Two Students View an Art Methods Course: A Case Study

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The importance of making students comfortable with art cannot be overstated. Students who are successful in their art methods class will be more willing to teach art in their own classrooms. Further, as future teachers, they will be more likely to appreciate the value of art as an integral part of the total curriculum.

Three years ago I began teaching an art methods course at a small liberal arts college. The class had been designed to meet requirements for both elementary education and art education students because of low enrollment in both programs. The course content included stages of child development in art, lesson planning, classroom organization, aesthetic perception, and art production skills. While both groups handled the theory content of the course well, there was a marked difference in the level of confidence in art production ability and in discussing art works. As a result, I took their varying degrees of art expertise into account when I planned art production activities.

At the time I was teaching this methods course, I did not have the opportunity to study, in depth, a problem of great import, the association of anxiety with art production and discussion of art works. However, since returning to graduate school, I have had the opportunity to do such a study in conjunction with a course on naturalistic inquiry.
Rationale for the Study

As part of their teacher preparation program, elementary education majors usually are required to take an art methods course. Students often have limited art backgrounds, unless they have developed a special interest in art. Due to this lack of experience in art, students may feel an elevated level of anxiety that inhibits their performance in the art methods class. Very little research has been published on this subject as it relates to art, though the existence of the problem is well known in other subject areas, such as mathematics. Therefore, there is little information to guide formulation of strategies to alleviate this condition in art methods courses. One of the purposes of this study was to discover what levels of anxiety were felt by college students from such classes, how their instructor dealt with anxiety in class, and what measures these students felt were appropriate in alleviating the anxiety problems. The other purpose was to gain insight into the perceptions the art methods students had pertaining to other aspects of the class. I felt that a productive means of learning about art anxiety was to conduct interviews to gain insight into students' perceptions of their experiences in regard to this phenomenon. The following are questions I used to guide my interviews with students:

- What did they think about being required to take the class?
- How did they feel when asked to do various types of art assignments?
- What effect was the experience of taking the class having on their perceptions of art as an important part of the total elementary
curriculum?

- What were their goals coming into the class and leaving the class?

Data Gathering

The strategy I used in data gathering followed case study procedures of naturalistic methodology developed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). In this procedure, the researcher endeavors to collect very detailed information about respondents' personal beliefs or "constructions of reality" concerning their experiences. These constructions allow the researcher to compose a narrative report that closely approximates respondents' experiences.

Two students from the art methods class volunteered to be respondents in my study. Interviewing each student separately about the same class allowed me to validate the information one student gave against what the other gave. The procedure is known as triangulation and is an important aspect of naturalistic inquiry. I also observed one class session as a second method triangulation.

Responses to the interviews were categorized according to content and did not necessarily follow the outline of questions asked. This categorization was then used to build a narrative report that should give other readers a vicarious view of the experiences two students had during one art methods class meeting. This information may then be used in subsequent decision making.

Both respondents were interviewed twice, about two weeks apart, during the last half of a spring semester. They were instructed to give their
impressions of experiences in the methods class up to that point. I used
the list of questions given above to guide the interview rather than as a
specific list to be answered. Interviews were held in a small study room in
the education library. Audio tapes were made during the interviews and
were later transcribed by the author. One observation was done during the
two week interval between interviews. During the observation, notes were
taken on the physical environment of the classroom, the learning
environment, student and instructor behaviors, the teacher's lesson outline
and time allocations.

The Respondents

My respondents were enrolled in an art education methods class\(^1\) for
elementary education majors taught by a fellow doctoral student. The
two students who responded to my request for volunteers were seniors.
They had very little background in art in elementary or high school but had
taken a fine arts course in crafts and visual design required by the School
of Education. One student, Courtney, had already completed student
teaching. She had graduated the previous semester and was taking the
methods course to complete requirements for teacher certification. The
other student, Stephanie, was to do her student teaching the following fall
and would graduate at the end of that semester.

Courtney can best be described as thoughtful, reserved—with a
contained enthusiasm, and serious, but with a good sense of humor.
Stephanie is a tactfully assertive woman, who packs a lot of information
into each statement. Her constant enthusiasm and confidence reveal her optimistic outlook on life.

Their instructor, Susan Lewis, is in her third year as a doctoral student. This is the second semester she has taught the art methods course. Before returning to graduate school, she spent several years teaching art in public school. Her attitude toward the students is serious, yet amiable; she is quiet and reserved but with a ready sense of humor.

To illustrate the experience these two women had in their art methods class, I will give a brief description of one class meeting in which they participated. Then I will comment on the students’ construction of reality.

The Study

On a table at the front of the room, Susan Lewis arranges handouts, materials for printmaking, and examples of pattern: a smooth grained wooden sculpture, a large piece of brain coral, and photos of textiles. Her preparations for class were carefully thought out and appropriate for the elementary classes her students will be teaching in the future.

Among the first students to arrive in class is Courtney, a slender woman who is slightly out of breath. Her serious approach to life is evident in the way she acts and speaks. Having completed student teaching last semester, she is well aware of the importance of what she plans to do with her life and is impatient to get started.
As Ms. Lewis checks the attendance silently, Stephanie enters and finds an empty chair next to Courtney. Stephanie is full of enthusiasm today as usual and is obviously happy to be in class.

Ms. Lewis begins her lecture by holding up illustrations of textile patterns and explaining the design of each one. She passes them to the nearest students and then holds up the wooden sculpture, pointing out the grain pattern, and the coral, drawing her finger along the convoluted surface.

Students pass around the illustrations. The stamp pattern Ms. Lewis is now discussing is a simple repeated stripe, done by placing the stamp down side-by-side across the paper. She gives a brief verbal description of the process and asks if the class wants another demonstration. They indicate no; they are eager to begin. She advises that they do some exploratory patterns with stamp pads and newsprint paper. The final print, to be handed in for grading, should be restricted to printer's ink and brayers on white paper.

Stephanie and Courtney are both finishing their stamps. "Time is always a factor in art," Courtney thought, remembering the A200 crafts and design course. "Last spring in A200 we were told to take our time, to do the best we could. In here, we don't spend too much time on any one thing, but it's not the purpose of this class—to perfect a piece of art. I guess the class last spring was for that." She reminded herself, "This is a methods course, we're learning how to teach art; that was a fine art studio course." She also remembered another difference, how the instructor in A200 had
scared her the first day when he put heavy demands on the class. Ms. Lewis’ approach had made a difference in how she felt about doing the projects for this class, the anxiety she felt during A200 was gone. "In fact," she thought, "for the first time, everything I’m taking this semester is fun. But, I’m enjoying this class especially as a relief from listening to lectures and note taking in the others. There is freedom to think differently here, to think creatively."

Stephanie thought about A200 also. She remembers how she had hated it at the beginning because they drew all the time. "I hate having to look at something and draw it. If I can draw from my mind, I can do pretty well," she thought. But then they had done linoleum prints and she had enjoyed that activity as well as the three-dimensional cardboard design. Thinking back, she remembered looking forward to the art methods class because she had heard that it covered similar projects. She wouldn’t have the same hesitancy as before.

Ms. Lewis walks around the room checking with students on their work. The learning atmosphere in the room is supportive and relaxed. Stephanie recalls listening to her friends in the business school talk about competition and diversity in their job prospects. Then, thinking of her own, "Education people will have similar experiences in the future; we will have much in common."

Courtney thought back to her student teaching when, while she was teaching an art lesson, a boy in the class had looked at the painting being done by the boy sitting next to him and said, "Oh, that’s ugly!" She
remembers the hurt in the child's eyes and resolves to try to create the same positive atmosphere in her classes as she felt in this one.

Ms. Lewis looks over Courtney's work, and shows her some other design possibilities with pencil on a scrap piece of paper. Courtney nods acceptance of the ideas and asks a question on color schemes for the print. Ms. Lewis makes a few suggestions, referring to a color wheel on the bulletin board. Courtney begins again by pulling out a new sheet of paper and a pencil and sets to work drawing interlocked, simple geometric shapes lightly on the paper. She appreciates the low key atmosphere of the class because she doesn't feel afraid to confront her instructor with questions. That fact had helped dissolve the initial anxiety she had felt at the beginning of the semester. She remembered her student teaching experience in Ireland and what some of the teachers had said about teaching art. They hadn't had training in art and felt insecure about teaching it. As a result, they didn't do many art activities with their students.

As she gets ink, a brayer, and paper from the materials table, Courtney remembers how art had been such an enjoyable experience in her own elementary years. "But, in junior high I had so many other interests, and I couldn't draw things the way I wanted to. I can still only draw stick people." She moves to an open space, around the table from where she has been sitting, and begins printing, rolling ink on the stamp and pressing it carefully into the design she has envisioned.
Ms. Lewis announces that there is only a short time left in the class for today. She gives instructions for putting finished work on the wooden shelves. Grading will be done before the next class. "We haven't had much time on this assignment, but I think I've gotten what Ms. Lewis wanted us to get." Courtney smiles to herself, "but I wish we had more time."

Stephanie looks at what she has done with a critical eye, "Okay, I've followed the directions and that's what counts. My grade should be okay. I'll have to remember this policy when I start teaching. Your attitude toward doing the project and how well you follow directions is as important as showing artistic ability." As she is resolving to keep these things in mind, Ms. Lewis remarks that Stephanie's print has an asymmetrical arrangement that is very interestingly balanced. Stephanie continues the discussion of balance using the vocabulary she has learned this semester. When Ms. Lewis moves on to another student, Stephanie returns to her previous thought, "That's another thing to remember for the future, to use the proper art terms with my students. I can start out by using the same technique as we used in here for the painting critique."

Courtney holds her inking tray under the faucet. She watches the yellow-green water running across the white porcelain of the sink. "There is so much organization to be done for art classes. I guess I learned how important it is last semester in Ireland. But, Ms. Lewis' strategies on organizing everything for art activities will be really useful."
Comments on Constructions

As can be seen from their constructions of reality, the very high anxiety levels I had expected to find did not exist in these two students. Both women stated that the successful completion of A200 course gave them confidence and had the effect of lowering their anxiety level upon entering the art methods course. The syllabus/calendar and the handouts Ms. Lewis provided were appreciated as guides to their activities and gave them a consistent structure within which to work. Finally, the instructor's acceptance of them and her low-key personality made them feel at ease. Both students felt that the information they were gaining would be useful because they saw the importance of art to their future students. They saw that art has an important part to play in comprehensive education. Therefore, they had no argument with the requirement. Their approach to creative assignments was one of considerable interest coupled with a sense of freedom from the structure of other classes. They were both concerned with organization of art activities for their students and with finding resources for teaching art. Both women commented on the positive effect Susan Lewis' teaching style had on them. They wanted to emulate her approach in the future. Stephanie's stated goals emphasized integrating art into the other content areas. Courtney was more interested in organization as an important goal.

The constructions of reality held by Stephanie and Courtney are enlightening and will be very useful for me when planning future art methods courses and in curriculum planning in art education. The
confidence these two women gained in the crafts and visual design course suggests that anxiety may be lowered in methods courses by simply having prior formal experience in art production. Therefore, a possible solution to the problem of anxiety was suggested by this study: experience in an art studio class prior to taking an art methods course may be an important part of the curriculum for elementary education majors. This finding is conjecture at this point, but will provide seeds for decision making in the future.

Another finding suggested by these interviews is that the style of teaching and interaction with students displayed by the instructor may have a great influence on students' future teaching practices. Both women stated that they want to emulate Ms. Lewis' teaching style. The implication is that the effect of our teaching style, not just the importance of what is taught, may have a great influence on our students in art methods courses.

Footnote

1 All references to places, students, teachers and classes have been changed for confidentiality.

Reference