

"I can't draw--I'm not an artist":
SUGGESTED METHODS FOR IMPROVING NINTH GRADE
ART CONSCIOUSNESS

by

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INTRODUCTION

This paper describes three model classroom procedures that I have devised. Each is meant to give students personal experiences and insights about questions facing artists today: Is artistic expression personal or public; Why do the general public react negatively to contemporary art; What are the rewards and motivations (aesthetic, and non-aesthetic) facing contemporary artists? It is important that students, as potential artists, probe their own attitudes, evaluate for themselves, and come to their own conclusions.

In each model, students answer specific questions about the assignments, in order to verbalize about their experiences and insights. Then, through class discussion, they are asked to extend their immediate experiences into general principles about artists working in the community.

This kind of classroom experience, I feel, generates working principles for the student artist. Even better, it trains them to continue to assess their artistic attitudes about art, and to understand what they are trying to do. When students have found their own direction and purpose, they can make better choices among media, techniques, concepts, and the studio training they are receiving.

Each model proposed here is only one suggested way of showing students how a particular principle can operate, and each is only one way to lead into the general questions. Even these models should be flexible; classroom situations are not static. The students may have other questions, other conclusions, see other principles working. Of course, there are many more questions an artist has to ask himself as he develops a strong concept of what he's doing, but I believe these are three which must be asked.

On the basis of student attitudes I have seen, I have predicted some reactions and attitudes. In the models, directions are given by the teacher. However, for brevity's sake, in the teacher-student exchange, student response reflects attitudes rather than actual dialogue.

"T" indicates teacher question

"S" indicates general predicted student attitude

The following questions are implicit in the model classroom situations.

Personal expression will deal with whether art should be technique oriented--deal with form organization (aesthetics), self oriented, or primarily a

social-cultural form of communication. How will the students see the role of the artist, and the role of art in our society? How has the public defined art, especially contemporary art of the last twenty to twenty-five years? Is it possible for any single group of artists to communicate to the public in general? Should there be an attempt for a group of artists to broaden the base of communication and touch upon broader cultural values? Should the artist be concerned with how the general public, especially those who do not share an interest in art, feel toward art?

In developing their opinions about art, students will also have to think about the criteria that label some products art, and others something else. Since an aesthetic is subjective, it changes according to who is applying the value judgement. Establishing one work as better than another, or one style better than another becomes very difficult and arbitrary. However, since aesthetics does serve a major role in determining the preferences of visual organization, how has this come about?

Finally, the rewards and motivations of artists today are very complex. External rewards in art such as professional standing (historical position, fame) or purely

financial rewards are often basically superficial in motivation. Many artists are primarily motivated by rewards received through personal growth and acquisition of self knowledge. On the other hand, many artists today also want to reflect broader cultural values and present new information useful to society.

A consideration of all these attitudes will form the background of discussion in the following classroom situations.

EXPLORING PERSONAL EXPRESSION

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Situation I:

Ten students will be given a black and white magazine photograph. They will be told to copy it exactly, using their no. 2 pencil. Proper scale and proportion will be stressed.

The remaining students will act as an audience observing, recording and making some conclusions about what they observe. The ten students participating in the first situation will partake in the following two situations.

Situation II:

Students will be given the same magazine photograph. They will be told they may make as many changes, using the photograph, as they wish. They may also use a variety of different materials in order to cut it up, re-glue, add color, change textures, cartoon it, collage it, etc. When they finish they must write on the back of their project whether they were concerned, as they worked, primarily with technique or with aesthetics (their personal taste). This will be stated to the group after all have finished this assignment.

Situation III:

Students are told: Imagine yourself as the magazine photograph in Situation II. You are on the desk watching all that is going on. What kind of images did you see as you were glued, cut-up, torn, painted on, penciled on, pressed on, etc. Imagine the brush on top of you applying paint. How did it feel? Maybe you were crumpled or folded. Write a description of the feelings you experienced. When students are finished they will then be told to use symbols or narration (or combination of both) to describe their experience.

Examples of Teacher Questions and
Predicted Student Responses:

- T - From what you have observed, which situation seemed to be the easiest and why?
- S - Situation II seemed to be the easiest because they were able to experiment with the photograph and materials without any restrictions.
- T - Then of Situation I and III which was the most difficult and why?
- S - Difference of opinion. Situation I is more difficult because it involved achieving a technical skill.

Situation III is more difficult because it involved a thought process.

T - Would you consider Situation I a creative-expressive process? Why?

S - No, they were only trying to copy exactly what was there, without making personal expressive changes. They were not allowed by alternatives--they were confined and restricted.

T - Was Situation III a creative-expressive process and why?

S - Yes, because they were forced to think of themselves as something else and express how they felt visually on paper, using symbols or narration, or a combination of both.

T - Would you also consider Situation II a creative-expressive process? Why?

S - Yes, because their freedom to experiment with technique allowed them to be creative, in that sense, and because of this they were able to make personal decisions on how they expressed it visually.

- T - Considering the different kinds of decision making in Situation II and III, which one seemed more difficult to express visually and why?
- S - Situation III was more difficult to express visually because of two reasons: first, because they had to think of themselves as another object and; second, in order to express that visually they had to decide on symbols and/or narration that would communicate that experience.
- T - Give the drawings from Situation III to a person in the audience. Those students who receive the drawing describe in writing what the drawings communicate to you. What happened to the student as the photograph? How did he feel? When you are finished, return the project, with your statement, to the student who gave it to you.
- T - Those students who own the projects compare the statement with what you wrote earlier. Are the descriptions similar? Were you successful at communicating your experience? If not, why?
- S - (Variety of reason).

T - Do you think that if you had been able to select a different material, or a variety of materials to work with, you would have been more successful in communicating your experience? Or would it have been more beneficial for you to first discuss a variety of ways in which to communicate your experience, then be given a choice of material to express that idea visually?

The teacher will then work the questionnaire into a discussion dealing with the role of the artist and his work.

The discussion is meant to allow each student to frame his own view on the relative merits of the following three artistic values: achievement of technical skill; personal satisfaction from work which is not meant to communicate but is visually pleasing to them; communicating to the public what the artist finds valuable.

T - We've discussed three situations in which students dealt with technical skill (Situation I), personal satisfaction from working with a variety of materials without restriction (Situation II), and communication of an idea (Situation III).

- T - Let's assume that the artist is concerned with only one of the above. Suppose you are the artist, which belief do you feel is more important to your growth as an artist and why?

- T - Is technical skill, for example, being able to draw perfectly, inherited or a learned process? Why?

- T - Is personal self-expression more important to you, as a student artist, than communicating ideas and beliefs to the public? Why?

- T - If the artist is concerned with communicating ideas and beliefs to the public is it possible to satisfy all levels of the public?

EXPLORING THE GENERAL PUBLIC'S REACTION
TO MOST CONTEMPORARY VISUAL ARTS

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Situation I:

Ten students will be selected to listen to and watch a video tape recording (VTR) of a student reading a poem. Students will not understand the meaning of the poem because of its reference to systems outside their realm of understanding. The poem will be continually read for ten minutes.

The remaining students will act as the audience recording the comments and behavior of the student watching the VTR.

Situation II:

Class will be held in the media center of the school. The same ten will be placed in listening booths so earphones may be used. A sheet of paper and pencil will be given to each of the ten students. They will be encouraged to use the paper and pencil to record their own reaction to the music, if they wish. Country western music will be played since this also deals with reference to systems outside their realm of understanding. Music will be discussed, since students can relate to it easily.

The remaining students will be asked to record facial and body gestures of the students who are listening to the music, plus any vocal reactions heard.

Examples of Teacher Questions and
Predicted Student Responses:

T - In both situations, the reaction was negative. Why?

S - Both were boring and incomprehensible.

T - Why were they boring and incomprehensible?

S - Because they do not relate to things that interest us and we understand.

T - Which do you feel is more enduring, the poem or the country western music? Why?

S - Country western music will probably last longer because music is important to most people.

T - In what way is music important, or meaningful, to most people?

S - It functions as entertainment and communication.

T - If you had listened to music by Elton John, or Cat Stevens would you have found that also boring and incomprehensible?

S - No, because their music appeals to us, it's fun to dance to, and the lyrics relate to us.

T - What do the lyrics communicate to you?

S - The lyrics communicate things we understand and relate to, for example, love, friendship, and social statements.

T - The lyrics in country western music communicate the same things, yet you said it was boring and incomprehensible. What is the difference?

S - Country western music relates to people with different social backgrounds.

T - What do the lyrics in most songs force you to do mentally?

S - They force us to think about what the song is communicating.

T - If the lyrics in most rock music force you to think about what is being communicated, what are the lyrics in the visual arts, and do they serve the same function?

- T - Before you answer that question let's look at some slides of contemporary art, primarily of the last twenty-five to thirty years. (Teacher will select different categories of objective and non-objective work.) You may comment freely as each slide is shown. Do you like or dislike the painting(s)? Why? Does it communicate anything to you? If you don't think the painting is meant to communicate a message or a feeling, what function or purpose does it serve?
- T - Assuming the lyrics of a painting are the recognizable symbols, and the music color, line, etc., why did most of you react negatively to paintings that were partially or completely representational?
- T - Why didn't those paintings communicate something meaningful to you the way lyrics in rock music affects you?
- T - If you enjoy rock music without lyrics, why didn't you like the completely abstract paintings, since both are considered contemporary?

- T - Music is primarily public oriented. It's recorded for your enjoyment, and most musicians are concerned with communication to the public. It's difficult for us to live without music for more than a day. Do you think the general public, students included, feel the same way about contemporary painting, or other contemporary visual arts?
- T - Are most contemporary visual arts too self-oriented so that the general public assumes the artist is not concerned with society?
- T - Should the artist be concerned with public reaction to his work?
- T - As student artist, do you feel personal self-expression is more important than communication of beliefs or ideas (information)? Is communication really a function for the visual arts?
- T - Does the artist have to give up his self-expression in order to develop an art that would be public oriented?
- T - Is it possible to develop public oriented art that would affect us the way music does? Why?

REWARDS AND MOTIVATION

EXPLORING THE ARTIST'S REWARDS
AND MOTIVATIONS
(Aesthetic, Non-Aesthetic)

Situation I:

Ten students will be selected to cut out from magazines images using their favorite color. Students will be encouraged to trade with one another for their favorite color, since there will be no limit to the amount they may have. Students will have twenty-five to thirty minutes to work. Approximately ten minutes before the assignment is due, the teacher will begin to state the following changes in the requirements (allowing a few minutes in between each statement):

- a. "The students with the most amount of lavender images will receive an A."
- b. "On second thought, the student with the largest lavender image will receive an A."
- c. "On the other hand, I think it's better to give an A to the student with the largest red image containing a small amount of lavender."

Students who are not participating in this situation will be asked to record student reactions and behavior.

Situation II:

A different group of ten students will be selected to cut out photographs from another stack of magazines.

The students will be given the following three choices:

- a. To receive an A, they must create a small scrap-book containing magazine photographs they find visually attractive for their design qualities.
- b. To receive a grade, they must select a series of images about their favorite recreational activity (sports, traveling, hobbies, etc.). It will be emphasized that the important thing is to reflect upon why they like this activity. After collecting images which reflect both the actual activity and their reasons for liking it (physical fitness, knowledge, relaxation, etc.), students will be asked to paste them up in a collage format.
- c. Those who do not feel an A grade is important are to manipulate information in any way they want to present a point of view, or message to the viewer. The information presented is more important than the format. Formats could be posters, essays, speeches, dramatic performances,

etc. Students will present their information, or message, to the class for a vote. If the message/information is understood, the student receives a pass grade. If it is voted down, the student fails, but will be given two more attempts to pass. Failure to pass after three attempts will not be recorded.

Examples of Teacher Questions and
Predicted Student Responses:

- T - Why did the pleasant atmosphere in Situation I change to one of frustration and tension?
- S - Because of the unfair change in the requirements, the situation became very competitive! Students became angry and nasty. Some students gave up and others were forced out of the competition by fellow student's actions.
- T - Why do you consider the change in requirements for Situation I unfair?
- S - Because it was too sudden and the choice of successive requirements, appears to be arbitrary.
- T - If the change in the requirements was unfair and too sudden what motivated most students to continue?

- S - Receiving a grade of A is very important to many students no matter how ridiculous the requirements might be.

- T - Did the same degree of tension and frustration occur in Situation II? Why or why not?

- S - No, because the requirements were stated clearly beforehand and there was free choice among three options.

- T - Before the requirements were changed in Situation I, what kind of student behavior was exhibited?

- S - Most students became very involved with meeting the specific requirements (lavender, size, etc.) to earn the one reward (grade of A).

- T - Was the same kind of competition and motivation involved in Situation II as in Situation I? Why or why not?

- S - No, because more than one reward was established, more than one motivation was suggested.

- T - What did options a and b in Situation II force students to do?

- S - They were forced to make decisions about personal preferences in activities as well as visual organization.
- T - How did that affect your choices when you started your scrapbook and collage?
- S - Students had to be concerned only with aesthetics in Situation I, and aesthetics as well as personal involvement in the recreational activity in Situation II.
- T - We have explored various rewards and motivation in the previous assignments. Let's see how they might relate to formal art, private, symbolic art, and post formalist art.

SUMMARY

Up to this time my work has been involved with exploration of techniques, and these techniques alone have defined my work and myself as an artist. Many times, my justification for a project was established when I was well into my work, or even finished, almost as an afterthought or exercise -- instead of clean and compelling ideas and reasons being the motivation for my projects. My high school and undergraduate art education dealt only with exploration and use of various fine art techniques, not with personal motivation or execution of ideas. For example, dividing fine art into separate course descriptions -- painting, printing, sculpture, object and figure drawing, design I and II, mechanical drawing, photography, ceramics, jewelry, design with fibers, wood, metal, etc. -- confines one to develop within that particular technique; therefore, what is important is how things are stated, not what is said or what the very best means might be. I feel it would have been more valuable for me to participate in art courses which first emphasized the importance of formulating concepts about oneself and society. And then by working in a variety of media, I could discover those which offer the right vehicle for ideas.

With that kind of background, the disciplined training in a particular media that studio courses offer, would be even more valuable, because a student artist would have some idea of what he wanted to accomplish with the media in which he has chosen to utilize.

In evaluating the teaching of art to junior high school students, I find the same process of "art defined by techniques," Students think of art in terms of being "able to draw correctly," "paint beautiful pictures," "manipulate colors," etc. Anything less than top technical quality leads to frustration and a feeling of inadequacy. When students comment, "I can't draw -- I'm not an artist," or "Do we have to do this," these are clues which indicate to me that we need a change in attitude and approach.

The students are less frustrated by simplified projects that demanded less skill, and that produced end results they could put to use, like macramé planters and painting on denim clothing. However, to them art still means working with various materials. Discussion of student work in terms of their values, for example, why students select certain symbols in their work, is considered unnecessary and peculiar by the students, since this practice is new. I'm not suggesting that exploration of

techniques and use of various materials be eliminated -- students enjoy manipulating various materials. However I do feel it's important to force students to recognize and develop the values, ideas, and feelings that they consider important. The aim is to make students realize that they can discover meaningful things about themselves and the world they live in. If this initial discovery can be made apparent to them, then the specific methods (techniques) or the specific approaches (aesthetics) will become more appropriate and sensitive.

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