

Art and Language as Studio

Pat Badt
Cedar Crest College
Visiting Professor

Art is a language. It is a visual language employing a lexicon of signs to impart meaning. Art can be understood in the structuralist terms of signified and signifier. Paintings and sculptures exist within the free flow and exchange of meaning common to sign systems. Unfortunately, in contemporary society we are often illiterate concerning how to read and interpret things seen. We are unfamiliar with the sign systems being employed. To see is to interpret. This phrase describes both the visual world around us and the world of art.

Understanding the world visually means developing a curiosity about what is seen, not taking sight for granted, and constantly questioning what falls within our vision. Paul Cezanne, the French painter, said that painting was the contemplation of things too subtle for words. He was describing the naming of something seen in paint, the color of a shadow, the brightness of a white tablecloth, the distance between objects. All of these visual sensations can have meaning within a specific visual context.

Drawing once was an important subject for the scholar. Before the invention of the camera one had to have enough drawing facility to describe something seen, whether it be the anatomy of a leaf, a person, the detail of a place, or the design of an instrument. Drawing belonged to the province of science. It was an inquisitive endeavor. It required an analytical approach to the world and sensitivity to the language of visual description. Art of the early 20th Century was imbued with this attitude which allowed for the later development of an abstract art which imparted visual meaning using the same signs of description.

In addition, art is an important marker of cultural diversity and a common ingredient of cultures. As our world becomes a global village we can rejoice in the diversity of our cultures. Art is a natural resource. It can be an invitation and a gateway into all cultures. Those conversant in its language are lucky indeed.

In American colleges, students are required to take art classes as part of the general education requirements. Many of the students will have had no other exposure to art.

After an introduction into the language of art many students find an enrichment that they will carry throughout their lives. Art classes and the actual experience of painting, drawing and sculpting can be fundamentally important.

Art must be taught in this type of studio situation. A studio is a workshop environment where students get hands-on experience in the materials of art and the articulation of visual ideas. Art cannot be a passive activity. Art cannot be taught within the conventional lecture-hall format. The student has to engage in the activity of art rather than passively receive information about it. This is often a new and difficult challenge for the student as every class necessitates performance and demonstration.

The instructor's role is to encourage the students in their performance and to offer constant critique. The mix of encouragement and criticism is extremely delicate and very important.

In teaching Conversational English, many of the same classroom practices used in an Art Studio can be employed. In learning language as in learning art, putting textbook knowledge into practice can be a frustrating and an often embarrassing experience. Therefore, the classroom environment has to be a supportive environment. The student has to be encouraged *to do* and *to experiment*. The first point to stress in both art and conversation classes is that communication is the primary goal of language. In order to do this, the students must be encouraged to express themselves at all costs, in whatever manner. It is more important to try to express oneself than to get it right. The second point to stress is that a student can only develop language skills through practice. Mistakes are a part of practice. Painting was once described by the contemporary painter Willem de Kooning, as the sum of corrected mistakes.

In the art studio, a student's ideas are often more advanced than their means to express them. In conversational English this is also the case. An instructor must create an environment which supports and respects the student's every attempt at communication. In addition to this, the student must learn to develop creative flexibility in the expression of ideas. If one's approach to an idea doesn't result in communication, another approach must be attempted. Hand signals, facial expressions and body language are all tools which can be developed in the conversational language process.

To take some of the pressure off the individual, the class can sometimes be thought of as a collective. Group activities can be organized to encourage peer-work and learning from one's peers. A shy student can more easily contribute within a group situation and gain confidence to practice their abilities. Similarly the more practiced and skillful student can tutor and instruct peers within a casual, group-oriented environment.

However, ultimately the individual must stand alone. At the end of a studio semester in

Art/Conversation the instructor individually meets with each student to discuss their technical and conceptual development throughout the semester. This takes the form of a critique/conversation. This meeting, in conjunction with students attendance and participation in the classroom/studio, forms the basis of the final evaluation.

Language is an art.