

Writing Experiences Across the Art Department Curriculum

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Why would artists feel the need to write when they have at their fingertips a vocabulary of visual imagery which communicates experience and which has functioned effectively for thousands of years? Why teach future artists to write when their energies should be directed to communicating through visual, non-verbal means? These questions and many others continue to arise whenever artists write or whenever educators of artists ask their students to write.

Artists and art students write about art in order to clarify experiences and to account for responses to things that excite or frustrate them. The written response, as does the visual response, demands that we more carefully examine what is before us or within so that we may translate it to word, image, or symbol. It is that second or third look that moves to a deeper response. The outcome or product provides a forum for us to share that response with an audience.

Writing about art, although well established within the visual arts, remains a controversial issue among artists and educators of artists. One may consider the written response to be a compromise of the artistic experience and that asking art students to write will take time from the most important task, creating visual art. It is evident, however, that there is support for the integration of

writing experiences in visual arts education. This paper outlines the work of several advocates of writing across the art curriculum.

Cynthia Vascak, an artist and art educator who is actively involved in writing experiences with her students in studio art classes and art education methods classes, states that the interactions between visual and written language “facilitate understanding, provide meaning, nurture personal involvement in the learning process, generate ideas, and heighten perceptual awareness.” She suggests that the manipulation of symbols, through written and visual forms, enhances understanding and enriches meaning. “The more languages we have access to, the greater our capacity to intensely experience, translate experience, to know and to communicate.” Each form of expression enriches the other and each has qualities that are essential to success in artistic exploration in any medium.

A survey of colleagues in the Art Department identified several disciplines of visual arts education where writing is an essential component. The disciplines of the art studio, art history and art education are all components of a comprehensive art curriculum, and the consistency of written experiences links together diverse disciplines with common methodologies. When artists write about artistic matters and processes, perhaps they hope to simplify the difficult task of understanding visual responses. Through writing, as artists, we learn; the written word becomes a medium of communication which can support and complement our visual response. The written word may also compromise the visual response and reduce the strength of the visual communication. The artist and the writer, as well as the musician, the mathematician, and the actor, learn to communicate through a complex system of symbols and through this system, generate fluency of ideas, processes, reflections.

Writing in my drawing classes, at introductory and advanced levels, is an important component of learning to draw and understanding the visual responses artists have had throughout history. As I state in my syllabus, “Learning to draw well involves more

than just drawing. It also means observing, reacting, reading, critiquing, writing and, in many ways, learning to see all over again. Drawing, real drawing, will be a way for you to translate your experiences into a visual form using a variety of languages.” Research and writing is an important aspect of drawing in my classes, and writing helps students learn and understand this new language.

Each week, students are asked to find a reproduction of a drawing, in an art book or art journal, which they respond to in some way and which is related to an area being explored in class. Students are asked to spend most of their time looking at the drawings to best understand the artist’s methods of drawing and use of materials, style and technique. First, they emulate the drawing in their sketchbook to capture the style, technique, and feel of the artist’s work. Second, they copy a quote, an idea, or a thought from the book or journal that gives insight into the artist’s mind and work. And third, they write a few lines in their own words explaining what they find relevant and significant about this drawing. As with any research, they are asked to cite the source of the drawing. Although somewhat resistant at first, students eventually become enthusiastic about this assignment and begin to see the power of research and how writing reflective response to master works can lead to the growth and progress of their work as well as their general understanding of art.

The following passages are from a student’s drawing sketchbook:

It’s amazing how much more you get of a work when you recreate it. I’ve recognized things that I wouldn’t have noticed otherwise. You really have to get to know the work. This work in particular, although being quite sketchy, has quite a bit of detail when you really take time to look. I noticed the lines are made darker and get light to make things look farther away, like we were doing in class.

I immediately liked Beardsley's work. First of all, it was different than most of the works I had been looking at. The fact that he created such works with mostly line or dots or such, I find very interesting. What I find most interesting about this piece is how the whole picture conforms *to* the inside of the circle, from the felt foot to the arch of his back.

Scroll-curl of hair, profile at left into an ear, sound holes-eyes and mouth, strings-crooked nose. I didn't even see the face until I read the text, but now that's all I see smiling up at me.

Looking through a book of Van Gogh's work, I realize that he used perspective quite a bit, be it in still life or outdoor scenes, but he always seemed to keep it loose. The Bedroom is just full of perspective from the one-point perspective of the floor to the two-point perspective of the furniture. The point of eye level I have marked is a bit more apparent in the actual work (Heather Sheedy).

Cynthia Vascak describes four approaches to writing that she integrates into her studio and art education courses. These are writing experiences which are multi-modal, integrating writing with other cognitive/artistic processes in a seamless fabric of artistic response. Vascak asks her students to, first, write about creation as a visual language and the primary means of communication; second, write reflective sketchbook journals that combine words and images; third, write reflective free writing in preparation for thematic or critical discussion; and fourth, write responses to works of art. For Vascak, writing in her classroom moves beyond the traditional experience to become "multi-modal symbol manipulation as a vehicle for the enhancement of understanding and meaning regarding learning."

The following are from two of Vascak's students' drawing sketchbooks:

I learned a lot about modulating lines in this piece. I used them a great deal as in the shell, in the grain of the wood of the chair, and in the actual leaves of the sunflowers. I feel that I also achieved a depth in this piece. You can see this depth with the lower left corner sunflower overlaps the shell and how the stem of the same flower wraps around the chair (Kelly Temple).

I am in the middle of a drawing assignment, frustrated and doubting my talent. I can't seem to make the figure come to life. I stopped and pulled out my pastels and ink. I just made marks and lines until my frustration was gone. I was happy with this little creation. I would have considered it just a doodle but it has more meaning, It is a representation of how I dealt with my frustration (Karen Cantara).

Susan Tucker, ceramic artist and teacher, has integrated writing into the critique process for three-dimensional art works which combines close directed observation through drawing with descriptive writing. In preparation for a group oral critique, students are asked both to draw several views and specific sections of their completed three-dimensional forms showing specific aspects of the design related to the assignment and to describe in writing what they are seeking and defining step-by-step. Both the visual and written description are required of each student.

This exercise enables students to abstract and comprehend the component parts of design such as line, shape, relation of positive shape to negative space, relation of similar elements, proportion, and other relationships within the overall structure and composition. Tucker states, "I believe this experience improves their

working vocabularies and their ability to articulate clearly about the composition of their artwork, especially when combined with the subsequent oral critique—the opportunity to speak about the design of their work. The intense involvement in looking and describing seems to crystallize understanding for students in a memorable way. They are able to apply their understanding to the next projects with noted improvement.”

The following are responses from Tucker’s critique questionnaires:

Because the form started with square geometric shapes, I stayed with geometric shapes, cutting off corners and different segments from the cube, reapplying them to extend walls and create other negative geometric shapes that extend beyond the actual cube. The similarities are mostly square chunks taken from the cube, implying square negative shapes and leaving square visual windows into the original cube (Mike Mansfield).

The front side I feel is the strongest because I’ve created nice closure using a half-triangle, half rectangle shape as well as a negative triangle enclosed by two positive triangles (Lauren Marinelli).

Richard Hunnewell, art historian, integrates writing experiences throughout his classes at all levels and states, “Writing is essential to processing art history!” His students universally respond positively about the value of writing and collaborative discussion in groups, and then class discussion as a way of developing critical viewing, thinking and writing skills.

Hunnewell describes a variety of writing methods he uses in his art history classes which include free-writes to focus on issues and clarify background; short essays in introductory level courses to see how students are developing critical skills in reading, viewing, writing and assimilating material; short essays in upper

level courses as a basis for critical discussion on an artist, work, issue, research or writing process; and essay components in final exams. Hunnewell indicates that art history students respond well to writing experiences where they role play an artist, contemporary viewer, or art critic; plan an exhibition of critical works; or write a preface to a particular work or series of works.

The following writing samples are taken from short essays of two students in upper level art history classes:

The Japanese love of nature and of organic things in life is more than just aesthetic. When walking through a forest, you are transported away from the chaos and busyness in your life in a moment, and I think the Japanese were deeply touched by this. We all incorporate things that move us into our lives in some way or another. The most basic element that moves all humans in life is something that will always be remembered and revered-especially in Japan. A reverence of nature (Michael Swartz).

The Northern Renaissance aesthetic reveals an interest in the human experience, the entwining of mysticism, and the layering of multiple realities and symbolic meanings. They were not interested in the reproduction of the natural world and its appearances, but a deeper search into the reality of experience delegated to metaphor and the appearance of reality (Kathleen Brennan).

The successes of students in the art department may result because a variety of means of symbol-making is encouraged for the expression and communication of their experiences. As each form of expression complements and enriches the other, students develop a richer and more extensive vocabulary to learn, know, and express themselves as artists and scholars.