

Teaching Art Criticism: Kuwaiti Teachers' Perceptions

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مقتصر البحث

إن هذه الدراسة أخذت بعين الاعتبار إدراك مدرسي التربية الفنية في المرحلة الابتدائية لأهمية تدريس النقد الفني، وأنه من الأجزاء المهمة في برنامج التربية الفنية. ومن خلال هذه الدراسة التي تدعمها الدراسات السابقة وصلنا إلى طريق واضح يؤكد أهمية تدريس النقد الفني. إن هناك أموراً تدل على أن مدرس المرحلة الابتدائية في دولة الكويت ليس لديه الدعم والتأييد الكافيين لتدريس النقد الفني في المدارس.

Abstract

This study concerns Kuwaiti elementary level teachers' perceptions of teaching art criticism as part of an art education program. The investigation was guided by the distinct approach to qualitative research which has been described in the literature as phenomenography (Marton, 1981). Findings of the research suggest that Kuwaiti elementary teachers have a restricted perception of the teaching of art criticism. This restricted view has implications for not only teacher training programs but also for the quality of teaching and learning of art criticism in schools.

The incorporation of art criticism as a relevant and necessary part of an education program at all levels has been established. The actualization of this incorporation has been often limited by a lack of understanding or enthusiasm on the part of participating teachers. In an attempt to determine the underlying problems in the inclusion of art criticism an analysis of teachers' perceptions has been conducted as reflected in this study. Teachers' perceptions towards art criticism are an important aspect of the success of incorporation. Aspects of what teachers' focused on as well as what they consider to be important aspects of criticism were investigated. The study consisted of a small sample as is attributed at the phenomenological method used.

Problem

As Kuwaiti elementary art education teachers are exposed to expanded curricular designs, such as discipline based art education, they are required to incorporate aspects of art criticism into the educational experience they offer their students. It has been observed that this portion of the art experience is often lacking or weak. In an effort to encourage and foster greater ability among elementary art educators it is necessary to identify the reasons underlying the problem of incorporating art criticism into the art education curriculum.

Hypothesis

1. Teachers are unclear as to how to teach art criticism. While introduced to art criticism in their teacher education classes they have not established, for

themselves, a clear understanding of how to design and incorporate lessons including art criticism.

2. Teachers are unable to present art criticism in an understandable format for elementary level students. The language of art criticism and the topics unique to the discipline have not been made understandable for young students.

Rationale

This study seeks to provide insight into the problems associated with Kuwaiti teachers' incorporation of art criticism into an elementary art curriculum. It is through the teachers' own perceptions and reflections that insight is gained. We can determine that art criticism is lacking and it then becomes important to understand why. If we are to continue to teach art education students that art criticism is of value we must identify why as teachers our graduates are not incorporating it into their lessons.

Limitations

This study reflects a small sample as is fitting for the methodology. It is limited in its ability to be generalized to the greater population though it provides insight as to the nature and problems of the incorporation of art criticism from the teachers' perspective. It would be of additional benefit to survey a larger population to see if these perceptions are valid among greater numbers. Further investigation into possible alternative methods of incorporating art criticism would be beneficial as well.

Goals and Objectives

This paper will seek to:

1. Identify teachers' attitudes towards the incorporation of art criticism into art education lessons.
2. Identify teachers' knowledge of art criticism as reflected in their perceptions and use of art criticism.
3. Identify possible areas for improvement in lesson planning.

Literature Review

Art educators for some time have advocated the inclusion of art criticism as an important component of art programs in schools (Greer, 1984). Galbraith (1990) warned that art teachers will need to have a variety of teaching capabilities and strategies at their disposal in order to cater to the broader art curriculum that now exists in schools. Hamlim (1991) also articulated concern regarding the teaching of art criticism by "nonart specialists or art specialists who have not had the opportunity to problematize their art preferences and what these preferences mean for instructional choices" (p.19). Chapman and Newton (1990) reported that the results of their survey indicate a wide range of interpretation by teachers of what the teaching of art criticism involves. They also noted that teachers of art in elementary schools are less likely to use the term *art criticism* than art teachers in junior, middle or high schools.

Boyd (1993) has surmised that elementary school teachers, when interviewed in an investigation of teachers' perceptions of national curriculum innovations (Boyd & McCadden, 1993), revealed more confidence in teaching art which focused on practical art production rather than on the critical appraisal of artworks. In a study of middle school art curriculum, Anglin (1993) concluded that middle school teachers were often the authors of their own curriculum documents.

The literature indicates a probable link between teacher's lack of experience in art and art education, and the quality of teaching in art criticism in schools. Teachers who perceive a deficiency in their own ability to teach art criticism may often be working with young children across a range of compulsory curriculum areas. The age range of students who are taught art differs in various locations. In addition, students may or may not have

regular or occasional access to specialist art teaching provided by local education authorities.

Hamblen (1991) has proposed that gaining some insight into the disposition of teachers toward the inclusion of art criticism in the classroom schedule would be useful. In addition to gaining information on teachers' attitudes about such teaching, it may also be pertinent to describe how teachers perceive the teaching of art criticism, and what they understand it to be. Attitudes and beliefs are founded upon an individual's basic perceptions of various phenomena (Merton, 1981). Dall'Alba (1991) has maintained that there is a direct link between teachers' perceptions of teaching and student learning, and that the initiation of change in such perceptions can be facilitated only by greater understanding of what these perceptions are.

Research guided by phenomenography evident in the literature (Clark, 1984; Dall'Alba, 1991; Larsson, 1986; Pramling, 1988; Svensson, 1989; Svensson & Theman, 1983) provided encouragement for the phenomenographic approach used in this study. Reports of such research demonstrate this approach to be clearly defined, well directed, and highly credible. For example, in describing the value of researching individual perceptions of various phenomena, Marton (1988) argued that such investigations could play a vital part in the formation of a scientific base for teacher education in the future. Art education programs often fail to deliver adequate or appropriate experiences in art criticism which are easily transferable into effective classroom practice by future teachers (Eisner, 1980). A greater understanding of Kuwaiti teachers' perceptions of the teaching of art criticism could serve as a useful tool in the preparation of both specialist art teachers and, in particular, Kuwaiti elementary school teachers, who often enter their art teaching experience with little prior engagement in the world of art.

Elementary Art Teachers' Perceptions

Twenty-three (23) teachers were participants in this study. The primary school teachers are art education teachers and graduates of PAAET's College of Basic Education's Art Education program. The ages of the elementary school students range in

age from five to nine years. The participants constituted the entire staffs of five elementary schools in Kuwait except for one school. This is in keeping with the aims of phenomenography, as a research approach which seeks to control the context of the subjects under investigation (Marton, 1981). In searching for elementary school teachers' perceptions of the teaching of art criticism identification of specific perspectives were not attributed to specific teachers. Neither was it within the scope of the study to describe the culture of a particular individual or group of teachers, nor to quantify the distribution of perceptions held by individuals or over the group as a whole. Rather the aim of the study was to identify perceptions held by the subjects about the teaching of art criticism and to describe the qualitative variation of such perceptions.

Thirty-minute interviews were conducted with individual teacher participants. The interview was designed as an unstructured conversation, which would render sufficient data to satisfy the research analysis. Participants were invited to describe some of the art activities they undertake with their classes. Teachers were encouraged to discuss art criticism with comments such as, "That is very interesting: could you tell me more about that?" The interviews were informal, and most of the discussions were reflective on the part of the participants. Whenever possible, by asking open-ended questions, interviewees were allowed to select their own horizon of response (Marton, 1988). To allow the uninhibited flow of the participant's experiences, judgement was² suspended. Although the interviews were open-ended, they were purposeful (Khan and Cornell, 1957). The conversations focused on the teachers' perceptions of teaching art criticism, what they considered it to be, and what it involved.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed and the data analyzed using a phenomenographic approach. This involved the processing of the teachers' statements through various stages of selection, elimination and grouping relevant to the investigation. This process has been describes as empathic and comparative (Larsson, 1986). The first phase of the analysis was a selection of statements; individual declarations that related to perceptions of the teaching of art criticism. Into the second phase of the analysis, relationships among the statements were found. Categories of these relationships were developed then described and interpreted in the form of six perceptions.

Importantly this methodological feature of phenomenography differs in procedures from traditional paradigms of content analysis in that the categories are not speculated upon in advance. Svensson and Theman (1983) describe this stage as placing demands on the researcher to arrive at the most fundamental characteristics of the perception. Repeated exploration of the transcripts in this study substantiated the integrity of the analysis. The content analysis was supported with a contextual analysis derived by continuous checking of statements within their original contexts to maintain primary and intended meanings. However, the contents of the statements indicated they could fit into more than one category of description.

Finally, categories of description were identified through abstract descriptions of the perceptions, which included the main organization of the content grouped in the category. This enabled a determination of the most fundamental characteristics of the perceptions of teachers. Marton pointed out that different perceptions do not necessarily signify differences between individuals, but may be related to different situations, which allows individuals to move between categories while the categories themselves remain stable (Marton, 1988). This idea is supported by the theoretical assumption that there are a limited number of qualitatively different ways that people experience phenomena in the world (Clark, 1984; Marton, 1981, 1988). In order to describe the perceptions, it was necessary to reveal the main content of the perception (referential) and how that was organized (structural). In phenomenographic research, categories of description are to be viewed as the major outcome of the investigation (Marton, 1988). All of the teachers' quotations grouped in the categories were short and direct descriptions, because complex and lengthy presentations or results often reveal an incomplete analysis (Svensson and Theman, 1983).

Results

Data analysis yielded six perceptions of the teaching of art criticism. The quotations in each category represent statements found in the data. The perceptions, in

the form of categories, do not represent individual teachers. Rather, the categories are supported by selected quotations representing several teachers.

Perception 1: The teaching of art criticism is seen as a selection of artworks for presentation

Description: The focus of this perception is on the teachers' acts, selection, and presentation of artworks for students. Selection is always based upon criterion. The teacher views the act as an arbitration between the students and the art world. The teacher has a variety of reasons for choosing specific art works: for example, art works might be selected to provide resources for other subject areas or for decorating the classroom. This perception casts the teacher of art criticism into the role of a facilitator, who selects various examples of art for a variety of different teaching contexts.

"I do know that we have some very interesting books on well known Islamic artists that are simple for the children to use, because I used them last year when we were doing something on creative things. We did lots of things tied in with Kuwaiti history, so the focus was on Islamic art."

Interpretation: The teachers viewed selection of art works for presentation to the students in two distinct ways. Their process of selection is either directed by the content of another subject area or by the teachers' reasoned belief concerning the suitability of objects for use in the classroom. They may choose particular objects of study for reasons external to a rationale for art education criticism, wherein art objects are used as instruments or examples for other areas of learning rather than as a provision of experience with the object as art. They used selected art works and learning objects to illustrate social studies topics and to encourage the appreciation of what the teacher perceived as beauty. They selected some books from the classroom of their ease of use and restricted specific appraisal according to age of the learner. Because the teachers do not describe criteria for the selection of the objects as an inherent part of the objectives for the outcome of the lesson, the presentation of art is considered a taken-for-granted

and commonplace event rather than a devised, significant, structural part of the curriculum.

Perception 2: The teaching of art criticism is seen as stimulation for learning.

Description: The focus of this perception is the learner. The teacher reflects on how the student may be affected by looking at artwork and concludes that it has a positive result and thereby stimulates learning. The teacher regards stimulation through looking at art as a positive outcome, which can motivate the students through the provision of the type of enjoyment, which challenges them to respond.

“To present a work of art...if children had no appreciation of art, then they would be totally energized and surprised by the work of art they would be seeing. They love to see their work around the room because it doesn't just stimulate learning...It is more enjoyable to work in a colorful room. And it is also looking at the things (artwork) that have been done in order to give the children ideas, so often children can be stimulated to create themselves by seeing what has been done.”

Interpretation: These teachers regard the teaching of art criticism through the exposure to various art works as stimulation for learning. The emphasis of this perception is on the nature of a specific type of response to looking at art, which can be described as energized, surprised, and stimulated. The implication is that only certain types of art can evoke this form of response in students, such as a colorful work, which can reverse a stultifying idea of art and give children new ideas. These teachers do not assume that they play any major role in the interaction between student and the artwork other than by making viewing of the object of study available. Neither do the teachers suggest that the student undertake any particular form of investigation.

Perception 3: The teaching of art criticism is seen as the demonstration of an expertise.

Description: The focus of this behavior is the behavior of the teacher. The teacher gives a demonstration of a process or skill. The demonstration may be an enactment of responding to specific works of art that have been brought into the classroom. It could also include the demonstration of a technique for making art in a situation where the art criticism experience is concerned with student work in progress in the classroom. In this perception the role of the teacher is defined as that of leading by example with the teacher having specific behavioral objectives in mind.

"I have been able to pass on those skills to the children, I say 'You can all do it, you just have to observe that tree or that leg of the chair.' I would point out how beautifully colors go together or how peaceful some picture is or how vibrant because of the bright colors that have been used."

Interpretation: The teacher demonstrates a particular process. This demonstration could be an enactment of a process of art criticism, such as verbal observation of the formal qualities of an artwork. It might also entail the description of specific visual outcomes that can be achieved through various practical art techniques. This form of demonstration also could include the teacher making art with an individual student or in front of the whole class. The teacher models the skill as an expertise. There is an acknowledgement that certain behavior represents expertise, and although teachers so not necessarily consider themselves to be experts in the outside world, within the classroom they may assume such a role. A demonstrator emulates behavior that is presented as desirable for the students to acquire. This objective is exposed in the teacher's statement, "You don't always give a demonstration of what is expected to be done," which implies that when a demonstration is given it is expected that the students will attempt to copy it.

Perception 4: The teaching of art criticism is seen as the fostering of a learning process

Description: The focus of this perception is on the learner. The teacher views the outcome of the student's interaction with works of art as a learning process that may lead to the acquisition of specific skills. The teacher regards the accumulation of these skills as a direct result of looking at art, taking the learning process for granted and providing few clues as to how learning takes place. Rather, such teachers describe the learning process as one that is fostered to the teaching of art criticism in the form of looking at and talking about art.

“(Students) should be able to develop a critical eye. I like to sometimes get them to appreciate art...skills like interpreting what the work is about. Any responding to pictures will give them critical awareness...probably in the lower school though you would look on it not so much as an artistic skill but as a general skill.”

Interpretation: This perception incorporates the impact of the teaching of art criticism on the learner. There are three major components of this perception, which include the learner, the learning process, and what is learned. The learners are referred to as developing, appreciating, interpreting, responding, and looking. The teachers' appreciation of their own roles within this perception are somewhat unclear. Their active participation in the learning process of the students appears as one of advocacy rather than as a formulated interaction. The skills described in this category fall into two areas. First, an implication that the teaching of art criticism brings about a passive appreciation of works of art on the part of the learner is identified. Second, that these teachers see the learning process as one in which the learner can “develop a critical eye” and “interpret what the work is about” is identified. The role of the learner alternated in the perception between passive acceptor and active participator.

Perception 5: The teaching of art criticism is seen as a momentary reflection

Description: The focus of this perception is on a momentary reflection which takes place between the teacher and the learner while talking about art. This type of

reflection may take place incidentally as part of an art lesson or as something that comes up in another subject. The time taken for this type of interaction is extremely limited. The teacher sees momentary reflection as a casual mode of encounter between the teacher and students.

“Not talking about it in a formalized way, but very informal way, usually on a one-to-one basis. I suppose I do (talk about art) if I am doing a roving discussion and we might be talking about ‘how did you achieve that effect?’ We look at what we have done, how we could make it more realistic etc. I think with them (young children) you can only point out the different types of textures and the looks of things. And I do point out beautiful things to them.”

Interpretation: This perception is not about what is learned through the teaching of art criticism, but rather it focuses on a strategy for teaching it. The teacher and the learner are the main players in this perception where the style of the interaction between the two constitutes the content and structure of the perception itself. Momentary reflection may be part of a larger learning process, or it may be limited to what is taking place. The teacher assumes an unidentified object of study and a mode of encounter between the teacher and learner. This encounter may focus dialogue between the teacher and one student, which is apparent in the statement “usually on a one-to-one basis,” or between the teacher and a group of students. A momentary reflection also could transpire with the students, as a “roving discussion.”

Perception 6: The teaching of art criticism is seen as a joint exploration

Description: The focus of this perception is on the relationship between the teacher and the learner. Together the teacher and the learner explore and investigate the artworks in a mood for discovery. The teacher attempts to view teaching from the perspective of the learner and sees joint exploration of art as a positive strategy for both teaching and learning both inside and outside of the classroom.

"I think that it is important to let them see the work of established artists as well as their own, and the outside world, nice to go on safari sometimes just to have a look around.

We will explore pottery and play with it...Have a look at things that are there, and hopefully bring some of that back with me and make that part of my experience and their experience. I have a decent background to art and art appreciation...I like to see art with children done in more of an exploration and discovery, for myself and the children."

Interpretation: The teacher is describing a relationship between the teacher and the learner for art criticism instruction. The teacher takes account of her or his own experience and role within the learning process undertaken by the student and views the relationship between the teacher and student as one of joint explorers. This is apparent in the statement: "Make that part of my experience and then their experience," and "For myself and the children." The joint experience is one of exploration, well represented in one teacher's notion of going on a "safari."

Summary

This study identified six primary school teachers' perception of the teaching of art criticism. These perceptions revealed those primary school teachers

- select particular artworks for art criticism for a variety of reasons, including their ability to promote art appreciation and decorate classrooms, their ease of use, and their suitability for the age of the students.
- attempt to stimulate students of teaching art criticism as a challenge to their existing notions of art.
- sometimes exhibit behavior associated with art criticism for their students. Teaching by example is sometimes a demonstration of linguistic acts that describe observation, colors, and atmosphere of artworks.
- identify learning in art criticism as a process undertaken by the student. They are more able to articulate the outcome of that learning than how the learning takes place.

- regard momentary reflection with the students as a specific mode of encounter in the teaching of art criticism. This teacher-learner relationship may take the form of a roving discussion with the whole class or between the teacher and individual students. Reflection may concern the work of established artists or be about student work in process.
- regard their role in the teaching of art criticism as similar to that of the learner. Exploration is the driving factor for this relationship; wherein discovery of art works within and outside of the school is desirable. The art criticism process is at times a shared experience, which challenges traditional notions of the teacher-student relationship.

Conclusion

This study was founded upon a concern for the relationship between extant theory and practice in art criticism instruction, in particular in primary education. The focus of the research was not to examine the extent to which art criticism instruction is taking place in primary schools, but rather to explore the variation in teachers' thinking in what actually constitutes such teaching.

When compared to the spectrum of educational possibilities for teaching and learning in art criticism, which is well-documented in literature (Anderson, 1988; Barrett, 1991; Congdon, 1989; Hart, 1991), the teachers' perceptions appear limited. With the exception of the perception of their roles, their perspectives failed to take in consideration the life-world of the learners. The other perceptions assume the presence of the learner but give no clues to how learning takes place. Recent studies that surround cognition in general education emphasize a transfer of focus to the learner that is thought to have implications for art education and art criticism in particular (Jones, 1991).

None of the perceptions I found address any of the wider issues that art criticism may embrace, such as multiculturalism or gender equity (Congdon, 1989). The perceptions also fail to reflect any manner of a philosophical or theoretical base from which art criticism is being taught. The mention of language skills could loosely

correspond to developmental linguistics as a components of foundational areas of art criticism (Hamblen, 1991), although the teachers did not take into account the linguistic development in relation to art-specific language. I found no evidence in the perceptions or categories of description that teachers had reflected upon their teaching of art criticism and no stated implications of their roles as teachers of art criticism beyond their claim of fostering art appreciation.

Neither was there evidence of a set format or procedure for the teaching of art criticism. Interestingly, of the three types of art criticism instruction identified by Hamblen (1991), the perceptions I found in this study correspond to the "naturalistic or informal art criticism which occurs without an instructional format or specified focus" (Hamblen, 1991, p.12). The absence of a specific format or plan for art criticism instruction could be attributed to the teachers regarding art criticism as a support for other subject areas. This notion of art criticism as integrated with other subjects was apparent in the teachers' perceptions of selection, where the choice of artworks was often guided by social studies (Islamic or Kuwaiti historical representations.) Recent literature suggests that art criticism instruction, when integrated with other subjects, can lead to its ultimate trivialisation (Chambers, 1989; Eaton, 1990; Osbourne, 1991).

If the primary school teachers who participated in this study had received instruction in art criticism in their pre-service training, it was not evident in their perceptions of teaching. Galbraith (1990) suggested that ideas gained from pre-service methods courses by teachers will often give way to more traditional emphases found in schools and thus reflect a narrow background in art criticism. Future research in art criticism that is concerned with the experiences of primary school teachers, or other nonart specialist teachers, who are responsible for the delivery of art criticism instruction, still has situations worthy of investigation. For example, it would be useful to have more information about different understandings of art criticism that exist between specialist and non-specialist art teachers, in particular how these teachers reflect on their training in art criticism. It is pertinent to investigate how local education departments monitor and evaluate the relationship between national policy and classroom practice in art criticism, and to find out how much support is offered to primary school teachers.

With mounting evidence of concern for the qualities of teaching in art criticism, where has probably been improvement in the provision of art criticism in schools. Considerable time has passed since Witkin (1977) reported that he found no evidence of creative appreciation in the classrooms that he observed. In contrast, Chapman and Newton (1990) found that teachers are well aware of art criticism and are attempting to include it in their programs. Art criticism, with its inherent opportunities to help students create and derive meaning from visual art, is still in need of a firm foundation alongside other areas of the school curriculum. It deserves our attention.

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