

Teweiariki Teairo

Introduction

Human beings have numerous direct sensory links to their environment and everything in it. Each of these sensory links has the capability of providing specific experiences (such as pleasure or pain). In the arts, all the sensory organs play a role. In the visual arts, perception plays a dominant role in providing these assorted experiences. To derive maximum benefit from our visual environment - both natural and person-made - our perceptual capabilities need to be systematically stimulated, nurtured, cultivated and disciplined.

This article considers, firstly, one simple component of an ideal art curriculum in schools that could facilitate and enhance greater understanding and appreciation of the visual environment and works of art, namely - *art criticism*. Secondly, the article explores implications for the art curriculum in schools in Oceania with particular emphasis on art criticism.

Art criticism

The more we attend to ... images,
the more we see what they possess.
The more we see, the more we feel.
(Eisner, 1988:19)

The term *art criticism* refers to the process of systematically exercising a serious and objective examination and judgement of a work of art. Art criticism is thinking, talking and writing about a work of art in order to discover its deeper meaning and to clarify the way observers react to it. In this process, a viewer engages in a personal "dialogue" with the selected artwork. Through the application of experience, a new image is created during the course of this dialogue. In this way, observers come a little closer to appreciating the beauty of someone else's

creation. Interestingly, interpreting images to discover or uncover their meaning may prove simultaneously confusing, difficult and fascinating. There may be as many interpretations of the same work of art as there are critics! Moreover, these interpretations may be markedly different from what the artist originally intended! This, however, is not a bona fide justification for non-participation in art criticism. It both broadens and enriches the scope and depth of discussion, thereby significantly invigorating it.

The pedagogical function of art criticism, according to a leading art theorist, is to:

help students participate in [the] chain of looking, seeing, and experiencing, and later to transfer what they have learned to do with art to the world at large.

(Eisner 1988:19)

Art criticism is important because it provides students with opportunities to learn to perceive, explore and describe their visual world in a highly individual and unique way. Such a process and encounter will inevitably be based on aesthetics (Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson 1990), the branch of philosophy that deals with the study of beauty.

Art criticism in Oceania

There are several important factors pertaining to art curriculum and art criticism which Oceanic art curriculum writers, educators and students need to pay attention to.

Art is one of the defining characteristics of any culture or society, reflecting the mother culture and local environment. It is physically and ideologically shaped by these two factors. It follows that an ideal

art criticism approach should also be firmly grounded in both the culture and local environment. The contents of any art curriculum ought, therefore, to include important aspects of society's art and material culture. Similarly, any art criticism approach ought to follow local notions and priorities for judging good art.

As with all curricula used in Oceania, an art criticism curriculum needs to be tailored to suit the Oceania context, and this involves diverging somewhat from the western tradition of art criticism because of the nature of art in Oceania.

Firstly, the western methods of critiquing a work of art call for the critic to perform the task when a work of art is completed and has been presented to the public for viewing (usually through exhibitions). This approach is considered both inappropriate and inadequate in Oceania (Wendt 1983; Tausie 1980). In Oceanic cultures, the producer and production process are, in many cases, equally important, if not more important, than the finished product. For example, in Kiribati - where in-laws are considered very important one would value a mat because it was made and presented by an in-law. In other countries, such as Tonga, enormous tapa are made collectively by women. There is a sense of community bonding in this collaborative approach to making a piece of artwork.

Secondly, art is not produced merely for the simplistic purpose of exhibiting it for its decorative and expressive qualities only, as is the case in the western art world. In Oceania, its functional qualities are often regarded as more important than its expressive ones. There is a natural and almost inalienable duality between the aesthetic and utilitarian qualities of a work of art.

There is a tradition of criticism in the western world which has no counterpart in the concepts of indigenous education in Oceania, which is naturally deeply rooted in local culture. These concepts and

practices are not always conducive to the exercising of art criticism. A common feature of these Oceanic societies, where politeness is highly valued, is respect for elders, in-laws, guests and persons in authority. Most of the artwork for criticism would have been produced by people who fall under one of these categories - hence, the reluctance of students to willingly engage in critiquing the work of others. This may also be due to a misconception regarding the term *criticism*. It almost always carries negative connotations in the islands of Oceania. Anecdotal evidence from the author's teaching experience in a secondary school in the region and at USP shows that students usually associate art criticism with, at best, searching for negative aspects of a work of art or, at worst, "rubbishing" or ridiculing it. However, as Eisner's (1972, 1988) ideas clearly show, art criticism need not be negative, and once the nature of art criticism is understood, this reluctance may be overcome, and the student will reap the rewards.

The rewards are many, and for several reasons. Firstly, it is often desirable to comment upon the sources of inspiration of the artist. While art is usually a highly individualistic medium of expression, an artist in Oceania today is confronted with a myriad of factors (political, social, religious, technological and material) that could play a significant role in the development of his/her artwork. In addition, the introduction of western art materials and ideas to these islands has created greater possibilities for local artists and craftspeople to experiment and innovate. An artist in Oceania today is able to draw upon the arts and traditions of his/her cultural roots, re-interpret them and use contemporary art media and ideas as springboards for his/her own heightened creativity. The extremely exciting work of young artists currently painting, drawing, singing, dancing, sculpting and carving at the Oceania Centre for Art and Culture at the USP are

classic examples of such innovation and re-invention.

Thus, there is an infinite range of diversity between works of art in terms of style, sources of inspiration, purpose and meaning. These may be derived from the physical and/or cultural background of the artist (and Oceania is a goldmine in this respect), or they could simply be fantastic creations of a fertile imagination. There is a corresponding limitless scope of possibilities of interpretations in Oceania because of the "open-endedness" of the nature of art criticism. In other words, there is richness in diversity. Collectively, these represent the potential for making the process of art criticism in Oceania immensely interesting.

Unfortunately, art education is one of those subjects that have been and continue to be severely marginalised in primary and secondary schools in Oceania. This has culminated in a general lack of understanding of works of art, a reluctance to participate in the production of artwork and, therefore, a perpetuation of this trend. This has been so, despite our rich and dynamic cultural and artistic heritage in the form of visual arts (tattooing, masi printing) (Jenkins 1992; Thomas 1995), performance arts (music, oratory, dancing), crafts (pottery, carving, weaving), architecture and others. Generations of children have therefore grown up, deprived of a true understanding of the essential components of their culture - namely, the skills to produce, understand and enjoy these works of art. It is a vicious cycle that is becoming increasingly more difficult to break.

Guidelines for art teachers

The following can be used by art teachers as guidelines when conducting art criticism with their students - or anybody else for that matter. Obviously, the degree of complexity needs to be matched with the level of students' cognitive capabilities. Let us now consider the

proposed guidelines that ought to inform art criticism.

Description

Descriptions of imagery are concerned with denotations - that is, what is obvious on the surface. This can include a description of the medium (pencil, watercolour, oil paint) used and the manner in which it is used, surface used (paper, canvas, board) and the images that are depicted. It also includes the style(s) and technique(s) used by the artist.

Composition

The term composition refers to the use and arrangement of the different elements of design used in art - namely, colour, shape, form, lines, shade and texture - in such a way that the whole picture hangs together both visually and conceptually.

Meaning

Works of visual art, like poetry and other means of creative expression, usually carry messages and meaning. Sometimes, these are obvious, as in popular artwork such as advertisements. At other times, the messages and meanings are extremely difficult to decipher, let alone comprehend. This tends to be more common in contemporary abstract art. In such cases, the art critic is forced to engage in the arduous task of attempting to unravel the connotations of the imagery to derive meaning. An awareness and understanding of the cultural background of the artist is extremely useful in these circumstances.

Creativity

In assessing the value of a work of art, critics are often required to determine the original contribution of the artist and the extent to which s/he has succeeded in expressing what s/he originally wanted to express. Eisner's typology of creativity in

the visual arts is useful for the judgement of the creative values of visual artwork. In his typology, Eisner (1972:217-222) identifies several factors which must be considered when assessing the creative values and originality of a work of visual art:

- ❖ **Boundary pushing** - the extent to which an artwork demonstrates an artist's ability to find new uses for existing objects.
- ❖ **Inventing** - an artist's ability to create something totally new.
- ❖ **Boundary breaking** - the exercising of artistic insight and imagination to reject accepted assumptions and to offer new, plausible alternatives.
- ❖ **Aesthetic organising** - the quality that enables one to create coherence, harmony and order in art.

In using the Eisner typology of creativity in the visual arts, students could be advised to allocate a value (say, from 1 to 5) for each of the factors in relation to an artwork being critiqued.

Implications for art curriculum in Oceania

There is a need to re-examine art curricula in Oceania with a view to:

1. providing a more appropriate and holistic art education programme,
2. providing a more culturally relevant and more humanistic curriculum, and
3. enabling our students to appreciate, enjoy and react appropriately to visual stimuli and artwork.

There is an need to introduce appropriate art curriculum in many schools, especially those that contribute to providing a more holistic education. In cases where art is already being taught adequately, programmes could be adjusted to positively accommodate art criticism requirements. Such an undertaking could and must involve an incorporation of indigenous worldviews and local artwork.

Many schools continue to follow art prescriptions from metropolitan countries, usually those of former colonial governments. These overseas prescriptions assume a ready availability of art materials, and access to art galleries, museums and practising "artists". Following these prescriptions is the result of either an attempt to ensure international credibility or a lack of local will to develop a truly local art curriculum. Unfortunately, art is widely regarded in Oceania as a luxury. This is reflected in the imposition of relatively high duties on art materials, culminating in the prohibitively high costs of many good quality art materials and books, and hence reduced access. The implication here is that:

1. locally relevant curricula must be developed,
2. art educators need to be innovative and to improvise where necessary,
3. studies of local art and indigenous educational ideas should be incorporated.

Conclusions

It is possible to mount art criticism by introducing it in cases where it does not exist and by incorporating it into art curricula where art is already being taught. Such an exercise has the potential to make art lessons more enjoyable and culturally relevant, and to sharpen students' perceptual skills and heighten their appreciation of the visual world around them. Such a superior power of perception is more conducive to responding appropriately to the visual stimuli around them and appreciating the creative work of others. The systematic introduction of students into the elegance of the world of art criticism would open up many possibilities for better appreciating their environment and the creative work of others.

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