

INTERPRETING THE FRAMES

Interpreting the Frames: An Analysis of the Implementation of the New South Wales
Visual Arts Syllabus, Year 9

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May 28, 2001

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Abstract

The content of US K-12 art education is open to debate. In the past ten years, under the influence of Discipline Based Art Education (DBAE), curriculum writers have expanded the school art experience beyond the processes of art making to include aspects of art history, art criticism, and aesthetics. While this practice reframes the context of art making to inform it historically and theoretically, it falls short of cultural critique, which can also include an incorporation of visual and material culture study. It is imperative that US educators look for other methods of teaching art that include diverse art forms and that reflect the interdisciplinary structure and social concerns of our contemporary culture.

This dissertation reviews a State-wide art education curriculum that includes all of the above topics, art making, art history, art criticism, aesthetics, and cultural and theoretical criticism as it occurs within the classrooms of two state run schools in Sydney, Australia. New South Wales (NSW) divides its art education curriculum into conceptual Frames, the subjective, the cultural, the structural, and the postmodern,, in order to direct ways of identifying, investigating, explaining, understanding, and judging works of art (NSW Support Document, 1997, p. 26). The Frames enable art educators and students to find connections between artistic forms, practices, their content, and their context.

This research project included a seven week case study, from July 25, until September 8, 2000, of two Year Nine Additional (elective) art classrooms, of two experienced art teachers within two public high schools in Sydney's northern suburbs, Hornsby Girls, a selective school, and Pennant Hills, a coeducational institution. Both schools' art departments and their student bodies

have excellent reputations locally. I observed the art teaching methodologies of the two teachers, analyzed the teachers' interpretation of their subject matter, which was chosen from the NSW

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Syllabus, and recorded student interpretations of these subjects. My question was: **How do these two teachers interpret the NSW Syllabus?** Do the Frameworks for study present a template for a theoretical understanding of the nature of art making practices, as it claims? Do the teachers interweave aspects of art making with art history, art criticism, and cultural studies, and cultural critique as suggested within the Visual Arts, Years 7-10 Support Document? How do the Frames fit together within a course of study? Or is the Syllabus a written document that is largely ignored in favor of uncritical studio practices? My concluding query is How can NSW art education practices and curriculum inform those of US art educators?

Introduction

The NSW Visual Arts Syllabus, Years 7-10 (1994)¹ ,, is part of a K-12 continuum together with the Visual Arts strand of the Creative and Practical Arts Syllabus K-6 and the Visual Arts Syllabus Years 11-12” (Visual Arts Years 7-10 Syllabus, 1994, p.1). Visual Arts, along with Dance, Drama, Music, and Classical Ballet comprise the 7-10 Creative Arts Learning Area.

The Syllabus contains two courses, a Mandatory course and an Additional studies (elective) course. The Mandatory course is graded pass/fail and provides core experiences in the Visual Arts for all students in Years 7-10. The course is used to meet NSW Board of Studies one hundred hour mandatory requirement in the Visual Arts for the School Certificate. This one hundred hours is usually spread over the period of two years, during grades 7, 8; students usually have two forty

¹ Within this paper “NSW Syllabus (1994)” will refer to the NSW Syllabus (1994) Years 7-10.

minute art classes a week, although this can vary according to school structure (personal conversation, Gooding-Brown, 2000).

Students electing to engage in an extensive, in depth study of the Visual Arts may do so in addition to Mandatory studies during grades 9-10, Students engaging in Additional studies usually visit the art room up to four times per week for either forty minute or one hour and a half blocks, as is common in US schools. Both Mandatory and Additional studies are internally assessed and

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recorded on the student's School Certificate. Additional studies can comprise 300, 200, or 100 hours of time in addition to Mandatory work.

Visual Arts Practices, Content, Teaching and Learning

The NSW Syllabus, which was created by practicing K-12 art educators, art education professors, and State officials, is structured around three main components: **Visual Arts Practices**, **Content**, and **Teaching and Learning** (NSW syllabus, 1994, p.1.). The **Visual Arts Practices** include art making, critical study, which also includes aesthetics, and historical studies; they are modeled upon the practices found within the field of contemporary Visual Arts. That is, teachers and students take note and emulate the methods in which artists research and are informed by their own artistic inquiry as they incorporate life experiences and diverse and interdisciplinary fields of study into their work.

According to the NSW Syllabus (1994), within the art making portion of their studies, students become familiar with visual conventions which allow them to produced individually and socially meaningful art work (p. 16). Within the critical studies portion students learn how to develop arguments that support their ideas (p, 17). Through historical study students consider several historians' interpretations of artworks in catalogues, journals, books, and electronic media that belie social perspectives and power structures (p. 17).

Content within the NSW Syllabus refers to artistic **subject matter**, the **forms** that it takes, and the subjective, cultural, structural, and postmodern **Frames** that inform it. **Subject Matter** broadly identifies areas of interest that may be interpreted by the students visually. Subject matter units include People; Other Living Things; Objects; Places and Spaces; Events; and Issues and Theories. **Forms** refers to a range of media suggested for art making, which includes drawing, painting, three dimensional forms, printmaking, photography, fiber, ceramics, and electronic media. Selection of Subject Matter and Forms may be enlarged or added to by teachers and students in

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order to match their own areas of expertise; mixed media, installation, and performance art are additional artistic forms that are used within the schools.

Teachers select **Subject Matter** to explore through a broad range of **Forms** using the lenses of the **Frames** to create curricula. The Frames provides viewpoints through which one can address the processes of art making, art criticism, and art historical analysis. The **Teaching and Learning** component assists teachers in planning and relating this subject matter into a sequential curriculum. The NSW Visual Arts Syllabus document (1994) states that the state Syllabus provides for both flexibility and consistency in school implementation, but that all teachers must provide scope and sequence in their selection of content and organize their classes around art making, art criticism and historical studies. According to the Syllabus, both Mandatory and Additional studies emphasize art making.

Students within both Mandatory and Additional courses are required to keep a Visual Process Diary (VAP) which is used for recording, planning, and reflective purposes. The Diary provides evidence of a student's exploration of the content as it pertains to the various structural Frames, and it records the development of the students' thinking over a course of study. It acts as a means for the student's individual voice to be heard. Each school, and even each teacher, may format the VAP differently for their students

The NSW Syllabus (1994) expresses concern for both individual students' specific needs and contemporary social concerns when it asks that Practices and Content reflect the considerations of the Common and Agreed National Goals for Schooling(1989) and the Board of Studies' Statement of Values and Supporting Draft Statements of Principles (1993). The Syllabus states that the following perspectives be included within art education courses: Australian, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander; multicultural, including the education of students from non-English speaking backgrounds; the environment; gender equity; new technologies; the education of gifted and talented students; the education of students with disabilities and learning difficulties; the education of socioeconomically disadvantaged students; and the education of isolated students

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(p.40). Both schools that I observed included a unit of Aboriginal Studies within their Mandatory art curriculums and developed units concerning environmental and gender issues.

In planning programs, the NSW Syllabus asks that teachers give consideration to the need for a variety of teaching strategies and methods of presentation and structure learning activities around available resources. The NSW Syllabus (1994) encourages the teacher to teach to his/her strengths and expertise and utilize his/her personal interests in the development of art education curricula that meets the needs of his or her student body. It recognizes the "...teacher as motivator, facilitator, provider of information, initiator of ideas, [and] demonstrator of methods and techniques" (p.31).

Aims

The aims of the NSW Syllabus (1994) are diverse. They not only enable students to evaluate and communicate their own ideas and feelings, but they also facilitate an understanding

of how art works are identified, created, categorized by individuals, societies, and cultures. This categorization includes placing art works within cultural contexts, both contemporary and historical.

These art works also include cultural artifacts, for the Syllabus not only evaluates works within the traditional gallery oriented art world, but includes the works of craftspersons, architects, and designers. The Syllabus also stipulates that the NSW curricular content is evaluated according to a construct that allows both teachers and students to continually reflect upon their own methods of analysis. This construct, called The Frames, is peculiar to the NSW Syllabus and provides a common ground for understanding various approaches to the creation of art work and to the dialogue surrounding it.

Frames

“The introduction of the Frames into the Visual Arts 7-10 syllabus was motivated by a concern that the previous visual arts Syllabus was too focused on process” (Draft Visual Arts

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Years 11-12 Support Document, 1995, p. 6). The previous syllabus was subjectively based and focused upon the creative problem solving model of art and upon modernist aesthetics which believe that the aesthetic experience is a natural condition, rather than a construct of artistic understanding and an interpretation of social conditions.

The advent of the current Visual Arts Years 7-10 Syllabus in 1994 with its implementation in 1995/6 was a result of visual arts teachers’ concerns that “ for some time that the meaning of many contemporary art works presented at Sydney biennials and *Perfecta* were largely inaccessible through aesthetic contemplation alone” (Draft Visual Arts Years 11-12 Support Document, 1995, p.7). These works were based within a conceptual and contextual framework that informed both art making and art viewing. Classroom art making practices based upon a traditional contemplation of artistic beauty failed to confront the social, historical, and critical framework behind the art making.

Hence, visual art teachers established the following frames as a means of establishing a conceptual dialogue within the 7-10 classroom. (Visual Arts Years 7-10 Support Document, 1997).

The **Subjective Frame** explores the intuitive, emotional, and sensory experience behind a work of art as felt by the creator and by the viewer. The unconscious and the psychological factor into Subjective Frame art making. **The Cultural Frame** factors the community presence and social identity into an artistic identity. Such cultural orientations include the study of cultural ideologies; the effects of race, class, and gender; artistic movements and their manifestations as social ideologies; the relationship of technological and scientific innovation to artistic practices; and the influence of politics and economics on art making. **The Structural Frame** views art work as a symbol system and a visual language and uses semiotics as a means of studying formal relationships. This Frame includes the formal analysis of art as we know it. **The Postmodern Frame** analyzes the recontextualization of art images into new forms. These appropriations include irony as a cultural critique and as a form of revealing underlying power structures. The Frameworks are not mutually exclusive; they often intersect. Their main purpose is to encourage a dialogue of

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interpretation as works of art are described and placed within social and historical contexts. (Visual Arts Years 7-10 Support Document, 1977, pp. 25-29).

The teachers whom I interviewed within my school placements all used The Frames within classroom curriculum, and the two teachers with whom I was placed referred to the The Frames' terminology within classroom discussion and lecture. Their students demonstrated a knowledge of The Frames' levels of meaning within assignments completed within their VAPDs, and the Year Nine students, while feeling most comfortable, as would US students,

interpreting art works in terms of the Subjective and Structural Frames, managed to understand that art works are peculiar to cultural understanding (Cultural Frame), and that art works could contain social and political commentary (Postmodern Frame). Students in the academically advanced selective high school had no difficulty in viewing their own art making and art studying as a lens through which they were viewing the world and could use The Frames as a means of talking about it.

“A Sense of Place--Suburbia” Unit Plan

Units of instruction (subject matter) within schools using the NSW Syllabus revolve around one or more Frames and incorporate many forms (media). For instance, at Pennant Hill High School, within an eleven week unit called “A Sense of Place--Suburbia” students drew portions of the surrounding neighborhood on location in order to develop small scale mixed media postcards that were their personal reactions to suburban life. Within the same unit, which is couched within the Cultural and Postmodern Frames, the students, through their own research, came to understand historical periods of Australian domestic architecture and then recognize contemporary architecture’s appropriations. They photographed and made floor plans of their own homes and then analyzed them according to the Australian domestic architectural styles: Colonial, Victorian, Federation, Bungalow, and Contemporary (Strange and Familiar Environments Lesson Plan, Pennant Hills High School, 2000).

The Unit’s Critical Study included an examination of the suburban environment and a discussion of issues relating to it, such as homogeneity vs. individualism; council ordinances and restrictions; the relationship of the house to the site; and the suitability of suburban project

homes to the Australian environment. Within this process students recorded the many accouterments of suburban life, such as letter boxes, sign posts, electricity poles, curb construction, etc., and often contrasted it to the native Australian bush that the suburbs displaced. Students collaged their visual suburban research into a culminating Term Art Making project, a multi-layered mixed media postcard and print of aspects of suburbia.

As a part of the Unit's Critical Study, the Year Nine teacher related the unit to the art works of Australian surfer graphic artist, Reg Mombassa, whose witty visual commentary on Australian suburban life appears on up market t-shirts and surfer items, as well as that of other artists, such as Aboriginal artist, Lin Onus, whose installation pieces critically comment upon the displacement of Aboriginals from main stream Australian culture. (Strange and Familiar Environments Lesson Plan, 2000, Pennant Hills High School). The teacher relayed to me within a personal interview that she was committed to using the art lesson as a means for students to become more aware of their own physical and cultural environment (personal interview, August 2000.) The Suburban Unit's contents incorporate the Subject Matter "Places and Spaces" as suggested by the 7-10 Syllabus.

The Year Nine teachers at Hornsby Girls' School interpreted the "Places and Spaces" subject matter by creating a semester long unit, two Term unit around the theme: "Nothing Lasts Forever--Exploration of the Urban Environment." Within this unit, Year Nine girls took a class excursion to the center of Sydney where they recorded both vital and decaying urban settings through the use of photography and of drawing. Within their VAPDs and class lectures, students and teachers discussed "...the contrasts between Modern Utopian views of the City and the Postmodern reality of the city in decay." (Year Nine Overview 2000, Hornsby Girl's High School.) The teachers used the grid as a metaphor for the modern city and the machine

aesthetic, and within the students' beautifully designed VAPDs, the girls rearranged their photocopied lecture notes covering the works of Boccioni, Leger, and Mondrian, into grid formats. They also studied the works of artists Mandy Martin, Niki de St. Phalle, and Jeff Smart to understand artist's depictions of cities in decay.

Within the Art Making part of the Unit the Hornsby students created six different spreads within their VAPDs, three that metaphorically depicted the city as utopia, and three that metaphorically depicted the city in decay. I was able to witness the second part of the Art Making portion which included the creation of Urban Totems, three-dimensional structures made from found materials, such as fence posts, wires, screws, and scrap metal that represented either the city in decay or the city as utopia. When I interviewed the girls about their art making process, they were able to explain their preliminary research, refer to specific artists from the unit who influenced them, and metaphorically link their materials to meanings that they had created for them. The inclusion of both critical and historical studies had truly informed their art making.

Higher School Certificate

Some of these girls, along with some of the students at Pennant Hills High School were planning to take the two-year Higher School Certificate (HSC) Course in the Visual Arts in Years 11 and 12. This course includes both a State-wide written exam in critical and historical studies and a final portfolio review, both of which are internally and externally assessed for a mark that is factored into final marks received in other academic subjects for a final grade point average. This final high school grade point average determines a student's eligibility to major in certain courses of study, be they design, law, mathematics, biology, etc. at various state run universities (Margo Armitage, personal communication, 2000). Therefore, the critical and historical backgrounds that these students receive in Years 7 through 10 is sequential and culminates in a body of artistic knowledge that enables the student to successfully think and write about art as well as make

informed decisions relating to their own art making. Because the high school exam changes yearly,

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there is no way that the teacher can teach to the exam, therefore, the teacher must insure that the students gain the necessary interpretive and critical skills to both conduct research and reflect upon it within the art class room; this process is meant to emulate the practices of the art world, which includes writing and thinking critically about art as well as making it.

Unlike the Higher School Certificate, students earning a School Certificate, a culmination of Years 7-10, are internally assessed. Individual teachers use suggested Syllabus Outcomes as demonstrated within the 7-10 Support Document along with their school's assessment policy to determine student assessment. School curriculum and teacher performance come under review by the NSW Board of Studies every four years (Gooding-Brown, personal communication, 2000). To stay abreast of current practices, classroom teachers maintain close contact, sharing pedagogical methods and curriculum units through area Cluster meetings. The Board of Studies appoints and trains willing classroom teachers to act as assessors for the HSC. During an intense three week period during the end of Term 4, these teachers, who are paid a small stipend for their services, work in small groups, often traveling across the state, to discuss and mark visual and written student work. This assessment process acts as an extraordinary vehicle for disseminating current classroom, theoretical, and art world information. Also, classroom teachers regularly attend graduate courses and seminars to keep abreast with changes in the field (Armitage, personal communication, 2000).

The HSC exam that is written yearly by a task force from the NSW Board of Studies along with instructors from COFA acts as a benchmark for teacher performance. Teachers must be aware of current art world theory and practices in order to prepare their students to sit the rigorous written theoretical exam and to create and defend insightful and well crafted bodies of work.

Students who receive high marks for their HSC work receive State citations. A yearly exhibition of selected student HSC work from both public and private schools, called Artexpress, hangs in the national Art Gallery of New South Wales as well as in other venues throughout the city and is one of the most widely attended visual arts events in Sydney. A published catalog records the included work

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as well as the students' written statements. The public notes what schools are recognized for their strong art departments, and art is taken seriously as an academic discipline within the State curriculum.

In conclusion, by visiting the classrooms of two Year Nine teachers, one at Hornsby Girls, and one at Pennant Hills High School, spending entire days with them, alternately, during the Third Term of the Four Term school year and by attending a two-day Cluster seminar called to discuss the implementation of a new Visual Arts HSC, I was able to witness how two active and engaging art educators, along with fifty other NSW art educators consistently and sequentially treat Art Education as a structured, academically, and aesthetically rigorous curricular discipline, using the NSW Visual Arts Syllabus and its Framework of interpretation.

Personal Interest

Recently, as a first year full-time ninth grade public school art teacher in Reston, VA, I have come to appreciate the amount of time, effort, and resources it takes to create an Art 1 curriculum that includes works of contemporary artists along with critical and historical references pertaining to it. I have also come to realize the difficulties involved in encouraging a classroom of thirty students of widely divergent academic capabilities to both speak and write about art within a setting that has been largely reserved solely for art making. Admittedly, I have a long way to go before my curriculum and my classroom results begin to emulate those that I observed within the two high schools in Sydney.

As a consolation, I have been told by the Australian teachers that I was with that NSW Visual Arts school results can be widely varying and are often solely dependent upon the efforts of the teachers within the schools in spite of all of the Syllabus's good intentions. I was even taken by my host teachers to a school whose Visual Arts classroom and curriculum was left in disarray by a previous teacher. As with US schools, teacher expertise, student willingness to participate, and teaching facilities all play a part in creating student outcomes. For my own research, I was fortunate

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to have been invited to observe two best practice schools, and even they were not without some routine difficulties. Visual Arts pedagogy continues to be both a performative and an evolving process, and even the best teachers do not hold the final answers.

Some Research Conclusions

Within my research I observed how two NSW art educators integrated the practices of the art world into their Year 9 Mandatory curriculum as they interpreted subject matter through the structure of conceptual Frames. About sixty per cent of classroom time was allotted to art making and forty percent was allotted to "theory" or what US educators would call aesthetic and social critique as well as art historical practices (personal communications, Pennant Hills High and Hornsby Girls' School, 2000). Since the students recorded their critical writings and historical research within their VAPDs, I was able to observe for myself that well over half of them were reflective learners in Pennant Hills, while most of them were within the Hornsby selective school.

While the Year 9 curriculum was prescriptive within both schools, and students were assigned defined thematic projects with specific outcomes, such as the creation of postcards, sculptures, ceramic abstractions, etc., students used personal research, such as drawings, photographs, or evaluations of the works of various artists which was part of the course content

to inform their final art making projects. The students recorded their research, reflections, and analysis within VAPD's that then acted as valuable sets of notes available for future projects. I was told in personal interview within both observed schools that Years 7-10 curriculum is prescribed by the teacher in order to present the student with a breadth of art making experiences and a study of range of contemporary and historical artists in order to build a foundation of disciplinary knowledge from which a student may draw when he or she comes to create his or her personal art portfolio in the end of Year 11 and throughout Year 12 HSC.

Unlike in the US, art history is not taught in a chronological fashion in NSW, for, as the teachers follow the Visual Arts Syllabus, they choose a range of artists to study from a variety of historical periods, with an emphasis upon the contemporary, linking them thematically by subject matter, and analyzing them through the lenses of the four Frame: Subjective, Cultural, Structural, and Postmodern. I have also observed how these Frames, which could potentially have positivist overtones, have been treated fluidly as the constructs for dialogue that they were designed to be.

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Newly written classroom texts, such as Artwise by Glenis Israel, created by classroom teachers teaching concurrently as they wrote, published and distributed solely in Australia, translate the works of both contemporary and historical artists, designers, and cultural groups in language that can be easily understood by high school students according to the standards of the Years 7-10 and Years 11-12 Visual Arts Syllabi. These texts address issues of postmodernism, critical and cultural theory, along with semiotics in a manner that is non threatening to school students and that enables them to make connections across historical periods and to connect diverse subject matter, such as literature and science, to the Visual Arts curriculum. Both schools that I attended used a

diverse range of these texts within their classrooms and school libraries to aid teachers in creating curriculum and to serve as research tools for Visual Arts students. I found ample evidence of their use within student and teacher notes and within VAPDs.

Research Procedures

My research was in the form of a case study, or the study of a specific group of individuals that are bounded by time and place (Cresswell, 1998, p. 61). I conducted a cross case analysis: I conducted my research at both sites in a similar manner and cross-referenced information in a nightly reflective journal used multiple sources of information: teacher interviews, student interviews, tape recordings of class sessions, notes and direct observation, and physical evidence, such as classroom texts, course syllabi, photographs, copies of students' writing, in order to recreate and analyze the classroom space and interactions. Within the teacher interviews I worked to establish an autobiographical context for classroom procedures by asking the teachers for their classroom and teacher training histories and their personal philosophies. Taking a feminist

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approach to qualitative research, I wanted the cooperating teachers to play an active part in my data collection, realizing, at the same time that I must look critically at the collected material, and triangulate student perspectives, teacher perspectives, and participant observer perspectives of events in the classroom (Maxwell, 1996, p. 131). I also conducted member checks (Seidman, 1998) as I allow participants to read interview transcripts and interpretations.

To increase my understanding of art teacher preparation as it may inform years 7-10 classroom practices, I interviewed art education faculty at COFA who were involved in the creation of the Years 7-10 Visual Arts Syllabus. I also attended a graduate class there in order to gain a clearer view of the art education theory that informed both the creation of NSW curriculum and pre service teacher practices.

Research Conclusion

An immersion within the Australian culture and the NSW curricula enabled me to recognize US approaches to art education as the social constructions that they are and presented me with diverse approaches to teaching art that I had not yet experienced within US art education. I am certain that comparable pedagogy does occur within US public schools, but I am not aware of it being sanctioned and prescribed on such a large State wide basis. By observing the manner that contemporary art world practices, including those of cultural and social critique, are incorporated into both the curriculum and the classroom procedures of two NSW schools, I sensed a connection between current art educational theory and practice. This link is so often missing within US art education.

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