A NATURALISTIC STUDY OF PRIMARY AGED STUDENT'S VISUAL AND VERBAL RESPONSES TO SELECTED VISUAL STIMULI

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An important research question in the 1970s was the relative contributions of maturation and learning to the rate of artistic development (Wieder, 1977). Whereas Lowenfeld and his followers emphasized the biological development of the child and discouraged adult interference with children's art production, later researchers emphasized the importance of instruction in the artistic development of children (Eisner, 1973).

At this same time, some researchers began to see a need for an alternate research methodology other than the empirical model that pervaded educational research. Empirical research emphasized objectivity and reliability to such a degree that findings often had little educational significance. The emphasis on quantitative data caused researchers to neglect the important contributions of qualitative data. An experiment that focuses on an isolated variable, in a controlled setting, over a short period of time has little in common with what happens in a regular classroom setting where all variables interact over the course of about nine months.

I decided to conduct an alternate research during the 1984-1985 school year. The study could be termed **naturalistic** in that it had three characteristics associated with naturalistic methodology. First, there was an initially exploratory and open-ended approach to the research problem. The stated purpose of the study was to document my teaching plan, using two related units, with respect to how students respond to my instruction both verbally and in their artistic production. My investigation was not to gain evidence in support of an hypothesis but to gain insight as to how I could improve my teaching, generate questions that could serve as a focus for future research, and work out methodological problems in conducting a naturalistic study. Secondly, the research took place in a natural setting, that is, in the classes I normally taught. Thirdly, I was involved in the

study as both a researcher and a participant (Alexander, 1982).

My objectives were as follows:

1. To document my unit plans and lesson plans emphasizing the component of awareness, design, skill, creativity, appreciation, and responsibility.
2. To tape record my presentation of each unit and lesson to the children.
3. To take slides of the visual stimulation used to solicit verbal and productive responses from the students.
4. To tape record my students' verbal responses to the stimulation.
5. To take slides of students' productive responses to the stimulation.
6. To keep a log during those units to record various observations of students' verbal responses and actions while working on their art projects.

The study was conducted at a primary elementary school in the midwest that consists of grades K through 2. I decided, initially, to include all my classes in the study and focus on units that featured geometric shapes as building blocks for students to create animals and people. It soon became apparent that this was unrealistic, due to the limitations placed on my time by my teaching responsibilities. In the actual study I included only 12 first grade classes, 5 second grade classes, 4 kindergarten classes, and a readiness class and only focused on the animal unit.

The Unit

The objectives for all three grade levels were primarily the same.

1. Students would know the names of five geometric shapes (circle, square, rectangle, oval)
2. Students would be able to point out these shapes in slides of real objects and in reproductions of art works
3. Students would be able to choose geometric shapes and assemble

them to construct a basic body for the animal of their choice

4. Students would be able to use geometric shapes to create animal forms with drawing materials, construction paper, and paint

5. Students would complete the pictures by adding details to the animals and backgrounds of their art work

The kindergarten and first grade classes viewed the same presentation which focused on locating geometric shapes in real objects, an artist's painting, and a student's drawing. The second grade viewed slides of real animals and artists' paintings which depicted animals. These were projected on a large piece of paper. As the students made decisions about which shapes each part of the animal's body resembled, I drew that shape around each part of the animal's body. When the projector was turned off the basic geometric body was left. Students then made suggestions about what details could be added to complete the picture. For their first art projects, students were to choose any animal they wished. All students were provided with a wide range of photographs of animals and art reproductions depicting animals. Some were hung around the room; others were placed in various visual files to which the children had access.

Observations and Questions

By documenting my students' verbal responses and art products I obtained evidence of more common student responses and unusual responses. As a result, several questions occurred to me that suggested avenues for further research.

Observations: Certain items in the slide presentation were mentioned by the students over and over again in all classes. Often they were mentioned in almost the same order.

Questions: What items are pointed out most often in each slide? Which are usual responses and which are unusual responses? How long does it take for the obvious responses to be exhausted? Would spending more time

on fewer slides develop children's powers of discrimination better than spending a little time on numerous slides?

Observations: More second graders made use of visuals in their art work than did first graders, some of whom paid attention to the visu some did not. Kindergarten students used visuals the least.
Questions: In a given class, what percentage of students are influenced by visuals and what percentage are not? Are the same students consistently influenced or are different students influenced at different times? What role does chronological age and/or development play in a student's awareness and use of visuals?

Observations: Some children chose one animal for their drawing and repeated that animal in both the construction paper project and the painting project. Other children chose a different animal each time.
Questions: How many children use the same animal in each medium? Are all their pictures the same, or are there differences? What reasons do the children give for their choices?

Observations: It appeared that what was learned about using shape in drawing carried over to the paper project to a greater degree than to the painting project.
Questions: Looking at individual students, what characteristics do they carry over from one medium to the next? How does the change of medium affect their art work? Are there ways I could modify my painting lessons to better accommodate qualities of various media?

Observations: Certain animals were chosen over and over by many students. Often I had to rearrange seating so several students could share the same visual.
Questions: What are the most popular animals? Which visuals seem to impress the students the most? Why? What reasons do students give for their choices? When several different students are obviously influenced

by the same visual, how is their art work similar and how is it different?

Observations: Some students attempted to draw an animal exactly as it appeared in the visual. Others, drawing from the same visual, modified the visual to accomodate their art work. For example, one student viewing a photograph of a koala bear in a three quarter view with only one eye visible drew the bear with only one eye. Others drawing from the same photograph, changed the view to a profile or a frontal view.
Questions: How do students handle what they perceive in a photograph or art reproduction and what they know to be true about an animal? Do students perceive visuals as something to copy exactly or as resources for the details in their own drawings?

Observations: Some students were able to verbalize about the use of shape in art reproductions but were unable to successfully use the shapes to make their own art work. Others had no problem doing either task. I was unable to discern if there were any who could use the shapes in their own work but were unable to verbalize.
Questions: What are the characteristics of those students who do well both in verbalizing about art and in making art as compared to those who have difficulty with one or both these tasks? What relationship is there between a student's ability to respond verbally and his/her ability to produce good art?

Observations: The majority of students who used the visuals in making their art work chose photographs rather than art reproductions. More photographs than art reproductions were available for use.
Questions: Are more students influenced by photographs than art reproductions? Does the ratio of available photographs to art reproductions play a part in the strength of influence of each? Do specific student characteristics play a part in determining what kind of visuals are chosen as inspiration for art production? What are the characteristics of students who seem especially attracted to using art reproductions as a basis for

their art work?

Conducting this type of naturalistic study has many advantages. Teachers can document the outcomes of their instruction and evaluate effects of their teaching. They also can be led to a better understanding of their students and generate ideas for improved instruction. Researchers are able to elicit questions from the field that may be more applicable to the actual practice of teaching. This type of research offers researchers opportunities to work out methodological problems before embarking on a more elaborate research study.

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