

Patterns of Art Criticism of Senior High School Students in an Examination Context

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Summary

Education in Hong Kong has undergone many changes in response to waves of curriculum reform since the late 1990s. Major changes have taken place in the method of assessment and the format of the new senior high public examinations. In Visual Arts, the new examination paper places heavy emphasis on art appreciation and criticism. This study used examination scripts and interviews with twelve students as the primary sources of data. The Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority conducted a pilot examination in Visual Arts in June and July 2007. Students were asked to compare two artwork reproductions within 45 minutes. A total of 95 Form Six students (aged around 18) from 17 different schools participated in the pilot examination. Six students with scores of more than 75% (high scorers) and six students with scores of less than 45% (low scorers) were selected as the subjects of the study. Each student was also interviewed and invited to reflect on how they had constructed their written presentations in the pilot examination. The answering strategies of high scorers and low scorers were compared and the following were found:

Formal analysis versus contextual analysis

High scorers showed competence both in analysing artworks in terms of visual elements and design principles and in relating these to the context of the work. By comparison, low scorers seldom analysed or interpreted the artworks in context, especially

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contexts related to socio-cultural or art historical themes.

Isolating versus associating/connecting strategies

High scorers connected what they saw in the work with the environment in which they lived, their personal experiences, knowledge and emotions. Low scorers, by contrast, only provided a plain description of the work. A major difference between the high and low scorers is that the former were able to connect their contextual knowledge to either forms or representations in the artwork. They did not create a kind of free-floating association but made “logical” interpretations based on what they discerned from the works.

Describing versus comparing strategies

Comparisons between the two artworks from different perspectives can be found in the scripts of the high scorers. Some high scorers presented a systematic comparison of the medium, expressions, techniques, styles and contexts of the two artworks selected. They were able to highlight the similarities as well as the differences between them. Low scorers, on the other hand, tended to describe the work in a simple manner and did not compare the two works. They apparently could not see why the two works were placed together and they treated them as unrelated in any way.

Generalizing versus specifying strategies

High scorers were able to give a careful description of an artwork. They did not describe the entire work in a comprehensive manner but selected what was important, often giving very specific details. In contrast, the low scorers tended to give general descriptions of a work. Sometimes they just produced a list of the things that appeared in the painting. In other instances, low scorers drew over-simplified conclusions. Some low scorers described their feelings about the work in a general sense but failed to connect them to the artwork itself.

Reporting versus judging strategies

When engaging in art criticism, students are expected to provide a judgment of the artwork, rather than simply stating a preference or giving an inventory of what is seen. A unique feature of the answers of the high scorers was their making of value judgments of the works and providing justifications for these. Their evaluations were rarely of the work as a whole and were usually interwoven with their discussion of specific details of the work.

Although not all evaluations were supported with explanations, the high scorers attempted to present their personal viewpoints using informed argument. By comparison, the low scorers rarely made judgmental remarks.

The results of this study have revealed that the major problem of the low scorers is that they did not interpret but merely provided descriptions. They did not connect the artwork to either their personal knowledge and experiences or historical and artistic contexts, or if they did, these connections were too vague. To develop students' art criticism ability and enhance their performance in this area, schoolteachers and teacher educators should seek improvements in the following aspects: the students' grasp of visual arts knowledge, understanding of art criticism and interpretation, the teacher's conceptions of art and teaching methods and opportunities for the students to practise art criticism and inquiry. Helping students to make informed judgments about artworks is important, for it not only helps them to achieve a good grade in examinations but also enhances their enjoyment in looking at artworks and making sense of them.

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