is based on the Sapir/Whorf hypothesis of linguistic determinism, or linguistic conditioning. This theory holds that the language we speak shapes perception. According to the Sapir/Whorf hypothesis, language is likely to shape how students think about art.

My third aim invites description and analysis of the social and curricular levels of *CAT*. Cazden identifies the functions of classroom discourse as "the language of curriculum, the language of control, and the language of personal identity" or "the propositional, social, and expressive functions" (Cazden, 1988, p.3). In teacher and student discourse about art, "the propositional" can be understood as curricular (talk about art) and "the social and expressive" can be understood as social, how teacher and student talk establishes and maintains their roles in the social arena of the classroom. Thus, in this study, teacher and student *CAT* is described and analyzed as communication at the curricular *and* social level.

Given the paucity of research in this area of art education, this study seeks to illuminate a phenomenon, *CAT*, that is integral to teaching, and by inference, given the linguistic theoretical framework, to illuminate how talk might influence learning.

Site and Participants

• Miramar High School's students' backgrounds range from working class to upper middle class families.

• Mr. R. is considered a good teacher. He teaches printmaking, design, and art history at Miramar. He makes and collects art. He has taught high school art for 35 years. He is well respected by his principal and other art teachers at his school and in his district. He is a popular teacher with students.

• Printmaking is a an introductory level class in which students work with linoleum block printing and silk screen.

Expression. *The Role of Discipline-Based Art Education in American Schools* (1988) uses Criticism, History and Culture, Aesthetics, and Production.

• Mr. R.'s printmaking students range from 9th to 12th graders. They vary in how much art they've had before this class and in how interested they are in art. Printmaking 1 had one group of about 30 students in the fall semester and another group of the same size in the spring semester.

• Classes at Miramar meet on a rotating schedule, every class meets every other day for 100 minutes.

Methodology

Data Collection

• I spent approximately 6 hours a week as participant observer in the printmaking classroom, including classtime and about a half hour before and after class, twice a week. This totals approximately 216 hours in the two semesters of observation.

• I recorded a total of 45 hours of naturally occurring *CAT*.

• I interviewed Mr. R. and a total of 11 of his students throughout the year.

• I interviewed five groups of 3-4 students together, at different times throughout the year.

• I talked with students in class throughout the year.

• I photographed student artwork, finished and in progress.

• I videotaped one group interview and two class sessions.

Data Analysis

I selected an episode of *CAT* in Contexts 1 and 2, and several, which were shorted episodes, in Context 3 for analysis in the body chapters of my paper. Context 1 is analyzed in Chapter 3, Context 2 in Chapter 4, and Context 3 in Chapter 5.

Episodes were selected for analysis based on their being representative of typical *CAT* in Mr. R.'s Printmaking 1 class, and for their being particularly illustrative of how *CAT* shapes teaching and learning.

In Chapters 3-5, episodes of talk are introduced with a description of the particular setting in which they happened. I then describe the social and the curricular levels of the discourse. I use a coding system that I developed for analyzing *CAT* to micro analyze just a few lines from each episode (see examples p.11), which enabled me to look at examples of *talking art criticism, art history, aethetics, and studio practice* as direct references and also as indirect, tangential, and ancillary.

Finding 1. *CAT* occurs in three distinct and very different contexts.

Context 1, teacher-student whole-class, focuses primarily on the how and why of printmaking that students will do or are in the process of doing. It can last from 30 seconds to 85 minutes. The curricular level of Context 1 *CAT* is rich and comprehensive. The social level is filled with implicit expressions of credibility and of power dynamics of speakers in their roles in the classroom. For example, in the episode of Context 1 *CAT* analyzed in Chapter 3, Mr. R. shares his extensive background and knowledge of art and in the same words, establishes credibility for himself as teacher. When questioning something Mr. R. had said, his student

Mike makes a point of using art vocabulary that Mr. R. had introduced, and in doing so, establishes credibility for himself as student and challenges Mr. R.'s credibility.

Context 2, teacher-student one-on-one (and impromptu small groups), focused primarily on critique of individual student artwork, usually artwork in progress. It can last 30 seconds to 10 minutes. As in Context 1, the curricular level is rich and comprehensive. The social level attends to teacher and student implicitly establishing credibility through their knowledge of art, and negotiating the extent of power each has in assessing and making final decisions concerning the student's artwork. For example, in the episode of Context 2 *CAT* analyzed in Chapter 4, Mr. R.'s critiques attend to a vast and varied collection of components and nuances particular to visual art within the context of his student Norman's work. This is the curricular level of his talk. These same words, on the social level, are also peppered with "could," "may," probably," and "you got two choices," which implicitly communicate the extent to which Mr. R.'s comments can be understood as suggestions or directives. His student Norman's critiques are comparatively less vast and less rich in art content—the curricular level—but are also peppered with "well actually" and "it's supposed to be" in his attempts to establish his own credibility and establish the extent of his authority, or power, in final decisions concerning his own artwork, the social level.

Context 3, student-student one-on-one (and impromptu small groups), focuses on both the how and why of the printmaking projects and on individual student's artwork. It ranges from just 2 to 36 exchanges. In comparison to Contexts 1 and 2, the talk is brief, less rich, and less comprehensive on the curricular level. Students appear to avoid using art terminology, for example using the common term "frame" instead of "mat board," which means more than just a frame. On the social level, this art talk communicates strong adherence to camaraderie. In the episodes examined in Chapter 5, this camaraderie falls under three headings, Liaison's Interpretations, Stick-Togetherness, and Compliments.

My descriptions of these three contexts of *CAT* offer a structure and suggest the facility of talk about art that can help teachers to incorporate talk in their art pedagogy and curriculum more effectively.

Finding 2. *CAT* is abundant.

In each semester of Printmaking 1, Mr. R. gave three introductory lectures, which lasted from 50 to 85 minutes, approximately six procedural lectures, which lasted about 30 minutes, approximately 4 procedural mini-lectures, which lasted 10 to 15 minutes, and approximately 20 procedural micro-lectures, which lasted from 30 seconds to 5 minutes. This is about 1/10th of the total class time. When he was not addressing the whole class, Mr. R. spent the majority of the rest of class time talking to students one-on-one and students were free to talk among themselves. I cannot gage accurately from my data how much student-student talk was art talk (and this amount would vary greatly from student to student). Based on my observations and recordings, I estimate that 20% of student-student talk was about art.

The Sapir/Whorf hypothesis claims that the words we use affect thought and perception. Due to the great amount of talk in art classrooms like Mr. R.'s, it is likely that teaching and learning in art are significantly shaped by the content of *CAT*.

Finding 3. The four domains of art education, Art Criticism, Art History, Aesthetics, and Studio Practices (CHAS), do not get equal attention in *CAT*.

As shown in Appendices A and B, Mr. R. and his students *Talk Studio Practice* most. Art Criticism is second. Art History is referred to much less than Art Criticism. And Aesthetics is barley touched upon at all. This trend is also noted in the episodes of student-student talk presented in Chapter 5.

Of course, Printmaking 1 is a studio art class and it is no surprise that Studio Practice receives the most attention in the talk. However, it is notable that Art Criticism receives nearly as much attention as Studio Practices. *Talking Art Criticism* appears to be a natural companion to *Talking Studio Practices*. It is also notable that Art History and Aesthetics receive so little attention due to the fact that these are important domains of art education that are recommended components of art education in national, state, and local curricular mandates. In light of these mandates, *CAT* was inattentive to these two important domains in the classroom I studied.

Finding 4. *CAT* includes direct, indirect, tangential, and ancillary references to the four domains of art education.

These four types of references to art in talk can be considered on a continuum of strong to weak framing. For example, "Historically, Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein may be the most famous Pop artists who did silkscreens" is a strongly framed, or direct, art historical reference in comparison to "Take a look at this old silk screen," which is on the other end of the continuum, a weakly framed, or ancillary art historical reference. What is most strongly framed (see Bernstein, 1971 in Eisner, 1991, p.76) indicates what is likely to be important to the speaker to communicate.

This continuum of directness of references to the domains of art broadens what teachers can consider Art Criticism, Art History, Aesthetics, and Studio Practices (CHAS) in talk and highlights how framing in talk is likely to shape teaching and learning.

Finding 5. *CAT* is primarily teacher-talk and thereby imbued with the curricular and social concerns of the teacher.

As shown in Appendices A and B, teacher art talk far out weighs the amount of student art talk, ranging from about 3 times as much to 8 times as much. As mentioned above, student-student talk in class is only about 20% art talk. Considering that *CAT* carries both social and curricular messages, the great majority of art talk to which students are exposed in class is teacher-talk that is designed as communication—deliberately and nondeliberately (Cazden, 1988)—not only about art, but about the social dynamic between a teacher and his class.

Students simply do not talk as much about art as they could. Lemke (1990) suggests that students must practice using the language of the disciplines they study in order to be understood by other practitioners of that discipline and to better understand the talk of other practitioners of that discipline. His point is about membership and communication within communities of speakers. My analysis extends Lemke's findings by adding that students must practice actually generating their own art talk because due to the social function of talk, simply mimicking the teacher's talk may not sound, nor be, appropriate when spoken by a student. Also, based on Cazden's (1988) view of talk as propositional and social, students need to practice talking about art not only as a means of communication about art within the community of their art classroom,

but also as a necessary means of maintaining their social role in the classroom when engaged in discourse about art.

Finding 6. *CAT* focuses on characteristics of art that simultaneously support social functions critical to speakers' roles in the classroom.

This study has shown examples in each context of *CAT* of how *CAT* is simultaneously curricular and social. Because teacher and students must continuously maintain their social roles in the classroom, those aspects of art that can also facilitate maintenance of social dynamics are stressed to most in talk. For example, in teacher *CAT,* making comparisons between (1) how novices and experts *do* artwork, (2) saying that "art is hard work," and (3) telling students that they have autonomy (choice) concerning certain aspects of their work explicitly explains processes of art and implicitly prescribes how students will behave in class, i.e., they will (1) work like novices, (2) work hard, and (3) make their own choices. (Making their own choices appears to enhance motivation in light of the dubious tasks of working like novices and working hard.) In interviews with students, these three charcateristics of art were mentioned repeatedly as what students felt they were learning about art. Thus, such topics have both curricular and social outcomes that are conducive to the high school art classroom. Similarly, in student-student art talk, compliments, for example, attend to successful qualities of student artwork *and* maintain or build good feelings between peers.

The teacher *CAT* mentioned above attends to general characteristics of art, but is inattentive to particulars, such as, what are the different qualities we can perceive in novice versus expert *artwork*, in what *ways* is art hard work, and what *kinds* of choices do artists make in their autonomous roles as creators of art. In student art talk, compliments attend to successful qualities of student artwork, and maintain or build good feelings between peers, but are inattentive to less successful qualities, that could enhance the artwork and extend the learning experience for both speakers.

Recommendations for Teachers

1. Encourage students to participate more in *CAT because* they need to develop ways of talking about art that are compatible with their role as student in the classroom, rather than just mimicking the teacher's talk.

2. Encourage students to use art-specific vocabulary (with each other and with the teacher) *because* although they can communicate with more common terminology, the richer art terminology can enhance the quality of their talk and consequently may enhance the quality of their learning.

3. Strongly frame (be direct) all four domains of art education in talk at different times *so that* students can distinguish between them and recognize each as important.

4. Recognize that even ancillary references to art in talk can shape teaching and learning. Less direct references can be used to generate lists of starting points for more direct, or strongly framed, discourse in the different disciplines.

5. Require students to read and write about art so as to extend their exposure to discourse about art beyond the plentiful, but limited scope of *CAT*.

Recommendations for Further Research

Further studies could focus on:

1. The effects of age, gender, and socioeconomic status on *CAT*.
2. The effects of structured small group work on *CAT*.
3. The effects of strongly framed in comparison to weakly framed *CAT* on learning.
4. The effects of *CAT* on qualities of artmaking.
5. The effects on student-student art talk on learning.

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CAT CODING SYSTEM

CURRICULAR LEVEL	SOCIAL LEVEL	IMPLICATURE & INFERENCE
talking art criticism **t/sC**	teacher credibility **t/sTC**	dialogic flow **t/sDF**
talking art history **t/sH**	student credibility **t/sSC**	patterns and vocabulary **t/sPV**
talking aesthetics **t/sA**	teacher power **t/sTP**	non-linguistic acts **t/sNL**
talking studio practice **t/sS**	student power **t/sSP**	

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Figure 3
(From Chapter 1, page 24.)

Examples Context2

32. Mr. R.: = *Cause that would give us something.*=

CURRICULAR LEVEL	SOCIAL LEVEL	IMPLICATURE & INFERENCE
tS Refers to result of studio practice.	**tSP** Teacher limits student power by extending his speech despite the fact that the student begins to say something, signified by, "um."	**tDF** Teacher cuts-off speech of student, interrupting synchrony of their discourse.
tC Assesses projected result of suggested change.		
tA Attributes a human quality to artwork, namely, "giving."	**tTP** Teacher grants himself the power in this moment of discourse to finish his thought and establishes himself as member of decision-making team with student artist.	

33. Norman (student): =I *was doing this on purpose,*

CURRICULAR LEVEL	SOCIAL LEVEL	IMPLICATURE & INFERENCE
sS Student refers to the studio practice he employed this is, in effect, a reference.	**sSP** The student now claims power in the conversation by interrupting the teacher.	**sDF** Student repeats interruption of synchrony of text demonstrates use of standard.
sH In effect, this is a reference to the history of the artwork.	**sTP** The power the teacher exhibited in the previous line is countered by the student's claim to power.	**PV** Student uses standard vocabulary concerning artmaking, "purposefulness." This is an example of use of standard terminology in order to contradict the teacher's implied suggestion that the student was intimidated by a certain aspect of this process.
	sSC Student claims credibility via the purposefulness of his actions while making this piece of art.	