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Linda Colness-Himes

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Developing Art Critical Agency In An Undergraduate Art Education Writing Course: A Case Study

Linda Colness-Himes, M.A.

A Purposeful Inquiry

Art criticism as talk and writing about art, especially the contemporary (Anderson, 1993; Barrett 1994), has been the domain of scholars, journalists, and free lance writers in the arts. This limitation does not, however, reflect art education's position, not since Barkan proposed critical, historical, and aesthetic inquiries for humanistic arts education in the 1960s (Efland, 1990). In spite of Barkan's initiative and decades of further efforts, studies in art education still disclose problems related to K-12 art teachers' resistance to art criticism. Art criticism is a core concept of contemporary art education (Anderson & McRorie, 1997). Resistance to implementing art criticism is attributed to an array of problems. They include retention of the once-a-week time allotment for art education, art teachers' lack of confidence in administrative support for nontraditional disciplines, and school community preference for art production (Davis, 1990; Mims & Lankford, 1994). Teacher education research has inferred inadequate preparation as a reason for slow art criticism incorporation (Bullock & Galbraith, 1992; May, 1993; Zimmerman, 1994). Survey results revealed that art criticism exists in some higher education programs as an aspect of art history rather than a distinct cognate focus. In other cases, it was neither a required nor an elective course for preservice or inservice teachers. These widely conducted studies' outcomes suggested values within school and academic communities may inhibit art criticism's development as a core concept.

I also considered art criticism's neglect in a broader context. I reflected on art education's long term development toward a comprehensive program (Efland, 1990) in view of the literary arts' long established tradition of publicly recognized critical inquiry. I learned that part of the problem could be different epistemologies underlying art education, and that newer curriculum approaches, whether or not grounded in epistemology, are being promoted (Siegesmund, 1998). And I learned that in the past decade theoretical disagreements have been aired, resulting in art education's accelerated movement from an expressivist viewpoint to a more conceptual approach (Greer, 1993). Another matter surfaced when I tried to situate art criticism's slight infusion in the curriculum within these developments. Why does research not clearly indicate that art education's public identity has been transformed completely beyond the traditional association with art making? I wondered why educated communities have not galvanized support for alternative art practices that would communicate on a broad scale the wider parameters of art cognition.

Early in my literature review, I concluded that making a significantly new contribution about art cognition would require more than showing how students respond critically to certain artworks a researcher selects. It would be necessary

to show what can be done to convey what students learn from art and art criticism. So upon deciding to investigate art critical learning, I sought studies that would convey how I might contribute to effecting the public's authentic understanding of what art criticism contributes as art cognition.

In Images, Language, Media, and Mind, educational experts from various disciplines said that in the age of visual media technology, even common visual objects contribute to a knowledge domain of visual language arts:

Our inner and outer worlds are dominated by images--whether we receive them, send them, or think them; whether they happen inside our heads or outside our skin; whether we find them in statements, in dreams or in ads for Dodge trucks or on computer screens, in films or scientific reports or Pepsi commercials. (Fox, 1994, p. x)

Concern from other disciplines makes art education's widening academic scope a significant interdisciplinary matter. The concern acknowledges art cognition's multiple dimensions. As a former literature teacher, the reality of imagery's fascination and power led me to believe that visual arts criticism and literature should have parallel status in the general curriculum. Otherwise, youth are expected to develop visual arts literacy on their own to cope with newer media technology.

Some art education theorists expressed a more specific concern. They questioned whether various intellectual potentials are actualized through art instruction (Berleant, 1991; Eisner, 1985; Koroscik, 1990; Parsons, 1992; Perkins, 1994). The following inquiry statement reflects some reasons why I approached art critical learning with teacher research case study methodology: We have not adequately examined how current practices "help or hinder our students' success in comprehending art content It is no longer enough for art teachers to teach so their students will develop an awareness and appreciation of art" (Koroscik, 1997, p. 5). I believed an accurate examination would consider the kinds of knowledge students contribute to art critical activities and the ways they learn from artworks and artists' and critics' practices.

In my search for studies about how I could measure art critical learning, I found no case studies of the art criticism teaching and learning relationship. And I discovered that art was not a content area investigated in the longest and largest research initiative on learning -- 2,000 studies across 25 years known as the Writing Across the Curriculum project (Hillock, 1986). I saw this omission as significant in terms of art education's identity, and it sparked my interest in art criticism's literary attributes. It was reasonable to assume that learning how art becomes meaningful could be accomplished through special language processes that invite and teach critical appraisal of art criticism as well as artworks.

At this point during my dissertation research, I was able to capitalize on an opportunity. I taught a course entitled "Writing Art Criticism." I had student participants but needed to design a teacher research case around them. I

addressed whether I would dovetail teaching with research or research with teaching, but the thought of a reciprocal outcome was more enticing. To teach and analyze art critical learning with contemporary artworks, art criticism, and composition as content, I developed a theoretical framework comprised of contemporary aesthetics and learning theory.

A Framework for Art Critical Learning

The dilemma of Formalism versus Contextualism has been a major art education curriculum issue (Anderson & McCrorie, 1997; Hamblen, 1991; Parsons, 1992). In terms of acceptable response to art, a persistent polarity begs the question of art's significance: What is more significant to learn, the artwork's formal properties, sensory effects, and evidence of style progression in its features, or the historical and/or cultural meanings embedded in it? The polarity slips into a dichotomy in so far as perceptual knowledge related to psychobiology is pitted against contextual knowledge related to philosophy and sociology. The dichotomy implies art cognition is either the result of visual thinking or verbal thinking. Bruner's (1973) developmental theory claimed visual thinking precedes the more mature verbal thinking. Visual imagery is eventually abandoned in favor of verbal reasoning. In contrast, Arnheim (1986) said thinking occurs in a visual medium, and language merely augments it. That is, visual thinking supersedes verbal learning. Without verbalizing, one can sustain and enhance learning with viewing over a lifetime.

In terms of curriculum and instruction, when instructional approaches to art response ally with one or the other of these views on thinking, implementing art criticism is likely to favor either the Formalist or Contextualist approach. Formalism focuses on the unity and effects of visible features on the viewer. Contextualism requires language-based explorations such as referring to artworks' backgrounds to make art response meaningful. With my interest in what strategies students employ to understand contemporary artworks, I accepted dual aesthetics, figuring that response to artworks requires reconciling some kind of meaning in either scheme. Therefore, dual aesthetics would open wider cognitive horizons. For purposes of my study, dual aesthetics included Lyotard's (1979) theory of modernism and postmodernism, Jencks's (1989) theory of double coding, and Darracott's (1991) historical and Barrett's contemporary (1994) views of the critic (see Figure 1).

Social constructionism was a compatible learning theory for my study. It rejects the cognitivist notion that learning occurs in isolation (Noddings, 1995); rather, learning operates in public discourse as well as in reflective thought (Friere, 1968; Vygotsky, 1962). As students write art criticism they simultaneously enter into it their cultural influences, entertain ideas learned from art education discourse, and accept the invitation to contribute to it (Bruffee, 1986). In this respect, developing critical agency, a desire for integrity of thought and level of confidence in influencing others was a major objective. This idea relates to Dewey's concept of student participation in democratic processes (1916). I modified the term to include critical consciousness which reflects Freire's (1968)

FORMALIST (modernist)	CONTEXTUALIST (postmodernist)
Descriptive	Empathic
Analytic (inner relations)	Interpretive (inner decoding,
outer relations)	
Interpretive (historical)	Authoritative (research)
Culturally distanced	Communicative (narrative)
Politically distanced	Instrumental (political, social, communal,
propagandizing)	
Subjective (taste, voice)	Discursive (voices)
Position based	Culture based
Viewer oriented	Viewer based
Artist oriented	Idea and activity oriented
Emphasis on form	Emphasis on making, working
Judgment	Values
Invents terms (styles)	Polysemy (multiple meanings)
Personal product	Social production

Figure 1. Dual aesthetics refers to familiar concepts in art education, Formalism and Contextualism. Art critical perspectives are listed as modernist or postmodernist.

concern for the voiceless being repressed. Disposition is another aspect of learning development (Prawat, 1989; Perkins, Jay, & Tishman, 1993) with origins in Dewey's (1933) theory of thinking. Essentially, a critical thinking learner is adventurous, retains curiosity, plans strategically, is organized and thorough, seeks improved understanding, evaluates and justifies reasons, and self monitors alertness and control of mental processes.

To facilitate and observe interpretive art criticism development, I drew from hermeneutics, a search for plausible meaning "without expecting a single meaning will be found or that it will be anchored in an unassailable foundation" (Noddings, 1995, p. 71). Ricoeur's (1972, 1976) principles of aesthetic interpretation for all the fine arts fit in this paradigm. His procedures reflect Dewey's (1933) flexible sequence of critical thinking.

In search of related ideas in art education, I detected aspects of interpretive art criticism and social constructionism in Codd's (1983), Anderson's (1993), Walker's (1992), and Bolton's (1995) studies. Combining their ideas with Ricoeur's, I formed a template of art interpretive experience for my observation and analysis of art critical learning. The template projects art interpretation as involving an object or event, denotation and connotation, a fictive view of the world, intertextual meaning construction, empathy in view of an effort and/or a testimony, and verbal language conventions.

The Case Study

Armed with contemporary art and language based theoretical learning models, I embarked on a one year case study as a teacher researcher with 74 undergraduates of various majors in four consecutive classes of Writing Art Criticism. My research informed participants were engaged in American contemporary art study and criticism activities, in self selecting artworks for criticism from a range of venues and sources, and in processes toward producing art criticism with techniques and expressions of intermediate level writers. My teacher research questions were: To what extent might the students' art critical learning experiences inform the teaching of art criticism?; How do they construct meaning of contemporary artworks, and how do their ways relate to their understanding of art in general?; and What facilitation efforts best generate their understandings of contemporary art and critical responses to artworks?

Before developing a social constructionist approach, I applied a teacher research assessment method in a five week pilot study (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). I aligned teacher methods to conform with the course textbook's sequence (Barrett, 1994), tested my methods against the syllabus requirements, then assessed the teaching and learning outcomes in view of my research questions. I returned to the literature to learn how I could improve my methods for more adequate data. My new motives centered on contemporary art and the possibility of interdisciplinary instructional methods.

With reinforced knowledge of aesthetics in relation to hermeneutics, I revised my art instructional methods to reflect knowledge of dual aesthetics. I selected contemporary artists and artworks to illustrate concepts in six units of presentation for which I wrote lecture notes, collected different forms of reproduced artworks, and arranged visits to art exhibitions. I developed language and literature based instructional activities based on composition theorists' methods established in social constructionism (Bizzell, 1983; Bruffee, 1984). I designed art critical activities that used art discourse conventions, art discourse analysis, scholarly projects in the manner of critics, and intellectual sharing.

My data collection involved two types of sources (Franklin, 1971). Records contained my discrete notebook and journal accounts of observed learning and art interpretive strategy building and my writing prompts and study guides. Customized documents were students' completed quizzes and exercises, 74 student journals, and 91 art criticism compositions which students evaluated as their best contributions to art critical discourse.

Employing content analysis, I developed a coding scheme for an analysis framework of art critical learning (Holstie, 1969; Krippendorf, 1980). I analyzed art critical learning in Art Critical Activities, Language Facilitation Strategies, and Literary Arts Facilitation Strategies and within seven factors of art learning in these facilitation categories. I did a theory-based holistic reading of the art criticism corpus of 91 writings, resulting in an Art Critical Learning Experiences category. For each art interpretive experience, I applied a quantitative linguistics measurement to a pair of writings, using 26 art interpretive terms that comprised

a glossary, one of the language facilitation strategies. Adding to these broad and focal context-sensitive content analysis methods (Huckin, 1992), I am making graphic comparisons among art learning categories, art interpretive writings, and process and product outcomes.

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