FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

Translations

THE NATIONAL ART EDUCATION ASSOCIATION SPRING 2003

Volume 12, No. 1

Dr Mary Erickson, Editor

A Refereed Publication

Viewpoints for Art Understanding

Mary Erickson and Faith Clover

Developmental theories can give teachers a basis upon which to predict the knowledge, abilities, and values of individuals or groups before they encounter them. Developmental theories can also help teachers plan the level at which, and sequence through which, they choose to introduce new information, skills, or values to others.

Five viewpoints people can use to understand art provide the framework for this review. Viewers can use each viewpoint anywhere on a continuum from naive to sophisticated. When viewers are able to approach artworks from two or more viewpoints, they can choose the approach they deem most appropriate for understanding different types of art. Clover and Erickson (1997 and 1998) built on distinctions identified by Parsons (1987) in formulating and refining these five viewpoints.

Non-Reflective Viewpoint

Clover and Erickson (1997 and 1998) propose that people using the Non-Reflective Viewpoint[1] have an immediate positive (or negative), response to artworks without benefit of reflection. This viewpoint is based on little or no information beyond the artwork itself or it may be based on something that the artwork reminds the viewer of an immediate association. Sophisticated as well as naïve viewers can respond immediately to particular artworks. However more experienced viewers can reflect on and explain their responses.

Parsons interviewed 300 individuals over a period of ten years about their responses to eight artworks. He found five distinct stages of art understanding. According to Parsons people using ideas associated with his first stage have "an intuitive delight in most paintings, a strong attraction to color, and a freewheeling associative response to subject matter" (Parsons, 1987, p. 22). Erickson (1995) used Parsons' stages in her analysis of second graders' responses to art and also found evidence of free association.

Housen (2000) proposes a theory of developing art understanding based on many interviews with children and adults. Viewers in her first stage "lack a framework for responding to works of art and use the tools closest at hand. These naïve viewers, relying on perceptual cues, let bold and obvious stimuli in a work of art trigger idiosyncratic associations [with which they] create stories" (Housen, 2000, p. 282).

Beauty, Realism, and Skill Viewpoint

Clover and Erickson (1997 and 1998) propose that people using the Beauty, Realism, and Skill Viewpoint believe that good artworks must show beautiful things, be realistic, and exhibit skill.

Parsons' (1987) second stage "is

Submit 3 copies of manuscripts forTranslations for review to: Dr. Mary Erickson, Translations Editor, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ 85287-1505

organized around the idea of representation. …. It is true [according to viewers using this stage] that some paintings are nonrepresentational, but they are not really meaningful. A painting is better if the subject is attractive and if the representation is realistic" (1987, p. 22). Parsons explains that children find it difficult to "take the point of view of another person and empathize with their feelings and states of mind (Parsons & Blocker, 1993, p. 157). Children at this stage "find it hard to read anything of the artist's intentions or feelings in a work and usually pay little attention to them. They tend to be more interested in the subject matter" (Parsons & Blocker, 1993, p. 157).

In her study of second graders, Erickson (1995) also found interest in the difficulty and skill in making art and use of words like "beautiful" and "pretty" to describe a wide range of artworks. Similarly (1995) in her analysis of fifth grade Navajo and Mexican American students, Clover found that the majority of their responses to eleven artworks from diverse eras and cultures used the Beauty, Realism, and Skill Viewpoint.

Viewers in Housen's second stage use "the natural world and the conventional world … as their measuring rods" (Housen, 2000, p. 283). These viewers are less subjective and are interested in questions like "how the work of art was made, how long it took to make, how much it cost to buy, and how it has been used" (Housen, 2000, 282-3).

Without additional studies of viewers in diverse cultures, there are insufficient grounds to conclude that beauty, realism, and skill are norms prized universally across cultures. Valuable insights would be gained from research on viewers' responses to art in cultures that condemn depiction of people or animals or in cultures whose art traditions have not focused on realism or representation.

Expression of Ideas and Feelings Viewpoint

Clover and Erickson (1997 and 1998) propose that people using the Expression of Ideas and Feelings Viewpoint see an artwork as a communication between an artist and a viewer. The ability to interpret meaning, significance, or function is essential to this viewpoint.

People using ideas associated with Parsons' third stage value "creativity, originality, and depth of feeling" (Parsons, 1987, p. 23). The feelings of both the viewer and the art maker are significant. Parsons explains that "preadolescence, in general, brings a greater ability to understand the point of view of others and a greater interest in their emotions. This means, among other things, great interest in the expressiveness of artwork, and in what artists may be trying to say" (Parsons & Blocker, 1993, p. 159).

Viewers in Housen's fourth stage[2] "seek a more personal experience with the work of art. …. [They] use intuitions, past experiences, informed emotions and affect-laden memory as guides to interpret the symbolic content expressed in the work of art" (2000, p. 283). Clover (1995) found that secondary Navajo and Mexican American students and some novice adults used ideas associated with the Expression of Feelings and Ideas Viewpoint more frequently than they used any other viewpoint.

Erickson (1995) found that after instruction some students as young as second graders moved beyond an interest in the identification of subject matter toward speculation about the function of artworks. She (1996) found evidence that some students could distinguish their own viewpoint from that of the artist. In another study she (1997) found evidence that some middle school students sought the perspectives of others after instruction on issues of art conservation.

An ability to interpret, beyond identification of subject matter, is associated with the Expression of Feelings and Ideas Viewpoint. Freedman and Wood (1999) analyze the impact that visual culture may be having on young people's understanding of art. They propose that high school students may apply their understanding of advertisements to museum painting. "...students may try to apply what they have learned about decoding advertisements to the painting in an effort to understand it, rather than interpreting the painting in an extended manner, as might be appropriate" (Freedman & Wood, 1999, p. 130).

Koroscik (1997) identifies problems that novices often encounter as they attempt to interpret artworks, such as naïve concepts, undifferentiated concepts, garbled knowledge, compartmentalized concepts, disoriented search patterns, and guessing, among other problems. Short (1996-1997) reports that instruction in art criticism can improve high school students' interpretation abilities. Without instruction viewers' abilities to interpret feelings and ideas in art can remain naive.

Artworld Viewpoint

According to Clover and Erickson (1997 and 1998) people using the Artworld Viewpoint have been initiated into the ideas, values, and standards of their culture's artworld and apply them in their responses to the art of their own culture. These ideas, values, and standards are in addition to general cultural differences in perception and understanding held by all people in that culture.

In 1964 Danto introduced the term "artworld" in philosophical circles. He argued that "to see something as art requires …. a knowledge of what other works the given work fits with, a knowledge of what other works makes a given work possible" (Danto, 1997, p. 165). Becker (1982) described a culture's artworld when he wrote that "all artistic work, like all human activity, involves the joint activity of a number ... of people. …. The work always shows signs of that cooperation" (1982, p. 1).

Art specialists are people who have been judged to have met the standards to be achieved by experts within their own artworld. Art historians, critics, art teachers, exhibiting artists, and art museum curators are some of the art specialists in the mainstream artworld in the United States. Specialists in each artworld hold certain art

ideas and practices in common. For example specialists in the Modern artworld value originality, individual genius, respect for materials, and the idea of the avant garde.

Parsons (1987) calls his fourth stage Form and Style. The judgments of people using stage four ideas depend on "culturally learned ideals" (p. 143). In 1987, Parsons described those ideals as deriving from one international artworld, which "draws on many sources and traditions, but in an important sense it is one world, roughly as large as all the societies touched by the Western tradition" (p. 142). By 1993 Parsons and Blocker describe a postmodern, multicultural situation with "artistic traditions of different cultural origins" (p. 36). They write that "cultures and art traditions are always changing and influencing each other, always hybrid in one way or another" (p. 27).

There are many traditional, evolving, and hybrid artworlds, such as Asian, African, Oceanic, indigenous American artworlds; colonial and post-colonial artworlds, the world of global media, and more narrowly focused artworlds such as artworlds centered on contemporary quilt making, comic book illustration, tattooing, car art, and so forth. One would be hard pressed to identify one set of ideas and norms appropriate for all artworlds.

In different artworlds, art specialists may hold quite different beliefs about art. Jim, A., et al. (1997) records the responses of Navajo artists and medicine men to questions about the nature of art and beauty as well as the function of art in Navajo culture. Lackey (1993) describes the traditional pottery-making artworld in Acatlán, Puebla, Mexico and the role teachers and traders have played in its evolution. Mead (1993) outlines four distinct stages required in becoming *mwane manina*, or "artistic man" among carvers in the Soloman Islands.

According to Anderson (1990), in the Yoruba culture of West Africa "some families specialize in particular crafts [such as mask making; weaving; and bracelet, stool, or tray carving], in which case a child's years of artistic training are an essential part of growing up. The child whose interests and talents do not coincide with the family profession may be apprenticed to a master in another medium (Anderson, 1990, p. 122). Anderson (1990) describes the distinctive vocabulary and standards that Yoruba art specialists use to judge beauty artworks.

According to McNaughton (1993), blacksmiths in the Western Sudan make artworks, as well as other objects, and perform other roles within the Mande society. "The profession floats on a sea of secret expertise that outsiders have no right to learn about. .... [Beginning apprentices learn] the Mande principles of secrecy but not the secrets [until they are further along in their apprenticeship]" (McNaughton, 1993, p. 7). As apprentices work their way through their instruction, they receive beads, amulets, and tools to designate their status. "[A small white bead] was a special blacksmith's device, used to announce membership in the profession and to protect the wearer...." (McNaughton, 1993, p. 6). Seeing an apprentice wearing the bead brings about a change in the way other members of Mande society perceive the apprentice.

Davis and Gardner (2000) report that "with exposure to the domain, individuals become progressively more attentive to the aesthetic properties of individual works of art. They become progressively more aware of the 'others' who create works of art working in a domain that has tradition, context, and values" (2000, p. 258).

Erickson (2002) compared middle school students' understanding of their own artworlds before and after instruction about people, places, activities, and ideas of several artworlds. She reports statistically significant increases in students' understanding of their own artworlds. She measured beginning level artworld understanding. Parsons identifies more advanced artworld understanding in his fourth stage. According to Parsons (1987), people using ideas associated with his fourth stage understand that "the significance of a painting is a social rather than an individual achievement" (p. 25). They understand artworks as existing in relationship to a tradition. They value art criticism as a guide to perception.

Wang and Ishizaki (2002) developed an Art Appreciation Profile based on Parsons' five stages. Wang and Ishizaki found that in Japan, where "capable teachers give art classes with production and criticism mainly so students can learn the elements of art" (p. 388), students understood the elements of art. However Japanese students did not exhibit an awareness of what Parsons called "a community of viewers."

Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson's (1990) study of museum professionals found four types of response: "a perceptual response, which concentrated on elements such as balance, form, and harmony; an emotional response, which emphasized reactions to the emotional content of the work and personal associations; an intellectual response, which focused on theoretical and art historical questions; and finally, what we characterized as the communicative response, wherein there was a desire to relate to the artist, or to his or her time, or to his or her culture, through the mediation of the work of art" (Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990, p. 28).

Housen (2000) describes persons at her fifth stage as having viewed many artworks over a long period of time. They "are shaped by a self-aware willingness to encounter the work of art playfully as one would a friend. Viewers try to interpret the work of art by re-creating the problems, choices, and solutions the artist once faced" (Housen, 2000, p. 283). They are able to "integrate analytic and emotional responses" (Housen, 2000, p. 283).

Parsons describes a fifth, yet more sophisticated stage of art understanding, which some artworld specialists achieve. People using ideas associated with this stage have

"an alert awareness of the character of their own experience, a questioning of the influences upon it, and a wondering whether one really sees what one thinks one sees" (Parsons, 1987, p. 25). They understand that they come from a tradition, but that it is their responsibility to judge the values of that tradition and then affirm or amend those values based on their own values.

As people become familiar with any art tradition, they become more able to integrate ideas and norms from that artworld into their response to art. Sophisticated artworld viewers grow more self aware and reflective about that tradition.

Plural Artworlds Viewpoint

Clover and Erickson (1997 and 1998) propose another level of achievement in art understanding that they call the Plural Artworlds Viewpoint[3]. People using this viewpoint have knowledge and ability to apply ideas and norms used by art specialists in various cultures. Also these viewers consciously make choices among alternative viewpoints, selecting the most appropriate for the artwork they are seeking to understand.

According to Clover (1995) when viewing a traditional Navajo rug, older Navajo respondents used ideas and norms appropriate to the Navajo artworld. Those Navajo and Mexican American viewers who had extensive mainstream U.S. art education and who also maintained strong ties to their traditional culture were able to use traditional Navajo or Mexican American ideas and norms as well as ideas and norms from the Modernist artworld.

Clover and Erickson's Plural Artworld Viewpoint goes beyond cultural understanding. People using this viewpoint not only appreciate differences in cultural beliefs but also are familiar with the standards and norms that art specialists in another culture's artworld use to interpret and judge art made in that artworld. Additional research is necessary to refine and elaborate this viewpoint.

[1] Clover and Erickson originally labeled this viewpoint "Immediate Attraction."

[2] Housen identifies a sort of fact-gathering stage between her second and this fourth stage, in which "Viewers use facts, dates, styles, biographies, and histories to place the work of art within its niche, to give the work a fitting label" (Housen, 2000, p. 283).

[3] Clover and Erickson originally labeled this viewpoint "Alternative Artworlds."

References

Anderson, R. (1990). *Calliope's sisters: A comparative study of philosophies of art*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Clover, F. (1995). *Contributions of gender and culture to aesthetic response*, doctoral dissertation, Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona.

Clover, F. & Erickson, M. (1997). Art advocacy: What every educator should (but may not) understand about art. *School Arts, 96*(6), 42-43.

Jim, A., Smith, K., Whitethorne, B., Nez, R., Begay, S., Singer, E., Isaacs, F., Walters Sr, R., Tso, F., & Peaches. D. (1997, February). *Art.* Talking Circle conducted at Greyhills Academy High School, Tuba City, AZ.

Clover, F. & Erickson, M. (1997). Viewpoints: Exploring how we understand art. on *ArtsEdNet* posted by the J. Paul Getty Trust [Available Online] http://www.getty.edu/artsednet/resources/Viewpoints/index.htm.

Danto. A. C. (1997). *After the end of art: Contemporary art and the pale of history.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Danto, A. C. (1964). The art world. *Journal of Philosophy, 61* (19), 571-131.

Davis, J. & Gardner, H. (2000). Symbolic literacies: The developmental portrait research has produced. In R. S. Smith (Ed), *Readings in discipline-based art education: A literature of educational reform* (pp. 257-263), Reston, VA: National Art Education Association.

Erickson, M. (1995). Second grade students' developing art historical understanding, *Visual Arts Research, 21* (41), 15-24.

Erickson, M. (1996). Sixth grade students' development of art historical understanding. In C. Henry (Ed.), *Middle school years: Issues of curriculum and instruction* (pp. 75-67) Reston, VA: National Art Education Association.

Erickson, M. (1997). Transfer within and beyond DBAE: A cognitive exploration of research issues. *Visual Arts Research, (23)* 2, 43-51.

Erickson, M, & Young, B. (2002). *Multicultural artworlds: Enduring, evolving and overlapping traditions*. Reston, VA: National Art Education Association.

Freedman, K. & Wood, J. (1999). Reconsidering critical response: Student judgments of purpose, interpretation, and relationships in visual culture. *Studies in Art Education, 40* (2), 128-142.

Housen, A. (2000). Museums in an age of pluralism. In R. S. Smith (Ed), *Readings in discipline-based art education: A literature of educational reform* (pp. 281- 7), Reston, VA: National Art Education Association. 287-294.

Korosik, J. S. (1997). What potential do young people have to understand works of art? In A. M. Kindler (Ed.), *Child development in art* (pp. 143-163), Reston, VA: National Art Education Association.

McNaughton, P. R. (1993). In the field: Mande blacksmiths. In R. L. Anderson & K. L. Field (Eds.), *Art in small-scale societies: Conteporary readings* (pp 3-8), Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Lacky, L. M. (1993). Learning to be a potter in Acatlán. In R. L. Anderson & K. L. Field (Eds.), *Art in small-scale societies: Contemporary readings* (pp. 170-178). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Parsons, M. J. & Blocker, H. G. (1993). *Aesthetics and Education*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Parsons, M. J. (1987). *How we understand art: A cognitive account of the development of aesthetic understanding*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Short, G. (1998). The high school studio curriculum and art understanding: An examination. *Studies in Art Education, 40*(1) 46-65.

Wang, W. & Ishizaki, K. (2002). Aesthetic development in cross-cultural contexts: A study of art appreciation in Japan, Taiwan, and the United States. *Studies in Art Education, 43* (40), 373-392.

Highlights & Implications

Art teachers may want to:

- Question assumptions they might have about art being a universal language that is understood in the same or similar ways by people growing up in different cultures.
- Consider the possibility that Modernist ideas, such as the elements and principles of design, or the value of originality, are not necessarily important concepts and values in all cultures and eras and that other concepts and values may be more important in other artworlds.
- Reflect on the viewpoints they personally tend to use.
- Reflect on the extent to which their art instruction is and should be dictated by their own viewpoints on art.
- Consider what viewpoint(s) their students tend to use.
- Use their knowledge of their students' viewpoint(s) to help them predict the kinds of artworks about which their students are likely to be particularly curious.
- Consider how their students' viewpoint(s) might affect their motivation to learn particular art-making skills or their willingness to take on particular art-making challenges.
- Plan instruction focused on helping students learn how to interpret meaning, significance, or function of artworks made in their own and other's cultures.
- Plan instruction about important people, places, activities, and ideas in more than one artworld.
- Plan instruction to increase the number of viewpoints in their students'response repertoires.