

A Review of Empirical Studies on Art Criticism Education from 2005 to 2015

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Summary

This article offers a critical review of empirical studies on art criticism education published in eight art/aesthetics education academic journals from 2005 to 2015. Thirty-nine studies were selected, with the research methodology, scale, participants and topics/issues being analyzed in each case. In addition to providing a comprehensive picture of the latest developments and current practices in the field of art criticism teaching and learning, the review identifies those areas that require further research and exploration.

Beginning with a presentation of the general idea of art criticism as an activity for understanding an artwork that not only involves the exploration of visual elements and their relationship to one another but also searches for those meanings conveyed by the artwork, the authors then summarize the development and discourses of art criticism education within the last few decades. These include the development of Discipline-based Art Education in the US and the introduction of Critical and Contextual Studies in the UK. The specific public art criticism examination at the senior secondary level in Hong Kong is also described.

The purpose of the review was to answer the following questions:

1. What were the methodology, scale, participants, area of study, and settings of the identified empirical studies?
2. What were the major findings of these empirical studies? How could these findings be categorized for the purposes of referencing art criticism teaching and learning?

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3. What can be learned from these empirical studies in the context of the overall development of art criticism teaching and learning?

The selection of journals was based on four criteria. First, the journal had to be related to art/aesthetics education. Second, it had to be in Chinese or English. Third, it had to have been in continuous publication for at least ten years. Fourth, the journal should have a relatively high ranking or impact factor, or been included in some reputable academic databases. Based on the above, eight academic journals were selected. The researchers then began the paper screening process by reading the titles and abstracts of each peer-reviewed paper to decide whether it should be included. An in-depth reading might be involved if the previous process was not adequate to determine its relevance. Limitations of the review were also identified.

The review results on research methods are presented in terms of five aspects: methodology, scale, participants, area of study, and setting of the studies. Most of the studies involved small-scale qualitative research on students in school settings. The review also reveals that many of the studies focused on exploring the factors that affect the teaching and learning of art criticism and investigated the characteristics of students' critical responses. A table summarizing the results was created.

The review results on research findings are discussed in terms of two major areas: (1) the impact or effectiveness of art criticism-teaching strategies reported in the identified studies, and; (2) the characteristics of children and adolescents' responses to artworks. In the former case, this involved: (1) repeated encounters with the same artwork; (2) the relationship between viewing duration and better art appreciation; (3) the cultivation of reflection through group work; (4) non-discursive responses to artworks; (5) mixed response strategies, and; (6) linguistic ability and art criticism. In that of the latter, the issues were: (1) the appeal of familiarity in critical responses; (2) visual perspective versus social or introspective perspective; (3) the influence of the socio-cultural environment on art criticism, and; (4) the preference for realistic and 3D-constructed artworks. These findings have practical implications for implementing specific teaching and learning methods, as well as understanding characteristics of students' responses.

As the review reveals, there were only 39 papers (1.9 per cent) on empirical studies among all the papers published in the eight art education journals between 2005 and 2015. This is an extremely low percentage. More field-based investigations are clearly needed in this area. The results based on the methodology and scale of the reviewed studies also indicate a need for more quantitative and medium- to large-scale studies; while qualitative research may be a better way to capture the rich meanings of people's critical responses, quantitative methods and analyses are

likely to provide results with a higher degree of conclusiveness and generalizability. Moreover, most of the studies concentrated on the formal education system, according to the statistics. They were conducted in school settings, with school students representing the majority of research participants. Greater attention should perhaps be paid to the education of the general public in art criticism and the development of their critical responses.

The appeal of the familiar, as also demonstrated by the review, was a common phenomenon in students' critical responses. From a postmodernist position, responses generated from a viewer's personal experience are just as valid as those developed from art-historical, cognitive or socio-cultural perspectives. However, problems arise when personal experience becomes the only perspective that students can subscribe to, especially when combined with a lack of awareness of other angles from which an artwork can be viewed. From the education standpoint, teachers should be encouraged to take the personal experience response as a starting point when engaging students in classroom art interpretation activities.

A number of the empirical studies were still interested in the investigation into the visual preferences of students, or the ways in which students respond to visual elements. This is a reflection of the modernist aesthetic and its emphasis on the visual paradigm. Art interpretation begins as a visual experience, but certainly does not end with it. Overall, then, there is a need for future research to move from the visual to the visual-cultural paradigm. It seems that some student participants in the reviewed empirical studies were not used to giving critical responses within a visual-cultural paradigm, suggesting the importance of cultivating their critical responses to artworks from a combination of visual, cultural, historical, psychological and social perspectives.