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# A Comparison of The Goals of Studio Professors Conducting Critiques and Art Education Goals for Teaching Criticism

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This study compares the stated goals of professors of college studio art courses for their studio critiques with the goals professed in art education literature for the teaching of criticism by art teachers. Findings of this inquiry suggest that in most cases the two sets of goals are in conflict. As a result, during their studio education, future art teachers are being guided by goals for criticism that are not in accord with the goals being set forth in their study of art education.

Art education majors are taught values and methods of art criticism in their curriculum and methods courses, and through their studio courses they are also routinely and frequently exposed to studio critiques by professors of art. If art education students eventually teach the way they have been taught, it is likely art professors' critiques of student artworks will have a significant impact on how future teachers treat criticism in their own classrooms. Art education students may well be more influenced by their participation in studio critiques than by reading about criticism in art education texts or occasionally practicing criticism in art education courses or perhaps even by taking a course in criticism. Studio critiques are likely to be very influential in a student's education because of the sheer accumulation of critiques students participate in throughout studio courses in several media over several years. Studio critiques are also likely to be influential experiences because of the students' acute and vested interest in the critiques since it is their own work which is the subject of critiques, and critiques often effect professors' grading of students' art.

The purpose of this study was to identify the goals of studio professors and compare them to the goals of criticism commonly held in art education literature. If the goals and subsequent activities of art professors in conducting studio critiques and the goals and activities professed in art education literature are similar, then considerable and beneficial reinforcement should occur; if, however, the goals of studio professors are significantly different, then art education goals are likely to be subverted.

## Art Education Goals for Art Criticism

Feldman (1970, 1973) has articulated several goals for teachers engaging their students in art criticism. Feldman (1973) defines art criticism broadly as talk about art, talk which is informed and organized for the sharing of discoveries about art and the human condition. Informing and organizing talk about art teaches the value of looking longer, more carefully, and more intelligently at art. Goals of this activity are the ability to read the visual environment and the learning of skills needed to choose among competing values. Another is character-building through learning how to take chances in offering interpretations and judgments about art and coping with disagreements. An overriding goal is to extend learning beyond what students make to the study of architecture, cinema and television, and all of publicly designed space so that students come to understand "the visual dimension of social living" (p. 55). A compatible set of goals Feldman (1970) articulates is the learning of the procedures of criticism which

he identifies as description, analysis, interpretation, and judgment. These specific goals are in support of the larger goals stated above, but the learning of these critical procedures is valuable in itself because these procedures slow the viewing encounter with the art object and aid in preventing premature judgment.

Chapman (1978) also advocates the study and practice of criticism so that children gain the ability to respond to works of art and the environment, because acquainted with subtle forms of feeling and more challenging images than they are likely to examine by themselves, and learn how experts examine works of art. In learning how experts examine works of art, children need to learn procedures of criticism, and Chapman offers several approaches to criticism including those she refers to as deductive, inductive, and empathic. She details each one of these approaches and stresses the critical procedure of interpretation more than the procedure of evaluation, excluding evaluation totally from the empathic approach.

In his approach to criticism Smith (1973) distinguishes between two basic sets of activities he calls exploratory aesthetic criticism and argumentative aesthetic criticism. The former has sub-activities of description, analysis, characterization, and interpretation towards the goal of "an intelligent interpretive perspective with a capacity to perceive, understand and appreciate works of art" (p. 49). When engaging in argumentative aesthetic criticism one argues in favor of an explicit critical assessment, to communicate an account and defend an interpretation and evaluation if challenged to do so. According to Smith the ultimate aim of art criticism is the furtherance of humane values.

Although these authors offer different descriptions of art criticism they are in harmony and general agreement about the broad goals of teaching art criticism. Each values criticism as a means to understand and appreciate art; each recommends methods and procedural directives or general principles for engaging in criticism; each recommends some familiarity with the enterprise of professional art criticism; each takes the objects of criticism to be more than specific artworks and includes the visual environment; and each fosters the development of a critical social consciousness through art criticism.

These three authors' writings about criticism and its goals certainly do not exhaust the literature on criticism in art education but they are frequently cited in the literature of art criticism in education, and they are here assumed to sufficiently and fairly characterize art criticism in art education. These authors served as a basis for developing questions asked of studio art professors concerning their practice of art criticism when conducting critiques in their college art classes.

#### Method

##### *Subjects*

The subjects were 19 professors of art at a large midwestern university. Four of the subjects were full professors, seven associate professors and eight assistant professors. Three of the subjects were women; one of the subjects was black. No first year professors were included in the study. At this particular university there was clear departmental delineation between art education and studio faculties. Those interviewed taught only studio courses and had no responsibilities for art education proper nor for student teaching supervision. During the time of the study the 19 professors were questioned about their critiques in the following 19 courses: drawing and painting (3), sculpture (1), ceramics (3), printmaking (1), photography (2), fibers (1), industrial design (1), jewelry and metal smithing (1), studio humanities (2), foundations (3), and performance art (1). Most of the students in these courses were undergraduate art majors, some were art education majors fulfilling studio requirements, others were

freshmen and sophomores with undeclared majors, and some were non-majors fulfilling studio humanities requirements.

### *Procedure*

The professors were interviewed by 19 advanced undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in an upper level art education course, "The Studio Critique in The Teaching of Art." Although professors of studio courses routinely critique the work of individuals in one to one situations, especially the work of advanced undergraduates and MFA candidates, the topic of the interviews was limited to group critiques held during studio classes. Particular attention was paid to undergraduate classes.

The interviewers introduced themselves to the professors if they were not already acquainted through participation in classes in the past, informed them about the research project, and obtained permission to observe one of their critiques as a source of examples for furthering discussion, if needed. The student interviewers were trained to be courteous and non-threatening in their questioning and were provided an interview schedule with seven open-ended questions written by the researcher: What do you consider a critique to be? How often do you conduct critiques? Why do you conduct critiques? Do you have different goals in mind for graduate students and undergraduates? What is a good critique? What is a bad critique? Each conducted a 30-45 minute interview using the interview schedule and probing follow-up questions of their own.

The researcher analyzed transcripts of the interviews looking for similarities and differences between goals the professors held for criticizing art in their group critiques and goals advocated for the teaching of art criticism by the selected art educators, Feldman, Chapman, and Smith.

### **Results**

The frequency of the critiques held by the university art professors interviewed varied considerably: many faithfully conducted critiques as the culmination of each studio assignment, several conducted group critiques of work in process as well as finished projects, and some held critiques only at the conclusion of an academic term.

All of the professors interviewed exhibited a positive attitude toward the importance of the studio critique in their teaching, and some explicitly singled it out as the most important aspect of their teaching. Although all stressed the importance of the critique in their teaching, they also expressed apprehension about their own effectiveness in critiques. Most mentioned that they preferred critiques in which students actively participated as discussants and specifically measured the success of their critiques on the frequency of student participation in the critiques. Although most stated that they wanted a high occurrence of student talk, several also admitted that they tended to talk more than their students. Some, however, felt it proper particularly in foundation level critiques that they should do most of the talking because of the students' introductory level of knowledge about art. One professor succinctly stated about all of his critiques, "I'm not interested in their comments ... they present and I criticize."

Although only a few of those interviewed used systematic approaches to criticism, intentionalism as an implicit method of interpretation and evaluation played a major role in the critiques of most of the professors. In lower level courses, the intent of the professor in making the assignment was matched against the student's solution to the assigned problem; in upper level courses where assignments were open ended or set by the student, critiques frequently centered around what the student said he or she tried to do or hoped to accomplish. Thus, the intent of the professor in making an assignment or the intent of a student said in making a piece of art was the major criterion for judging that art.

For most professors interviewed, the major goal of the studio critique was said to be the evaluation of student art work. Most explicitly equated "critique" with "evaluation" or "judgment" and many emphasized negative rather than positive aspects when judging their students' art works. In response to the question, "why do you conduct critiques?", professors' expressions varied from mild to harsh attitudes regarding the critique and evaluation: "To show them how to make their art better," "To help find the strengths and weaknesses in their works," "To understand good and bad solutions," "To correct what was wrong," "To [get them to] see their flaws," and "To show them their failings."

Several professors routinely conduct critiques of work in progress, and their main purpose in these is to give advice that would aid the student in improving the work before it is completed. Others see all student work, even finished pieces, as work in progress and offer advice on change for improvement. "Remaking" works of art, that is, helping students to see how their specific pieces could be changed for improvement, is a constant focus of several professors in conducting their critiques.

Two professors stressed motivation as an important goal, but the stress was still on motivating better art making: "to encourage good work ... to offer positive and negative reinforcement;" "to give them a pep talk ... to motivate like a coach." Only one interviewee discussed learning to talk about art as a major goal and expressed concern with helping students "to learn to verbalize about art ... to learn to talk about their work." Some used the critique as a chance to emphasize techniques taught in a specific lesson. The single comprehensive goal of the critique for those interviewed, however, was succinctly stated by one professor — "To help them make art better."

#### Discussion

There are several important differences between the goals identified by the interviewed professors of studio art for conducting critiques and the goals commonly professed in art education literature for teaching art criticism. That there are differences is not surprising. As Geahigan (1983) has made explicit, criticism is a polymorphous and essentially contested concept which is perennially disputed. Because of the nature of criticism it would be a mistake to assume that there is one best way of criticizing art. It would also be a mistake not to consider questions of educational value when choosing among competing goals for the practice of criticism and conceptions and methods of engaging students in criticism.

The main difference between the goals of the interviewed studio professors and the goals in the selected art education literature is one of scope. The studio professors generally use the critique to achieve one specific goal, namely, the improvement of the art making of their students. In art education literature, however, criticism is commonly considered to be more than a means; it is considered a subject matter in itself and as subject matter, criticism is presented as a body of knowledge which has a logic, various recommended procedures, and a variety of goals, one of which, for example, is "a public that reads and understands criticism" (Smith, 1971, p. 11).

In practice, the critique in the studio classroom is inextricably linked to the evaluation of art made by student artists. Several professors explicitly equate the critique with judgment and most implicitly adhere to a definition of criticism as judgment. Art educators, however, offer explicit definitions of criticism which are considerably more inclusive — "informed talk about art" (Feldman, 1973, p. 50), for example — and see evaluation as merely one of the aspects of criticism. Although Feldman, Chapman, and Smith each consider evaluation an important part of criticism, Feldman asserts that from an educational standpoint, judging art is "perhaps the least important aspect of criticism" (1973, p. 51); two of Chapman's (1978, pp 80-90) four

approaches to criticism do not include evaluation; and similarly, one of Smith's (1973) approaches does and the other does not. In the studio classroom, however, the critique *is* evaluation; and as typically practiced by those interviewed, the critiques reinforce the ordinary usage of "criticism" as negative judgment. Studio critiques perpetrate a very limited notion of art criticism as the judgment of art.

When art educators do write specifically of engaging in and teaching about critical judgment they caution against making premature judgments, usually distinguish between preferences and values, stress the necessity of providing reasons to support critical judgments, and discuss the role and value of competing criteria in judging art. The interviewed art professors did not indicate knowledge or valuation of such distinctions and procedures in judging art. Moreover, when criteria for judgments were employed, the criteria were usually intentionalist: the students' artworks were often measured against either the assignment as stated by the professor or the intents of the students in making their artworks.

When asked, very few of the interviewed studio professors had specific procedures for criticizing art. Feldman (1970) distinguishes aspects of criticism as description, analysis, interpretation, and judgment; Smith (1973) delineates description, analysis and characterization, and interpretation; and Chapman (1978) presents several different methods of criticism, each with carefully delineated steps. These authors also list a variety of specific goals for each of the procedures and activities they present. They take care to explain the procedures and values of description, for example, as a data gathering process which aids against premature closure, prolongs the viewing of art, increases visual acuity, and provides an essential basis for interpretation and judgment.

Art educators also stress the procedure of interpretation as a procedure of building arguments on the basis of evidence in and around the artwork, and they claim that interpretations are open to counter-arguments. In the studio critiques discussed in the interviews the student's intent in making the art or the professor's intent in assigning the project were accepted as the implied basis for interpretation, if attention were devoted to the interpretation of the student's artworks at all. When disputes arose about the meaning of an artwork, the artist's interpretation was the norm for interpretive accuracy. None of the professors expressed any hesitancy about the validity of citing the maker's intent as the determining factor in examining works of art. Art educators informed by the literature of aesthetics, however, express considerable hesitancy in relying on intent as a basis of interpretive accuracy or artistic worth.

In the studio critiques, student artworks were the exclusive objects discussed, whereas in art education literature paradigm examples of art by professional artists both historical and contemporary are recommended for discussion, as are examples from architecture, cinema, television, and non-art objects from the entire designed environment. One of the reasons offered by art educators for a wider selection of objects to be criticized is to meet their broader goals of developing a critical social awareness.

### Conclusion

This comparison is not made as a condemnation of the studio critique as it is currently conducted at the setting of this study or as it is likely conducted in art courses on other campuses. The studio critique as it is being conducted may be effective in improving the making of student art and deserves empirical investigation regarding its effectiveness; but that is well beyond the scope of this study. What is apparent and important, however, is that in conducting critiques, these studio professors are not doing criticism as it is recommended in art education literature. Because there are marked differences between what is recommended in art education majors and art students who may become art teachers are routinely and repeatedly being exposed to

and are practicing a limited version of an art criticism with narrow goals. Since the students may well teach as they have been taught in their studio critiques, the discrepancies between the two versions of criticism are important. Other studies are needed which investigate what art teachers in the schools are actually doing in their classrooms with criticism and what their attitudes and knowledge are regarding art criticism.

Harmony between studio art and art education curricula in the practice of art criticism would enhance the chance of success for the achievement of art education goals for the teaching of art and criticism. But since this is not the case, art educators could improve their chances of success with their students by examining and discussing the differences between the studio critique as it is practiced by studio professors and art criticism as it is recommended in art education readings. For example, intentionalism as a method of criticism may be appropriate in the studio class for determining whether the student has met the professor's goals for an assignment, or for aspiring artists to consider their motivation for making art, but this method has severe limitations when used as the sole criteria for interpreting and judging works of art and other artifacts in the world beyond the studio. Similarly, fault finding, "remaking," and improving upon student art may be appropriate in the studio classroom but is a very limited approach to considering questions of value when examining the range of artifacts recommended by art educators, or when examining work by artists from other times and cultures made under conditions quite different than the classroom and with criteria other than those of our day.

Also, studio critiques as they are currently conducted could likely be improved by a more deliberate examination of their goals and a more careful match of procedures to achieve those goals. Studio professors teach a range of students, from MFA candidates concentrating in a specific medium, to freshmen and sophomores fulfilling a general studies art requirement. This may be the one and only college art course that undergraduates take, and the improvement of their art making may not be the most appropriate goal for involving them in critiques. When the improvement of art making is chosen as a goal, for example, then the employment of explicit criteria and the use of clear reasons in support of judgments would likely make those judgments more understandable and perhaps more acceptable. Those professors who expressed difficulty in achieving their stated goal of engaging students in dialogue about artworks might enjoy greater success if they were more aware of the standard trilogy of description, interpretation, and evaluation as critical procedures, and if they tried some of the many methods recommended in art education literature for engaging students in descriptive analysis and interpretive argumentation, and for arriving at more carefully reasoned and more fully argued judgments. They and their students would have more to consider and more to talk about.

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