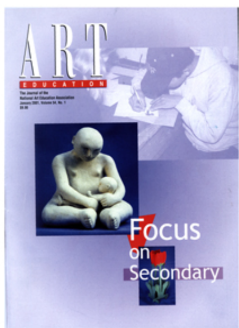

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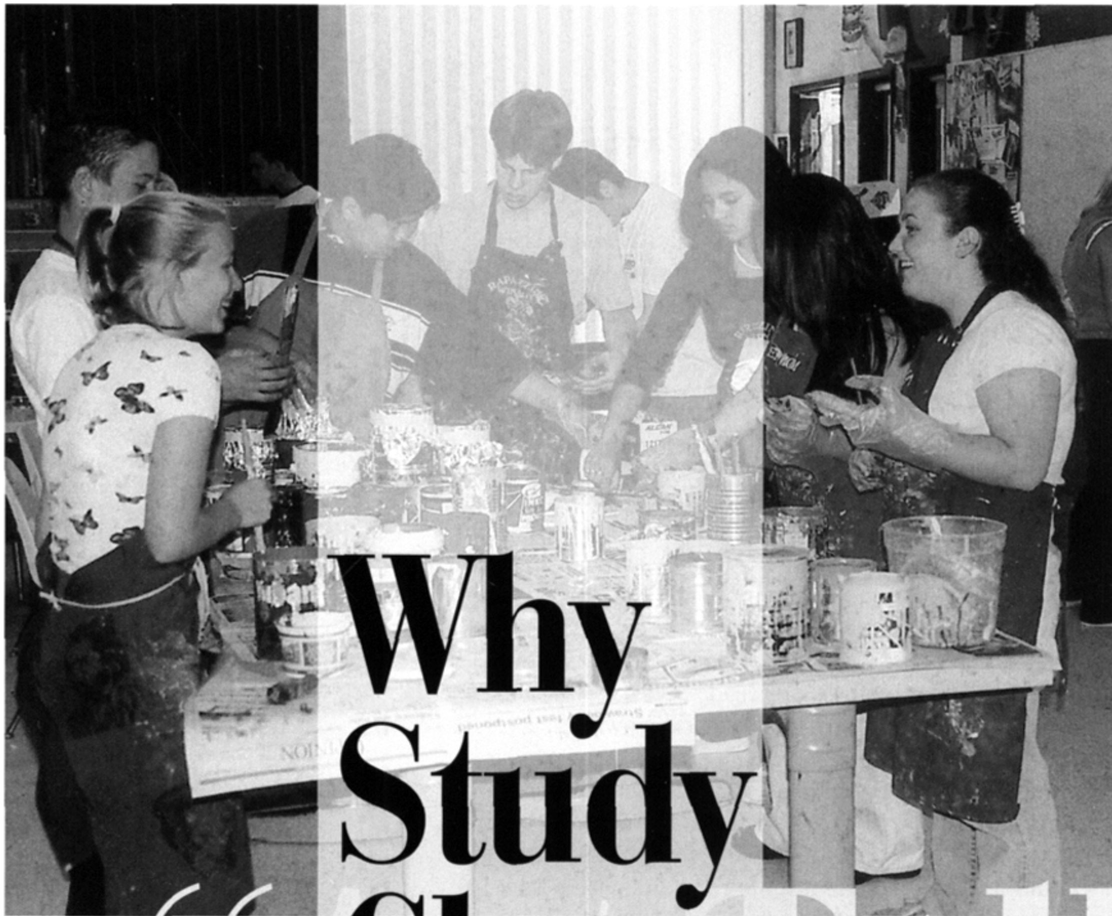


Why Study Classroom Art Talk?

BY TERESA L. COTNER

More Talking in the Art Classroom, Please

Talking about art is a relatively new curricular and pedagogical component in art education. Until recent decades, K-12 art education focused on development of studio or technical skills and on the psychological development of children through art-making (Efland, 1990). Since the 1960s,[1] educators such as Bruner have called for curricular and pedagogical shifts in all school subjects towards increasing relevance to professional practice (Dorn, 1994, pp. 4-7). In Bruner's (1960) words, the difference between school practice and professional practice in related subjects should be that of "degree, not kind" (p. 14). Art educators attended to this reform effort. Barkan (1962) called for curriculum

development in the arts to shift away from the child-development models and to focus instead on professional practices including studio, art criticism, and art history (p. 14). Including non-studio practices in art education extended the role of discourse about art in the classroom. Talking about art became a curricular and pedagogical concern in art education.[2]

High School, Old School

Getting young people to engage in discourse about art has proven to be a daunting task for teachers (Efland, 1976). High school teachers in particular seem resistant to adding language-oriented components to the traditional studio curriculum. However, since teachers and students are commonly called upon to try something new as times change and curricula, in turn, change, we should not assume that the relative newness of talking about art as classroom practice is solely responsible for the difficulties teachers and students experience. For reasons unknown, high school art teachers have participated very little in professional development training in discipline-based approaches to arts education and persist in providing studio-based courses (Wilson, 1997). Currently little is known about the extent to which high school art teachers teach in the non-studio domains of art or about the role discourse plays in teaching and learning in art. This is an alarming deficit given that as of 1998 in the United States, 32 states recommend visual arts as a requirement for high school graduation (*NAEA News*, April, 1998).

Looking for Models of High School Classroom Art Talk

How should teachers and students talk about art in school? At one time or another most of us have experienced how difficult it can be to describe in words, spoken or written, the various kinds of responses we might have to a piece of art. Whether participating in a studio-based or discipline-based curriculum, art teachers and students must regularly find words with which to talk about their responses to art as well as other issues that arise in art, or at least, issues that arise in art classrooms.

We often look to professional practices as exemplars, and this poses some problems. In two studies that present lesson plans for high school art, professional practice in art criticism is considered an appropriate model for adolescents (Leshnoff, 1995; Lee, 1993). Conversely, in his comparison of professional art criticism to K-12 classroom art criticism, Barrett (1991) notes that art critics, drawing from artworks themselves as well as from external sources, use literate, colorful, and provocative language; are motivated by an awareness that their writing is data for recorded art history; and seek to convince (p.91). In contrast, Barrett cites Feldman's well known method for art criticism in school (description, analysis, interpretation, and evaluation) that recommends that classroom criticism should be as "unloaded" as possible and should not hint at meaning or value (Feldman, 1987). This comparison strongly suggests that what is acceptable in professional practice is unacceptable in the classroom. Such findings leave many questions regarding classroom practice unanswered, especially pertaining to high school art talk, in which student artwork and art discourse may be compared to professional standards.

Questions concerning how to talk about art in the classroom are further complicated by opposing views on the teacher's role as guide. Much research supports the need for teachers to provide students with background information on art and artists and to guide student discourse about art (Koroscik et al., 1988, 1992; Koroscik, 1997; Erickson, 1998, 1994). Still others formulated arguments in favor of a child–centered rather than an art–centered approaches to art discourse, stressing the affective responses of the student. Hickman (1994), for example, suggests that students draw upon personal experience when perceiving a piece of art, not just content, composition, and expressiveness of an art object. (See also Walker, 1996.)

In a major study of art talk as a window into cognitive development (using interviews with preschoolers to college professors), Parsons (1987) divides art talk into four categories and five stages. The four categories are: 1) subject matter, 2) expression, 3) medium, form, and style, and 4) judgment. The five stages are: 1) favoritism, 2) beauty and realism, 3) expressivism, 4) style and form, and 5) autonomy. Parsons finds that "[m]ost elementary school children use stage two ideas. Many, but fewer, adolescents use (at times) ideas from stage three. After that, circumstances become more important than age" (pp. 11-12). As educators and researchers, we are charged to discover what circumstances, if any, can help extend adolescents' repertoires for talking about art.

In a related study that employs discourse analyses of student-student and student-teacher conversations in a fifth-grade art class, Kakas (1991) finds that frequency and content of talk was influenced by teacher feedback, procedural components of the lessons, and other

contextual factors. She recommends additional studies of art classroom talk in order to gain insight into how student learning is shaped by talk during art lessons.

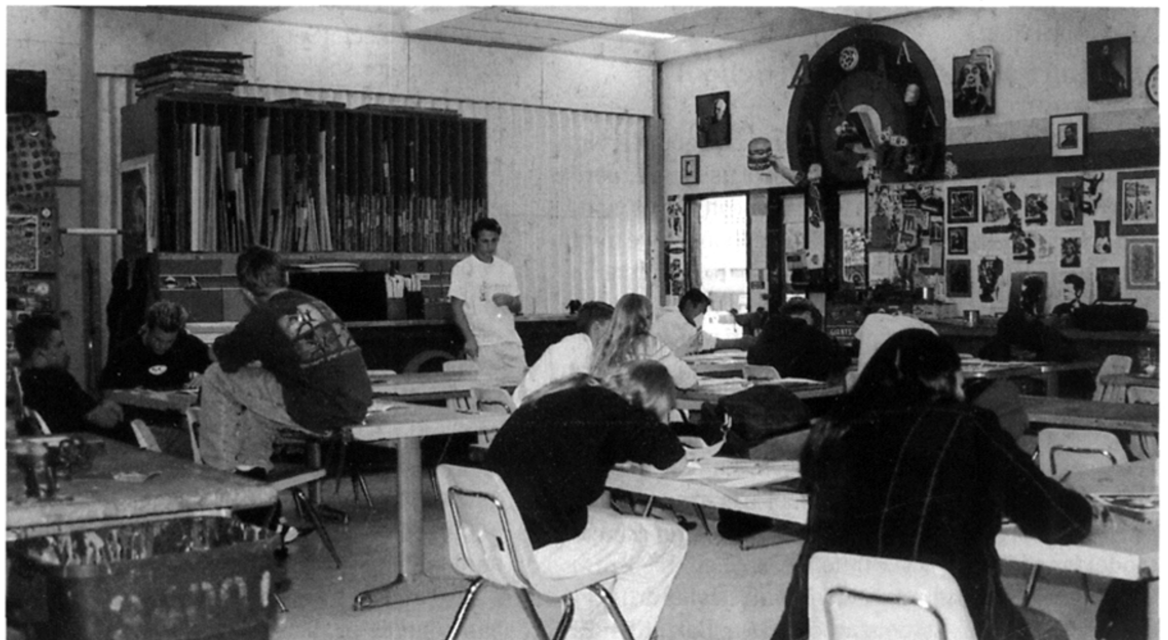
The Scope of Classroom Art Talk

Art is a form of communication. Talking about art is a way to communicate to others what we make of our encounters with our own art-making and of our encounters with artwork made by others. For some, talk is only a form of reporting thoughts and feelings (Geahigan, 1998, 1999). For others, talk is a vehicle through which we can tease out meaning from experience; trying a few words out in response to a work of art and allowing the words themselves to help shape our encounters and subsequent understanding of a piece of art (Barnes & Todd, 1977, 1995, p. 11; Soep & Cotner, 1999).

Classroom talk about art can be subdivided into four types, *talking art criticism, talking art history, talking aesthetics, and talking studio practice.*[3] *Talking art criticism* refers to talk that pertains to the powers of perception, the ability to synthesize and assess sensory information in art such as light, color, texture, and composition. *Talking art history* is to speak of the cultural and historical contexts of art including biographical information about artists and about the style of a particular work of art comparatively and chronologically with other art styles. *Talking aesthetics* is a philosophical discourse about art that analyzes the very nature of art and the characteristics of aesthetic experience. Aesthetics is defined in the *Random House College Dictionary* (1982) as "the study of the qualities perceived in works of art, with a view to the abstraction of principles; and the study of the mind and emotions in relation to the sense of beauty" (p.22). *Talking studio practices* refers to talk about creative expression through various techniques and procedures using arts media. The character of art discourse invites interdisciplinary borrowing. It is not always clear where art criticism or art history ends and aesthetics or talk of studio practice begins.

The role and character of classroom art talk is unlike curricular talk in any other high school classroom. High school art classrooms, unlike most high school classrooms, are rarely quiet. Students are often more-or-less free to talk among themselves throughout the class period except when the teacher addresses the whole class. Studio art teachers do not lecture every class period, and rarely do they lecture for the entire class period. This leaves art teachers most of class time to talk with students one-on-one. Even in high school art classrooms where literature such as art history texts and art magazines are readily available, the presence of the spoken word far outweighs that of the written.

As with encounters outside of school, most school encounters with art are mediated by the words that are spoken, how they are spoken, and the context in which they are spoken.

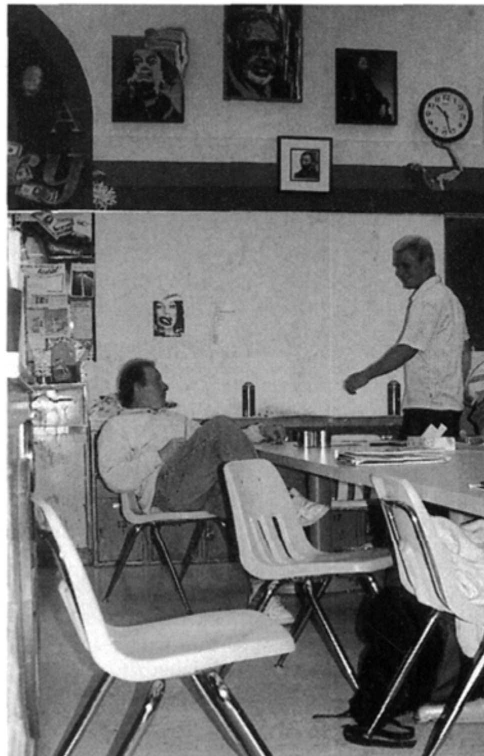


High school students talking and working.

According to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativity, one's native language can affect patterns of thought and perceptions of reality (Whorf, 1956). I suggest that we can extend this hypothesis to include vernaculars as a subset of language. In other words, the vernacular used in a given context can influence patterns of thought and perception of that context. Therefore, according to this interpretation of the Sapir/Whorf hypothesis, the language that is used to talk about art in the high school art classroom will shape the teaching and learning that takes place in that particular environment.

An utterance that may seem inconsequential can actually affect an experience in an art class a great deal. For example, to look at a painting and say, "That's good," "I don't get it," "Seems kind of African," or "I could do that," is to articulate, or represent in words, some of the ways in which we are able to think about the piece of art. The above examples of student art talk (taken from interviews with high school art students) are related to the disciplines of aesthetics, art criticism, art history, and studio practice, respectively. These examples alone may represent a notably impoverished repertoire of discourse in these four domains of art. However, an abundance of such utterances from a diverse group of students and their teacher, who is trained in both education and in art, can provide a rich backdrop of classroom talk about art. Simply put, the richer the art talk, the richer the teaching and learning.

Any study of classroom discourse is a form of applied linguistics, the study of situated language use in a social setting. Linguistic theory



High school teacher and student talking.

Whether participating in a studio-based or discipline-based curriculum, art teachers and students must regularly find words with which to talk about their responses to art as well as other issues that arise in art, or at least, issues that arise in art classrooms.

describes classroom talk as having three simultaneous levels, "the language of curriculum, the language of control, and the language of personal identity" (Cazden, 1988). In light of this theory, classroom art talk can simultaneously impart art concepts (the curricular level) and social concepts (the control and personal identity levels).

In the classroom, verbal cues can help students explore and secure meanings in art. At the same time, these cues also can regulate what students look for and think about in their encounters with art (Koroscik et al., 1992,). When verbal cues about art also direct attention to matters of schooling such as student behavior and grades, we verbally combine matters of art and matters of schooling. In the following examples (again, taken from interviews with high school students), matters of schooling show a strong presence within the art talk of students: "This [my art project] is an 'A'," "I showed it to my friends," "I am proud of it," "I tried hard," "It's going to be in the art show," and "We have some sculptures in our living room." These statements, while explicitly focused on art, implicitly convey matters of schooling of a more social-developmental nature, i.e., getting good grades, interacting with peers, developing self-esteem, developing self-discipline, producing a product that is praised by others, and making connections between school contexts and personal contexts. The implicit references to social goals, which are important in schools, may have an impact on what students notice about art and incorporate into their developing concepts of art.

Even in high school art classrooms where literature such as art history texts and art magazines are readily available, the presence of the spoken word far outweighs that of the written.

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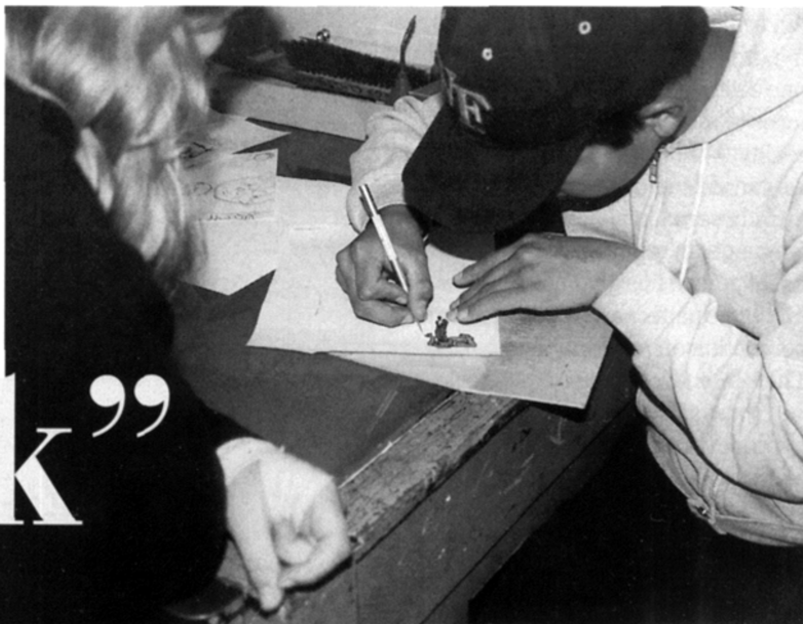

High school students talking and working.

Lemke's study of high school science discourse, *Talking Science* (1990), provides a comparative example of how art teachers and researchers might look at and learn from classroom art talk. In his study, Lemke suggested that specialists—including teachers—use language in ways that are particularly well suited to their discipline, be it music or physics. Lemke's study of meaning-making in context stresses that the novice or student must practice using the subject-specific language styles that the expert or teacher uses in order to understand the structural concepts of the discipline and in order to communicate this understanding to others who use the same semantic patterns and specialized terminology. In other words, they must become conversant in the language style of the discipline. To date, one finds no research on how this phenomenon plays out in a high school art classroom, where speech patterns, terminology, and opportunities to speak are likely to be different from those found in art venues beyond classrooms and those found in non-art classrooms.

Summary

High school art teachers come to their classes with rich repertoires of experience in art and in teaching. Perhaps as a result of this, they have participated less—in comparison to K-8 teachers—in formal training focused on current curricular reform recommendations (Wilson, 1997). Given the recommendations for arts education in documents such as the National Standards and state frameworks, it is critical to find out more about what and how high school teachers teach and what and how their students learn in the four domains of art described in this paper as art criticism, art history, aesthetics, and studio practice.

Given what we currently know, there are at least four good reasons to study high school classroom art talk.

- Art criticism, art history, and aesthetics are mandated components of studio arts curricula, making discourse a critical component of art classroom practice.
- Most high school students today are required to take art, highlighting the role of art as a critical component of the high school curriculum.
- Many high school art teachers have been resistant to changing from studio-based to discipline-based approaches to art education, thus justifying the need for learning more about high school art discourse and developing viable and educative uses of art discourse at the high school level.
- High school art teachers and students rely heavily on talk, and little, if at all, on written texts and writing assignments, making talk the most prevalent form of art discourse in the classroom.

High school art may be the last formal art education that most students receive. Including art criticism, art history, and aesthetics in studio arts curricula extends the role of classroom art talk. Research in art education and in linguistics has focused less on high school than on the lower grades. It is therefore critical to examine the role and function of talk as well as other forms of discourse in high school art classrooms.

Teresa Cotner recently completed her Doctor of Philosophy degree in Education at Stanford University and is currently supervising student teachers at the University of California, Santa Barbara. E-mail: tlcotner@yahoo.com

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FOOTNOTES

[1] In response to the 1957 Soviet launch of Sputnik I, the first artificial satellite, many in the United States rallied to gain and maintain technological prowess. They looked to education to produce the best thinkers in the world.

[2] In this article, the term "discourse" refers to speaking, writing and reading, while "talk" is used in reference to spoken language.

[3] In this article, I use the terms Criticism, History, Aesthetics, and Studio (CHAS) for purposes of brevity and clarity. *The Visual and Performing Arts Frameworks for California Public Schools* (1996) uses Artistic Perception, Historical and Cultural Context, Aesthetic Valuing, and Creative Expression. *The Role of Discipline-Based Art Education in American Schools* (Eisner, 1988) uses Criticism, History and Culture, Aesthetics, and Production.