

Condition Critical: A Misdiagnosis in the Treatment of Critical Practice in the Proposed Curriculum for Visual Arts

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Abstract

This paper evaluates the provision for critical practice in the Visual Arts, Kindergarten to Year 8, in The Arts: Initial Advice Paper (ACARA, 2010). Focusing on the strand of Responding, the scope and theoretical assumptions underpinning this proposal will be aligned with the theory of critical meaning, typically represented in Year 7 students' critical reasoning about artworks. How and on what terms a 12-year-old student explains and justifies a critical judgement is analysed to illustrate the basis on which they construct a point of view about art. This reveals a significant mismatch between students' own theories of critical meaning and those underlying the form of art criticism in the proposed curriculum structure. The notion of 'responding' as an appropriate representation of what it means to interpret artworks is found to be questionable. Rather than supporting students' development, this provision ignores students' own theoretical structures. Learning is therefore compromised. This assessment of just one aspect of what should be a forward-looking, 21st century curriculum reveals a lowest-common-denominator approach to Visual Arts education has been adopted.

At the national forum on The Arts: Initial Advice Paper (ACARA, 2010) on May 3, 2010, it was declared that the language used in the proposals for an Australian Curriculum had been carefully considered. It was made clear the terms traditionally used to describe learning in the different art forms had been discounted in favour of three generic 'strands'. As the discrete art forms and particular practices within

them are subsumed by this generic description of the Arts, it is evident that each will lose their distinct and unique identity. This paper contends the loss of discipline-specific language means the ACARA proposals do not represent Visual Arts educators' beliefs about what is valued in the learning area, nor do they respect students' theoretical orientation to Visual Arts as a knowledge domain. To illustrate this mismatch between the discipline and the ACARA proposals, the strand *Responding* will be examined in terms of its adequacy in representing critical practice in the Visual Arts.

According to the ACARA paper, responding is a strand attending to 'analysing, appraising, appreciating, contextualising, critiquing, evaluating, interpreting', among other forms of engagement more suitable for application in other art forms (p.8). A definition of responding reveals that students 'apprehend' and 'comprehend' artworks. They 'apprehend the artwork by experiencing it through the three dimensions of perception and relating them to three contexts of meaning' (p.8). Content is secured through the adoption of a structural aesthetics, including elements, principles, techniques and methods (Brown, 1993). Critical interpretation is thus reduced to visual literacy wherein the students perceive and receive meaning via experience of symbol systems within artworks. This use of structural aesthetics to secure trustworthy knowledge in visual arts has been disputed because it reduces the relationship between viewer and artwork to one of generic systematic analysis, obfuscating the intentional significance of art (Beardsley, 1958; Brown, 1993, 1989; Wolf & Geahigan, 1997; Wollheim, 1987).

Given the proposal purports to cater for students from Kindergarten to Year 8, it follows that the strands and content of the curriculum should support development of critical and practical reasoning. The following discussion will test how cogently responding, with its attendant structure of apprehending and comprehending, as an orientation to critical interpretation of artworks, supports Year 7 students' developing theories of critical meaning in Visual Arts.

In recent research on children's theories of critical meaning in art, children of different ages were asked to assemble an exhibition of portraits and explain their choices (Maras, 2008). This research explored the centrality of practical reasoning

to the development of theories of meaning within critical practice (Brown, 2005; Maras, in press). The realist premise framing this research is that we do not merely respond to artworks. Rather, artworks are artefacts that are 'ontologically nested within the causal circumstances of their formation' (Brown, 1993, p.48; Freeman, 1995, 2001). Seeing them, we are caused to have thoughts arbitrated by our beliefs and theories about art. When we give reasons about what we think artworks mean, we are ascribing facts to them (Searle, 1983, 1995, 1999; Brown, 1989). Facts, or concepts, are recursively constructed through critical reasoning (Brown, 2005; Feldman, 1987). Critics recognise and identify properties of artworks as representations of the intentional motives, beliefs and desires the artist adopts when producing artworks in a particular way, on purpose, to cause an audience to engage with its content (Wollheim, 2001, 1987).

Using examples from a 12-year-old student's critical reasoning performance, I will compare key assumptions within the structural conception of meaning proposed and the realist bases on which a student constructs a judgement about the meaning and value of art. The focus is on Dimitri's curatorial performance. I have chosen this particular example of critical reasoning because it is typical of the common-sense critical dispositions of 12 year olds. The question I am seeking to answer is: What kind of 'response' is anticipated in the advice and how does this measure up to what students really do when taking on a critical disposition?

To 'respond' means to give a reply, react, or to show some effect in return from a force. In the context of the study, it could be argued that Dimitri was asked to demonstrate 'interpretive skills' through engaging 'in participatory relationships between themselves and artworks' (p.19) to make a response. But what Dimitri did was to work in a way that moved beyond an experiential response to the artworks. The exhibition comprised eight portraits he deemed suited to different tastes of potential buyers of art for particular locations, including a preschool, home, office and religious site. Rather than work from his emotions or senses, he construes meanings derived from an explanatory system focussed on a variety of social agreements and intentional interactions he knows occur between agents in the artworld. Dimitri's exhibition of portraits is entitled *Artexpress* because:

"It's like a place where they...I reckon I call it express as in there's heaps and heaps of varieties to choose from, like the way they are designed, the cost they might be cheap, some might be expensive...the expressions of how they're actually posing..."

Dimitri's conception of artworks as, "*something different, not all the same thing and like people can see it and go 'oh, that's something different',*" involves a complex explanation of how artworks causally relate to artists, audiences and representational interests. He is able to speculate about how different audiences appreciate different kinds of pictures for different reasons. Speaking about Frans Hals' *Boy with skull*, he declares he likes it, because of:

"The way they've made it...I reckon people would like it cause he is...one of those people back in the old days, not pirates...but like, you always see them in the tavern and all that and that's popular for old people."

In all cases he ratifies his choice of artwork with a specified audience who will appreciate or like the work and would consider buying it because of how the artist has represented the pictorial content. As he continues assembling the exhibition, he gradually clarifies his reasons for selecting artworks. He masters to some extent the iterative nature of his ideas and gradually consolidates his views about what is art. The facts he ascribes artworks show he is well aware of the cultural significance of art as a commodity with monetary value and its function as display, decoration or as an artefact reflecting or commemorating cultural ideologies, religious beliefs and heritage.

Does Dimitri make 'aesthetic sense of images' (ACARA, 2010, p.19)? No. Like most students his age, Dimitri is not an innate structuralist (Maras, in press, Brown, 1993). Dimitri does not use the 'elements of art' as the basis of his judgements of meaning and value. He does discuss colours, shapes and the like. He explains that art is:

"Meant to be in some pictures, something different,t more creativity, like they sponge it and they make outlines and shadows...to make it more interesting and to attract people."

Here we see him construct a reasonable relationship between properties he sees in the pictures with the intentions of artists in relation to audiences. Dimitri simply

recognises properties such as lines, smudges, shapes and colours in artworks. He identifies them as a properties associated with artistic actions involving representational intent of artists in relation to audiences.

Apprehend means to catch, or to take into custody, arrest, or perceive. The word comes from the Latin *apprehendere*, to seize. So does Dimitri apprehend artworks? It could be argued that by making a curatorial selection of eight portrait paintings from a larger group of pictures, he may have arrested, or taken into custody some of the portraits. But this is a ludicrous notion of what it is that an art critic does when making an interpretive judgement or curatorial policy. The problem is that the basis on which these particular works were chosen reflects his beliefs about what artworks are and how they function as artefacts within a nexus of relationships describing the interactions within an art world. Dimitri constructs his selection strategically according to how the works function as representations made by artists in a particular way. He also acknowledges that artists make artworks in relation to their understanding of different audiences' 'tastes' and 'interests'. He knows artists make artworks to 'attract' audiences of different ages and interests.

Comprehend, in colloquial parlance, means to 'get the picture' or to understand. It comes from the Latin *comprehendere*, meaning to grasp, to seize. It would seem that the terms apprehend and comprehend mean the same thing – another slippage in the selection of language in the proposals. Dimitri does not comprehend artworks, but rather infers their meaning, based on what he is caused to think about when he sees them. The inferences he makes, or the meanings he grants the works, are embedded in a relational network of reasons that are gradually, over time, consolidated in a point of view. The point of view or judgement stands as a representation of his theory of artworks as artefacts.

It would appear that Dimitri's critical stance does not match the view of art represented in the paper. Dimitri may struggle if studying this version of Visual Arts because his intuitive, critical disposition, distributed over an intentional set of art world relations, is not aligned with the definition of 'art as experience' articulated in

structural terms. Rather than adhere to structural ascriptions of meaning and value, garnered via visual experience, he works from an entirely different disposition or point of view. His theory of art is sustained by an ontology of art, wherein artworks are artefacts. They are real things. As intentionally made objects, he explains how their value lies in the exchanges between social agents in the art world.

If we match what this 12 year old has achieved in conceiving a curatorial policy for an art exhibition with what is offered in the proposed curriculum structure, we can see substantial differences in the assumptions underpinning the two conceptions of art as a domain. The 12 year olds' realist position is quite sophisticated when positioned with the continuum of understanding we witness in children's conceptual development in art (Maras, in press). It is replete with reflexive dexterity, relational complexity across concepts of a domain and intentional grounding, affording a clear view of how artworks as artefacts function as representations. The paper fails to factor in any references to intentionality or representation as the basis for understanding what is art, the very concepts this student relies on to form a judgement.

Conclusion

This evaluation has revealed how the scope of a theory of art represented in the critical reasoning of a 12 year old exceeds the complexity and scope of the current proposals for the Visual Arts in the Australian Curriculum. Far more complex ontological underpinnings are evident in the critical theory typically represented by students in Year 7. As realists, their well-defined common-sense theories of art present art educators with substantial theoretical bases to further develop art knowledge (Freeman & Parsons, 2001; Freeman & Sanger, 1995; Maras, 2009). The proposals for art criticism fail to acknowledge students' own qualifications as knowers. The ACARA proposals obfuscate the cognitive significance of this learning area by disregarding the centrality of theory building to art learning. The reflexive, metacognitive and recursive nature of critical reasoning is ignored. The opportunity for teachers to build on their students' existing intuitive theoretical dispositions about agencies in the art world to support development of explicit and increasingly more synthesised autonomous critical dispositions will be denied if the

ACARA proposals are accepted. They are disrespectful of the learners for whom this curriculum purports to support. Rather than working with the theoretical structures in students' minds, teachers may be over-determining them with a dose of structuralism made palatable through the age-old syrup of experiential rhetoric - a lowest common denominator explanation of the Visual Arts.

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