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Analysis and Critique in the Secondary Art Classroom

by

Sarah Nott

A thesis submitted to the Graduate College
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Analysis and Critique in the Secondary Art Classroom

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Western Michigan University, 2021

This paper is a study of analysis and critique in the secondary visual art classroom setting. I begin by examining the purposes these two practices can serve, and then document some of the positive outcomes of analysis and critique as well as their inherent flaws. The flaws are subcategorized into examinations of the risks of formal analysis or Formalism, the unintended emotional impacts critique and analysis can have, effects of teacher behavior, a survey of critique-caused trauma and notes on implicit bias. For the purposes of my literature review, I analyze analysis and critique through phases and writing exercises specifically, and as curricular components more generally. Next, as assimilated from my research, I present a series of guidelines for ensuring positive outcomes from analysis and critique in a classroom setting such as establishing and ensuring balance of power and maintaining transparency of purpose and clarity of intent. I conclude by summarizing the various purposes analysis and critique can have in a secondary art classroom.

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Sarah Nott

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Introduction

Analysis of one's own artwork and the artwork of peers can be an enriching method of developing the self in an artist. It forces questions about creation: do we make art solely for ourselves? Do we create art in an attempt to convey something to others? How do we understand and interact with our own art and the art of others? Though some would argue there is no one correct or incorrect interpretation of meaning in a work of art, there are still many ways to examine how we think about, describe and articulately discuss visual art. The creation of images and their analysis often coexist in an educational setting, and it can be said that through learning to analyze and critique both their own work and the work of others students can gain a better understanding of their own work. This is not always easy, as opinions about art can be considered subjective; but from this subjectivity, a myriad of schools of thought on how to analyze, discuss, and write about visual art have emerged.

As a point of clarification, for this paper a critique is a discussion or examination of a student's own artwork or the artwork of peers using the methods and practices available for analyzing works of art. I will discuss critiques and analysis equally; in this paper, all mentions of analysis will be directed toward their use in any of the many available forms of critique that can be practiced in the classroom. Critiques can be diverse: they can be written or oral, independent or group-based; they can occur between peers, with an educator, or as a personal reflection for the artist. In order to obtain as much useful research as possible, my definition of critique is broad; even just the process of an artist sitting down and analyzing their own work in silence, with intent, could be considered a critique. The specific settings in which these critiques and analyses occur can vary, but my research will focus on their use in a classroom setting. I will be sharing methods and research specifically structured to serve in a critique setting as well as

methods intended for analysis of peer art; more generally, I'll cover teaching techniques of analysis and then demonstrate utilization of these skills in the process of critique as well. If critique is responding to, interpreting, and making judgements, analysis is the critical thinking process that leads to the critique. Essentially, this paper is about getting students to write and talk about art. For example, a student sitting down to examine and reflect on their own art in writing could be called analysis; several students observing the art of a peer and discussing it could be seen as critique—but both serve the purpose of deepening and expanding student thought about and engagement with visual art.

Visual art critiques are stereotypically seen as occurring when the artist views their work as finished: an artist presenting or explaining while their peers and/or teachers comment on and judge their final artwork. However, the stage of completion during which a work of art can be critiqued and analyzed should actually be highly variable. For example, one cannot discuss critique without the awareness that a primary part of the importance and appeal of visual art can be the process and the experience of creation; some of the methods examined here will address that, and the importance of not fetishizing the finished work of art over the creative process to the detriment of student growth. Both summative and formative critiques and analysis hold significance in this research. Venable (1998) confirms this, noting “judgement is an on-going and never-ending process that is enmeshed with how we think about things. I do not believe a cut and dried decision can result from any set of procedures as the final step of understanding. Judging works of art is part of our awareness and grows with critical understanding” (p. 8). It bears clarifying, as well, that because critique and analysis can happen orally some terms might need to be defined for use in this paper. I will be using Graybill and Easton's (2015) work examining various types of oral interaction. They provide the following definitions:

- *Conversation* consists of convivial, casual, friendly, talk about personal and social matters; it's usually not directed or facilitated.
- *Discussion* is talk that has a purpose—often to make a decision. Discussion may seem unstructured at first as people brainstorm ideas and explore possibilities, but it becomes more structured as people choose sides. It may, in fact, begin to resemble debate.
- *Debate* is an extreme form of discussion, in which the format dictates that people take sides and advocate for that side, rebutting points from the other side. Debates are usually structured and formal; they leave no room for compromise or building on others' ideas.
- *Dialogue* is more structured than conversation, but less structured than discussion or debate. Dialogue engages people in building their understanding of an issue, without the pressure to make decisions or be "right." People inquire into ideas, rather than advocate for their own or others' ideas. (2015, para. 6)

With critique and analysis quantified above and with types of oral interaction thus defined, I will review several methods of analyzing and understanding visual art that can be used with students in a secondary educational setting to explore their own work and the work of others. This paper explores methods of art analysis and critique designed to increase student learning among adolescents, and so will focus on curricular or pedagogical practices in peer- and self-critique and analysis. Some of the methods and practices included in this paper may be initially aimed at primary-age students; they are included here because, as Terry Barrett says in his 1997 book *Talking About Student Art*, “high-school students who have not talked about art are, in some respects, at the developmental level of kindergartners who must learn basic

principles of art” (p.xiii). This paper proposes several methods of implementation for the methods or practices covered. A compassionate and well-designed discussion and analysis of student art in a classroom setting—whether through self-critique or peer and teacher interactions—can serve to strengthen a student’s understanding of their own motivations and creative process.

Literature Review

Purposes of Analysis and Critique

The classroom critique is one way of helping students analyze works of art, and a way for the artist to hear the thoughts and suggestions of peers. There are many approaches to and practices for critiques in a secondary visual art classroom setting, many of which I will expand upon in this paper, but a critique is typically a live large-group discussion, where a student artist, their peers, and an educator, on equal footing and with equal time given to any voices, share a dialogue about each student’s artwork. Such sessions can involve the artist in a growth experience, or can be traumatic, depending on how the critique is facilitated by the instructor. In her article *Using Critiques in the K-12 Classroom*, House (2008) contends:

Critiques can be a means of assessment of student work, providing both the student and teacher with a measure of the student’s strengths and weaknesses. A critique that occurs in process, when students are actively engaged in developing ideas, and producing works of art, provides them time to slow down, step back and reevaluate their next step. (p.49)

House is also of the opinion that through critique, “Students move beyond the ‘I like it that way’ statement as they are encouraged to reflect upon their own work and the work of others, and they articulate what they see, thereby developing the necessary vocabulary to express their thoughts” (p. 49). While part of the classroom teacher’s job is to provide and define visual arts vocabulary

to add to their student's repertoire, this knowledge isn't meaningful unless applied in a way that is personal to students and entrenched in real analysis.

In his article *Teaching Aesthetic Criticism in the Schools*, Smith (1973) similarly describes the intent of critique in an educational setting as developing among students "a capacity to perceive, understand and appreciate works of art" (p. 39). Barrett (2002) affirms that "the goal of interpreting is not to seek one, true, eternal interpretation of a work, but rather to construct interpretations that are insightful, original interesting, provoke new thoughts, expand meaningful connections, and so forth" (p. 298). Barrett further proposes that "if critiques are interpretive, students will learn that their artworks can convey meaning. If critiques are not overly negative, students will be encouraged to continue making art that is meaningful to them and their viewers" (1997, p.5). This paper examines methods of analysis and critique under the understanding that, in a classroom setting, they are most useful as formative or summative tools for assessing student growth, not as judgements of worth or proclamations of truth. Gomez and Grant (1996) point out, for example, that "through in-class critique, educators can provide students with ways to consider, assess, and act on situations that can help them to make positive changes in their art and in their attitudes about art made by others" (p. 258). It's through processes like this that teachers can offer students growth experiences instead of experiences of trauma or self-consciousness.

Positive Outcomes of Analysis and Critique

It is the responsibility of the teacher to scaffold and structure analysis and critique to achieve positive outcomes. Those outcomes can take many forms: a positive emotional outcome, for example, could mean the student leaves critique feeling inspired and uplifted, or a positive educational outcome could mean the student leaves critique with a better or more embedded

understanding of concepts or techniques. Wenham (2003) notes that while “an artist’s view of art is likely to centre more on what artists do; on art as an activity or process,” teachers have to consider not only that but “the response of ourselves and our pupils...to our own work and other people’s artwork” (p. 1). In other words, “children cannot be taught art by activity or product-oriented methods alone. Looking at and talking about art is as important as making it” (Grant & Gomez, 1996, p.255). Feldman (1970) describes critique and analysis in the classroom as a tool for taking “vaguely perceived feelings, odds and ends of ideas, intuitions, interests, and anxieties” and working with students to “fan [them] into flame, into present awareness” (pp. 191-192). Housen (2007) has found that “growth in critical and creative thinking accompanied growth in aesthetic thought. In other words, in the process of looking at and talking about art, the viewer is developing skills not ordinarily associated with art” (p. 2) and further contends that “in the course of talking about the [artwork], learners effectively teach each other, bringing new observations to light, offering opposing views, and ever widening the discussion” (p. 15).

The positive outcomes of examining our own artwork are echoed in some of the benefits of being exposed to the art of others. When students examine the art of their peers, it can illuminate “the roles played by imagery in society, audience reception, media ownership, the construction of their own multiple subjectivities, and the nature of representation” (Duncum, 2002, p. 7). In his chapter in *Contemporary Issues in Art Education*, Barrett (2002) notes that:

...by more carefully telling or writing what we see and feel and think and do when looking at a work of art, we build and understanding of what we see and experience by articulating in language what might otherwise remain only incipient, muddled, fragmented and disconnected to our lives...when writing or telling about what we see and

what we experience in the presence of an artwork, we build meaning, we do not merely report it. (p. 292)

There is no benefit in the notion of a defined quantification of ‘successful art’. This research is instead directed at the intellectual and performative *act* of critique in its myriad of forms and its potential benefits for young and developing artists. In his article Barrett (2000b) surveyed a large group of arts educators and found that most wanted their students to “leave a critique with renewed enthusiasm for making art” and that in a successful critique “ ‘excitement should be generated for further investigation and refinement’ ” (p. 32). These are the goals for secondary art curriculum that will be proposed in this paper.

House (2008) collected interviews with educators at all levels in order to present examples of successful and unsuccessful critiques. Some of the positive outcomes she surveyed included critiques furthering “achievement of intent or aesthetic and technical concerns,” allowing “a means for developing critical awareness,” and synthesis, application and retention of recently acquired concepts and terminology (p. 49). She also illuminates several of the most common negative outcomes of critique her interviewees experienced, such as when “the students displaying their work feel like targets, the other students... do not know what to say” (p. 48), critiques becoming “long, tedious, and boring” (p. 49) or students feeling “‘humiliated’ by the public scrutiny of their work and they lacked the confidence to challenge the ‘master’” (Davies in House, p. 50). The last issue refers to the imbalance of power between the student artists and the teacher facilitating the critique, which is an issue that will be explored in further depth later in this paper.

Yokley (1999) contends that “Questioning and conversational encounters become political acts as they open possibilities for change through self- and societal introspection and

reflection” (p.20), referring to the ability of analysis of art unfamiliar to the viewer to challenge preconceived notions and “resistance to certain ideas or ideologies that the work reveals” (p. 20). Yokley further defines what she views as a positive critique outcome by noting that approaches that are limited to formal or regimented visual characteristics “are very different from this...approach that recognizes the critical and political power of visual imagery and then channels that power to reveal worlds and ideas that sometimes lie hidden from view” (p. 20). She affirms that “Oftentimes, art teachers consider the interpretive process separate from the artmaking process; yet, studio interpretations are enriched by ideas from hearing, speaking and writing interpretations” (p. 22).

Inherent Flaws in Analysis and Critique

With the purposes and potential positive outcomes of critiques outlined above, next I will document some of the research that has been done on the flaws and pitfalls associated with analysis and critique in a visual arts classroom setting. They are varied and manifold, and must be carefully taken into account by any teacher hoping to use these practices in their classroom.

Formal Analysis

Some of the flaws associated with critique stem from one of its oldest standardized methods—formalism, or the Feldman model. In his article *Art Criticism: Modifying the Formalist Approach*, Prater (2002) criticizes the formalist model, saying “The principal weakness of this approach is how poorly it addresses the ceremonial and utilitarian artworks of non-Western cultures and even Western religious and utilitarian art forms” (p. 13). In other words, the formalist model does not allow for the discussion of significance derived from use or intention. Feldman breaks critique down into four stages: description, analysis, interpretation, and evaluation. ‘Evaluation’, as he terms it, has drawn Feldman’s method quite a bit of criticism

over the years for being blind to the context or origins of a work of art—how can an intrinsic value possibly be placed on a work of art when the viewer has no understanding of its purposes or embedded cultural meanings? Grant and Gomez (1996) state in their book *Making Schooling Multicultural: Campus and Classroom*, approaches such as formalism “ [prepare] students to approach art as a series of objects about form and feeling isolated from context” (p. 249). This approach, if not reworked to be inclusive and contextualized, can be detrimental to student thought.

Unintended Emotional Impacts

Another problematic aspect of the studio critique is that its link to learning is limited, or indeed even filtered, by the emotional and mental state of the individual student. In addition to this limitation, the teacher’s handling of the critique can also dramatically impact the students’ overall comfort and engagement with the activity. This, in turn, compromises the validity of the learning experience. Blair (2006) explores this concept through research reported in her essay, “ ‘At the end of a huge crit in the summer, it was ‘crap’—I’d worked really hard but all she said was ‘fine’ and I was gutted’ ”. For her research, Blair interviewed students and teachers at three universities in England. Even though Blair was working with college students, her findings easily apply to the secondary learner.

While Blair (2006) posits the value of the studio critique, she points out flaws in the process as it has traditionally been undertaken. She opens her analysis with the observation that “the crit presents an important opportunity for an assessment dialogue” and goes on to describe how the studio critique can allow students and teachers to “bring together and share, in a group environment, points of clarification or discussion” (p. 83). That said, the primary body of her research reveals that the experience is uncomfortable if not traumatic for students. Blair explores

how “a student’s persona of themselves,” what she calls “the perception of self,” can determine whether a critique is of any value (2006, p. 85). For example, depending on the format critique and analysis take, a student’s comfort with presentation and public speaking can also impact their ability to benefit from the experience. Furthermore, Blair’s interviews reveal that students can dread the critique and view it as a performance wherein some students will win and some will lose. Blair cites the work of Percy, who notes that students who find success in the experience of the critique will “become a member of the fraternity, but those who cannot find a way of comfortably participating become isolated and alienated from the discourse” (Percy in Blair, 2006, p. 151). Too often, Blair finds, students “do not hear or remember what they have said or what has been said about their work” (p. 89). Little learning or opportunity for growth can come from the feeling of having failed and being seen as an outsider.

Teacher Behavior

Even more critical in determining the positive or negative impact of a studio critique than the student’s prior experience is the behavior of the teacher leading the critique. Blair (2006) rightly suggests that “Formative assessment in design cannot be prescriptive” (p. 83). The skilled teacher does not ask questions with an answer in mind; the supportive teacher realizes that they must help the student to “navigate their own pathway through this ‘sea of opinion’” (p. 84). As Blair explains, the “crit could also be affected by factors such as the power position of teacher/students” (p. 85). Blair found students want to receive both positive and negative feedback, but “the manner in which this feedback is given is critically important” (p. 86). It is crucial for the teacher to be conscious of the language they use and to be aware of the power dynamic, even when it is subtle, that exists within a school setting. The physical arrangement of the critique is also a responsibility of the teacher. The teacher must ensure that students can see

and hear each other and clearly see the art being discussed. The arrangement of a critique and analysis setting can also help to prevent unhealthy power dynamics; that is, students seated and presenting in a large circle or small groups is preferable to asking them to stand alone in front of a large regimented peer group.

If the feelings reported by college students in Blair's research are strong, a high school student might suffer even more within the parameters of a poorly run studio critique. Her study reveals that, while dialogue about the thinking process can be of benefit to both the artist and the other students in the group, there is little evidence that a large-group studio critique has any measurable positive learning value. On the other hand, small groups—when carefully designed—can offer students an opportunity where each individual feels they have a voice. The activity should be collaborative and student-led, not teacher-centered with overly rigid questioning. Blair's research is a primer not only for how to facilitate an effective studio critique, but for how to be an effective educator as a whole.

Critique-Caused Trauma

Another strong argument against employing peer and teacher critique paradigms within the secondary classroom is the long-standing damage that this approach has imposed on generations of students. Doren (2015), in her essay, "Is the critique relevant? The function of critique in a studio art classroom, told three times," develops an argument against the way in which "formalized assessment is experienced in art school" (p. 194). To facilitate her analysis, she offers three perspectives: one is the ideal of what a traditional critique attempts—but fails—to do, the second "take(s) apart this ideal," and the third offers a "focus on the presentation of originality and how we determine the meaning of an artwork" (p. 194). Her assertions are written

from the framework of a post-secondary setting, but the conclusions are clearly applicable to the high school art classroom setting.

In the first “vantage point” (2015, p. 193), Doren demonstrates the stark contrast between the ideal of the class critique versus the reality of how students feel during and after its practice. The central argument of the ideal is that dialogue will “stimulate growth through debate” and allow “the invention of alternatives as the central core of an imaginative practice” (p. 197). These beliefs, she proposes, are embedded into the art classroom as almost unquestioned traditions and established practices. However, Doren points out how students “dread this experience” and see it as a “painfully public form of judgment” (p. 194). The traditional critique assumes there is value to “a set of terms and conventions, a vocabulary, which allow us to develop consensus about the meaning of a given piece of art” (p. 196). However, she goes on to reveal a paradox around this narrative: “The attempt to develop objective criteria for establishing meaning assumes a kind of passivity, a removal of the individual’s subjective response, in the interpretation of the art work” (p.197). The tension is between this supposed objectivity and the subjective experience of actually making art.

In the second section of her essay, Doren exposes the “violence of authority-driven education” (2015, p. 194) and reveals how the teacher, as the “acknowledged expert in the field and as the person who controls outcomes in the form of grades” (p. 198) embodies a power structure that, in most cases, will prohibit a truly open, let alone educational or even helpful, discourse. In section three, she explores the dichotomy between how an artist is viewed and what a critique assumes. Contemporary Western culture has long portrayed artmaking as “solitary and introspective” (p. 197). At the same time, the critique asks the artist to not only hear the views of others but to make changes based on those views. Additionally, Doren explores the complexity

of seeking meaning in art. Too often, the efficacy of a work is “based on the directness of relationship between artist’s intent and viewer’s understanding” (p. 200). If that viewer is the teacher, the position of power not only restricts the usefulness of the critique, it may prove to disable the student artist’s creative voice.

Doren’s conclusion functions as a powerful yet succinct overview of what an effective “enquiry”—not critique—might look like in the art classroom. She includes the importance of “embracing the complexity of multiplicity and ambiguity in meaning” and notes that teachers can “mitigate the exercise of authority in the classroom by recognizing how our own understanding of an artwork is one of many valuable interpretations” (2015, p. 201). She offers specific questions students could ask each other and teachers could use for a framework when guiding students in dialogue. Most importantly, she reminds us of the importance of introspection, context, and the “intractable combination of personal expression and contexts that dip in and out of history” (p. 201).

Implicit Bias

Another negative facet of analysis and critique is that the studio critique, and formalistic approaches to art analysis as a whole, can be gravely flawed as a result of implicit bias. Speaking generally of interactions in the classroom, Fine and Ruglis (2009) point out the possibility of inherent bias being introduced by the teacher or students, particularly if it is embedded in a pedagogical process such as critique, or in any classroom activity that seeks to measure the success of a student using a tool designed outside of that student’s culture. Such approaches expose the deeply entrenched patterns of the “thick racialized dialectics of ‘merit’ and ‘lack’ cultivated in public education” (p. 20). Unfortunately, the misuse of formalism is exactly that: determining what has merit and what does not. Fine and Ruglis offer a justification for the need

for liberatory pedagogy; they appeal for a dramatic shift in education that would advocate for social change and direct awareness of oppressive forces. Though not specifically rejecting formalism in the high school art classroom, the work of Fine and Ruglis aligns clearly with Feldman's (1992) assertion that "formalist art is elitist and that formalist art instruction demeans working-class and/or populist values and aspirations." (p. 124).

As the previous section on the justification of critique points out, critique has its proponents: Feldman (1992) refers to the appeal of formalism in the classroom as "The Seductiveness of Formalism" (p. 122), and highlights the clear linear manner in which the formal elements and principles of design can be incorporated into a curriculum. Formalism and its structures, however, perpetuate the myth of objectivity. In reality, "the formalist criteria of success—even if they can be made explicit—seem especially vulnerable to charges of arbitrariness" (p. 124). He questions that formalist art instruction may aim to "teach people that their spontaneous feelings and natural interests have little or no aesthetic validity" (p. 124). The idea of objectivity is, when layered over student art, limiting and demeaning, and it is in this vacuum of objectivity with its lack of context and background that inherent bias can be most dangerous.

Analysis of visual art cannot be discussed without also addressing implicit bias and the cultural, social and religious context of arts and the viewer. All methods of analysis that are eventually implemented in a secondary visual art setting should be examined carefully to ensure that the terminology or practices they employ do not stem from a place of bias. In their book *Art History, Aesthetics, Visual Studies*, Holly and Moxey (2002) caution us that while it is often a standard practice to mine art history for trends and techniques, one must be careful because "canons are established, parameters or paradigms chosen for discussion of a time period or place

that may depend on assumptions or determinations that ignore or dismiss the art and culture of other places or peoples as unworthy of attention, second-rate, or derivative” (p. 71). Grant and Gomez (1996) note that “educators have shifted toward a greater emphasis on looking at and talking about art in school. However, there has been a continued absence of attention paid to issues concerning the art of multiple ethnic, gender, and socioeconomic groups” (p. 247). They note that an important part of critique and analysis can actually be discussing “why certain works of art have been valued in the past and why we study them today...[and] the reasons that some art valued today was not valued in the past” (p. 255). Gude (2007) writes that it should be the objective of the classroom teacher to facilitate analysis in such a way that “students will understand art images within the larger context of living in a society saturated with images, produced for a wide range of purposes” (p. 11).

Certainly, the cautions and concerns around analysis and critique are weighty. As art teachers, we must be diligent to not fall into the post-colonial, heteropatriarchal, or culturally biased language that can well up from the realm of our inherent biases. Instead, we must guide students, through careful instruction and modeling, as they learn to use language in the process of being makers of original art.

Analysis and Critique as Structured in Phases

One way to manage the potential risks of a classroom critique is to use a phase- or step-based approach to looking at and talking about art. Hurwitz and Day (2001) propose that “One of the goals of critical activity is the development and use of the language of art,” and suggest this can be accomplished using a phased approach to the critical act (p. 217). Their phases are as follows:

- Phase One: Description - The terms used during the critique and analysis are clearly defined and easily understood.
- Phase Two: Formal Analysis - Formal analysis “require[s] the [student] to discuss the structure or composition of an artwork... [using] the language of design.”
- Phase Three: Interpretation - This is when “the student moves to more imaginative levels [of interpretation] and is invited to speculate about the meaning embodied in a work or the purpose the artist may have had in mind.”
- Phase Four: Judgment and Informed Preference - This phase “invites students to render their opinions regarding the worth of an object, provided their opinions are based on what they have learned in the previous stages” (pp. 218-219).

Hurwitz and Day (2001) note that, regarding the final ‘judgement’ phase, it is important to “recognize the distinction between preference and judgement in response to works of art”. The latter might be subject to discussion but the former is innate and “not subject to correction by authority or persuasion since one’s personal liking or disliking of an artwork is an aspect of one’s individuality” (p. 219). This sentiment is echoed by Fowler (2002), who mentions that during group analysis of works of art “initiating and enforcing ground rules for appropriate behavior during these discussions can be beneficial in achieving a positive outcome” (p. 36).

The Hurwitz-Day format perhaps draws inspiration from the often-referenced Feldman or formalist model of practical art criticism, which uses the phases description, formal analysis, interpretation and judgement (Feldman, 1994). A similar method can be found in the 2002 Wink-Phipps Visual Analysis Guide, which breaks down the process of looking at art into four phases: identification, looking at the formal elements, considering the cultural context, and considering the expressive qualities (pp. 22-27). These are predated, even, by the writings of Smith (1973),

who categorizes the phases of what he calls ‘exploratory criticism’ into “the overlapping phases of *description, ...analysis, ...characterization, ...and interpretation*” (p. 40).

Prater (2002) proposes his own alternative model to formalism that progresses as follows:

1. Prepare to critique (gather available information)
2. Examine literal qualities (realistic or accurate details) of the art object
3. Examine functional qualities of the art object
4. Examine the formal qualities of the art object
5. Examine the expressive qualities of the art object
6. Determine relevant theories as a summary of the analysis process (p.14)

Prater intends this model to “avoid the idea of judging artistic success in the initial absence of contextual information” (p. 14). Smith (1973) similarly suggests that “formal analysis can be quite complicated and demanding, ...[and] should be used cautiously in the elementary grades, lest the learners become too self-conscious about the dissective mode of attention that typifies analysis” (p. 41).

Weaknesses of an explicitly structured or ‘phase-style’ approach to art analysis and critique are not limited to formalism alone. Venable (1998) notes that “such models may not reflect an accurate picture of the way critical learning takes places...rather than a linear relationship, deeper understanding is seen as a web of connections” (p. 8). Venable also suggests that “models that use inflexible sequencing short circuit the potential for complex learning by ensuring that certain outcomes are precast, discouraging connections to other areas” (p. 8).

An additional ‘phase-style’ approach to art analysis and critique has been detailed by Housen (2007), who quantified aesthetic stages that students grow through as they gain experience looking at and talking about art. Housen is one of the publishers of a structured

system of analysis called ‘Visual Thinking Strategies’ (VTS). Housen observes that based on the “complexity of the viewer’s remarks at each [aesthetic] stage, it becomes understandable that their particular ways of processing—their stages—must be taken into account if we are to design effective educational experiences” (2007, p. 8). I have condensed Housen’s definitions of these stages as follows:

- Stage I, Accountive: viewers are listmakers and storytellers. They make simple, concrete observations. They make observations and associations and share narratives that seem idiosyncratic and imaginative. Their judgements are based on what the viewer knows and likes, and are colored with the viewer’s emotions (2007, pp. 2-3).
- Stage II, Constructive: viewers use their perceptions, knowledge of the natural world, and values of their social and moral world to make observations with a concrete, known reference point. Viewers pass value judgements of the art based on these traits and with less connection to emotions. Their observations and associations become more linked and detailed (p. 4).
- Stage III, Classifying: the viewer uses an analytical stance and examines history/style etc. They are eager to use the facts that they have accumulated to analyze the piece in a complex and multilayered manner. They believe the work has a clear and rational meaning/message (p. 5).
- Stage IV, Interpretive: the viewer seeks an interactive and spontaneous encounter with a work of art, paying attention to subtleties and themes and allowing feelings and intuitions to dictate critical observations (pp. 6-7).

- Stage V, Re-Creative: the viewer suspends disbelief and views the artwork as an animated/emotive being, combining personal contemplation with broader and more universal messages, symbolism and concerns (pp. 7-8).

Based on these stages, Housen and the Visual Thinking Strategies system provide three questions to be asked as a phased approach to discussing and analyzing art with young people: “What is going on in this picture? What do you see that makes you say that? What more can you find?” (2007, pp. 9-10). These discussion prompts can be used to encourage students to progress through the stages of aesthetic development detailed above as they gain more and more experience examining works of art.

Analysis and Critique Through Writing Exercises

While many of the previously discussed methods of analysis and critique are phases that could be executed orally or in writing, several instead rely on the specific application of these practices in a written form. In her article ‘Hands-On Writing: An Alternative Approach to Understanding Art’ Barnes (2009) lays out a written exploratory analysis method workshopped at Colorado State University, reminding us that “Because similar cognitive strategies are used in the practice of both visual and written literacy, incorporation of authentic writing activities not only strengthens students’ writing abilities, but reinforces the basic art curriculum as well” (p. 41). Barnes also noted that “Committing their ideas to paper forced students to reflect on their thoughts and words. Written comments became an important step of metacognition, allowing students to follow their insights from an initial spark of understanding, to a fully executed idea.” (p. 44).

While the method of written analysis explored by Barnes involves low-tech approaches, online and electronic forms of writing cannot be ignored in today’s educational climate. In her

article *The New Conversation: Using Weblogs for Reflective Practice in the Studio Art Classroom*, Overby (2009) highlights the benefit of an open-ended blog- or comment-style electronic critique:

Some art analysis methods... can be rigid in their structure and limit the type and amount of student response during discussions. Typical high school students, however, do not focus solely on analyzing artworks; they are interested in their peers' thoughts and reactions. Thus, a discussion left open to meandering produces interesting and meaningful connections to the students' interests and experiences. (p. 19)

An online platform of written critique can be easily accessible to the contemporary student while also addressing the closed-off or purely self-reflective nature of written analyses of art. Although it does require that the educator monitors student writing for appropriate content, benefits of the online writing- and discussion-based platform include that “Blogs are a collaborative learning environment...[and] The teacher is a facilitator rather than an authoritarian figure” (Overby, 2009, p. 22), and that students can link references and post associated images/other works of art. With the addition of these benefits, she believes that “combining conversation and writing, such as in a blog, can bring a new level of understanding and energy to one's artmaking” (p. 20).

In her book *Visual Literacy: Writing About Art*, Tucker (2002) gives a further explanation of the advantages available in written examinations of art as opposed to discussions or simple brainstorming:

...writing works as a heuristic—a method for discovering meaning—precisely because of the ways it differs from speaking. Writing produces a visible record of your responses

that allows you to reread and develop your thoughts. You watch ideas evolve and take shape on the page. Writing, in short, is another way of seeing. (p. 2)

Tucker goes on to outline a structure of several specific writing prompts or exercises that can be undertaken during the examination of a work of art. She expands on each question asked within these exercises, explaining why they relate and giving samples of past student responses to the prompts from her own experience using these exercises. Tucker then goes on to describe how the written observations of the viewer can then be used to defend specific opinions about a work of art, and notes that “in doing so, the speaker progresses from *description* of the visual elements of the painting to *formal analysis*—that is, to a consideration of how these formal elements work together (or don’t work together) as a whole” (2002, p. 52). Importantly, the last writing activity that Tucker offers is one aimed at understanding the role that context and origin have in viewing a particular work of art. She has developed effective prompts to serve this purpose that will be detailed in the body of this paper.

Barret (1997) often discusses writing as a tool for critique. In one exercise, for example, students created box sculptures that depicted the way they were seen by others on the outside of the box and the way they viewed themselves on the inside of the box. They then were given the artwork of another student to analyze, and on a piece of paper folded in half wrote first their initial impressions based on ‘exterior views’ and then their revelations on seeing the interior of the box. This is an example of how the permanent records created by reflecting in a written form can be put to good use (pp. 50-53). In regard to this critique structure as well as others, Barrett addresses the important dichotomy of artist’s intent and viewer’s interpretation. He asks, and encourages teachers to ask:

Can we know an artist's intent? Ever? Always? Do some artists work intuitively, drawing on the subconscious, and even intentionally block specific intent? Is an artist's intent, when available, always relevant to the meaning of the artwork? Can an artist mean to express one thing, but then express more than that, or something different from that? Should the artist's stated intent be the final arbiter when determining the accuracy of an interpretation? (p. 49)

Sayre (1995) encourages students to examine art by addressing the following series of prompts in writing:

1. Determine what the subject matter of the work is
2. Consider the formal elements of the work and how they relate to the subject matter
3. Then ask yourself how these elements are organized
4. Next consider how the artist's choice of medium has affected the piece
5. Finally, consider what all this might mean (p. 58)

He also cautions that any questions intended to result in a written analysis of an artwork should not rigidify or restrict the writing of the observer—instead, prompts such as these should be considered “a guide designed to help [the viewer] take the notes and organize the thoughts that will eventually lead to writing” (p. 58). In this scenario, the prompts would simply be used as a jumping-off point for students to take broad steps into their own written explorations of their own artwork and the artwork of their peers.

Analysis and Critique as Curricular Components

Many art education theorists don't simply suggest a specific written or oral method of critique; they instead address it holistically as an important and intrinsic part of the curricular structure of a successful art education classroom. Eisner (1973-74), for example, points out as a

defense for the inclusion of art criticism and analysis in the classroom that “children respect thoughtful evaluation and criticism because it testifies to them that their teachers are taking them and their work seriously” (p. 13). Barrett (1997), whose writing prompts are given above, also provides a series of guidelines that are meant to apply to critiques of any type, as collected from years of running critiques in a classroom setting (pp. 94-98).

Stewart (2008) focuses not on any specific medium or approach but on composition and design, giving a very structured and analytical breakdown of the various components of critique and analysis. She quantifies critique as serving one of two purposes: “objective criticism is used to assess how well a work of art or design utilizes the elements and principles of design” and “subjective criticism is used to describe the personal impact of an image, the narrative implications of an idea, or the cultural ramifications of an action”. In the former, “discussion generally focuses on basic compositional concerns”, and in the latter, “discussion general focuses on the subject and content of the design” (p. 141).

One cannot discuss implementing analysis and critique in an art curriculum without addressing Visual Thinking Strategies, or VTS. While a more in-depth examination of VTS practices will occur in the body of this paper and some of the ‘stages’ associated with VTS are detailed previously, I will mention here that its overarching curricular goals are to “teach thinking, communication skills, and visual literacy to young people. Growth is stimulated by three things: looking at art of increasing complexity, responding to developmentally based questions, and participating in group discussions that are carefully facilitated by teachers” (VTS, 2001, p. 1). The standardized VTS curriculum notes that “rigorous discussion of a wide range of art is the impetus for cognitive growth” and “VTS also significantly increases art viewing skills, extending the art making skills that are the appropriate emphasis of art teachers” (p. 1). By

implementing the VTS curriculum, teachers can “enable students to debate possibilities and let the visual thinking process itself strengthen their ability to examine, articulate, listen and reflect” (VTS, 2001, p. 1). Though most research and curricular materials provided by VTS apply to the use of their techniques in analysis of professional or fine art, not the student’s own artwork, I include it because I view its practices as highly applicable to a student critique setting.

Assimilation of Research

I have explored here some of the possible positive outcomes of critique and the various formats it can take—written, oral, or structured as a curricular component. I have also researched some of the most studied pitfalls of critique and analysis, including a longstanding bias towards formalism, which is dangerous in its propensity to ignore context and use of art objects; a tendency for critique and analysis to be structured so that the students feel as though their identity is being evaluated instead of their art, or just feel judged or criticized as a whole; the frequent risk of teachers mismanaging critiques and becoming figures of absolute power of judgement; and the ongoing impact of implicit bias on the information and opinions that come up in critique and analysis. Through the research available to me, it seemed that two of the primary approaches to critique and analysis were to approach them specifically through writing or to integrate them fully into a curriculum, utilizing multiple formats to implement them for multiple purposes. From these two tracks of thought and from all of the information I was able to glean about the flaws and pitfalls of critique and analysis, I will generate a series of best practices and possible successful structures for these forms of discussion and thought in the secondary visual art classroom and curriculum.

Implementations of Analysis and Critique

For the synthesis of my research into a usable form, I have broken my content into three areas: first, a series of best practices for analysis and critique, including creating an equitable balance of power, teaching supportive language, encouraging transparency of purpose and clarity of intent, and suggestions for the structure of the physical environment where critique and analysis occur. Next, a documentation of potential formats for analysis and critique, including structures of peer- vs. self-analysis and examinations of the different forms critique and analysis can take when structured in pairs, large groups and small groups, as well as explorations of written and oral executions. I conclude with an examination of the various purposes critique and analysis can serve when executed following the provided guidelines, including as a formative assessment for the educator, as a clarifying or expanding exercise for the student, as a method for building community, and as a problem-solving exercise for works in progress. It is my hope that by providing these formats, practices and uses, this research can help secondary visual arts teachers compassionately and successfully implement analysis and critique in their classrooms.

Ensuring Positive Outcomes from Analysis and Critique

Teaching Supportive Language

With the understanding that this research is intended to apply to as many of the forms of analysis and critique discussed above as possible, it is important to consider the structure of language both in peer-to-peer interactions *and* in teacher-to-student interactions. In both of these forms it is essential to ensure that structures are installed to prevent detrimental or discouraging interactions from taking place. Eisner (1973-74) confirms this, noting that “learning to talk about art insightfully, poetically, and sensitively is one of the great educational needs in the preparation of art teachers” (p. 14).

Robert Barnes (2015) proposes that when the teacher questions or comments on an ongoing work of art created by a student they should always proceed with caution, “for fear of harshly criticizing, destroying a child’s fragile confidence, or stereotyping the work” (p. 119). Barnes also notes, however, that when done effectively positive interactions can be very helpful in student engagement and understanding. Barnes suggests questions that tend less toward formal analysis and more toward helping the young artist frame how an artwork sits in their greater experience of creation; these include asking for “further ideas around the theme on which they are working,” discussing “feelings evoked by the artwork,” learning about “the effort put in,” and brainstorming “ways in which ideas could be used in another medium another time” (pp. 119-120). These questions help an educator avoid automatic praise and generic reinforcement, encouraging instead specifically descriptive praise, where “the teacher describes the good features of the art being done” in order to draw the student’s attention to “specific positive points about their work” (p. 120). This pursues the greater objective of discussion, which is “to involve children in building up their skills in verbalizing, visualizing and remembering” and to “vitalize children’s imagery and expression so that they are sufficiently confident in talking about their ideas, as well as working them out in a practical art medium” (p. 122).

Barrett (2002) points out as well that in regard to verbal critique and analysis in particular, a teacher can “constantly reinforce listening skills as well as skills of observation and verbal articulation” (p. 294). Barrett also has several recommendations for teachers in the roles of facilitators of critique, as well: “concentrate on being a facilitator rather than a critic...don’t feel obligated to discuss the work of every student every time... try to get everyone involved... pursue answers with follow-up questions” (1997, pp. 94-98). This climate of a collaborative learning culture does not just happen; it is up to the teacher to create a space in which all students

feel supported and safe. Furthermore, while a supportive and safe learning environment is crucial, the art classroom must also be established as a place where risk-taking is welcome and encouraged.

Before beginning to work with high school students in effectively critiquing their own art and the art of their peers, art teachers can endeavor to work with other departments within the building to teach basic inter-personal communication skills. Working with the English department—and ideally across the entire curriculum—art teachers can reinforce skills that are being taught in the English classroom and, in turn, strengthen the efficacy of the critique experience in the art classroom. Furthermore, it is not an overstatement to propose that this interdisciplinary approach, well-managed and reinforced by all departments, could endeavor to help students communicate effectively beyond the art and English classroom and, indeed, beyond the school setting overall. Cummins (1979) is credited with research around the notion of basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS), and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP). While the work of Cummins is primarily around the development of English Language Learners in the academic setting, his premise is that students need to learn not only the skills of face-to-face communication but acquire language that is supported in the academic environment specifically (pp. 121–129).

The effects of communication skills on critique and analysis are significant enough that they should even be discussed and taught by art educators *outside* the context of visual art. For example, some school district's secondary-level communication courses offer specific instructions for phrasing effective questions and checking for perception. The steps of offering two possible interpretations and then requesting clarification work well in the art critique, but also serve the broader purpose of learning a “tool for helping us understand others accurately

instead of assuming that our first interpretation is correct.” (Adler, 2013, p. 97). These concepts should be taught directly, early in the course, and reminders of the basics can be placed in a course syllabus and even posted within the classroom. Furthermore, it is an enjoyable icebreaker early in the semester to practice these skills in the form of role-play. The role-play activities are best taught using non-art examples and even examples that are a bit silly. This approach helps students to relax and even laugh while still using language structures that may be new to many. A playful attitude to learning language skills also aligns well with the importance of incorporating a spirit of exploration in the art classroom. As Gude (2007) puts it, “Students of all ages need opportunities to creatively ‘mess around’ with various media—to shape and re-shape lumps of clay or to watch as drops of ink fall upon wet paper and create riveting, rhizomatic rivulets” (p. 7). Many interpersonal communication techniques are easily taught in similarly playful manner. Before even introducing a specific process discussing art, teaching these basic communication skills can have a profoundly important impact on student experience.

Establishing and Ensuring Balance of Power

I’ve heard a recent educational catchphrase encouraging teachers to ‘be a guide on the side, not a sage on the stage’. While this may sound a bit trite, it is an accurate summary of the concept I’ll discuss here. Using all of the information previously covered on positive methods of communication, a teacher’s next most important step towards ensuring positive outcomes from analysis and critique is to make it clear that students are on equal footing with one another and with the educator. An “asymmetrical power relationship inhibits dialogue...and if there's no dialogue, there’s no learning” (Sara & Parnell in Blair, 2006, p. 89).

Many of the negative outcomes of critique and analysis that have been covered thus far stem from student feelings of inadequacy, judgment and inferiority, and if students feel confidence

and ownership over the processes they're a part of in the classroom these feelings can be avoided. Andrews (2005) wrote about a change she undertook in her role as art educator when she shifted more control to her students—where she had previously felt she “ladled out all the instruction”, when power was given to her students her role was more to “set the tone and establish expectations, functioning more like an art orchestra conductor” (p.39). Holley and Steiner (2005) recommend that teachers who want their classroom to be a safe place or a place of balanced power should “create ground rules for class discussion; demonstrate respect for other’s opinions...be friendly and personable in their interactions with students; and behave in a nonjudgmental way toward students” (p. 61).

Something that can greatly assist with ensuring an equal balance of power is varying the format of critiques. Many of the most hurtful situations I uncovered in my research involved a student alone, sometimes standing physically with their art, with their peers and instructor seated separate from them and commenting on their work. Doren (2015) notes her surprise when she observes how “an otherwise dynamic studio classroom will then critique a final project by going around the room and naming the successes and failure of each project, one at a time, while the majority of the class sits silently” (p. 194). In this setup, the power is completely in the hands of the instructor and classmates, and this uneven balance of power means that any feedback will feel like a judgement instead of an observation or question. Housen (2007) further states:

The teacher’s role is not so much to impart facts, or manage drill and practice, but to facilitate the learner’s process of discovery. The teacher enables development by creating and managing a supportive learning environment that encourages learners to discover new ways to find answers to their own questions, to construct meaning, to experience, and to reason about what they see. (p. 14)

To encourage this environment with a balance of power, an educator should vary the way that students undertake critiques; they should not be solely structured with a student standing alone in front of peers and teachers. Based on the research I've done regarding positive and negative outcomes of critique and analysis, some of the actions that can be taken to ensure an even balance of power include:

- Removal of the teacher as a voice or participant in critique and analysis: educator instead is purely a facilitator and moderator in a student-run experience. Doren (2015) notes that critique can be a means by which teachers “use their power to determine outcomes as a way to establish authority” (p. 198) and removal of the teacher as a participant can help prevent this.
- Small group work: educator breaks students into smaller, more intimate groups to prevent student artists from feeling loss of control. A large group can leave students “not fully engaged with the process or listening to the assessment feedback” (Blair, 2006, p. 842). Some of the inherent problems with a large group in a classroom can be related to the physical distance between the people in the room. Maintaining “personal distance,” that is closer than four feet, or at least a “social distance,” which is 4 to 12 feet, has proven to increase speaker/listener comfort and increase the degree of self-disclosure. Distances over twelve feet “signal a less-relaxed type of conversation” (Adler, 2013, p. 209). In a small group of fewer than seven, the ideal social distance can be maintained. (Obviously, the Covid 19 Pandemic has changed how we physically distance from one another. It is likely our classrooms will be impacted by this for a long time. Still, it is important to note the ideal setting as we hope to return to normalcy eventually. Additionally, teachers should be aware that comfort with social distances can vary greatly based on students’

cultures, traditions, and past life experiences.) And on a more essential level, another problem with large groups is simply that “Students at the back cannot hear and so become disengaged with the experience” (Blair, 2006, p. 84).

- Student-designed questions and prompts: educator has students collaborate on, design and write out expanding questions and thought prompts to use during critique and analysis. If the content being discussed is generated by student feedback alone, the locus of power remains with the student artists.
- Disassociation from grading: it is an unfortunate sign of the times that educators are being constantly prodded to produce data about their students. By having critique and analysis be *ungraded* class components only, the educator can ensure that students know they are participatory and developmental experiences, not activities on which they are being intrinsically judged or evaluated.
- Student abstention: if the educator first disassociates critique and analysis from grading and then allows students to abstain if they are uncomfortable, the power of choice and engagement lies with the student artists. Many of the negative experiences I found documented in my research revolved around mandatory ‘final’ critiques; I could practically feel the weight and emotional heft of these events in the terms participants used to describe them. Art teachers “frequently deal with some very fragile egos in the beginning-level students” and the critique experience can be “most disquieting” (Rockman, 2000, p. 225). Allowing student choice and options can be one way to make the critique process more appealing to the apprehensive student.
- Analysis alone: educators who do not feel their students would respond well to critique—that is, discussing their own work or the work of peers—can instead stick with analysis of

art produced by past or practicing artists alone. It is, after all, the teacher's responsibility to know their students, and if a participatory critique would feel imbalanced or judgmental no matter the approach, the teacher can abstain.

- **Physical arrangement:** I will delve further into the physical setup of a classroom to make it a positive environment for critique and analysis later in this paper, but it must be mentioned here that an equal balance of power can be upheld by making certain students are arranged in a circle. Seated, standing, it doesn't matter—removing the stereotypical arrangement of one student standing in front of ranks of seated peers can work wonders to ensure the critique environment is one of equality.

Using some of these approaches should help the educator scaffold critique and analysis experiences so that they are beneficial to students instead of traumatic. Teachers should not be the sole voice in the room during critique, stridently laying down their judgements of student work as peers ogle; instead, critique and analysis should be participatory, unique and multifaceted student learning experiences that allow developing artists to expand their understanding of how visual art impacts its creators and its viewers.

Transparency of Purpose and Clarity of Intent

Teachers have the responsibility to ensure an equal power dynamic during analysis and critique, and they're responsible as well for the prefacing and scaffolding analysis and critique in the classroom so that the students have positive experiences. As Grant and Gomez (1996) put it:

Among the difficulties teachers find with early adolescent critique is that students tend to be concerned with being correct and how they are seen in the eyes of their peers. ...[they] tend to prefer realism in art and are often frustrated when they are unable to produce art that is highly realistic. However, creating a safe environment for writing and talking

about adult art can help students understand that multiple representations and interpretations are acceptable and enriching. (p. 257)

If a teacher can work to ensure from the beginning of the analysis and critique process that students understand its purpose, the experience will not be threatening or judgmental. It is the educator's responsibility to openly and warmly explain why it can be helpful to look at and talk about art for reasons such as those given above. Figure 1 shows the prompts that Tucker (2002) recommends. Though they rely on formal analysis, the prompts provide a framework that encourages students to think about a work of art in terms of how it compares to other works, and in regard to its creation (pp. 6-22).

Response Area	Prompts
Observations and Questions	Jot down your initial observations, responses and questions about the piece. What subject is depicted, and which visual details immediately catch your eye? For instance, what are the predominant colors and shapes? Where are areas of light and dark placed in the overall design? Which spaces are crowded or empty?
The Art History (Context/ The Comparative Method	[For this component, Tucker asks that the viewer select a specific additional work of art to be compared to the subject of their writing.] Does the object recall any other artworks you've seen? What questions do you have concerning this second image? In what ways are the objects alike or dissimilar?
Medium	What medium has the artist used, how is it handled, and with what effects?
Moving from Observation to Interpretation	How do all the elements you've noted work together to project visual meanings?
Research and Connoisseurship	What more would you like to learn about the artwork?

Figure 1. Prompts for analysis and critiques. Adapted from Tucker (2002)

In my view, structures such as Tucker's can essentially remove some of the pressure that critiques place on the connection between artist and artwork, instead allowing students to just

examine artworks as visual artifacts to further their understanding of aesthetic decisions. Perhaps by using frameworks such as these, we can prevent the feelings of personal judgement or inadequacy that have been so thoroughly documented in the critique setting. There is no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ in formats such as Tucker’s; instead, there is a couching of art into a student’s prior knowledge and a reflection on what they observe. Ensuring that this intent and purpose is clear to students from the outset will help prevent feelings of judgement and establish a successful framework for analysis and critique.

Several of the techniques mentioned previously regarding establishing equitable distribution of power can also help ensure that students know the reason *why* they undertake analysis and critique, and one that rings true enough that it bears mention again here is the removal of graded components from these processes. If student artists are aware from the onset of classroom critique activities that these experiences are not tied to ‘points’ or used as quantifiers of success and failure, they have the opportunity to engage with them with a mindset of growth and development and not suffer under a perceived atmosphere of judgement and evaluation.

A final step that art educators can take to improve the student critique experience is to use critiques more frequently on *unfinished* artwork than on final products. The teacher can make it clear to students that the experience of analysis they are about to undertake is formative: that is, they are clarifying their plans for completion of their work of art by sharing them verbally with peers, and workshopping any problems they have encountered with media and composition by engaging in dialogue about them. If the educator emphasizes that critiques and in-class analyses are experiences of sharing and development, the students will have less fear and vulnerability headed into these activities.

Comfort and Setup of Physical Environment

Though the space in which a critique occurs may seem like an afterthought, the physical setup of a classroom and the discussions that happen within it can truly have an impact on student experience. While it may seem obvious, an art classroom needs “an adequately sized space in which to convene, a wall surface or some other suitable alternative for displaying work in a manner that makes it easily visible to all critique participants, [and] adequate lighting” (Rockman, 2000, p. 220). The wall surface or similar, of course, is only required if a large group is looking at a work of art at once, but some means of display or area for setting work is necessary. Barrett (1997) recommends “be sure that everyone can see the work being discussed...be sure the speaker is audible to everyone” (pp. 94-98). Though these are small details, the feeling of attempting to share a personal or emotional observation and being unheard by peers is not a positive one, and can derail student comfort with talking about art a surprising amount. It is the responsibility of the educator not only to ensure that whatever format analysis and critique occur in is equitably audible and comfortably visible, it is their responsibility as well to build a physical classroom environment that is one of warmth and comfort.

There are several steps that can be taken to ensure that a classroom environment feels positive and welcoming to students. The tangible impact of physical environment on student comfort and effectiveness has been exhaustively studied, and could be my subject of research in its own right, but I’ll try to share information that most relates to creating a space conducive to sharing and observing. In their article “The Classroom Environment: First, Last, and Always”, Roskos and Neuman (2011) note that “light, temperature, air quality, noise, crowding—all these elements affect the instructional process” (p. 113), and share several recommendations of how teachers can modify their space to make it more welcoming as a whole:

First, they can maximize any exposure to the natural light available in the classroom; they can use mixed artificial lighting (direct and indirect) to distribute and diffuse light.

Second, they can use sound-absorbing materials to lower the general acoustic level (e.g., curtains, panels, screens, plants) and limit background noise; they can provide small places or nooks for silence and concentration in the classroom space. (p. 113)

When these elements are all addressed, the art room becomes a place of solace and comfort for students, a space of exploration and development instead of assessment and evaluation. So often this is not the case for academic environments, and by establishing this unique level of comfort an art teacher predisposes their students to feel comfortable sharing and discussing their own work. Holley and Steiner (2005) note that when these conditions are achieved, “a safe classroom space is one in which students are able to openly express their individuality, even if it differs dramatically from the norms set by the instructor, the profession, or other students” (p. 50).

Formats for Analysis and Critique

Groupings and Peer- vs. Self-Analysis and Critique

Analysis and critique can be shared experiences or individual explorations, and both can occur in a visual arts classroom setting. Barrett (2000a) notes:

We can think of acts of interpreting as having two poles, one personal and individual, and the other communal and shared. An individual and personal interpretation is one that has meaning to me and for my life... A communal and shared interpretation is an understanding or explanation of a work of art that is held by a group of individuals with shared interests.

(p. 8)

Barrett also points out that “individual interpretations can broaden the community’s understanding of a work of art” and that “communal interpretations can inform individual interpretations, causing individual interpreters to reflect more, consider further” (p. 18).

Furthermore, there are benefits to having students use critique and analysis both around their own work and the work of peers. While the former is intrapersonal, the latter must be undertaken with great care: for the reasons discussed earlier in this paper, a critique with peers can easily veer into judgement or discomfort. I have personally witnessed, however, peer discussion and analysis of a piece of art solve a problem a student artist was struggling with in their work. Students will say things in group analysis such as “I can’t figure out why this looks empty on the left-hand side” and positively light up when a peer notes “You could continue the pattern from the right” and so on. Sometimes that additional set of eyes can be extremely helpful. If perception is an important part of a work of art—say, a student is trying to express a very specific message, something they feel strongly about—a session of analysis and discussion with peers when their work is in its formative stages can help them discern whether they are successfully executing their intent. One of the students in Blair’s (2006) research put it well when they said, referring to a well-run critique, “You can learn from other peoples’ designs because the atmosphere is created in such a way that you don’t feel intimidated.” The same subject goes on to say how “when you don’t get spoken down to...you learn the reasons [for making suggested changes] and you just move on and learn” (p. 86). Long (2020) reinforces that “classroom dialogue proves crucial for effective pedagogy...educating with dialogue seeks to eliminate the power structure of professor to student” (p. 86). Long goes on to propose that the four factors most important when considering dialogue in the classroom are using small groups, encouraging student engagement, building respect, and utilizing open questions (pp. 87-88).

As mentioned previously, it is beneficial not just to encourage a supportive and positive environment in critique but to vary its form as well. In the coming sections I will discuss both oral and written formats for critique and analysis but would first like to emphasize that both types can occur in varied arrangements. A written analysis or critique, for example, could be undertaken by the artist in regards to their own work; it could be a multi-faceted writing exercise wherein students respond to the artwork of their peers aligning with different prompts; it could be a paired experience where two student artists leave notes for one another while their respective works progress. Oral analysis or critique might exist in small groups, perhaps, where student artists are randomly assigned to discussion groups to examine works of art together, or might be in the realm of an interview-style exchange between student and educator where the student expands on symbolism and meaning in their work if desired. All this is to say that the structures in the coming paragraphs can and should be executed in great variety and with consideration given to different groupings and structures; when well-orchestrated, the benefits attributed to a system in one format would translate well to another.

Oral Format Analysis and Critique

Some methods of critique and analysis are meant to be done verbally. Stewart (2008, pp. 142-145) offers several different specific types of oral critiques and discusses their explicit intentions. I have assembled them on the following page in a condensed format:

Type of critique	Purpose served by critique	Methods/ practices of critique
Descriptive critique	Helps you look carefully, report clearly, see details and heighten your understanding of the design	Do not evaluate, tell stories, draw conclusions, or make recommendations; simply describe the visual organization of the work presented.
Cause-and-effect critique	<i>Analyzes</i> the compositional choices made by the artist	Discuss the consequences of compositional decisions, not just the choices themselves.
Compare/contrast critique	Demonstrates similarities or differences in historical periods or artistic styles	Note the similarities and differences between two or more works of art, either historically or in a studio/ peer-to-peer setting
Greatest strength/ unrealized potential	Build an atmosphere of sharing and feedback without descending into negativity	Consider one strength and one area for improvement for a work of art
Long-term project development self-critique	Maintain awareness of progress and purpose when working on a project of 10+ hours	Determine essential concept, explore polarities, move from general to specific, move from personal to universal, develop alternatives, edit out nonessentials, amplify essentials

Figure 2. Types of critiques. Adapted from Stewart (2008)

Stewart goes on to provide a series of questions or prompts intended for use to address the last line item above specifically—that is, questions that are best served for workshopping a long-term or large-scale project. Stewart recommends that these occur, among other means, “in a large-group critique, in small teams, [or] in discussion with your teacher” (p. 146). They are as follows:

1. Should anything be added to the design?
2. Should anything be subtracted?
3. What happens when any component is multiplied?

4. Can the design be divided into two or more separate compositions?
5. What happens when the material is changed?
6. What is the relationship of the piece to the viewer? What is the relationship between the artwork and its surroundings?
7. Can a change in position [of elements of the composition] increase impact?
8. Is [the composition] compelling from all points of view?
9. Will a change in viewing context increase meaning?
10. Will a change in order or organization alter the meaning? (Stewart, 2008, pp.150-153)

This last list serves as a possible example of how the format of analysis and critique can be useful even in dramatically different setups. For example, small groups of peers could sit and discuss these components together, but it would be equally effective for a pair of student artists to sit with one another and have dialogue about these prompts.

An additional curriculum that is generally intended for oral execution is the Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) process, as previously mentioned. VTS dictates that the teacher select works of art of increasing complexity and guide students through discussions of them using the following three questions: “What’s going on in this picture? What do you see that makes you say that? What more can we find?” (VTS, 2001, pp. 2-3). This highly specific approach to facilitating discussions comes with many guidelines and suggestions for best practices. These include:

- Ask the questions provided to initiate an active process of discovery and probing on the part of the students.
- Listen carefully to and acknowledge every answer by looking with the students at the image, pointing to those details mentioned, and paraphrasing what students say.

- Facilitate the discussion as it progresses, linking various converging and diverging opinions and helping students to synthesize a variety of viewpoints.
- Encourage further inquiry, keeping the process open-ended and asking students to stretch and search for information beyond what they know. (p. 2)

VTS further suggests that during oral examination of a work of art, teachers “point, and be physically expressive”, “paraphrase each persons’ response”, “remain open and accepting”, “let [students] talk”, “don’t worry about repetition”, and endeavor to link thoughts as related ideas arise in discussion (VTS, 2001, pp. 3-6). Each of these practices comes backed with solid logic as to why it matters for facilitating successful discussion and analysis. Further advice associated with the VTS curriculum suggests that teachers redirect questions with student research when possible—for example, “where could we look to find that information”—and keep discussions to around fifteen to twenty minutes per work of art. VTS suggests that the best size of a group for verbal discussion is 15-18 students, which is unrealistic in most school settings, but could also indicate a good possibility for a split class or multiple discussion groups within one classroom if the teacher is comfortable facilitating two groups at once.

In a more targeted approach, Elfland et. al. (1996) offer suggestions for stimulating a group discussion of art *in context*, a conscious confrontation of the limited scope presented by analysis executed in a more formalist manner. Their suggestions apply specifically to verbal discussion, and refer to older artwork and art created outside the classroom. They note that “an awareness of the fundamental relevance of culture to artistic production and appreciation is vital” and:

Students should be acquainted with ways to form questions and search out answers in order to gain access to such fundamental aspects of art. A student might get different answers from different sources and may have answers that differ from answers reported

or developed by other students. These conceptual conflicts can result in rich discussion in class. (1996, pp. 118-119)

Efland et. al. provide several possible prompts for this discussion activity, including “how did/does the art form function in the culture?” and “for whom/ do/did they produce the art form?” (p. 119). Through these and the other questions offered by the authors, perhaps a student-led oral classroom analysis of a work of art could remove itself from the isolated and restrictive realm of formalism and veneration of classical artworks and progress into critical thought regarding the true nature of art and its role in human life.

Barrett (2012) offers an interesting contribution that bears mentioning here; it’s not a series of specific prompts, as covered in the previous paragraph; instead, Barrett discusses suggestions for student artists on *how* they participate in the acts of analysis and critique. His segments include “general recommendations for good group discussions” and “suggestions for interactive studio critiques” (p. 215). He steers student artists to “be honest with and kind to one another; otherwise, no one will want to talk for fear of being dealt with harshly” and proposes that if participants hear something they don’t agree with, “first acknowledge that you heard what the other said, agree with parts of the position if you can, and then move the conversation forward” (p. 215).

Written Format Analysis and Critique

While a well-run and thoughtfully structured oral critique can encourage student artists to make informed decisions about their current and future work, the successful critique is not limited to the oral critique. Written critique strategies and methods are equally effective in allowing students to engage in deeper reflection of their work. House (2008) has done research indicating “many teachers use a written response form of critique” and that “having students

write about the work ensured that everyone participated” (p. 50). House proposes several possible forms for the written classroom critique:

They can be short statements about the work that are given to the artist. The instructor can pose a question and students can respond in their journals about their own work, or the work of others. Likewise, small groups can discuss and write their reactions, before sharing them with the entire group. (p. 50)

Furthermore, it is imperative that students build their writing prowess not only in but beyond the art classroom. Traditionally, writing has been devalued in some visual art classrooms. This attitude not only overlooks the value of the written critique process, it fails to offer a great deal of potential practice with the writing experience. Coorey and Caldwell (2013) suggest, “as educators, we play a critical role in a student’s willingness to write and we need to embrace the practice of writing in the classroom. If we continue to focus entirely on the visual, we are doing our students a disservice” (p. 3). Writing itself is a learning process; the value of employing effective written critique strategies has the potential to strengthen the student as an artist and as a writer.

The Journaling Process as Written Self-Critique. One valuable form of written critique for the student artist is the use of a journal. Each student is provided with a blank book in which they can reflect on their creative process. Students are encouraged to make this notebook personal, and the teacher should give examples, show samples, and provide prompts, but not dictate exactly what goes in the journal or how it is formatted. It can be messy or neat, it may include imagery and words blended in collage form, it may even be a place a student can vent. At the design inception stage of a work of art, the journal may include sketches, reference images, personal experiences, sources of inspiration, questions, and a list of brainstormed ideas.

However, once the student begins working on a piece, the journal becomes a valuable form of written self-critique.

One effective approach to offer as a prompt is to have the student take a color photograph of a work in progress. The student prints the photo in the classroom and puts it in the journal. From there, the teacher offers a series of questions to serve as prompts for reflection. It is best to offer several prompts and allow the students to select the questions that resonate most with them.

Prompts for self-critique might include the following questions:

1. What is something you could add to this work of art?
2. What emotion does your work of art communicate? Was that emotion intentional?
3. What message does your work of art communicate? Was that message intentional?
4. What visual references to other styles or artists are present in your artwork? Were those intended or unintended?
5. What is something you have learned while working on this piece?
6. What is something you might want to change about this work of art?

It works well to offer students class time to write in response to the picture and the prompts.

Then, after a designated amount of time, students can have the option of sharing with the group about the writing process. The sentence starters, “I noticed” “I’m surprised,” “I’m glad,” “I wonder,” and “I wish” make effective starting points for students who wish to share some of what they have written. These sentence starters can be kept as a list in the journal or posted in the classroom. Students can also be encouraged to go back after sharing and add to their written reflections.

The journal serves as a place to begin a project and as place to document the process. Through reflection and optional sharing, the journal also serves as a tool for self-critique and

development. Coorey and Rinnert propose that “including reflective methods in the...classroom makes the students consciously aware of their design process, providing them with the ability and knowledge to improve upon it” (2013, p. 6). Finally, students are often quite attached to and proud of their journals at the end of a class. In many ways, the journal is, in itself, a unique work of art.

Rotating Round-Robin Written Critique. As a tool to engage students in reflection about their own work and to encourage them to work for clarity of intent, a written round-robin approach to critique is highly effective. In the secondary classroom, this mostly silent session of written critique, as House (2008) notes, “ensures that everyone participate[s]” (p. 50). With the size of classes in most school districts today, it is almost impossible for each student to have an opportunity to share or be heard in an oral critique session. This written exercise ensures each voice will be heard many times (House, 2008, p. 50). As with the journaling activities, prompts provided by the teacher will help students offer original, focused, and non-repetitive feedback to their peers. In turn, the student artist can process the feedback and determine which insights offer possibility for change or movement forward.

Crucial to the efficacy of any written peer critique is prior clear instruction and role-playing on the use of supportive language mentioned earlier in this paper. Likewise, students will have been taught the purpose and uses of any form of critique. Ideally, the classroom community has been established as a supportive and safe environment before the round-robin approach is introduced.

To facilitate this activity, each student lays out a work-in-progress on tables or easels. The teacher provides students with three colors of index cards. For illustration, we will say yellow, green and blue. Each student gets three yellow cards and half as many green and blue cards as

there are students in the group. If there are thirty-four students in the classroom, for instance, the students would get 17 blue and green cards. On the three yellow cards, the artist writes a question they would specifically like feedback on from their peers and signs the card. These cards are collected, shuffled, and handed out three to each student. As they are distributed, the teacher ensures that the artist does not get their own question card back. Each student finds the work of art by the artist, answers the question, initials the card and leaves it by the work of art.

After the students complete their question cards, they then move around the classroom quietly and offer feedback on their peers' work. On each of their green card, they are coached to write a positive "noticing." These should be specific to the work of art and written in full sentences. The teacher can remind students of the less helpful, generic positive, such as "I like this picture" or "Good job" compared to a specific positive, such as "It is effective how you incorporate emojis as direct representation of emotion." As with the journaling activity, the teacher should provide sentence starters. These starters can be optional but often prove useful. Examples of sentence starters may include the following and can be posted in the room or provided as a hand-out:

- My eye is drawn to _____...
- I found _____ to be the most successful aspect of this image because _____...
- I found _____ to be the most difficult aspect of this image to understand because _____...
- Your use of _____ is effective to create _____...
- I admire _____...
- I notice how this makes me feel _____...

Students are instructed to leave the green card only when a green card has not already been offered to a work of art. This ensures that one student does not get many cards and others none.

Similarly, students are coached to use the blue card for “wonderings.” The students have learned, again at the beginning of the school year or semester, to phrase observations as questions. Once again, the sentence starters are helpful:

- What would happen if...
- What do you think is the effect of...
- I’m wondering why you chose to...
- Would it work well if you...

As with the green noticing card, students sign or initial their blue wonderings card and leave it with the work of art. Also as with the green card, students know to only leave one blue card for each work of art presented.

Students find this activity enjoyable and helpful. They often listen to personal music and have brief, quiet conversations as part of the process. The teacher moves about the room as well, but instead of writing cards offers support to students and helps any who are having trouble finding something to say. After the activity is complete, each student-artist will have 37 cards they can enjoy reading. The teacher can coach the students to place the cards in categories beyond the three colors. It is exciting to watch the students process and sort the feedback. After the students have read the cards, the teacher should allow a period of time where students can move about the space and ask for clarification and explanation. An effective finish to what is often a two-day activity is to end in large group discussion where students thank their peers for the insights, share “one big thing” they learned, and offer plans for moving forward. This finish can also be done in the artist’s journal.

In both journaling and in the activity above, the fact that analysis and critique occur in a written form furthers the student experience and allows interactions that might not be feasible in a traditional classroom setup. Writing can also be a quieter, less intimidating way to introduce student artists to thinking and talking about their art. Coorey and Rinnert (2013) noted that “class participation in [oral] critiques increased as a result of the writing exercises” (p. 10).

Implementing methods such as these can introduce analysis and critique into the classroom setting in a way that is carefully scaffolded and focused on positive student experience and creative outcomes.

Potential Uses for Analysis and Critique in the Secondary Art Classroom

This paper proposes that there are more pedagogically successful uses of critique in the secondary art classroom than the single-occurrence, final judgement style of critique that has been discussed previously, where the power lies mostly in the hands of the educator and the outcomes are often hurtful instead of helpful. These more positive applications include analysis and critique as methods of formative assessment, to clarify or expand students’ ideas about their art, to help build community, to renew student interest in art, and to problem-solve works in progress.

Analysis and Critique as a Formative Assessment for the Educator

Though most of the forms of analysis and critique discussed in this paper are referenced in the context of what they provide to *students*, you cannot study analysis and critique without covering the possible purposes they serve for the *educator*. We know that excessive summative assessment--in the form of classroom practices or standardized tests--have been proven to be ineffective in improving student learning or teacher efficacy. Ingram (2007) points at “the increasing technocratic pressure students experience through standardized forms of

accountability” and posits that they “may have a dehumanizing effect” (p. 25). In contrast to these high-pressure summative assessments, analysis and critique of a student artwork can provide valuable information about the progress of a student in the form of a formative assessment. Some visual arts educators, myself included, find many of the mainstream forms of assessment traditionally used in the classroom to be restrictive or inhibiting; multiple-choice questions and fill-in-the-blank statements often do not properly illuminate the development of students as visual artists. Instead, checking in with students about their artwork in a manner similar to a critique can provide information for teachers about the student’s progress.

These formative critiques can essentially take the form of observations; a teacher can walk the classroom looking over student’s work while providing encouragement, asking expanding questions and dialoging with students to help them cement their intent and direction of work. Dong et. al. (2021) cite research supporting that “the closer a student is to the teacher, the more interactions between the student and the teacher, the stronger the student’s participation, concentration and interest in learning” (p. 2). Instead of requiring quizzes or repeated submissions, critique walkthroughs such as this allow the teacher to maintain an understanding of the progress of their class without burying students in meaningless busywork. Despite the dramatic difference between the act of walking around and talking with students about their art and more traditional understandings of a critique format—that is, one person in the spotlight defending their art and being commented on—I am of the belief that these formative assessments are a critique nonetheless. When art teachers give projects or lessons, they do so with the knowledge that some students will take significantly longer than others to complete them. Keeping track of student progress using methods such as this formative ‘walking critique’ can allow art teachers to pace their curriculum to match their students comfortable working speed.

Analysis and Critique as Expanding Exercises for Student Artists

Along with allowing educators to gather information on the progress of their students, analysis and critique can also serve as a method to encourage students to think about art in ways they may not have previously. This sort of expansion of ways of thinking is highly encouraged in many contemporary curricula, and is sometimes even given more significance than rote subject area knowledge. The prompts provided below by Tucker (2002, pp. 59-87) serve this purpose when having students examine a work of art from artists outside their peer group, or when observing works of art from earlier human history or cultures outside their own; while these experiences are not the peer-to-peer critique forms discussed elsewhere in this paper they still fall solidly in the realm of the analysis.

Response Area	Prompts
Site as Context	Where is the artwork meant to be seen? How is the <i>site</i> incorporated into the composition of the work?
Subject Matter, Function, and Form	What <i>subject matter</i> does the work depict, and for what <i>purpose</i> was the object designed?
Historical Context	How does the work reflect the <i>historical era</i> (or eras) in which it was produced?
Patrons, Performers, and Audience	Who creates the object, who speaks for it, who defines it, who sees it: what roles do <i>patrons, performers, and audience members</i> play in the production of art?

Figure 3. Prompts for reflecting on art in context. Adapted from Tucker (2002)

Tucker's prompts help move the student artists past simply looking at a work of art and making value judgements and into the realm of understanding the place visual art has in our lives as a whole.

Ingram (2007) is another writer who addresses the experience of analysis and critique as one that can expand student thought. The detailed analytical experiences she quantifies are “activities that address a variety of thinking and learning styles, that allow students to derive personal meaning from the artworks, that give students the opportunity to think about art in ways that they may not be accustomed to” (p. 30). These activities include assuming the postures and poses of characters in figural studies to experience the works of art physically, creatively staging possible exchanges between shapes, lines or characters from works of art using imagined dialogue, exploring emotional connections to objects seen in paintings by searching their memories for objects that hold symbolic or historical significance in their own lives, and writing responses to works of art in the form of a letter from the artist to the viewer or the student to the artist (2007, pp. 30-32). Each of these activities is an excellent example of an extending exercise—one that takes the discussion and analysis of a work of art and pushes it toward a meaningful experience, connected with students’ lives and real experiences. Experiences like these push analysis and critique beyond a simple breakdown of visual elements and principals and into the realm of students contextualizing art and humanizing their connections with it.

Analysis and Critique as Methods for Building Artistic Community

Effective instruction in interpersonal skills, establishing a balance of power and designing a comfortable physical environment can contribute to creating a safe space in which students can work together to critique their own work and the work of their peers. In turn, creating that safe space can lead to even more comfort, enabling increasingly in-depth critique and analysis. The notion of building community is difficult to define, but classroom teachers who seek to incorporate collaborative learning in their instructional model will identify how central the concept is to genuine learning and growth. Gillespie (2014) identifies “environment” as

“something as simple as a physical space,” but goes on to note that it is also “a complex system of experiences and relationships” (p. 13). These relationships are not simply what the students have with each other before entering the art classroom. In fact, the teacher can guide students in discovering that judgements and stereotypes students may hold about each other prior to working in the collaborative environment are flawed. The successfully run critique can help to break down pre-established opinions students may hold about their peers. Furthermore, as these social barriers are allowed to dissolve, the critique can become both honest and supportive. May (2011) proposes “when art educators allow for open dialogue and collaborative discourse between students and themselves in studio critiques, a rhizomatic experience may evolve as participants each build upon each other’s comments, one response leading to another response and so on” (p. 36).

Other community-building techniques which will lead to student comfort in the classroom and, in turn, increased comfort with the critique process include the notion of “playing.” Gude and others have asserted that “students can create meaningful artmaking by playing with methods, materials, and ideas” (Gude in Gillespie, 2014, p. 14). The teacher can incorporate events in the classroom that include collaborative making and encourage a non-linear and explorative approach. Creating an environment—and specific projects—where students are encouraged to manipulate media quickly and collaboratively and be freed from any notion of a singular finished product is an effective way to help students relax and enjoy being with each other in the classroom environment. Stanhope (2011) proposes that “the sharing of ideas and practice as a group, helps to increase student’s confidence in the communication of their ideas.” She goes on to suggest that “it is vital that students have confidence to give and receive constructive criticism to and from their peers. It is through this dialogue that issues, prejudices

and emerging philosophies have room to develop” (p. 393). The support given by the group, through discussion and questioning each other’s work, scaffolds collaborative environment. All students’ projects, no matter what the theme, are collaborative in terms of the development and sharing of practice. (p. 393)

Analysis and Critique to Renew Interest in and Enthusiasm for Art

I am of the belief that one of the primary outcomes of critique and analysis should be a renewed interest in and enthusiasm for art. An approach that I have found very helpful to achieve this result is to leave assignments open-ended in terms of execution and message. This way, when analysis and critique occur in the classroom, students benefit from seeing the diverse and varied responses multiple people from different backgrounds and experience levels can have to the same prompt or concept. Gude (2007) notes, “through a quality art education, students become familiar with, are able to use the languages of multiple art and cultural discourses, and are thus able to generate new insights into their lives and into contemporary times” (p. 14). She further points out that interest in and enthusiasm for art develops critical thinking skills applicable beyond the art classroom, and posits that “these abilities to investigate, analyze, reflect and represent are critical skills for citizens of a participatory democracy” (p. 14).

Analysis and Critique as Problem-Solving Exercises for Works in Progress

In a high school visual art setting, there can sometimes be a fearfulness of experimentation or an unhealthy emphasis on final products. Occasionally, this can result in students who semi-finish a work of art and then are reluctant to play around, modify it or push their personal boundaries for fear of ‘ruining’ the work; I truly cannot count the times I’ve heard that exact phrase in my classroom. Using analysis and critique as structured methods of examining one’s own work can sometimes help students break through this barrier and complete work in ways

they may have been fearful to do independently. Stewart (2008) gives a series of questions or prompts intended for use as a self-examination by an artist looking to improve the efficacy of their work of art or solve compositional problems (pp. 150-153):

1. Should anything be added to the design?
2. Should anything be subtracted?
3. What happens when any component is multiplied?
4. Can the design be divided into two or more separate compositions?
5. What happens when the material is changed?
6. What is the relationship of the piece to the viewer? What is the relationship between the artwork and its surroundings?
7. Can a change in position [of elements of the composition] increase impact?
8. Is [the composition] compelling from all points of view?
9. Will a change in viewing context increase meaning?
10. Will a change in order or organization alter the meaning?

These prompts are a good representation of an approach to analysis and critique that I have found very helpful in a classroom setting. Students are far more receptive to this method of thinking about their art—essentially brainstorming and self-analysis—than they would be to a highly traditional form of critique. The ‘written round-robin’ classroom activity previously discussed can fall into this use category, as one of its components specifically addresses the questions student artists have about their works in progress. As mentioned previously, when the intent and purpose of critique and analysis are made clear they are much more effective and pose fewer risks for unintended negative effects.

Conclusion

Gude (2007) proposes that “through a quality art curriculum, students will learn that they do not know many things that they once thought were certain. They will learn to see many things differently. They will learn new strategies of making meaning through which they can interrogate received notions of ‘the real’. They will learn how to play, not just with materials, but also with ideas” (p. 14). I find through my research here that, when executed correctly and cautiously, analysis and critique can help accomplish these goals. When done poorly, visual art critique and analysis can lean heavily on formalism, cause unintended emotional impacts and trauma, and become an unwilling vehicle for implicit bias. However, if a teacher works to teach and practice supportive language, establish and ensure a democratic balance of power in the classroom, establish transparency of purpose and clarity of intent, and ensure a comfortable physical and emotional environment, analysis and critique can be successfully executed in many forms: oral, written, small-group, large-group, or individually.

With these procedures and methods in place, multiple uses of analysis and critique in the secondary visual art classroom become clear. They can serve as a formative assessment for the educator leery of standardized or data-reliant traditional assessments; they can encourage student artists to expand their thinking about visual art; they can build the artistic community of the classroom; they can serve as a method to help student artists problem-solve or workshop ongoing works of art; and most importantly they can renew student interest in and enthusiasm for art, seeding creative growth, engagement and excitement rather than qualifying and adjudicating.

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