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Art Appreciation Instruction and Changes of Classroom Questioning at Senior Secondary School in Visual Culture Context

LI Min^{[a].*}; JIANG Xiaomei^{[b].[c]}

^[a]Associate Professor, Department of Fine Arts, Shandong Normal University, Jinan, China.

^[b]Teacher, Jining Yuying Senior Middle School, Jinan, China.

^[c]Master Degree, Department of Fine Arts, Shandong Normal University, Jinan, China.

*Corresponding author.

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Abstract

This paper discusses art appreciation instruction and the changes of classroom questioning at senior secondary school in visual culture context so as to improve art appreciation instruction and find out the strategy for the further development of art education at senior secondary school based on that at primary and junior secondary schools. It analyzes existing problems including classroom questioning in traditional appreciation education by the method of case analysis. It also makes in-depth discussion on art appreciation instruction and the changes of classroom questioning at senior secondary school in visual culture context.

Key words: Visual culture; Art appreciation; Classroom questioning

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INTRODUCTION

Art appreciation has been included in the required subjects of the senior secondary school for many years. However,

it seems to be impossible for teachers and even professors committed to appreciation education research in universities to clarify what it teaches students and what kind of ability can be fostered through it. It is a common case that our students are familiar with pop movies and advertisements instead of classic art recognized by the whole world. Is the classic art outdated? Or we should reconsider our teaching methods and techniques used for art appreciation?

In modern times, the society is awash with various pictures and videos. People get more information from them. The era of visual culture comes. In contemporary visual culture context, different visual information catches the eyes of students anywhere and anytime. Students who began in the 1990s and the 2000s have greater interest in pictures and videos than their predecessors. Guided by “great interest”, the art appreciation should be expressed among students. However, the opposite is an example. Students are indifferent to art classics enumerated in their textbook and are reluctant to answer the questions designed by teachers. The impact of visual culture is one reason. The getting out of the era of visual culture is a sword which has two blades. The art appreciation instruction should evolve to adapt to this era. It is an important issue that has to be studied.

Under the influence of visual culture, such factors as teacher, students and teaching content in art appreciation is undergoing changes quietly. Teaching techniques need to be adjusted to adapt to the new situation. “Ask and answer” is an important method for classroom interaction, because questions can trigger the students’ thinking. This method aims to help students construct the knowledge hierarchy and improve their ability of thinking. For classroom questions used in art appreciation instruction have their own features, the question design should have its emphasis different from other subjects. Moreover, in visual culture context, as the larger context changes, the design of questions certainly has some new features. The most important problem to be solved in art appreciation

instruction is how to inspire the learning interest of students by classroom questioning so as to stimulate their thinking, to cultivate their ability for “analyzing” and “understanding” fine art works and the ability for critical reading and to improve their aesthetic judgment.

1.1 Influence of Visual Culture on Art Appreciation Instruction

In visual culture context, the changes in the connotation and denotation of fine arts have different influences on art appreciation instruction:

Firstly, the contents of art appreciation are more diversified. For many years, the teaching contents emphasize on traditional fine art and realistic representation but marginalize the emerging forms of fine arts and different styles of art which are seldom discussed. With the enlargement of the connotation of fine arts, more and more visual representations and phenomena are incorporated into the category of fine arts, including many visual representations and styles which have a large quantity of audiences. Even so, the works of these new styles never appear in our art appreciation instruction. Nowadays, we are exposed to a lot of visual information good or bad. We should learn how to see and judge.

Next, the teaching method of art appreciation emphasizes on the visual perception of students. First, the development of reproduction technology allows us to obtain clearer image copies. High digital camera pixel means that any detail of artistic works can be clearly displayed. It is very important for the subject which underlines visual perception. Second, the visual display technology can show the most real condition of pictures. The huge display screen in the classroom has become an essential multimedia device for art appreciation.

Last but not least, the teaching process of art appreciation shows its combination with other subjects. It is thought by researchers that visual culture itself is multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary which involves many contents such as fine arts, music, movie, theatre. In visual culture context, the embodiment of this feature in the teaching process of art appreciation has inevitable influence on the subject content, the teaching method and the learning style and shows the tendency of art-oriented integration of multi-subjects.

Many new changes appear in art appreciation instruction in the visual culture context, which provides more favorable objective condition for the appreciation instruction. However, these advantages are accompanied with some problems. First, a large number of duplications of art works in the era of visual culture result in the loss of their uniqueness and authority. The current visual technology is well-developed enough to duplicate the art works of different regions and nations. Let's take Vincent van Gogh's works for example. Nowadays, we can easily get the pictures of his oil paintings clear enough to see its strokes. We can even get the approximately

three-dimensional duplications of advanced duplication technology, that is, we can get a tangible and concave-convex high-quality oil painting with same colors and shape with the original work. The unique works which are hand-made and contain the feelings and ideas of artists are easily displayed to us. This weakens their rarity and uniqueness and their authority is also greatly challenged. Second, our daily life is awash with visual information. We are accustomed to them and turn a blind eye to fine art works. The common effect of these reasons can easily result in visual “shallow reading”. In traditional society, the pictures are “scarce resources” and owned by a few people. Common people can only see these longed art works in art galleries, museums and the workshops of artists or private collection where people carefully taste and quietly appreciate them, with the feeling of admiration. They not only appreciate the superb artistry of artist, but also show their admiration at the wisdom of artists. In visual culture context, the pictures are just common things in modern society. We skim various duplicates of *Sunflowers* and *Mona Lisa* for many times and hardly have the feeling of a presence but the fast visual reading instead again and again. Even if many students know relevant information about these works, most of them are indifferent to these works. Since they lose their desire for appreciating these works, naturally, they will not make a deep understanding and value judgment of these works. The effect of art appreciation activities is greatly lessened.

1.2 Objective and Significance of Art Appreciation Instruction at Senior Secondary School in Visual Culture Context

W. J. T. Mitchell points out that “*spectatorship*” (viewing, watching, browsing and the practice of observing, monitoring and visual pleasure) may be a question as deep as the forms of reading (decryption, decoding and interpretation). The text-based mode hardly interprets the visual experience or the “visual reading ability”. (Wang, 2006) It means that the visual reading is the cognitive style changed from text reading. The “visual reading ability” is not inherent but is acquired by systematic and targeted learning.

Regarding the curriculum provision of regular senior secondary school, the art appreciation directly functions as the course for cultivating the “visual reading ability”. The achievement standard for art appreciation in *Curriculum Standards for Fine Arts at Regular Senior Secondary School (trial)* specifies: “By art appreciation, students should be able to actively take part in art appreciation activities; they should know the basic approaches of art appreciation and be able to describe, analyze, interpret and evaluate art works with proper terms (such as the terms to describe shape, color, space, material, etc.) and their opinions by one or more methods and make exchanges with other people; they should collect the

information related to fine arts by different methods or modern information technology ”; they should know famous artists and their representative works and main styles and schools of fine arts home and abroad; they should understand the relationship among fine arts, nature and society and comprehend fine arts in cultural situation; they should love Chinese traditional culture and respect the multi-culture in the world.”¹ It is clear that the training objectives specified in the achievement standard attach importance to the abilities and psychological qualities of students in art appreciation activities, i.e., the improvement of “artistic cultivation”. In visual culture context, the meaning of “artistic cultivation” is understood as an integrated concept. It has new requirements for the “visual reading ability” of students.

Firstly, in visual culture context, the art appreciation at senior secondary schools pays attention to cultivating the vision-based ability of critical thinking of students who are encouraged to express themselves independently. In traditional teaching, the importance is usually attached to the one-way knowledge instruction. Our students are used to accept knowledge instead of thinking, let alone questioning. They ask questions fewer and fewer. Most of them just want to memorize and know the given answers instead of understanding. However, because of the uniqueness of art appreciation instruction, it is supposed to be an important method for cultivating the ability of critical thinking. During the art appreciation, students make evaluation and judgment by perceiving the pictures. Due to different race, knowledge background and growth environment, people have different understandings of one piece of work. For different reasons, there is no model answer to a lot of questions. We should deal with the art works in a critical way. It is the critical thinking that can help students to distinguish intermingled visual information and phenomena in modern society. Furthermore, the teaching process of art appreciation is a process for cultivating the abilities of “appreciation and expression”. In art appreciation instruction, students should be encouraged to express their own opinions. This is very important in modern society.

Secondly, the visual reading ability has greater value in visual culture context. Today, we have to face and read the visual information from different fields. To understand the connotation of various pictures is an important way of learning about the world. As a kind of visual and intuitive presentation and expression, the picture is widely applied to different fields; therefore, the visual reading ability for understanding pictures is of great significance in learning about and understanding the world.

¹ *Curriculum Standards for Fine Arts at Regular Senior Secondary School (Trial)*. (2003). (ISBN7-107-16563-1/G 9653). Beijing, China: People’s Education Press.

2. ANALYSIS OF PROBLEMS IN CLASSROOM QUESTIONING FOR ART APPRECIATION INSTRUCTION AT SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL

The significance of classroom questioning is self-evident. American educator Peter Filene states in his work *The Joy of Teaching* that by pointing out the questions and their significance (connotation) and students participating in the teaching process, teachers can transform information transfer into the search for significance. *The Art of Classroom Questioning* written by Marylou Dantonio and Paul C. Beisenherz summarizes the ideas about effective questioning and states that in order to realize effective questioning, it is necessary to instruct the question design by teaching objectives.... In the course of questioning, teachers must immediately discover and deal with the need and interest of students. Wilen gave some suggestion on effective questioning in 1987. Key questions which hint text structure and give guidance should be designed. The questions must be expressed clearly and explicitly; the questions must conform to the ability level of students; the questions should be logical and successive; the questions should be designed based on different ability levels of students; the questions should consider the students’ feedback; enough time should be given to students to think about the question; the questions which can motivate the students should be adopted; the students should be encouraged to ask questions (Dantonio et al., 2006).

It should be noticed that the precondition of effective questioning is to guide the questioning by the teaching objective. The primary task of teaching is to determine the two parts (i.e. teaching objective and learning outcome) for the interaction of teaching and learning. It is called by Peter Filene as “the promise to the journey of teaching”. Effective questioning is a process, a system and a kind of teaching practice in methodology. Generally speaking, according to *New Curriculum Standard*, the characteristics of students and the development needs of students, the questions designed by teachers should base on the picture to stimulate the interest of students and highlight the humanity. Some principles to be followed in the design of classroom questions are: pay attention to relatedness and reasonableness; emphasize universality and individuality; highlight novelty and feasibility.

However, as a matter of fact, for the reasons of social cognition and teacher quality, there exist many problems in art appreciation instruction at senior secondary schools. In order to make an investigation on the current situation of classroom questioning for art appreciation instruction at senior secondary schools, the art appreciation lessons given by two teachers (Teacher S and Teacher M) from the art teaching and research group of Jining Yuying Senior Middle School are taken as the object of study. We also attended 10 lessons given by the two teachers.

2.1 General Information

Teacher S: She has been engaged in art appreciation instruction for more than 10 years; her lessons are rated as model lesson of Shandong Province. She graduated from the normal university with the degree of bachelor of art in art education.

Teacher M: He only male teacher of fine arts. He has been engaged in art appreciation instruction for more than 5 years; he graduated from the academy of fine arts with the degree of bachelor of art in art education. With good teaching skills, he had excellent performance in Shandong Teaching Skill Competition—Fine Arts.

Students (SS): First-year students from Class 17 and Class 21 of Jining Yuying Senior Middle School. They have received art appreciation education at primary and junior secondary schools.

2.2 Analysis of Classroom Questioning

The two teachers are well received among students and have accumulated rich teaching experience. In classroom questioning, they showed their respect to students and their opinions; when students made no response, they would repeat or rephrase their questions and gave students some hints for thinking. However, there exist some factors which may have negative effect on thinking and answering and are summarized as below:

2.2.1 Great Arbitrariness of Questioning

When Teacher S was instructing *The Characteristics of Fine Art Works*, the question “what did you think of fine arts and art appreciation in the past?” was shown in the PPT. Part of the lesson memoir is shown as below:

Teacher M: What did you think of fine arts and art appreciation in the past? (Short pause) Did you have fine arts lessons in your junior middle school? Did you like them?

SS: (The whole class) Yes, Yes.

Student 1: Art appreciation is to appreciate artistic works.

Following the first question, the teacher raised two more questions “did you have fine arts class in your junior secondary school”, “did you like it”. There are three questions in this sentence which have different targets and obscure definition. The students got confused easily. The first question is predesigned by the teacher but the other two questions are raised in class. Both the expressions and the sequence of questions are arbitrary to a large extent. Seen from the questions, the last two questions are for the whole class. They are supposed to stimulate the interest of students. In logical order, the last two questions should be put before the first question. The students recall their fine arts lessons at first and then the teacher can further ask their opinions on fine arts and art appreciation.

2.2.2 Improper Expressions and Ambiguous Questions

When Teacher M talked about freestyle Chinese painting, he showed *Ink Lotus* by Li Shan in Qing dynasty which is compared with *Lotus on the Water*.

Teacher M: They are both lotus. Can you tell the difference of *Ink Lotus* at *Lotus on the Water*?

Student 1: *Ink Lotus* looks better.

Teacher M: Why?

Student 1: (Silent)

Teacher M: What about the strokes?

Student 1: *Lotus on the Water* adopts exquisite strokes but *Ink Lotus* adopts rough strokes.

From the subsequent interpretation made by the teacher, it is known that the first question is designed to guide the students to compare the elaborate-style painting with the freestyle painting in terms of strokes. Nevertheless, this question is not limited to the comparison of strokes. Instead, it highlights the visual perception of human in these two paintings. Improper expression results in the nonconformance between the answer given by the student and the real purpose of teacher.

When two teachers presented their questions, sometimes, they employed yes no questions. Usually, the students just said “yes” or “no”. Such kind of question is narrow and limits the thinking of students.

2.2.3 Too Short Pause

The pause between “asks and answers” and the pause between “answer and feedback” are too short. Sometimes, there is no pause. Students are asked to answer questions immediately without any time for thinking; or feedbacks are given at once without the time for rethinking. Consequentially, students feel unconfident about their answers sometimes.

2.2.4 General Verbal Feedback, Lack of Targeted Evaluation or Follow—On Question and Single Subject of Evaluation

When Teacher S was instructing the function of art appreciation, she raised the following question:

“Is art appreciation help for your study and life?”

Student 1: It can make us relaxed.

Teacher S: Good.

Student 2: It can improve our aesthetic judgment.

Teacher S: Very good.

In the above case, after students gave answer to the question, the teacher just said “good” or “very good”. Her feedback is too general. Besides, no follow-on question is raised to guide students to explain or consummate their opinions. Attention is just paid the answer instead of the process of thinking. After the students gave answer to the questions, the two teachers made evaluation by themselves and the peer assessment was not adopted. In this sense, there is only a single subject of evaluation.

2.2.5 Self-Answering

When Teacher S was instructing the hand scroll, a form of Chinese painting, she raised a question “how to appreciate this kind of art work?” No hint was given to the students and the teacher directly told them the answer. Teacher M also has the same problem. While instructing *Horse Running on the Swallow*, he mentioned the relationship

between the running horse and the flying swallow. He raised the question “what means of artistic expression is used by the artist”. Teacher M did not ask any student to answer this question but answered it himself. Self-answering has no function. It seems as if the teacher asks students a question. As a matter of fact, the teacher is expressing his or her own opinions by self-answering.

2.2.6 The Opinions Are Imposed on Students

When Teacher M was instructing traditional Chinese and Western pottery, he showed some pictures of pottery and asked students “do you think Western pottery is more concrete than Chinese pottery?” Since he showed his opinion in language expression, he was not asking the opinions of students. Students would just say “yes”. This kind of question is a pseudo-problem. Students have to accept and cannot express their own opinions.

2.2.7 No Encouragement to Students to Ask Questions

In the ten lessons of art appreciation, the two teachers did not guide or encourage students to ask questions. All questions were raised by teachers on the basis of teaching content and process. Students were just asked to answer them.

2.2.8 Arbitrary Selection of Target Student

During the classroom observation, it is found that the two teachers selected the target student to answer his or her question arbitrarily. For example, Teacher S preferred to select the target student in the order of seats. Teacher M preferred to select the target student seated nearby or asked students to answer together. Although it is convenient for the teacher to select the target student in the order of seats, the students seated farther will become inactive easily and reluctant to think about the question. By the principle of proximity, Teacher M may easily ignore the students seated far away from him and the students in the class are not equally concerned. To answer together easily restricts the thinking of students and hides what are different from mainstream opinions. It is not good for students to develop and express their own opinions.

2.2.9 Single Form of Organization

The interaction between students and teachers is organized in a single form. Usually, “ask and answer” is carried out in the one-to-one form. In a class of sixty or seventy students, only a dozen of them have the chance to express their opinions and most of them do not have equal chance to answer questions.

3. CHANGES OF CLASSROOM QUESTIONING FOR ART APPRECIATION INSTRUCTION AT SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN VISUAL CULTURE CONTEXT

In visual culture context, the classroom questioning for art appreciation at senior secondary schools has some changes accordingly.

3.1 Pay Attention to Visual Sense and Return to Fine Arts

At present, the visual technologies are so well developed that all art works can be displayed by media (such as display screen and cell phone) in the form of clear picture or video. We can amplify the art works as much as possible. Let’s take the works of Vincent Van Gogh for example. Students can clearly see thick colors and dynamic strokes. Since high-quality pictures and dynamic videos can meet the requirements of students for appreciation, the teacher can raise more questions about visual perception. When the author instructed *Romantic Fine Arts, La Liberté Guidant Le Peuple* was compared with the work of Ingres. The question “What differences do they have in terms of strokes and colors?” was raised. Students could discover that the one has rough strokes but the other has exquisite strokes; the one has richer colors than the other one. The visual information can be fully displayed. Although most people do have the chance to visit art galleries and museums to watch the original works, they can appreciate them by visual technology. After all, only a few people have the chance to appreciate the original works. When the visual technology was not developed, students could only obtain limited visual information on textbook. The pictures in the book could not be seen clearly. Students had to get information by the narration of teacher or reading the text. For this reason, most questions designed by the teacher based on conventionalized views and conceptualized text information. The questions about the visual information were not mentioned. Consequentially, fine arts lost its essential characteristic—“visual perception”.

3.2 Pay Attention to Relatedness and Relate Art Appreciation With Life and Visual Experience of Students

The picture is more impressive than the words. It brings people more visual pleasure. Its advantages allow it to have a large number of audiences. The high school students are curious about new things and forms. They prefer to accept and study the things they are interested in. In visual culture context, the art appreciation instruction should be associated with the life and visual experience of students. The questions should be designed to stimulate their learning interest and arouse their aesthetic feeling. The questions in traditional art appreciation lessons were based on the text knowledge. They were related with relevant knowledge and skills. The experience and feelings of students who are the subject of classroom were ignored. Their enthusiasm was difficult to be stimulated. When the question is about the visual perception of some work, the question “what do you think of this work?” is improper. Most students are puzzled and do not know how answer it. When the author was instructing *Bedroom in Arles* made by Vincent Van Gogh, the author changed the way of questioning and did not ask the question about

the perception of this work. Instead, the question “if you have the chance for bedroom decoration, what kind of decoration style do you want?” was raised. Students actively thought about this question and expressed their own ideas. Next, the question “let’s see Vincent Van Gogh’s bedroom in Arles, how do you feel his bedroom?” was raised. The visual experience of their daily life was recalled and transferred into this work. At this time, they would carefully observe the bedroom in the painting. They were confident about their answers. Compared with the previous way of questioning, better effect was obtained. When the question “why do you feel this bedroom in this way?” was raised, the students would make analysis based on the visual language of the painting. In other words, we should start from the visual information and experience in daily life which students are familiar with and then associate them with the painting. Their “perception” will be mobilized. This way of questioning is more useful than the previous way which is just based on the painting. It can stimulate associative memory. When the aesthetic sense of students is evoked, they may really appreciate art work.

3.3 Pay Attention to Criticism and Cultivate the Consciousness of Problems

In visual culture context, the denotation of fine arts is expanded. More and more visual products are incorporated into the category of fine art works, especially some modern and post-modern works of video art and installation art. High-quality works and poor-quality works intermingle with each other. Besides, because of the development of classic study and especially the application of hi-tech means, the interpretation of the classics is diversified. These objective conditions allow teachers to raise the questions which can trigger the critical thinking. On the other point of view, in visual culture context, students are required to learn how to deal with and critically evaluate the large quantity of visual information. Therefore, the students must have the ability of critical thinking. Albert Einstein said: “The mere formulation of a problem is far more essential than its solution”, so the learning of questioning and the cultivation of consciousness of problems are of great significance in developing the learning ability of students. The questions in traditional art appreciation instruction emphasized the knowledge of fine arts and the answers were conventionalized. The teachers only cared about whether the answer is correct or not. It

reflects that the teaching activity was teacher-centered and textbook-centered instead of child-centered. It seems that the students actively participated in the class interaction. However, the students did not experience the real process of thinking, let alone the improvement of learning ability. When the students experience the real process of thinking, they will have some doubts and then raise some questions. The consciousness of problems is just what we should improve in our education.

3.4 Pay Attention to the Integration of Multi-Subjects and Encourage Students to Think About From Different Angles

Today, popular art is dominating. The fine art works exist in our daily life in different forms but the creation, appreciation and collection of these works involve the knowledge of multi-subjects. Accordingly, they should be analyzed in different angles. In visual culture context, the questions designed should not be limited to the fine arts but should be associated with other subjects. However, traditional questions only involved single perspective, which is not good for cultivating the ability of comprehensive thinking and broadening the vision. When the author was instructing *Fine Arts in the Renaissance Period*, the students were asked to discuss the question “How do the fine art works embody the spirit of the renaissance era?” This question was comprehensive and involved history, aesthetics, art criticism and art history. Students could think about this question in different angles.

The clear and rational understanding of art appreciation instruction and the changes of classroom questioning at senior secondary school in visual culture context can facilitate the research on the strategy for the further development of art education at senior secondary school based on that at primary and junior secondary schools, push the development of Chinese art education, improve the teaching quality and deepen the study of theories for art education.

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