

A Curriculum Critique of ArtsEdNet's 'Many Ways of Seeing'

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Many Ways of Seeing is a unit written by the Getty's education department, ArtsEdNet. The curriculum originally appeared in *Discipline Based Art Education: A Curriculum Sampler* produced by the J. Paul Getty Trust. Presently, the curriculum is available online. The six-week curriculum is designed for middle or junior high school students. Written to fit within this age group's general or foundation art course, the curriculum offers an introductory investigation into the themes of art, specifically the concept of originality, symbolism and visual literacy, and the study of folk and fine art. The goal of the curriculum is to teach students to "...substantiate with good reason their personal judgments about art of the past and present, including their own art." The curriculum plan is divided into six lessons each of which include an introductory paragraph, a list of objectives, materials, vocabulary words, step by step instructions on executing the lesson, evaluation strategies, extension activities, background information, and a bibliography.

While the curriculum explores valuable art issues (often neglected in traditional curricular) through a mixture of engaging activities, the individual lessons are loosely connected to the central goal and subsequent lessons and thus weaken the plan. Upon review, it appears that there are a number of peripheral themes and issues (i.e. what is art? How should museums define art?) that arise throughout the curriculum making it difficult to ensure an enduring understanding of the central goal is achieved.

Elements of the Rational Humanist and Cognitive Pluralist ideologies are evidenced within the curriculum. The influence of the Rational Humanist perspective is seen in the unit's emphasis on defining primary art works and the emphasis on active discussion. In two lessons students focus on detecting forgeries from originals, emphasizing the notion that originals or primary works are truly considered 'art'. Throughout all lessons, content is not learned through the memorization of artist names and dates but rather the concepts are explored through active dialogue and critical analysis. Many of the discussions throughout the unit revolve around debatable questions like 'What is art?' or 'What do we mean when we talk about 'original prints'? Following the *paideia* format, students are given time to reflect on their own thoughts before sharing their ideas with the group. The plan continually encourages teachers to remind students

there are no right or wrong answers. The reliance on discussion as a means for learning not only assumes that students enjoy participating and debating but also that the teacher is skilled in the role of facilitator and in creating a comfortable discussion environment.

The Cognitive Pluralism's argument that "...one of the human being's distinctive features is the capacity to create and manipulate symbols" aligns with the curriculum in that students are taught how to 'read' visual symbols and compose works of art that convey meaning using symbols. Cognitive Pluralism expands the concept of literacy to include "...the encoding or decoding of information in any of the forms that humans use to convey meaning." (Eisner, 1994) The curriculum offers a variety of curricular tasks (written assignments, oral presentations, visual art pieces, identification of visual examples) providing students with the opportunity to expand their aptitudes and experience new forms of success.

Given that the learning for this subject is primarily perceptual learning, the plan structures its design around the comparing and contrasting of visual images. Students are repeatedly presented with two visual images and asked to observe the subtle differences in relation to the concepts of forgery, symbolism or fine versus folk art. This assumption that students best learn the content through perceptual activities is prevalent throughout the unit. To offer another way for students to learn the concepts, the curriculum plan engages students in the construction of art, challenging students to apply the knowledge to their personal creations.

The curriculum plan assumes that students have a general understanding of art techniques (lighting, balance, line, etc.) and their effect on the meaning of visual images. While these formal art principles are essential to interpreting and conveying messages through visual symbols, the lessons do not explain or review the formal art principles. The introduction of the curriculum subtly addresses the issue, "Since the acquired knowledge and processing skills can be applied to subsequent units and lessons, we suggest that this unit be introduced in the initial stages of the course of study, but after students have had a review of the basic skills and concepts..." Perhaps an elaboration on 'the basic skills and concepts' would guide the teacher to explain and/or weave the impact of formal features and thus provide for a richer analysis of art. In terms of the educator, the plan assumes that the teacher has a solid foundation in the art concepts

covered. At the end of each lesson, there are a few paragraphs providing background knowledge on the artists or time period. However, in order for the teacher to facilitate a discussion that reaches the desired goals of understanding, the background knowledge provided is insufficient.

Learning Goals and Activities

For purposes of this critique, I will focus on three lessons within the curriculum plan. Specifically the three lessons attempt to provide students with the skills of gathering, analyzing, and interpreting visual and sensory data. The lessons build upon each other -- lesson 3 addresses symbols in nature, specifically the Banana people, lesson 4 expands the study of symbols to encompass art, and lesson 5 broadens the scope further to study universal symbol systems. While each lesson is clearly and consistently organized and utilizes various pedagogical practices, an explanation of the overarching purpose and final learning outcome of the lesson sequence is lacking.

The first lesson in the sequence begins with the teacher presenting a slide of the Goli mask (used in the previous lesson). The teacher models the process of reading the mask's symbolism for the students. After this initial modeling, the students are presented with a slide of the Chi Wara headdress. To focus the students' interests and assess the personal knowledge they bring to the activity, students are asked to formulate five questions about the piece. This component closely resembles the 'what' in a KWL chart and will serve as a tool for review at the closure of the lesson. Next, the teacher guides the class in a discovery dialogue of the symbols within the headdress. To apply the concepts learned, students create a headdress that reflects their beliefs, feelings, and traditions of today. The activity progresses through an organized sequence of modeling, guided exploration (orally) and active construction. To make the lesson more meaningful, perhaps the historical artifact of examination and creation could relate to the students current history curriculum. Therefore, their understanding of the cultural context would be greater, facilitating their interpretation of visual symbols.

The curriculum plan suggests appropriate evaluation strategies involving a written or oral quiz on the vocabulary words, a student composed essay about the Chi Wara headdress and the Bamana people, and a review of the students' personal

headdress. The main question underlying the evaluation strategies is ‘What is the level of their thinking and creative elaboration regarding the use of symbols?’

Lesson 4 expands the study of symbol systems to art. Within the introductory period, the teacher is prompted to emphasize to students that interpretations may vary based on the information, values, and feelings a person brings to the work of art. This lesson requires students to work in small cooperative learning groups. A clear rationale is provided for this structure, “Because students have a somewhat limited range of experiences, teams will probably be able to extract more symbolism in groups...” This lesson also uses a Symbolism Checklist to scaffold the students in their exploration. After interpreting a painting as a group, the class reads information on the artist and painting and reflects on the accuracy of their interpretations. This activity encourages students to self-assess their work, engaging them even more in the learning process. A different evaluation strategy presented in this unit requires students at the beginning of next class period to select an image from an array of choices that employs symbols and explain the meaning.

Universal Meanings, lesson 5, aims to teach students that art can communicate meaning by transcending time, culture, and traditional symbol systems. Once again, students are presented with an image and asked to interpret it, this time individually. Students are asked to do a free write on their response to a painting and then share their thoughts with the whole group. The lesson concludes with students constructing a piece of art that effectively uses symbols to convey a message. An exhibition will take place and viewers will react by writing and sharing their interpretation of each piece. Assessment will be based on how well a majority of viewers accurately interpreted the intended meaning. This assessment activity is particularly strong in that it engages students to review peer work while at the same time tests their visually literacy skills.

The curriculum plan emphasizes that the ability to detect forgeries and imitations (lesson 1 & 2) is a necessary skill in exploring art. I fear that this focus creates an unintended negative consequence. Will students over-criticize and not appreciate great works simply because they are closely based on another artist’s work? Does the curriculum too narrowly define art? Or perhaps, hopefully (as intended), the inquiry will have a positive consequence and increase general art appreciation and awareness.

