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## A RESEARCH BASE FOR ART CURRICULA IN TEACHER TRAINING INSTITUTIONS

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In the early 1970's, Eliot Eisner, Professor of Art and Education at Stanford University, conducted a study which was designed to gain a clearer picture of the achievements and attitudes of college and university students in the visual arts. He developed two instruments — the Eisner Art Information and Art Attitude Inventories (Eisner, 1972, pp. 146-152) — which could be used to test students' accumulated knowledge of the visual arts; and their attitudes towards, and involvement in, the visual arts.

His conclusions, based on the results of this study, indicated that U.S. schools had generally failed to provide students with the art education which he thought was desirable. It was found that students' knowledge of their culture contained in the visual arts was severely deficient; and their attitudes were based on narrow opinion and shallow foundations.

It is interesting for those involved in art education in Australia to speculate on the degree to which these findings might be coincidental with student achievements and attitudes in this country. Eisner's findings certainly strike a familiar chord with candid observations made by teachers of the visual arts in Australia. In order to determine the general achievements and attitudes of incoming student teachers into the Institute of Advanced Education at James Cook University, the author designed a series of tests which were used to indicate the achievements of students in terms of their knowledge and skills in the visual arts and the attitudes which they held towards this field. The information obtained in the author's opinion, is most helpful in the development of courses which most appropriately prepare student teachers for the role of teaching art in the schools.

### The Study

Since the research was designed to gain some understanding of school-based *visual literacy* attainment of commencing student teachers, it was necessary to firstly develop a clear working definition of this term. The Oxford dictionary defines 'literacy' as 'the ability to read and write'.

Broudy (1976) draws the close analogy in the visual arts as 'impression' and 'expression'. Therefore, if we accept this definition of literacy, we should conceive of visual literacy as constituting the abilities to cope with visual impression and visual expression. Put another way, visual literacy refers to:

- (a) the ability to be able to obtain meaning or feeling from a visual object or experience. These are the abilities which hold great relevance for *art criticism* and *art history*;
- (b) the ability to be able to creatively manipulate physical materials so that their transformation encodes meaning and feeling. This implies competence in *art production*.

These are the three areas (art production, art criticism, and art history) that Eisner (1972, p. 172) recommends for attention in school-based art education.

In order to assess students' competence in the three areas, one must decide on the relevant behaviours which are characteristic to operating in them, and design tests which suitably observe, and record those behaviours. For the purpose of the research reported in this paper, the behaviours that were recorded centred around *knowledge*, certain *skills*, and *attitudes* towards Art. The test was administered to a total of 105 students.

## I. Knowledge

It is believed that certain basic information is necessary to functioning with some success in the three art areas (production, criticism, history). A multiple-choice objective test was administered to ascertain knowledge levels in relation to Western Art, Australian Art, and general knowledge of terminology and art processes. The following results were obtained:

- (a) There is a high positive correlation (+0.97) between years of art education and knowledge about Art.
- (b) Rank order of knowledge proficiency:
 

General knowledge	61%	correct	answers
Knowledge of Western Art	50%	correct	answers
Knowledge of Australian Art	34%	correct	answers
- (c) 49% of all questions were answered correctly.

Considering the low level of difficulty of questions, it would seem that the average student leaving the school system at Year 12 has a significantly deficient knowledge base in the visual arts. And when one considers that these students represent those who have had the longest experience of formal education, one must have pessimistic reservations about the achievements of the bulk of the school population who leave the school system at an earlier age.

There are also grounds for concern at the level of knowledge of the visual arts in Australia. One could reasonably expect that students should have a profound understanding of their own immediate culture in order to operate efficiently and sensitively in it.

## II. Attitudes

Numerous questions were used to ascertain students' attitudes and values towards Art and artists; and the effect of the home environment on the formation of these. Specifically, the following information was obtained:

- (a) There seems to be a significantly high interest in the visual arts (95% like making Art; and 99% like viewing Art) but actual involvement in Art does not match this stated interest (only 43% make Art; and 79% have been to an art exhibition). The reasons for this discrepancy may be due to individual apathy or lack of opportunity in provincial and country areas.
- (b) It is generally accepted that parental values have a great influence on the formation of attitudes by their children. This research has found that more enthusiasm for Art could be generated in the home environment. Almost half (48%) of the student sample reported that their parents took no demonstrative interest in Art. There were 20% of homes in which no art works were displayed, and 44% of homes that contained no book sources of information on Art. The general picture which emerges from these figures suggests a very passive acceptance of the visual arts by the parent population and an increased responsibility for the schools to compensate for experience and resources not available in the home.
- (c) It was pleasing to find that a large majority of students (about 80%) had very favourable and positive opinions about artists. However, about one quarter of responses expressed some reservations about artists' normalcy while only a few displayed hostility.

- (d) Several questions were designed to ascertain student preference for objective or non-objective styles in Art. They were asked to state their preferences and reasons for style; and to select from four paintings the one they liked best. The results show that there is an overwhelming preference (84% of students) for realism in works of art. Except for those students who took Art to Year 10, preferences seem to move progressively towards a balance at Year 12. This may be taken to mean that years of art education at school may broaden tastes towards art styles. The reasons given by students accord with their choice of painting. They consciously perceive and prefer recognisable content which is realistically rendered. At Year 12 there does seem to be more balance in awareness and feeling for the aesthetic aspects of a painting.

### III. Skills

It was decided that the skills required of the visually literate person were those conducive to meaningful interaction with the visual environment (man-made and natural) and to expression of ideas and feelings in visual form. Three tests were administered to assess students' competencies in each of these areas.

Students were asked to give their reactions to Goya's *Military Execution, 1808*. In order to collate the reactions, use was made of Feldman's four stages of art criticism viz. Description, Analysis, Interpretation, Judgement (Feldman, 1970); together with a fifth category, Empathy.

The following results were obtained:

- (a) The predominant reaction seems to be descriptive in character (81% responses) with a significant number (64%) attempting some interpretation. However, about one third (32%) of the interpretations seemed to be off the top of the head, and no rational explanations were given.
- (b) Less than one quarter (20%) of the population had an emotional encounter with the painting. This was generally expressed in terms of man's violence towards fellow human beings. The limitation of this type of reaction is surprising considering the powerful images of violence, fear, and tragedy in this particular painting.

- (c) Only 10% of students made any attempt to probe the composition.

It would seem from the results that student interest is primarily restricted to what Eisner calls the primary surface. The majority of students seem unaware of, or incapable of penetrating to the secondary surface where the real meaning and significance of the painting lies. This conclusion unhappily applies as much to Year 12 students as to Year 8 students.

The second test involved students' immediate reactions to slides of two natural forms, one of interesting rock formation, and the other of unusually curled bark. For purposes of analysing the reactions, a slight variation on C.W. Valentine's response categories (Valentine, 1962) was adopted, i.e., Associative Responses, Aesthetic/Subjective Responses, and Descriptive/Objective Responses. The following results emerged:

- (a) There were 69% of responses which were objectively descriptive in nature.
- (b) 34% of the responses were imaginative in that the natural forms were likened to other objectives.
- (c) 34% of the responses indicated some awareness of the expressive qualities of the forms.

Again, it is evident that the visual perception of most students is conditioned to an awareness of the primary surface of visual form. This tendency also holds true for students who studied Art to Year 12.

The final test was administered to students to obtain some idea of their current skills in expression through the visual arts. The medium selected was painting since most would have experienced it at some time during their lives. The topic which was given and discussed in all its aspects was "The Fishermen". It was fully realised that this is a difficult area in which to assess skills and competence, particularly in looking at only one art work from each student; on a topic which may not have inspired all students; and in a medium which the students did not choose. Therefore the results obtained through the combined assessments of two people are treated with some caution.

It was decided to rate them in the categories of Originality of Idea, Expression (of idea and feeling), Skill in Handling Material, and Com-

position; on a scale of Above Average (3); Average (2); Below Average (1). The results obtained by this process were:

- (a) 30% displayed high competence;  
43% displayed medium competence;  
27% displayed low competence.
- (b) With increasing experience in Art at school, scores improved for each ability, i.e., there is a high positive correlation (+0.87) between years of art education and skill at artistic expression. The research does not tell us if this is due to natural pruning of those less skilled as the higher grades are reached, or if the increased experience at school results in better skills. In reality, both explanations probably play a part.
- (c) It was noted that, at the lower levels of competence, some of the work could be categorised into Lansing's Late Figurative Stage of artistic development (Lansing, 1969).

The general impression obtained from the assessment of skills seems to indicate that skills in artistic expression, while not satisfactory by a long way, are at least sufficiently developed by a majority of students to enable them to partially communicate in the visual mode. The same qualified satisfaction can not be applied to skills in artistic impression. The results from these tests would indicate that students' perception and aesthetic frame of reference are somewhat undeveloped in relation to the visual environment (man-made and natural). This is true even for students who took Art to Year 12. Perhaps there is a need to place more emphasis on those perceptual and inquiry skills in school art education programs.

### Conclusions

The research set out to ascertain competency levels in visual literacy i.e., competency in knowledge, skills and attitudes applied to artistic expression and impression. The following broad conclusions have been drawn from the information available:

- I. There is a startling lack of even basic knowledge about the visual arts. The test of knowledge was composed of what were considered to be facts of the most elementary nature, and students, on average, knew slightly less than half of them. Little is known about our national culture as recorded by the visual arts. These findings

make it apparent that students in general have limited concepts of their cultural roots and are also handicapped in their interactions with the culture.

- II The skills for artistic expression seem to be slightly better developed than those for artistic impression. Nevertheless, it was apparent that much more could be done to improve the expressive skills of students.

Of real concern is the general inability of students to interact meaningfully and sensitively with visual form. The majority of students seem to lack an aesthetic frame of reference and their perceptual and conceptual development is conditioned towards an objective assessment of reality. While these findings are disturbing, they should not be surprising in view of the bias towards the logico-empirical subject matter in primary school curricula today.

- III Student involvement with Art was disappointing considering the stated interest in both artistic expression and impression.

On the other hand, it was pleasing to find that they generally had a high regard for those in the community who create Art. The image of artist as non-conformist, strange, weird, eccentric, etc., does not emerge.

It is debatable whether or not one should be concerned with students' overwhelming preference for realism in art forms. Perhaps it is quite a healthy attitude. However, if this preference is based on a lack of understanding of the purpose and nature of the non-realistic styles (as the research on skills would suggest), then there are grounds for concern. It appears likely that students lack the skill and experiences necessary to enable them to interact meaningfully with all art forms. Equipped with these skills, perhaps we could expect a little more balance in student preference.

Student interest and involvement in Art apparently receives little encouragement in the home so that generally, the schools have the biggest opportunity and responsibility for developing knowledge, skills and attitudes in this human activity.

## Recommendations

The research, as outlined, made a broader assessment of students' abilities, achievements and attitudes with regard to the visual arts, than was attempted by the Eisner Inventories. In the opinion of the author, the conclusions of this study indicate a general lack of student preparation to undertake teaching responsibilities in the visual arts without considerable involvement in this field in pre-service teacher-education courses. The notion of allowing an illiterate to teach reading and writing in the schools could not be entertained. It is equally absurd to expect the visually illiterate to teach the complex language of Art.

The conclusions therefore suggest some guidelines which may be relevant in the development of art courses in teacher training institutions:

- I It is apparent that student knowledge about Art is deficient. Courses should specifically attend to the concepts (facts and generalisations) which are embodied in the historical study of the arts, the arts of other racial groups, the syntactical structure of art, and materials and processes. In particular, some emphasis should be accorded the visual arts in the student's immediate environment - regionally and nationally.
- II Students' greatest achievement in the visual arts seems to be in the area of art production. Nevertheless, some minor weighting should be given to this activity in order to further build on embryonic skills, and to provide a repertoire of activities which would be suitable for teaching art concepts and skills to children.
- III There is an apparent need to broaden the preference base for styles in Art. It is probable that considerable visual satisfaction and information is at present unavailable to a majority of students who have rejected the non-realistic art forms. This is most relevant when one considers that most 20th century art may be classified in this way.
- IV In the author's opinion, the most important issue to be faced in teacher-training art courses is related to the students' general lack of sensitivity to the aesthetic aspects of their visual environment and their inept interaction with art works. Since visual impression is the mode of involvement with the visual arts that most frequently presents opportunities for human beings, it is

imperative that teachers engage in this activity with confidence and sensitivity themselves if they are to inculcate the same skills and attitudes in their students. This suggests that art courses should place a major emphasis on:

- (a) The development of an aesthetic frame of reference. Students should be given experiences which help them to develop feelings towards, and empathy with objects of their visual environment. Their reactions to natural and man-made forms should not only be to surface appearance, but to the feelings and 'imaginings' the form engenders in the individual.
- (b) The enquiry skills necessary to critically examine visual form. Several models for the development of these skills have been promoted by various art educators (Chapman, 1978; Feldman, 1970). Student teachers should become familiar with at least one of these models and develop the skills needed for its application.

In summary, it could be said that none of these recommendations is revolutionary. Some are already notable features in art courses in teacher training institutions, and the research provides the support for their inclusion. However, from the author's enquiries, it appears that the great majority of content courses in art — as distinct from curriculum studies — are involved with creative expression. The recommendations in this paper support some modification in emphasis. It is suggested that the student teacher's own experiences and teaching effectiveness in relation to the visual arts will be enhanced if more time is devoted to development of skills for artistic impression than to involvement in artistic expression.

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