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EXAMINING FORMATIVE CRITIQUE IN THE HIGH SCHOOL VISUAL ARTS CLASSROOM

BY

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**EXAMINING FORMATIVE CRITIQUE IN THE HIGH SCHOOL VISUAL ARTS CLASSROOM**

BY

PETER C. EDWARDS

Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of  
Eastern Kentucky University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTORATE OF EDUCATION

2021

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## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my wife, Karen, and my children, Mark and Miriam. Their love, support, and patience have been vital to the completion of this work. Throughout this process, they kept me grounded and helped me to focus on what is truly important. My only hope is that my gratitude meets the measure of their generosity.

I also want to offer thanks to my parents, Mark and Josephine Edwards, who were a constant source of love and encouragement. They instilled a love of learning in me that exists to this day, for which I will be forever grateful.

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I would like to profusely thank all of the staff at Eastern Kentucky University, whose efforts contributed greatly to my ability to complete this work. They were able to assist me in innumerable ways, and without their help this work could not have been accomplished.

## ABSTRACT

Formative assessment techniques are integral to high school visual arts teachers' curriculum, but are not clearly delineated by state and national organizations. Additionally, formative assessment in the high school visual arts classroom, defined in this study as formative critique, had not been examined as extensively, and most research investigated either high school core content practices or critique procedures in higher education settings.

This qualitative phenomenological study sought to understand commonalities in the implementation of formative critique by high school visual arts teachers in central Kentucky. In this study, six veteran high school visual arts teachers were interviewed, using open-ended questions and a conversational approach. All interviews were conducted via video conference and digital materials used by participants were collected for analysis.

This study found that despite a lack of pedagogical guidance on the use of formative critique from art education organizations, participants' approaches were remarkably similar. Participants favored an individualized, conversational approach, and used questions to guide student work. Teachers in this study built relationships with their students, creating a supportive classroom atmosphere which lead to positive experiences in visual arts courses. According to participants, formative critique led to student growth and the production of more advanced artwork. Interviewees indicated that students were more willing to take risks and put forth effort when formative critique was used to build constructive environments.



Participants indicated that formative critique is used for positive daily interactions with students and focuses on artistic processes. Additionally, summative assessment could be viewed in a formative context under certain circumstances. These findings could be instructive for policy implementation when designing visual arts standards for high school classrooms and could be used to guide administrators' assessment of teacher practice. Finally, limitations and suggestions for further research are presented.

*Keywords:* formative assessment, critique, phenomenology, art education, high school

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## **CHAPTER 1: EXAMINING FORMATIVE CRITIQUE IN THE HIGH SCHOOL VISUAL ARTS CLASSROOM**

“Why do we even have art class?” As a high school visual arts teacher, this is a question that I have heard multiple times from multiple sources—including students, parents, colleagues, administrators, and, if I am being candid, myself. I believe that the answer to this question lies not with the products—the actual paintings, drawings, and sculptures that are the output of art classrooms across the world, but with the creative processes that drive the production of student artwork. The creation of student work in high school visual arts classrooms follows a process similar to most subject areas. Traditionally, an assignment is given to students by an instructor, students produce artwork as responses to that assignment, and, finally, the instructor assesses those student-produced works (Hetland et al., 2013; Rush, 1987). The time after the artwork is assigned and before the work is assessed is a period in which students form, edit, discard, and expand ideas. In the visual arts classroom, and for artists in general, this period of idea generation, technical implementation, and revision is referred to as the creative process (Dannels et al., 2008). During the creative process, visual arts teachers provide guidance through assessment that is an essential and valuable practice for students (Barrett, 1997; Costantino, 2015; Eisner, 2002). The methods used by Kentucky high school teachers to give feedback to their students in visual art courses during the creative process is known as formative critique, and was the focus of this qualitative research.

## **Background of the Problem**

When students are engaged in the creative process in a high school visual arts classroom, where concepts are combined with materials and techniques, the most rigorous and authentic assessment is required (Chen et al., 2017). Rather than merely assigning a summative score at the final stage, at which point revision is impossible, teachers must facilitate an environment in which students are expected to reflect upon and revise their artwork in an ongoing evolution through the utilization of formative critique (Costantino, 2015). The formative critique approach has proven to be beneficial, as it allows instructors to assist in the creation and revision of student work as it happens (Andrade et al., 2014; Boughton, 2005; Burton, 2001). When students are given feedback while working through the challenges that come with creating original pieces of art, it assists their process by forcing them to contemplate what they are doing and where they are going, technically and conceptually, with their artwork (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

As a high school visual arts educator, I am concerned with the creative processes of my students. In my visual art studio courses, I have always found formative critique to be a more valuable assessment tool for guiding a student's work than summative evaluation. The purpose of this research was to examine how Kentucky high school visual arts teachers use formative critique, or in-process feedback, to guide student work. Motley (2016) found formative critique to be beneficial in the assistance of the production of student artwork and noted that "the timing allows them [students] to receive and respond to considered opinions about



their work. At this intermediate point, the feedback can help students see their work more clearly or move past a sticking point” (p. 232). Knowing how to make choices and be intentional in one’s work in an effort to improve that work’s quality is a learned skill, and how instructors facilitate this is essential to understanding how the formative critique process works (Chen et al., 2017).

Assignments given to students in the art classroom are characteristically open-ended and require students to use technical skills to solve visual problems. Belluigi (2018) described student-artists, at the university level, developing critical thinking skills to create work in an unstable and uncertain environment. For students working through the creative process, learning to accept criticism can be difficult, but it is an enduring skill in the art studio (Costantino, 2018). To build the skills needed by their students, high school visual art teachers must employ formative critique methods in the classroom (Patton & Buffington, 2016). In the classroom studio, my role is to facilitate student success, assisting students so they can develop skills learned in class through the creation of their artwork. However, like many of my peers, I am faced with the challenge of finding and implementing formative critique best practices to support optimal student outcomes.

Typically, high school visual arts teachers provide multiple in-progress assessments, or formative critiques, of their students’ artwork, and these formative critiques guide revisions of student artwork until a satisfactory end is achieved (Costantino, 2015; Hetland et al., 2013). However, the way in which this classroom practice is implemented is largely unregulated, as neither the National Coalition for

Core Arts Standards (NCCAS) (2014) nor the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) (2015) provide clear guidelines about critique, formative or otherwise. Absent national- or state-level curricular directives, it is difficult to know how teachers are operating to guide student progress, or whether in-progress feedback is used at all. Due to the lack of a guiding framework for formative critique in high school visual arts classrooms, the opportunity for instructional variance is great (Burton, 2001; Colwell, 2004). Examining formative critique formats in high school visual arts classrooms becomes difficult, if not impossible when put in the context of Elkins (2001), who wrote that “it’s important to acknowledge that there is no good definition of ‘art critique’—no model, no history, no guide” (p. 112). Procedures could vary widely from school to school and teacher to teacher. However, if examples of formative critique, as used by high school visual arts teachers, could be recorded and analyzed, these data could be used to identify effective practices. These practices could provide guidance for formative critique standards in visual arts education at district, state, and national levels. The creation of clearer standards could also inform more comprehensive professional development for high school visual arts teachers. Utilizing a phenomenological approach, this research gathered data on high school visual arts teachers and how they use formative critique.

### **Problem Statement**

Formative critique is an essential tool for both high school students and visual arts teachers (Andrade et al., 2014). It allows teachers to challenge students and generates a conversation that informs the process of creation. Nicol (2010) “proposes

that feedback should be conceptualised as a dialogical and contingent two-way process that involves coordinated teacher–student and peer-to-peer interaction” (p. 503). If formative critique skills can be learned from visual arts teachers early on in students’ careers, it can teach students to make adjustments and move forward in a variety of academic and professional settings (Costantino, 2015).

This research sought to understand how visual arts teachers implement formative critique in high school visual arts curricula while operating in an environment where institutional and scholarly resources on formative critique are limited. National- and state-level policies regarding the practice of formative critique as used by high school visual arts teachers are lacking (KDE, 2015; NCCAS, 2014). NCCAS (2014) guidelines made no mention of formative or summative critique, and only made vague references to summative assessment procedures in general. The NCCAS document focused on the skills students should be learning in the visual arts, but little practical or theoretical direction was given to visual arts teachers regarding classroom strategies or assessment requirements. Similarly, KDE (2015) in the “Kentucky Academic Standards for High School Visual Arts” mentioned critique sparingly, but failed to define the term. Although the literature regarded critique, and specifically formative critique, as an important skill (Glass et al., 2013; Sawyer, 2017), KDE largely ignored the practice. KDE (2015) mentioned “constructive critique” (p. 576), a term that could be seen as tangentially related to formative critique, implying that KDE recognized the importance of this procedure. However, due to a lack of accountability measures or best practice examples, information specifying how

frequently high school visual arts teachers might use formative critique in their classrooms or what formative critique techniques could be used were not available from KDE or NCCAS.

The lack of institutional guidance regarding formative critique was compounded by a gap in the knowledge found in the literature about formative critique. The work of Crooks, (1988) and Hattie and Timperley, (2007) explored the use of formative feedback generally, but did not examine the technique's use in the visual arts. Much of the literature regarding formative critique focused on fine arts programs at colleges and universities (Belluigi, 2018; Dannels et al., 2008; Motley, 2016). Formative critique procedures conducted in visual arts courses on university campuses often followed similar procedures to those in high school visual art classes (Barrett, 2000). Therefore, many formative critique methods are translatable from the postsecondary level and could be used as guidance when examining formative critique at the high school level.

Additionally, much of the formative assessment research completed in high schools explored techniques used in the so-called *core subject* areas: mathematics, English language arts, science, and social studies (Bell & Cowie, 2001; Looney, 2009; Parker et al., 2013). There were parallels to be found in this research to visual arts classes, but there were also significant differences. High school visual arts classes often function as studio environments and, unlike the core classes, student produced work is often individualistic in nature (Eisner, 2002). Brewer (2008) noted "that there is a general consensus that visual arts assessment is greatly needed at all levels and it

should include more than multiple choice, matching, and fill-in-the-blank type test items” (p. 69), a view that makes comparisons of assessment techniques between core and visual arts classes problematic.

It should be noted that there have been scholarly papers written on formative critique in the high school visual arts classroom (Burton, 2001; Costantino, 2015; Sullivan, 2006), but the bulk of the research examined formative critique in visual arts courses in higher education or formative assessment in high school core content classes. This dissertation attempted to bridge the gap in knowledge between literature concentrating on formative critique in university art courses and formative assessment in high school core classes by focusing on the formative critique approaches of high school visual arts teachers.

### **Purpose and Significance**

Knowing how to make choices and be intentional in the production of artwork is a skill that can be learned by students, and identifying the ways in which instructors facilitate this is essential to understanding how the formative critique process functions in a visual arts classroom (Glass et al., 2013). The purpose of this research was to examine how high school visual arts teachers use formative critique, or in-process feedback, to guide student work. Belluigi (2018) described student artists at the university level who developed critical thinking skills to create work in an unstable and uncertain environment. The ability to accept criticism objectively and dispassionately can be a difficult skill to learn, but it can pay large dividends in the art classroom and beyond (Costantino, 2018). If students can learn to separate the

personal from the product, they can more effectively assess their work with the support of outside critique.

This research attempted to gather information on formative critique that could assist in the recognition of best practices in the visual arts classroom. Because there is little codification of the formative critique practice (KDE, 2015; NCCAS, 2014), meaningful comparison of approaches was difficult, if not impossible, as methods from school to school, and teacher to teacher, could vary widely. More data collection on high school visual arts formative critique procedures is needed (Costantino, 2015), and these data could be used to support meaningful educational policy development in the visual arts at the secondary level.

### **Research Questions**

In a discipline where the benefits of formative critique are integral to the creative process, how do teachers create meaningful feedback systems? In the visual art classroom, student produced work is often the culmination of a series of in-progress critiques. This standard practice in studio settings is codified at neither the national (NCCAS, 2014) nor the state (KDE, 2015) level, and there is no formal expectation of its relationship to student outcomes. In an environment where there is little direction for what is regarded as an essential practice (Costantino, 2015; Eisner, 2002; Hetland et al., 2013), it is uncertain if there are commonalities to approach, or if teachers function as islands of instruction, operating independently. Visual arts teachers are trained in a wide range of disciplines and are required to produce work in a variety of studio settings. Critique is a ubiquitous process in the studio at the

university level (Barrett, 2000), and it would seem intuitive that high school art instructors would bring this practice into their classrooms on the expectation that it would help students produce more sophisticated work. Simultaneously, the integration of critique in the classroom would provide students the opportunity to practice and internalize the enduring skill of hearing, evaluating, and choosing whether to implement outside feedback (Costantino, 2018). This research examined how high school visual arts teachers utilized formative critique in their classrooms.

Questions guiding this research were:

1. How do high school visual art teachers use formative critique in the classroom?
2. What guides high school visual art teachers' methods of formative critique in the classroom?
3. How do high school visual art teachers describe the impact on student performance when they use formative critique?

In addition to these questions, the open-ended format of interviews was used to collect data outside these parameters. High school visual art teachers explained student outcomes they hope to facilitate through formative critique and reflected on how they viewed their own classroom practices. In the spirit of openness and lack of bias, referred to as *Epoche* (Moustakas, 1994), I attempted to set aside preconceptions regarding formative critique when entering into this study.

## Research Design

To investigate formative critique practices of high school visual arts teachers in Kentucky, I used the phenomenological inquiry method. I chose a phenomenological approach due to the realities of the subject matter, as it allowed the investigation of the perceptions of participants' authentic, lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Because of the subjective nature of the educational processes involved in visual art education, phenomenology was suited to this research in visual art classrooms (Irwin & De Cosson, 2004). Additionally, in high school visual arts classrooms, student work is often of a subjective nature (Eisner, 2002), and analysis of the idiosyncratic interactions between teachers and students regarding assessment lends itself to the qualitative method. I utilized the constructivist viewpoint (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) to evaluate teacher perceptions of formative critique methods.

Participants in this phenomenological research consisted of visual arts teachers who were licensed in Kentucky and were currently working in high school classroom settings. Participating teachers were required to have at least three years of relevant teaching experience in visual arts instruction. Teachers participating in this study were also required to have had experience teaching advanced visual arts courses, regardless of media and techniques used in class. The examination of the formative critique processes of these teachers was expected to be valuable and relevant, irrespective of the specific artistic disciplines they taught.

Data was collected through participant interviews and the collection of artifacts related to formative critique. Interviews with teachers were conducted in locations



based on suitability for participant teachers. I met with participants in settings in which they felt comfortable, which included locations on and off school premises. It should be noted that it was necessary to conduct interviews through internet-based video conferencing. Interviews focused on formative critique procedures used by participants, lasted approximately one hour, and included a series of semi-scripted, open ended questions.

In addition to interviews, I collected evidence of teachers' educational practice as it relates to formative critique in the form of written materials. These artifacts included rubrics, critique forms, and other written materials related to critique procedures. Although formative critique is often conducted informally in a one-on-one setting (Barrett, 2000; Costantino, 2015), other documents and artifacts were investigated. Interviews with participating high school visual arts teachers, along with teachers' curricular materials, provided an authentic understanding of how formative critique was being utilized in Kentucky high school visual arts classrooms.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Feedback as Vital Classroom Practice**

Hattie and Timperley (2007) defined feedback as "information provided by an agent (e.g., teacher, peer, book, parent, self, experience) regarding aspects of one's performance or understanding" (p. 81). Their work provided an extensive framework for understanding feedback in its many forms, especially concerning feedback given on the process of work, i.e., formative critique. Hattie and Timperley argued that in-process feedback is most effective when assessing deficient student work, as opposed

to dealing with a lack of student understanding of the content. Additionally, Hattie and Timperley suggested that if criticism is to be effectual, it must clearly address the following questions:

- Where am I going? (What are the goals?)
- How am I going? (What progress is being made toward the goal?)
- Where to next? (What activities need to be undertaken to make better progress?) (p. 86)

This series of questions presented a logical, sequential pathway by which to challenge and encourage student work. In the studio, a set of parallel, visual art-specific reflections could be presented as:

- What concepts am I trying to communicate through my artwork?
- How visually evident are my ideas in the artwork?
- What could be done to improve the artwork?

The preceding questions could be used to provide guidance to students, through the process of formative critique, clearly fitting into Hattie and Timperley's model.

Students who are working in a high school visual art classroom are often highly varied in levels of experience, technical ability, and confidence (Hetland et al., 2013). Compounding the difficulty of teaching heterogeneous student groups, the assessment of creative pursuits is rarely completely objective in nature. Lucas et al. (2013) noted that formative assessment in the evaluation of creativity is subjective, which is comparable to procedures used in visual art classrooms. In this environment, students can struggle to self-assess work, which makes teacher input and evaluation a

necessary component for student growth (Lucas et al., 2013). The ultimate goal of teacher-led formative critique is that students internalize critical evaluation and learn to self-assess work in a clear and beneficial manner.

Formative evaluation, as a process, differs from summative evaluation in both duration and intent. Crooks (1988) noted that the implementation of formative assessment represented a much larger portion of class time than did summative assessment. Because formative assessment accounts for so much more instructional time, teachers must believe that formative assessment is advantageous to student results. Simpler content (e.g., true-false and multiple-choice questions) requires simple feedback, but as material becomes more complex, more nuanced feedback is required (Crooks, 1988). Regarding the assessment of creativity in classrooms, Lucas et al. (2013) found that “formative assessment has a view of reality that sees reality as socially constructed rather than objective. Variables assessed formatively are complex, interwoven, and difficult to measure” (p. 10). Additionally, formative assessment builds an environment where student work, facilitated and encouraged through teacher student interaction, is measured through individual improvement (Crooks, 1988; Lucas et al., 2013). Assessing in-progress student artwork, especially in more advanced courses, requires teachers to provide students with individualized feedback, which can be provided through formative critique.

### **Assumptions, Limitations, and Scope**

In this research it was assumed that participants were teachers certified to teach high school visual arts in the state of Kentucky, and that they would have the

requisite minimum three years of experience teaching visual arts, which would include experience at the high school level. It was also assumed that these high school visual arts teachers would, to the best of their ability, answer interview questions truthfully based on their classroom experiences. This open and honest access to participants' accounts of their experiences and their related artifacts facilitated the gathering of accurate and reliable data.

The examination of formative critique methods of high school visual arts teachers was limited by both the number, location, and characteristics of participants. The parameters of this study required interviewing between six and 12 participants, interviewed through video conferencing. Ultimately, six participants were interviewed and all interviewees were teachers working in the area of central Kentucky commonly referred to as the Bluegrass Region, which includes Anderson, Bourbon, Boyle, Clark, Estill, Fayette, Franklin, Garrard, Harrison, Jessamine, Lincoln, Madison, Mercer, Nicholas, Powell, Scott, and Woodford counties (Kentucky Board of Nursing, 2020). This phenomenological study was conducted using purposeful sampling methods at multiple sites. Because generalizability was not the intent of this research, it was not only acceptable, but advantageous, to choose participants with similar characteristics (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Lichtman, 2013). Furthermore, in their study of how administrators affect teacher learning, Tran et al. (2018) examined procedures at multiple locations to develop a more comprehensive understanding of educational procedures. I have acknowledged these limitations and assessed their effect on data collection and analysis in the following chapters.

As an educator who has worked in the visual arts for nearly 20 years, I have developed biases that could limit the validity of this research. Because the researcher functions as the recording instrument for qualitative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), I attempted to maintain and awareness of my preconceived notions of the ways in which high school visual arts classrooms function, both positively and negatively, to prevent that from affecting my data gathering. Additionally, I endeavored to ensure reliability by consistently documenting participant interviews and participant artifacts to remain constant in my approach.

### **Key Terms**

*Creative Process* – The methodical progress through materials and concepts by which artists design, alter and create artwork (Dannels et al., 2008)

*Critique* – A process for verbal or written feedback on original artwork in the visual arts. This is used to promote student achievement and reflection (Motley, 2016).

*Formative assessment* – A process by which a student’s understanding and application of material is evaluated prior to completion of the work. This can be assessed through multiple modes, but is always student focused (Torrance & Pryor, 2001).

*Formative Critique* – A synthesis of *critique* and *formative assessment* that will describe the ongoing evaluation of unfinished student artwork in high school visual art studios. This term will be used to describe a specific teacher-student interaction in which teachers encourage students to

reflect on their processes and products to promote artistic growth. This interaction is typically, though not limited to, verbal, informal, in-class communications.

*Student Artist* – This term will refer to high school students engaged in the process of creating original artwork (Bellugi, 2018).

### **Summary**

Formative assessment is a widely used technique implemented by teachers of multiple content areas and at multiple levels. Using the phenomenological format, this research focused on how visual arts teachers at central Kentucky high schools perceived the use of this approach in their classrooms. Through interviews of high school visual arts teachers, data was gathered on their classroom practices, information which contributed to the identification of common approaches and best practices. These findings could be able to affect policy decisions regarding visual arts educational expectations and improve classroom experiences for teachers and students. This research was intended to fill the gap in the knowledge that exists between the literature on formative critique in college art studios and formative feedback in high school core content classrooms. In the next chapter's review of the literature, overlapping approaches in feedback techniques and their specific relationship to formative critique are examined. Furthermore, the formative critique as an indispensable visual arts practice is presented.

## CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The academic environment, as it currently exists, is dominated by “final exams, state tests, college entrance exams (e.g., GRE, SAT, & LSAT), final performances, and term papers” (Dixson & Worrell, 2016, p. 156). In the United States, teachers in high school visual arts classrooms typically use summative assessment to evaluate and apply scores to student artwork. This research examined how students and teachers in the visual arts arrive at equivalent endpoints. Student artists working in high school art studios are not often required to recite facts or manipulate pre-determined formulas, but are challenged to create original works of art (Irwin & De Cosson, 2004). These works are usually based on teacher produced assignments, although in higher level courses student artists often begin to work more independently, designing individualized and inventive bodies of work (Costantino, 2015; Hetland et al., 2013). Eisner (2004) noted that the creation of artwork requires the essential “ability to compose qualitative relationships” (p. 5) and that there were no verifiable *right* answers in this endeavor. In this situation, which lacks clear parameters for what constitutes correct and incorrect, the leadership provided by teachers to student artists as they produce work is a vital classroom practice (Barrett, 1997; Dannels et al., 2008). In the visual arts classroom, formative critique, practiced as in-progress assessment, should be a central tool used by teachers to question, encourage, challenge, and inform a student’s creative process and work (Costantino, 2015). Formative critique allows student and teacher to confer and assess the progress of work, determine paths forward, and implement, or reject, suggestions.

The NCCAS (2014) guidelines, which were meant to provide a national foundation for arts education, did not mention the process of critique, formative or otherwise. The authors introduced the concept of “cornerstone assessments” (p. 15), a summative procedure for assessing student work, which were meant to be applied when student work has been completed. It was noteworthy that this document was heavily focused on the concepts and processes that all students can learn to become proficient in understanding the fine arts. The NCCAS guidelines emphasized the skills that students should learn regarding the fine arts, but little reference was made to how teachers should facilitate the mastery of those skills. The authors of NCCAS made a single reference to art criticism, noting that “people gain insights into meanings of artworks by engaging in the process of art criticism” (p. 14), but this is a completely different process than that of formative critique. Additionally, NCCAS wrote that “the standards are rooted in an outcomes-based approach” (p. 8), which placed a focus on the summative product created in a visual arts classroom. In contrast, formative critique challenges students and teachers to concentrate on the successes and failures contained within the process of creating work.

Correspondingly, in the Kentucky Academic Standards for High School Visual Arts the word “critique” appeared only once in reference to assessment of student work, with no clear definition of, nor guidelines for, practice (KDE, 2015). This again puts teachers in a situation where an essential skill is poorly defined and largely ignored. KDE mirrored NCCAS by referring to art criticism in the context of understanding artwork through interpretation and evaluation of finished pieces, which



can be student works, peer works, or master works. This also echoed the work of Glass et al. (2013), which examined how research-based protocols can improve education in the visual arts. Glass et al. found that student artists who analyzed master works of art were able to then transfer those skills when self-assessing their own artwork. The theory that the skills used for summative evaluation of the work of others can be transferred to self-evaluation is sound. However, it ignores the formative critique used to create and inform the work leading up to the summative stage.

Under the heading of “Artistic Process: Creating” (KDE, 2015, p. 576), KDE stated that students should fully understand the idea that “Artists and designers develop excellence through practice and constructive critique, reflecting on, revising, and refining work over time” (p. 576). This was encouraging, because it made explicit reference to an idea related to formative critique. However, no concrete procedures were suggested, and the practical applications were presented in vague terms. The ability to accept, analyze, and decide whether to implement feedback was a skill that KDE recognized, at least in broad terms, as essential to students in the visual arts classroom. Yet with no clear guidelines regarding formative critique procedures, it was difficult to speculate on what individual teachers were doing in those classrooms.

### **Feedback as Essential Practice**

Formative critique provides visual art teachers a means to assess student artwork while that work is in progress. This method of evaluation fit within Hattie and Timperley’s (2007) framework for feedback and how it guides student work. Hattie and Timperley found that the most constructive feedback prompted student reflection on

goals for work and on the progress being made toward those goals. This type of feedback is reflected in formative critique, which also challenges students to contemplate what they hope to convey through their work and how best to convey those ideas. Feedback for students creating original works of art, implemented as formative critique, is an essential practice in the creative process (Costantino, 2015; Hetland et al., 2013). Student artists are often inexperienced, insecure, and unable to practice the type of self-reflection necessary to assess, modify, and advance their own artwork. Therefore, it is imperative that the instructor working with the student artist be able to provide clear guidance, as demonstrated by Hattie and Timperley. In time, the eventual goal is for student artists to gain the experience, confidence, and metacognition skills necessary to self-assess their work with these same questions.

In terms of instructional time, summative evaluation represents a much smaller percentage of time than formative evaluation, according to Crooks' (1988) investigation of student outcomes related to formative assessment. If teachers are to spend this instructional time on formative evaluation, then that feedback must be beneficial to student outcomes. Crooks noted that validation of correct answers for simple questions is adequate, but "If the question involves comprehension or higher cognitive skills...more detailed feedback is desirable" (p. 456). Assignments in visual arts classes, especially at the upper levels, tend to require student artists to create original works that demonstrate a high degree of skill and critical thought, a scenario in which it would be necessary for the instructor to provide highly individualized, specific feedback. Crooks also addressed an "individualistic learning structure" (p. 466) in

which students were less competitive, more cooperative, and focused on “effort rather than ability” (p. 466). This creates an environment where students do not compare their work to the work of others, but rather to their individual limits and expectations, and work with instructors to utilize the essential skill of formative critique to build a studio environment where students are motivated by their innate desire to excel.

Concerning the intertwined concepts of formative critique, summative critique, feedback, and assessment, it should be noted that evaluating student produced work in the visual arts classroom is a qualitative procedure (Barrett, 1997; Hetland et al., 2013). To attempt to quantitatively measure student output in the art studio would be incredibly difficult and counterproductive. Eisner (2002) presented this example:

If I say a painting is three feet by four feet, I have provided a measurement. If I say the painting is a fine example of someone’s work, I am evaluating but not measuring. Thus, to assume that assessment and evaluation require measurement is to make the wrong assumption. (p. 180)

Thus, the assessment of student artwork cannot be directly compared to a grade on a spelling test or an algebra worksheet, which is not to imply a judgement of what is educationally more or less valuable. Nevertheless, this difference in approaches between the core content areas and the visual arts provides a point of contrast in pedagogical procedures and outcomes.

### **Formative Critique in Higher Education**

While there was research that explores visual arts assessment at the K-12 level (Andrade et al., 2014; Brewer, 2008), much of the existing literature dealt with critique at university level art and design programs. However, the academic writing regarding

critique processes in higher education was also far from complete, and Elkins (2012) noted:

There's an enormous literature on testing, but almost nothing on critiques. There may be up to five thousand institutions in the world that grant the equivalent of BFA, MFA, and PhD degrees in the visual arts, and if each one of those holds just five critiques a semester (and surely the number is much higher) then there are at least fifty thousand art critiques each year. And yet there is no standard literature on critiques: nothing about how to run them, what they're supposed to accomplish, what standards they might employ. (pp. vii-ix)

Elkins assessment might be hyperbolic, but it was supported by the literature regarding assessment of student artwork. Additionally, literature on critique at the university often examined critique with a focus on undergraduate students at institutions specializing in visual arts (Belluigi, 2018; Dannels et al., 2008; Motley, 2016). Hattie and Timperley's (2007) working definition of feedback was helpful to guide the examination of formative critique in visual arts classrooms and gave context for parallel work in different content areas. Additionally, Black and Wiliam (1998) noted that "The two concepts of formative assessment and of feedback overlap strongly" (p. 28), and while the terms formative assessment, formative critique, and feedback were not interchangeable, they were closely related in much of the literature regarding classroom assessment (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Black & Wiliam, 2009; Crooks, 1988; Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

Dannels et al. (2008) examined how teacher feedback informs students' presentations in classroom critiques at the post-secondary level. Within the framework of "communication across the curriculum (CXC)" (p. 2), Dannels et al. defined modes of communication and critique performance that were expected of art and design

students in their third year at university, while additionally examining strategies used by faculty in oral feedback sessions. Data was gathered through the coding and categorization of feedback given in recorded critique sessions. The researchers found that the competencies that emerged centered around the ability of students to clearly and concisely describe the conceptual and technical processes involved in the production of their artwork. Dannels et al. found that clearer expectations for student work and stronger communication skills were required for feedback, in the form of oral critique, to be an authentic, transformative experience.

Belluigi (2018) described student artists at the university level developing critical thinking skills to create work in an unstable and uncertain environment. The system needed to develop those skills encompassed numerous techniques, including critique, discussion and analysis of feedback. Belluigi's study examined the student experience at two fine arts institutions, the first with a traditional hierarchical academic structure, the second with a more collaborative environment between faculty and students. Belluigi argued that "the artist, much like the theoretician, is enabled to pose questions not only about but through the work. Such constructions of artmaking make allowance for creative agency while necessitating a developed capacity for criticality" (Belluigi, 2018, p. 307), which created a dynamic in which student artists must be able to communicate effectively for their work to be understood. Belluigi argued that ineffective feedback systems contributed to lower levels of students' "meta-cognition and critical judgment" (p. 320) abilities, but posited that more rigorous critique procedures in a cooperative environment could mitigate

these shortcomings. If those rigorous procedures can be identified and implemented, formative critique could help foster more productive studio environments.

Undergraduate students studying graphic design must develop skills, in addition to learning to take risks and understanding the role of failure, according to Motley (2016). The acquisition of technical skills is necessary, but without the use of critique, students struggled to articulate concepts evident in their design processes and products. In addition to providing valuable feedback to students regarding their work, Motley found that critiques fostered student reflection, taught students to speak professionally about their work, and created an environment where students learned and practiced interpersonal skills valued in the workplace. This demonstrated the far-reaching implications of formative critique and the transferability of the skill set taught by this type of feedback.

The ways in which institutions at all levels, from elementary school to higher education, attempted to teach creativity to students is examined in Sawyer's (2017) meta-study of art and design pedagogy. Only 18 of 65 of Sawyer's sources dealt with K-12 education, which "may indicate that the studio approach is more common in higher education than in K-12 classrooms" (p. 103). Nearly 10% of papers discussed critique as a process in the art studio, with varying results. While many students found critique to be a stressful experience, there were discrepancies in whether the overall experience was positive or negative. Students felt that without clearly defined parameters, critique was only worrying and not constructive. However, when the feedback was relevant and aimed at analyzing the student's process and improving the

work, critique was viewed more favorably. Additionally, Sawyer found that studio pedagogy, including assessment methods like critique, could help teach creativity in subjects outside of the visual arts.

While there can be vast differences in skill level and intellectual sophistication between high school and university student artists, the methods of formative critique are often similar. In an examination of how college level feedback can be improved, Barrett (2000) found that “critiques are also utilized in high school instruction, where high school teachers often replicate the methods of college instructors” (p. 30). Thus, it was suggested that instructors at the high school level should work to replicate, and when necessary modify, those college level practices that were both effective and appropriate for students working in the high school art studio.

### **Formative Critique in K-12 Art Programs**

Hetland et al. (2013) explored the components of the high school art studio and reported that critique, both formative and summative, was a fundamental practice in those spaces. Their examination of critique in authentic settings found that it was integral in compelling students to reflect on their work and to change modes of cognition as they did so. Critique generally, and formative critique specifically, is a communal, collaborative process. Hetland et al. noted that during formative critique, students must shift modes from working independently as artists engaged in production, to working with others, whether with teachers, peers or some combination of the two. This required that students stop the process of creating their work, make conceptual space to reflect on the things they are making, and be open to

feedback from instructors and peers. Hetland et al. also argued that while formative critique is important for improving the paintings, drawings, and sculptures that their students were working on in the moment, it could have more far reaching ramifications. Specifically, as students reflected upon and received feedback about their in-progress work, there was a motivation to envision the artwork as it might become with additions, subtractions, and alterations. Hetland et al. explained that “critiques extend beyond reflections on the work itself, because fundamentally they are reflections by students about themselves as developing artists” (p. 28). Thus, the process of formative critique was instructionally valuable in the moment as students worked through the creative process, but it also affected student processes going forward as they continued to create, assess, and revise.

In contrast to the role of formative critique in visual arts programs at the university and high school levels, Andrade et al. (2014) found that many elementary and middle school teachers working in fine arts programs in New York City initially believed that children’s artwork cannot, and should not, be assessed, lest it “threaten their self-esteem and diminish their motivation to engage in artmaking” (p. 34). This reflected Eisner’s (2002) work, which examined the fraught relationship the arts have with assessment and evaluation, where “such judgments are often regarded as impediments to the liberation of creative potential” (p. 178). However, Andrade et al. (2014) found that once the process of formative critique was defined and established, students thrived when authentic assessment was integrated into the curriculum, with many classrooms expanding the critique model to include peer-to-peer feedback. This



program created an environment where teachers were allowed to reflect on their practices and students were able to flourish utilizing a previously maligned tool. This case gives a glimpse into the possibilities of similar critique methods being used at the high school level.

In their article arguing for the importance of art education, Winner and Hetland (2009) made the point that rather than art classrooms adapting to resemble an “academic’ class, teachers of academic subjects might well benefit from making their classes more like art classes” (p. 4). They demonstrated that one beneficial way to imitate art classes was to include formative assessment, in the mode of formative critique. Winner and Hetland argued that when students, in any subject, received feedback and reflected on choices they had made about techniques and materials, those students gained a deeper understanding of the content. This assessment was echoed in Costantino’s (2018) work examining STEAM curriculum, which integrated art into the collected subjects of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. Costantino argued that this transdisciplinary approach enhanced all content areas by providing authentic feedback during assignments. Formative critique, when employed in all content areas, bolstered the argument for protecting visual arts education and incorporating definitive elements of visual arts instruction into other classrooms.

While exploring evaluation of student work in K-12 arts programs, Brewer (2008) found that assessment techniques are needed at all levels, but that they tended to be lacking overall and simplistic when available. Brewer documented multiple models of assessment and concluded that “there should be more authentic

performance assessment that includes student artwork, and what students demonstrate they learn from making art” (p. 69). This research revealed not a lack of opportunity, but a lack of implementation, and raised the question of why these techniques are not examined, refined, and applied to studio settings at all levels.

Through its Advanced Placement (AP) Art and Design Courses, the College Board (2012) acted as a bridge between visual arts instruction in high schools and universities. In the AP Art and Design courses, which included 2-Dimensional Design, 3-Dimensional Design, and Drawing, students worked with teachers to create a portfolio of artwork that was assessed at the end of the year by the College Board. This was meant to replicate introductory level university instruction in the visual arts, where students work in a more rigorous environment. Furthermore, students were expected to produce artwork of higher technical quality and more sophisticated conceptually than that required by a typical high school art class. The College Board (2012), in their “College-level Expectations in the Arts” report, sought to determine how the NCCAS (2014) standards aligned with expectations at the university level and “what habits, skills, and abilities constitute college-level learning in the arts” (p. 4). Participating universities responded that a skill they sought included the ability of students to modify and improve artwork according to critique, in addition to the expectation that “students regularly engage in critique of their own work and the work of peers” (The College Board, 2012, p. 71). The goal of AP courses was to give high school students opportunities to demonstrate skills commensurate with university expectations, so it was unsurprising that students who understood the process of critique, and especially

the essential practice of formative critique, were those who presented as most likely to have success at the college level. Additionally, the College Board provided resources for implementation of critique in the AP Art and Design Courses. Daley (n.d.) presented an excellent set of suggestions for practical applications. These resembled the national, standardized formative critique guidelines presented by NCCAS (2014). Unfortunately, these standards might only be seen by highly engaged instructors involved in the AP Studio Art and Design programs, despite the fact that instructors and students at all levels could benefit from their application.

### **Formative Assessment in K-12 Core Content Areas**

There was a large body of literature examining formative assessment at the high school level, which was focused on the implementation of feedback in what were known as the core classes: math, science, language arts, and social studies (Bell & Cowie, 2001; Looney, 2009; Parker et al., 2013). When comparing formative assessment techniques in core classes to visual arts classes, the closest parallels could be seen in the humanities in general, and in the content area of social studies specifically. Social studies courses, especially AP History, required students to look critically at world events and interpret them in rigorous ways. While this was not a perfect corollary to the formative critique process in the visual arts, there were clear similarities that indicate significant connections in classroom practice.

In their mixed methods study of AP US Government and Politics, Parker et al. (2013) examined what methods were most effective for student learning. One such method was “looping” (p. 1433), a process where students would revisit a central

question throughout the course. This looping technique was accompanied by student work and teacher feedback to achieve deeper understanding of content. Henderson et al. (1996) observed the processes of AP American History classes and examined the connections between teacher actions and student understanding in relation to the effectiveness of instruction. They found that while there were small differences in some instructional practices, “The most striking differences were in teacher questioning, with more effective teachers asking more questions, garnering greater participation and success rates, and attaining higher rates of student engagement” (Henderson et al., 1996, p. 32). This teacher guided questioning can be correlated to the practice of formative critique, in that instructors were giving feedback and seeking responses from students, in real-time, to encourage student achievement.

Additionally, Looney (2009) suggested that multiple, varied assessments could create a comprehensive view of student assessment, while alleviating the stress of single high-stakes tests. These processes mirrored the work of AP Studio Art students as they built a body of artwork. Students created images, received feedback, re-worked images, and received more feedback addressing the revised work, repeating this process multiple times over the course of the school year. Looney’s examination of innovation in the classroom highlighted formative assessment as a skill that is crucial to student achievement, and noted:

Teachers using formative assessment identify the factors behind variations in student achievements, and adapt teaching to meet diverse student needs. The focus is on helping all students to achieve at high levels. Students also develop skills to assess their own and their peer’s work, and develop strategies for “learning-to-learn”. These are the skills vital for problem-solving and the kind of higher-order thinking emphasised in innovative programmes. (p. 20)

In a visual arts classroom, a wide range of students create works, which present multiple, valid interpretations of assignment criteria. Visual arts teachers must be flexible in their formative critique techniques regarding the individual needs of students who are creating original and dissimilar pieces of art. This allows instructors to provide guidance to students in specific classroom tasks, while also teaching students the skills needed for effective self-assessment.

The work of Coffey et al. (2011) challenged how formative assessment was presented in research literature. Through the lens of science education, they argued that research should focus more on facilitating student processes, which aligned with how formative critique is often implemented, concentrating on student procedures and methods. Torrance and Pryor's (2001) work also focused on student centered collaborative assessment in the form of "divergent assessment...[which] emphasises the learner's understanding rather than the agenda of the assessor" (p. 617). The work of these authors pointed to a need for open-ended formative critique implemented by teachers to assess how students are working and facilitate efficient processes to increase student achievement. Students in studio art classes often work in differing modes on an assignment, finding multiple answers to a visual question posed by the instructor's assignment. Because many different responses to an assignment can be seen as valid, it is necessary that the in-progress assessment of that work be flexible to accommodate numerous creative interpretations.

The use of formative feedback in culturally responsive classrooms can be used to create an environment where teachers are "learning and collaborating" (Lindsey et

al., 2019, p. 70) with students to discover what is conceptually valuable. Talented artists can struggle to generate ideas and to execute sophisticated work, but if teachers can implement a classroom environment that employs the procedures of formative critique, they can assist students in that process of working “with foresight and vision, rather than reactively”, according to Lindsey et al. (p. 70). Similarly, formative critique allows teachers to understand what instruction students need regarding their work and how those goals can be achieved. As students are able to articulate their goals more clearly, the next step should be greater independence in their processes. Pai et al.’s (2005) examination of the role of independence in schooling demonstrated that fostering students’ ability to work autonomously should be a central goal of the feedback process. Students that internalize the formative feedback model learn to trust their own ideas and instincts and become more independent learners.

### **Implications Regarding the Visual Arts Classroom**

The literature suggested that the subjective nature of visual art makes the implementation of feedback and formative critique challenging (Barrett, 2000; Belluigi, 2018; Motley, 2016; Sawyer, 2017). However, if instructors can find a way to provide authentic, meaningful feedback to students who are in the process of creating work, the results can be significant. This feedback can encourage students to produce higher level work (Hattie & Timperley, 2007) while also teaching those students to articulate their ideas about their work more clearly (Belluigi, 2018; Dannels et. al., 2008). Additionally, this can foster student reflection on their processes and products in the

art studio (Barrett, 2000; Belluigi, 2018; Motley, 2016). Relevant formative critique can help give students the skills to make, speak about, and reflect upon the work they create, competencies which could be valuable both in and out of the visual art classroom.

In their overview of feedback methods, Black and Wiliam (2009) expressed that:

Since the responsibility for learning rests with both the teacher and the learner, it is incumbent on each to do all they can to mitigate the impact of any failures of the other (in the language of partnership law, teachers and learners are jointly and severally liable!) (p. 7).

This was a clear call to action for teachers of all subjects, but it resonated specifically for visual arts instructors and their use of formative critique. Visual arts courses operate in a studio environment, where students are continually endeavoring to produce original artwork intended to address a wide array of assignments (Eisner, 2002). Visual arts teachers typically use formative critique to interpret, analyze, and provide feedback that will affect the work of student artists. When visual arts teachers assess student artwork only at the summative stage, they risk missing opportunities to promote student growth throughout the creative process. The existing literature indicated that formative critique should be employed throughout student artists' creative process, and this research examined how formative critique is implemented by high school visual art teachers in authentic classroom settings.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents a research design for examining formative critique as practiced by high school visual arts teacher. The rationale for the phenomenological method in this study will be presented and methods of data collection will be described. Demographics of participants are examined to provide context to their responses. Additionally, interview settings, and the unique challenges presented by necessary video conferencing protocols will be described. An explanation of both risks and benefits to participants addresses the safety of teachers in this study as it relates to this research. As a visual art teacher, my biases and personal perspectives are documented, and data analysis procedures are introduced. Finally, methodological limitations are included in anticipation of possible constraints in regard to this study.

### **Using a Phenomenological Approach in the Visual Art Classroom**

The process of critique, and specifically formative critique, is an interactive, social process between student artist and instructor, mirroring the constructivist view which examines “the processes of interaction among individuals” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 8). Using a phenomenological approach, this research inspected how high school art teachers use formative critique in their classrooms. Bresler (1995) noted that phenomenology was concerned with “*created*” reality (p. 23). If the classroom and its instructional space is considered a as a teacher designed reality, the phenomenological approach is an ideal tool for examining the interactions that guide student outcomes in the visual arts.



Sullivan (2006) argued that the quantitative approach, while held in high regard, “has little chance of accounting for ends as complex as learning and teaching, let alone advance our knowledge of constructs such as imagination or visual cognition” (p. 22). Qualitative methodology was central to Sullivan’s work focusing on artmaking and artistic process as research, and provided a model for investigation in the highly subjective realm of fine arts education. As seen in the works of Dannels et al. (2008) and Motley (2016), research regarding critique in the visual arts typically focused on undergraduate students in art schools. Conversely, at the high school level, the large body of work on formative assessment focused on core subjects, like mathematics (Black & Wiliam, 1998). A phenomenological approach, examining the critiquing techniques used in the high school art studio, would help to bridge the gap between these areas of study.

Using phenomenology for the investigation of formative critique in high school art studios was a choice based on the nature of classroom practices. This was an analysis of interaction between teacher and student, focused on the teacher perspective and aligned with Creswell and Creswell’s (2018) constructivist views on interactions, which stated that “the goal of the research is to rely as much as possible on the participants’ views of the situation being studied” (p. 8). Analysis of formative critique required a qualitative, phenomenological approach because the quality of student work was open to interpretation by both teacher and student (Eisner, 2002). However, as the expert in the scenario, it was the teacher’s perspective that was examined. These interpretations, and the interactions that arise from them, assessed

though the lens of the instructor, lent themselves to a phenomenological approach (Bresler, 1995), and would have been difficult, if not impossible, to place into a quantitative context.

The driving force behind this research was an examination of how high school visual arts teachers perceived their implementation of formative critique in the classroom. Formative critique in this setting was informed by the deliberate choices made by visual arts teachers, a process which involved what Moustakas (1994) referred to as *intentional experience*, where individual interpretations were both unique to and valid for the participant. This research examined intentional experiences by collecting data from multiple teacher interviews, providing insight into the formative critique process. With this focus on teacher perceptions of formative critique, the goal was to document and analyze practices and understand how teachers perceived the effects of formative critique. The analysis of all collected data provided a holistic view of teacher procedures and practices, and the desired effects on student outcome.

### **Data Collection**

This research explored the way in which high school visual arts teachers employed formative critique practices in their classroom from the teachers' perspectives, and data was collected from interviews conducted with participants and artifacts used by teachers to implement formative critique procedures. Due to the subjective nature of the content, and the potential for a wide range of classroom practices, the goal was to interview between six and 12 teachers in the state of

Kentucky. This range is based on Creswell and Creswell (2018), who indicated that sample sizes in phenomenological studies may include between three and 10 individuals, and Starks and Brown Trinidad (2007) who suggested a sample size between one and 10 participants. Additionally, Starks and Brown Trinidad (2007) noted that participants can provide a great deal of information in a single interview. Research has indicated that a minimum of six participants, especially when they represent a homogenous group, can provide rich narrative and lead to saturation (Guest et al., 2006). Researchers conducting a phenomenological study must be able to give an accurate account of participants' lived experience (Lichtman, 2013; Moustakas, 1994), and the examination through multiple interviews of teachers concerning their practices was used to provide data in this study. The data gathered from this group produced insight into the formative critique methods that visual arts teachers were using in classrooms.

Using a semi-structured, in-depth interview process, I interviewed six high school visual arts teachers. Interviews focused on participants' perceptions of their use of formative critique when assessing in-progress student artwork. The tone of interaction was collegial and conversational for all interviews, which were open-ended. Interviews with participants lasted just over one hour on average, and all participants were interviewed one time, with the exception of Samantha. A follow-up interview was conducted with Samantha by telephone to clarify and member check responses. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. During interviews, I took thorough field notes and reviewed and augmented notes immediately after completion.

Participants were asked each question from a prescribed list, the first of which determined participants used formative critique in their classroom. This was used to establish a baseline for participants' classroom procedures, and participants' positive or negative responses determined which scripted questions would follow. As the interviews progressed, questions became more specific about participant perceptions of methods, guiding concepts, and student outcomes as they related to formative critique. All participants were asked each scripted question and many individualized follow-up questions were included when warranted by interviewees' responses. This allowed the freedom for participants to share deeper, more meaningful responses regarding their perceptions of formative critique. During interviews, validity was achieved through the use of frequent member checking by repeating responses back to participants to check for accuracy. Additionally, unclear or ambiguous responses by participants prompted clarifying questions to increase validity.

All participant interviews in this study were conducted via the digital conferencing application Zoom, which provided both audio and video recordings of interviews. In the interest of safeguarding the health and safety of all participants, no face to face interactions occurred (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2021). It would have been within acceptable guidelines to interview participants in person with masks on at a distance of at least six feet (CDC, 2021). However, it was determined that this procedure would have inhibited my ability to assess participants' verbal and non-verbal responses and would not have contributed to participants'

comfort or sense of well-being, which might have affected the quality of their responses (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012).

Response data was disaggregated to provide a full, rich description of the practices of participants. Barone and Eisner's (1997) method for Arts Based Educational Research (ABER) described "calling attention to seemingly commonsensical, taken-for-granted notions" (p. 96), an approach which can be directly applied to an examination of the creative process, including critique. Interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed. The first iteration of coding utilized a "qualitative codebook" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 196), in which interviews were coded for instances of formative critique practices, principles which guided participants' implementation of formative critique, and perceived outcomes derived from formative critique. This codebook was revised throughout the process, and a large expansion occurred regarding teachers' modes of critique. Additional codes were added as the data was reexamined, and unexpected responses and interactions, especially those concerning risk-taking and grading on effort, were recorded and integrated. Through multiple rounds of coding, analysis, and refinement of concepts, the practices, expectations, and self-reflections of visual arts teachers emerged. These themes delineated commonalities and divergences in approaches and expectations for student achievement, and were organized and presented using a phenomenological format.

In addition to transcribed, coded interviews, teacher generated artifacts were collected. Hetland et al. (2009) described how visual art teachers' documentation of student interactions was a valuable resource to those teachers. Collecting objects that

document teachers' methods of formative critique proved to be difficult, as it is often practiced orally as a one-to-one interaction (Costantino, 2015; Hetland et al., 2013). However, accounts of written formative critique, though much less prevalent, did exist in the literature (Barrett, 2007; Eisner, 2002). Due to health and safety issues, direct observation of teachers in classrooms was not an option. Therefore, I collected teacher produced artifacts that documented their formative critique methods via email and digital sharing platforms. These included, but were not limited to:

- Lesson plans
- Rubrics
- Forms
- Screen shots from digital communication
- Emails or other electronic messages

When collecting these data, all identifying student or participant information was omitted.

These additional data from teacher produced artifacts were examined for similar phrases and/or assessment techniques. Due to the lack of state and national standards, written content relating to formative critique was highly individualized. However, coding artifacts, even if they contain dissimilar themes, can provide validity to the research (Henderson et al., 2018). Smith et al. (2009) also found it “useful to collect extra data to help contextualize the interview material”, and participant interviews provided the bulk of the data collected in this study. The artifacts collected were coded, and similarities and inconsistencies with participant responses regarding their experiences regarding formative critique were recorded. Overall, the inclusion of

data gleaned from teacher-produced material increased the validity of the research by triangulating multiple sources of information to assess the accuracy of the collected data.

### **Limiting Factors and Benefits Related to Zoom**

Zoom meetings were necessary to protect participants and myself, but this protocol required me to adapt my interview procedures to establish consistency and build reliability. For all interviews, I incorporated the Eastern Kentucky University (EKU) logo pattern over a neutral gray background. This eliminated any distracting elements on the screen and served as a reminder of my institutional affiliation. It is possible that participants with negative views of EKU might have been influenced by this background, but it was not mentioned by any participant in any interview. It is also worth noting that conducting interviews via Zoom presented me with a unique advantage regarding personal presentation. The Zoom display screen included video of both the participant and myself, which allowed me to monitor, and more carefully regulate, my facial expressions and responses. This real-time ability to scrutinize my physical presentation caused me to be more aware of how I was perceived by participants, and I attempted to present a more neutral appearance. Conversely, participants also had this view on the Zoom screen, which may have contributed to less authentic reactions by interviewees.

While Zoom meetings provided an indispensable alternative to in-person interviews, it is necessary to note that significant, though rare, challenges arose. On occasion, internet connections were inconsistent, and audio and video transmissions

were indecipherable in real time. This required me to reiterate questions and to ask participants to repeat their responses. Utilizing Zoom provided both video and audio recordings, and these recordings allowed me to review what was said by participants, as well as body language and facial expressions. However, while video transmission was usually of high quality, it was limited to a participant's head and shoulders, and was an inferior substitute for live interaction. Although the literature on the effect of Zoom is in the emerging stages, Gordon's (2020) research into Zoom as used in the classroom found that inhabiting separate physical spaces and the inability to view and interpret non-verbal communication had a significant impact on "the quality of interactions and conversations between teachers and students" (p. 18). In light of Gordon's findings, combined with my experiences with participants, it is possible that some information only ascertainable with in-person interaction was lost due to online communication.

### **Participants: Demographics and Setting**

Visual arts teachers currently working in high schools located in the Bluegrass Region of Kentucky served as participants in this study (Table 1). Pseudonyms were used in all cases regarding the discussion and analysis of findings. The gender composition of this cohort, 67% Female, 33% Male, was reflective of overall high school teacher demographics (64% Female, 36% Male) in the U.S. (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2020). Study participants averaged 15.83 years of teaching experience, with both a median and mode of 18 years. Purposeful sampling was



employed to build a participant group with pertinent experience in the practice of formative critique.

**Table 1**

*Participant Demographics and Interview Information*

Participant	Gender	Age	Initial Interview Length (hr:min:sec)	Follow-Up Interview Needed (hr:min:sec)
Samantha	Female	43	0:37:40	Yes (0:22:32)
Kate	Female	40	0:50:00	No
Joyce	Female	35	1:20:45	No
Rachel	Female	46	1:12:47	No
Luke	Male	47	1:49:55	No
Quinn	Male	45	0:52:23	No

To ensure visual arts teachers possessed a depth of experience working with upper level students in a visual arts classroom, only teachers with three or more years of relevant experience were asked to participate in the interview process. All participants had taught students at the advanced level, which included 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade studio classes, Advanced Placement Art and Design courses, university level studio courses, and dual credit courses. Due to the wide range of media utilized in the visual arts content area, interviews were conducted with teachers of multiple disciplines, including, but not limited to, painting, drawing, ceramics, photography, and sculpture. Examining the formative critique procedures in these disciplines proved valuable, despite the differences in the technical aspects of participants' expertise in varied media.

Interviews were conducted in locations that were convenient to the participants. Quiet, interview-friendly locales were encouraged, which provided a more comfortable setting and created an environment more conducive to quality recordings (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). This included teachers' classrooms, which multiple participants chose as their setting during video conferences, an environment which is often a convenient and comfortable place to talk with teachers. Classrooms also typically provided a more reliable internet connection for Zoom conferences. All participants chose the opportunity to be interviewed via virtual online meetings as it was a safer, more convenient option. This approach increased the likelihood of participation and put interviewees at ease, thereby eliciting clearer, more thoughtful responses. Signed consent forms were collected from all participants. This purposefully selected participant group provided insight into the formative critique processes that teachers utilize in high school visual art classes.

### **Interview Questions**

Interviews with participants were semi-scripted. Developing rapport and putting the participant at ease is an important aspect of the interview process (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Lichtman, 2013). In the interest of initiating a comfortable atmosphere, interviews began with at least one introductory remark or question.

These included, but were not limited to:

1. How is your school year going?
2. A recognition of the challenges of the year, specific to remote teaching and learning.

3. Is your internet connection OK?
4. An expression of gratitude toward the participant for agreeing to the interview.

The following questions were asked of all participants:

5. Do you use formative critique in your classroom?
6. Why do you use formative critique?
7. What impact does formative critique have on student artwork?
8. How do your students respond to formative critique?
9. Explain the value of formative critique in your curriculum.

It should be noted that all participants indicated that they used formative critique, and were willing to speak about their practices extensively. Had any of the participants answered negatively to the initial question regarding formative critique (e.g., "I do not use formative critique in my classroom."), an alternate script of questions was prepared and would have followed. These alternate questions included, but would not have been limited to:

1. Why is formative critique not used in your classroom?
2. How do you assess in-progress student artwork?
3. How does (alternative in-progress assessment process) benefit students?
4. Explain the value of formative and summative assessment in your curriculum.

To accommodate unanticipated participant responses, I utilized follow-up questions when clarification was needed. Additionally, unscripted follow-up questions allowed the freedom to pursue unexpected or especially insightful responses related to the use of formative critique. This combination of scripted and unscripted questions allowed participants the opportunity to give richer, more insightful responses.

### **Risks, Benefits, and Trustworthiness**

All participants signed consent forms and personal information was kept anonymous through the use of pseudonyms and the redaction of any distinguishing information. Professional risk was minimal, as participants were not identifiable, and the subject matter explored in the interviews was not of a controversial nature. All precautions were taken to minimize health and safety risks, including the use of virtual meetings. Conditions did not allow for in-person interviews, but efforts would have been made to ensure participants' safety in interview settings. As the focus of the research was limited to teacher perceptions and actions, no identifying student information was deliberately collected in the study. Pseudonyms were used in transcripts regarding any references to student names in interviews.

A benefit to participants was the opportunity to *talk shop* with a colleague and member checks were conducted throughout each interview to assure accuracy. Following the initial interviews, contact was made to check the accuracy of responses of one participant, Samantha. This follow-up communication occurred via telephone and was used to clarify some ambiguous phrasing in a response. All participants were contacted via email, post-interview, to assess their comfort and confidence in their

responses, and to give them an opportunity to discuss concerns or questions.

Participants were also encouraged to contact me and provide additional commentary or clarification if they felt it was warranted, although none did.

Trustworthiness was established through my knowledge of the procedures and expectations of high school visual arts classrooms, through implementation of processes to encourage truthful participant responses, and through the use of the phenomenological method of inquiry, reflecting strategies recommended by Shenton (2004). As an experienced art educator, I possess a deep understanding of the content area and was able to perceive, record, and analyze intricacies and nuances of participants' narratives and interactions. Having a shared experience with participant visual arts teachers increased understanding and provided insight, helping to build *intersubjective validity* (Moustakas, 1994). Finally, participation was voluntary and anonymous, which created an environment where participants were motivated to speak and share materials openly, and without reservation, as they were not subjected to administrative or peer scrutiny. Participants were able to adjust and explain responses and actions through member checking, establishing a dialogue that fostered candor. These conditions allowed participants the opportunity to feel that they were not merely subjects, but active collaborators in the research. The implementation of these procedures protected participants and provided a sense of security, which in turn created the best possible setting in which to collect honest, relevant data.

## **Researcher Perspectives and Biases Regarding Formative Critique**

As an art educator, I have always valued process over product. At the K-12 level, there is an emphasis on producing finished work, but in my classes I am more interested in the choices my students make throughout the process of creating art than the artwork that is produced. In the classroom studio, my role is to provide guidance through this process. I do this by giving feedback to students and modeling behaviors that lead to investigation and reflection. Szekely (1978) states “The artist-teacher should be a continuous questioner and examiner in front of the class rather than the authority or the one who presents ‘the truth’ to the class” (p. 20). Additionally, possessing a great deal of knowledge about a subject can be a liability (Ellett, 2011), and I endeavored to be open to new perceptions and experiences as described by participants. I realized that I needed to be cognizant of the biases toward formative critique that I brought to the research and how those were beneficial or detrimental to interactions with participants.

Before beginning the interview process with participants, I reflected on my own procedures and biases regarding formative critique. I have taught visual art for nearly two decades, in a variety of settings. During this time, I have amassed many experiences, both positive and negative, successes and failures. This understanding of the overall curricular and practical day-to-day workings of visual art education processes has caused me to develop specific beliefs about how formative critique should be implemented.

Formative critique has always been a daily practice in the classrooms in which I have taught. Large sections of my day are spent interacting with students, often in an informal, conversational manner. I often ask students questions about their ideas, processes, and imagery, in an effort to encourage self-reflection and self-assessment of their artwork. I usually attempt to be positive, although I have been told that, occasionally, I can be too critical. Although I have strong preferences regarding the styles and forms of visual art I find interesting and appealing, I pride myself in my openness to a range of student expression, even when their aesthetics do not align with my own.

My goal as a teacher is to optimize students' individual concepts and skills, not to indoctrinate student artists in my own artistic vision. I utilize individualized formative critique to discover and nurture students' ideas, challenging and encouraging them when necessary. I rarely use written formative critique in my classroom, despite desiring to implement it on a more consistent basis. I am also often more concerned with students' artistic process and output, and less with forming teacher-student bonds, although I do try to maintain a strong rapport with students. As a visual arts teacher, I consider myself the expert in the room, but am willing to listen to student insights and provide alternative opportunities when appropriate. Formative critique is an important method for me to challenge students, with my ultimate goal being to teach them to develop an inner voice and confidence, and then learn to trust that voice. Ideally, if a student is successful in my classroom, especially at

the advanced levels, they will no longer need me, or my curriculum, to produce technically skilled, conceptually sophisticated work.

This reflection, and its application to this study, was informed by the phenomenological practices of hermeneutics and transcendental phenomenology. As a visual art teacher, it would be impossible, and disadvantageous, to ignore my experiences in the field and adopt a position of neutrality. In fact, when employing a hermeneutic approach, the new information discovered during research can inform the researchers preconceptions according to Smith et al. (2009). I found this to be true as I interviewed participants, and repeatedly reviewed and assessed my own biases regarding formative critique. To understand and interpret participants' experiences, it was necessary that I constantly reflect on my own parallel experiences and knowledge (Moustakas, 1994).

In addition to hermeneutic theory, transcendental phenomenological aspects were incorporated into my interpretation of participants' experiences. In direct contrast to hermeneutics, transcendental phenomenology dictates that a researcher enters into their research in a state of curious impartiality, known as *Epoche* (Moustakas, 1994). On its face, this might seem an absurd position to take as a veteran visual arts teacher interviewing other veteran visual art teachers. However, with the exception of one year, I have spent my entire career as the only visual arts teacher at the school that employed me. I have attended conferences, have friends who teach visual arts, and have had informal discussions with dozens, if not hundreds, of other art teachers over the years. While these interactions have provided some insight into



other teachers' practices, the practice of formative critique has rarely been discussed at length. I have a great deal of experience reflecting on and interpreting my own formative critique practices, but almost no experience when it comes to what other visual art teachers do regarding formative critique. In this study, my ignorance of other professionals' practice of formative critique was combined with a lack of national or state standards regarding that practice, creating conditions to apply Epoche to my research. Therefore, it is reasonable that even an experienced visual arts teacher could interpret participants' lived experiences without preconception, because, in an academic sense, no preconception of the practice of others existed for me in a concrete way.

As a practicing artist, a doctoral candidate, and a high school visual art teacher, I also represent what Sinner et al. (2006) described as the "artist/researcher/teacher" (p. 1224). The use of formative critique impacts each of these roles, and for this reason I am deeply invested in its application. In my classroom, formative critique is an essential practice, and during the school day I facilitate numerous critiques with students. Additionally, I endeavor to use formative critique as a way to reflect on my teaching practice and clearly assess my instructional successes and failures in the classroom. Conversely, when producing both paintings and coursework, I seek out feedback from trusted friends and colleagues. These biases framed my interest and approach to this research. However, my years of experience in the field, my study of the literature and theory regarding feedback in various settings, and my personal experience with the implementation of formative critique provided me with a

perspective and a knowledge base that were well suited to investigate the use of formative critique in high school visual arts classrooms.

### **Data Analysis**

Upon completion, interviews were transcribed and reviewed with audio-visual recordings and field notes to create an accurate sense of the participant and their responses (Smith et al., 2009). To begin the evaluation of formative critique as used by high school visual arts teachers, coding of interviewee responses was initially divided into three categories, based on the research questions of this study:

- Formative critique methods used by participants
- Guiding principles for the implementation of formative critique
- Expectation of student outcomes when participant uses formative critique

Grouping participant responses in these initial categories allowed for further refinement of categorical themes in subsequent iterations. Ultimately, a total of 12 themes emerged that related to the research questions. Additionally, one further theme was included that existed conceptually outside the research question framework, but was significant to informing the overall study. Interviewee responses were triangulated using repeated member checking during interviews, written formative critique materials submitted by participants, and my own personal experiences and pedagogical knowledge related to the field of visual arts education.

Throughout numerous readings of the interview transcripts, themes relating to formative critique were identified, examined, and categorized. Ambiguous or outlying

data were recorded by hand, analyzed, and either integrated into an existing category or set aside to be reexamined at a later date, which allowed opportunities for reflection and adjustment of themes. As themes became more established, a bank of interviewee quotations which clearly illustrated those themes was developed to provide the study with rich primary source material. Before each iterative session of coding, I attempted to reassess my personal biases and adopt what Smith et al. (2009) termed a “phenomenological attitude” (p. 12). Cataloging biases caused me to be more aware of preconceptions, and assisted in bracketing to focus on the participants’ lived experience. Intentional awareness of my preconceptions coupled with a reflective mental state allowed me to more clearly synthesize the participants lived experience.

### **Written Materials Relating to Formative Critique**

In addition to participant responses regarding formative critique, half of participants were able to share written materials used in class to facilitate formative critique (Joyce, Luke, and Quinn). Rachel had initially indicated that they would send me documents used in class, but later emailed to tell me that they had been lost on an old jump drive. Because I was unable to observe participants in their own classrooms to validate responses, these documents allowed me to triangulate data and increase the validity of the study.

### **Methodology Limitations**

Implementation of proper methodological practices were instituted, however there are some unavoidable limitations to this study:

- Direct observation of participants was not possible due to health risks. Because of this it was necessary to rely on, and wholly trust, participant interpretations of practice. This is consistent with phenomenological methodology, as it relates to perceptions of the lived experience of individuals (Bresler, 1995; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Moustakas, 1994).
- Transcriptions and field notes indicated that some participants confused the term formative critique for other forms of assessment and/or analysis in the visual arts. Specifically, the terms *formal critique* or *formal analysis*, which refer to a technical interpretation of an artwork (Anderson, 1993; Eisner, 2002), caused misunderstanding as the phrase formative critique is not in wide usage. Member checking was used to mitigate any confusion, and I utilized follow-up questions to investigate and clarify terminology and participants' understanding.
- Because of the conversational nature of interviews, combined with shared professional experiences and understandings of art room procedures, interviews would occasionally diverge from exchanges relating to the research questions. These tangents provided the opportunity for participants to talk shop, previously presented as a benefit to participants, and were not discouraged as they were often an opportunity to uncover candid revelations about participants and their experiences. When this occurred, I guided conversations to a natural

ending point and re-focus the participant, and myself, on the appropriate topic.

## CHAPTER 4: PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

This chapter presents participants' responses regarding their use of formative critique in the classroom. To provide context to responses, the specific challenges participants faced when these interviews occurred is documented at the beginning of the chapter. Participant perceptions of the use of formative critique are arranged by the guiding questions of this research. Interviewees detailed methods used in the classroom, the central principles that guided their use of formative critique, and their perceptions of student outcomes when formative critique was used. Additionally, an examination of printed materials utilized by participants, which provided insight into the written aspects of formative critique is included. Findings derived from high school visual arts teachers' reflections regarding formative critique provided context for the chapter's presentation and analysis of general themes. These themes defined the process of formative critique for this cohort and how formative critique shaped their interactions with student artists.

### Findings

#### On Teaching Visual Arts in a Pandemic

We're just reinventing the wheel every two to three weeks.

– Kate

When interviews were conducted, during the fall of 2020, most participants were teaching students in online classrooms due to school closures related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Beginning in the spring of 2020, participants had a range of experiences with teaching students in-person and online, which influenced responses.

In interviews with participants, formative critique experiences with physically present students were interwoven with narratives about how participants were currently implementing new formative critique techniques and strategies to best serve students in the virtual environment. To reflect the realities of these responses, I have designated vocabulary to situate narratives into two modes of participant experience. “In-person setting” refers to participant responses outlining experiences with physically present students and “virtual setting” refers to any participant narrative related to online, distance, or virtual learning conducted in the spring and fall of 2020. This vocabulary is based on terms commonly in use by school personnel during this research.

Responses related to virtual settings are often shorter and more inconsistent, as respondents were often simultaneously designing, implementing, and modifying virtual formative critique processes as the school year progressed. Many of the virtual instructional components had not been fully assessed by participants, and were constantly being revised and adjusted. Kate’s reflection on the school year, seen at the beginning of this section, reflected participants’ mindsets regarding teaching during a pandemic. Occasionally, there were no equivalent implementation strategies for virtual settings, or there were no participant responses regarding a virtual component in a situated narrative section, which should not be regarded as omitted, or incomplete, information, but rather a reflection of the pedagogical novelty of instruction in virtual settings.

## Visual Art Teachers' Perceptions of Formative Critique Methods

### *Daily One-on-One Interactions*

In a visual arts studio classroom, a great deal of time is dedicated to unstructured work time for students to produce artwork (Hetland et al., 2013). Unlike a traditional lecture class, this provides ample opportunity for visual arts teachers to circulate through the classroom and interact with students in an informal way. All participants described utilizing formative critique on a daily basis in an in-person setting, moving around the room and engaging with students. Interviewees responses were remarkably consistent after being asked about the frequency with which they implement formative critique:

- “On a daily basis I use [formative critique] in a really informal way, walking around the classroom, looking at student work, asking questions...” (Samantha)
- “The questioning, and things like [formative critique], and having them gauge their work? Every day.” (Kate)
- “I’m one of those that I hate to just sit and watch. I’m up in everywhere, all around, at the same time. I’m, kind of a constant feedback giver.” (Joyce)
- Rachel related that, she would constantly sit down with students and stand next to them to guide their work.
- “Lately? It's probably every day because I've had these small groups...so I can go down and sit beside everybody each day and talk with them.” (Luke)
- “It almost happens daily. I mean the, one-on-one, me walking around the room and talking to students” (Quinn)



Visual arts teachers typically have the freedom to move through the room while students are working on assignments, and participants responded that they used this time to conference individually with students. Most respondents indicated that it is a major portion of their day-to-day activities. Rachel related that the importance of one-on-one formative critique “Overpowers everything I do in the classroom, almost”. She even went so far as to voice concern that her focus on formative critique of student artwork might inhibit the formation of personal relationships with students.

Additionally, while all participants described their process of initiating interaction with students, only one participant remarked that it was students that sought out his expertise. Quinn talked about “students just coming and talking to me, critiquing and asking for advice” which was not mentioned by other interviewees.

While all participants practiced daily, one-on-one formative critique with students in in-person settings, most interviewees found that incorporating this technique was much more difficult when teaching visual art in a virtual setting. Kate related that in an in-person setting, the content of one-on-one interactions with students was driven primarily by individual student needs and questions. However, when interacting individually with students online Kate found that the responsibility for initiating discussions abouts students’ artwork fell to her, and observed that “Because we're virtual, I'm having to do a lot more driving”. Samantha also found that teaching students in a virtual setting had a detrimental effect on her ability to interact with students individually:

I know that it's really important to do the day-to-day critique, and I think it helps a lot, especially having the experience of this remote learning, where

you're not seeing students on a daily basis. That has really shined a light on what student work looks like when you don't get that informal day-to-day critique.

Samantha found this had a negative effect on student work, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

While most interviewee's reactions to working with students in a virtual setting were negative, Luke provided an interesting insight into a positive aspect created by some students working remotely. During the fall semester of 2020, Luke's class sizes were smaller, because some of his students were attending school exclusively online, and the remaining students were split into two groups that attended class in-person on alternating days. This allowed Luke time to "sit beside everybody each day and talk with them" about the work they were making in class.

Additionally, participants found innovative methods to continue incorporating individual formative critique interactions with students. Rachel liked the fact that because she was using Google Classroom:

My comments are kind of recorded, you know? I've got those down the line. And so, the thing that I would normally say to a kid in class about re-shading this part, or a comment on their pace, is right there. I can send it back to them.

Despite the limitations of the virtual setting, Kate also worked to provide formative critique interactions with students by making full use of the technology available:

The only way I can get feedback, they send progress pictures. Every so often, sometimes every day, or every other day, we do our Google Meets. [I've] found the best way for me to get them to send me work, so I can give them feedback, is they send me a text.

In an attempt to replicate face-to-face interactions with students, Joyce had participated in one-on-one Zoom conferences with students, but had doubts about its

effectiveness as compared to instruction in an in-person setting. In spite of the frustration felt by participants because of the barriers that virtual settings created between them and their students, all worked to find ways to translate the methods used in an in-person setting to the realities of a virtual setting, with varied outcomes. All participants indicated that regardless of their successes with online learning, in-person interactions were preferable.

### ***Group Formative Critique***

Beyond one-on-one formative critique with individual students, participant responses indicated that assessing student work in groups was the next most frequently used approach. Typically, group formative critique involves displaying student artwork and discussing it in class, which can validate students by providing feedback from both a teacher and peers (Barrett, 1997). Similar to one-on-one critique, all participants used group formative critique in their classroom, but with different frequency and with a greater variety of methods.

Multiple participants used structured prompts to provide a framework for teachers and students to critique student work. Kate used a set of cards, each with different visual arts vocabulary terms, to assess in-progress student work. Students set out artwork on tables, and Kate:

Divided cards evenly among the kids, so everybody has different terms, and they have the definitions on them, too. It's a great way to expand their vocabulary and understand what they're calling things, and they get to look at all the artwork, whether it's in-progress or at the end.

Students would then place their cards next to works that strongly display corresponding art elements (e.g., line, shape, color, etc.). After cards were distributed

next to artworks, students, led by Kate, justified their placement choices and discuss the work itself. Kate explained that this involved the whole class in reflecting on student work, and provided students with appropriate vocabulary with which to describe their artwork. She also indicated that because students are often wary of expressing opinions about artwork in class, using a game was a way to make them more comfortable, which, she explained, was “Why I’ve come up with these techniques to try to make it fun, you know? To kind of trick them into doing it.”

Similarly, to Kate, Rachel used an activity to facilitate class-wide formative critique that was based on a game she had previously used while working at a middle school. For middle school students, Rachel used a series of tokens, each representing some sort of award (a blue ribbon, a gift, etc.). Each student would act as a contest judge, and then set a token next to another student’s artwork and explain why that award had been given, using appropriate terminology, thereby generating discussion about the work. She adapted this for her high school students by creating a list of prompts about artistic qualities for discussion. Rachel found that giving students time to jot down ideas before discussion created a better experience for all involved “because just doing a dry critique, never worked for me. Just putting it out there and going, okay, pick out a work. They've got to have time to process it.”

All interviewees used some form of group critique that involved the whole class congregating and evaluating in-progress student work. Samantha related her approach, which involved students displaying their in-progress work on a bulletin

board, with the class gathered around. She then described that each student, in turn, would explain to the class:

“This is what I'm working on, and this is where I am.” They'll kind of explain it first. Then I'll ask students in the class, one or two students, to give them feedback. I really like a sandwich, you know? Something good, something they think they could work on, like a pairing.

Samantha used this method to encourage students to present appropriate critique and train the exhibiting student artists to accept and evaluate that critique. As an alternative, Kate would occasionally have students write their comments on Post-it notes and stick them next to the relevant student work. This strategy, which was also mentioned by Rachel, allowed an opportunity for more reticent students to participate in group formative critique as it removed the public speaking component.

Quinn indicated that the breadth of possible observations and suggestions was a significant benefit of group formative critique.

I like to bring in as many kids as I possibly can, just to get as many perspectives and different possible solutions as we possibly can. Most kids kind of have a focus, they see where the piece is going, and they've got to get to that end product. But when another student shares their perspective, they don't see the end that the other person sees. They just see the potential of where it could go, and that's a nice way to present to the other student. “Hey, have you thought about these opportunities?” (Quinn)

Quinn's approach created a scenario in which students received feedback on what they had already accomplished, which is a characteristic of summative assessment.

However, by integrating multiple viewpoints in group formative critique sessions, he presented students with multiple paths forward as well, which gave the student artists options for progression. While Quinn had an overall positive opinion of this method for

helping students, he also related that he had experienced challenging group critiques. He told a story of a talented student artist displaying a provocative drawing of a prominent American political figure engaged in a sexual act with the American flag that was presented for critique. Because it was a preliminary sketch for an assignment, Quinn had not previewed the work, and was caught completely unaware. Complicating the situation, this occurred in a ninth grade painting class, where, he said, students were less mature, and the controversial nature of the drawing caused a commotion in the room. Quinn said he tried to maintain a neutral stance, and discussed how the image might be interpreted by multiple viewers and what reactions this artwork might elicit. Ultimately, he admitted that although it was a complicated situation, because he had developed strong relationships with the students in the class, he was able to mitigate the situation, and turn it into a positive learning experience.

Participants all described difficulty replicating the dynamics of group formative critique in a virtual setting, but many strove to devise alternative processes. Kate used Google Slides to present student artwork and then had classes rate the work, though she admitted that she was “trying to figure out how to fill this void of getting feedback to students, and having students critique each other, and their own work. Because I'm struggling with that.” Quinn’s school was using Canvas, an online learning management system, similar to Google Classroom, which he used to communicate with students. Within this system he also used Google Slides to create a slideshow which included a dedicated slide for each student. All class members had access to this slideshow and students were required to exhibit in-progress artwork once per week.

He then separated students into groups of five or six, and required them to respond to group members' work by posting reactions and comments on the Google Slideshow. Joyce also facilitated small group formative critique sessions using the breakout room function in Zoom. By assigning students to smaller groups in online "rooms", she was able to engage students in a less stressful environment that did not involve the entire class. Participants were able to manage group formative critique in a virtual setting, but similarly to one-on-one formative critique in a virtual setting, none of them found this ideal.

### ***Conversational Method***

We're just having a conversation about artwork, on how to make it better.

– Quinn

When implementing formative critique in their classroom, many participants specifically indicated that they interacted with students in a conversational way, in both individual and group situations. Rather than issue directives or lecture students on artistic techniques and practices, interviewees described engaging students in discussions about their artwork. Luke's approach was to talk with students about their work, and:

The conversation usually yields some interesting insights for me to understand how much they know, where they actually want to go, and the confidence they have. I can also kind of tell if they don't really know what the objectives are and if they're kind of lost.

This allowed Luke to gauge student progress and understanding of the assignment, and it also informed the guidance he gave to student artists.

Quinn found that the ability to have conversations with students did not occur instantly. He found that students in the introductory painting class resisted informal discussions about their work, although they were more willing to utilize written comments on Google Classroom, which he attributed to the inexperience and self-consciousness of younger students. Quinn found that “over time, they just loosen up and we just have that conversation” about in-progress student artwork.

Occasionally, more informal conversational methods put participants at odds with school-wide curricular mandates. Kate related an experience in which administrators at her school implemented a policy requiring teachers to use daily “exit slips”, a small written assignment used to demonstrate student learning. She told me, “I’m not an exit slip lady. We have to clean up, we have more important things to do than the exit slip. So, I really don’t do that. I tend to have conversations.” Ultimately, she presented a case to her administrators that the conversations she had with students, which she documented, were a more relevant metric of student understanding, and administrators agreed.

Some participants found that they had to be vigilant in what they shared with students when they engaged in conversations about student artwork. Specifically, Rachel and Luke felt that they had to resist the urge to give students detailed suggestions about their artwork. Rachel found that, especially when working with highly skilled students, she had to consciously hold back, even when it might have been beneficial to the student’s work:



I don't want to be the one to tell them, I may have an idea, but I don't want to tell them that idea. I want to see where they go with that. So sometimes formative critique for me is, like, "Stop talking."

Luke reflected that he truly enjoyed having conversations about in-progress work with students but that he often found himself:

Trying really hard not to fill in the blanks for the students. That's something I've always struggled with. I want to keep things moving and keep it fun. I've got to let it stir and let the students answer things.

Both of these instances illustrated that while formative critique can be used to encourage and guide student work, it is important that student agency in the creative process be maintained.

### ***Questioning of Students***

I think [formative critique] always has to be presented as a question, or several options. It's never a directive.

– Samantha

When participants conducted formative critique, questions were the driving force behind the conversations between teachers and students. All interviewees gave examples of ways in which they asked students questions, and this was a key component of the conversational techniques documented in the previous section. Participants typically avoided telling students how to proceed, while simultaneously using questions to assess students' understanding and intention for their work.

Luke was a strong proponent of asking students questions early on in a project.

He told me that:

After presenting a project, there's that initial touching base with each student about, "Well, what are you thinking about for this? What are you thinking

about for this?” Not in progress, where there’s a tangible thing, but still the idea’s percolating. And at that point I’m always trying to be encouraging, but also trying to make sure that they understand the objectives.

As the assignment progressed, Luke would ask students about what elements from preparatory sketches they planned to use in a final piece of artwork. He found that by doing this, he could determine what students end goals were, which Luke believed could “help them put all those thoughts in order with a plan of action.”

Kate’s approach mirrored this, and she would “try to question them so that they tell me, where they think they’re insufficient, or where they need help, or what they really enjoy, what they get excited about.” Quinn described a situation where he used questions to determine student interest and create alternate paths to success in an assignment. During a figure drawing unit, Quinn found that a number of students, who were also taking welding classes, were failing to engage with the assignments:

They didn't really get into the figure drawing part of it. They didn't want to do it. It just wasn't them. So, we started talking, I was like, “Well, what else could we do? Could you weld something? Talk to me about welding.” And then they started talking to me about welding. I had them draw some supplies and arrange them into a figure. And they were like, “Okay.” So, then they started drawing pictures of metal rebar, like scrap materials they had in the welding shop and they made a stick man. Then, you know, we brought in the welding/ag teacher, and he looked at it, and he's like “Yeah, we can do something like this.” So, we ended up making a not a very organic or fluid, 10 foot tall metal sculpture of a figure running.

By questioning students and finding their interests, Quinn was able to modify the assignment to suit students’ particular skills and give them an opportunity to demonstrate understanding of the content.

The previous examples illustrate the impact that questions can have on teacher’s ability to implement formative critique and guide outcomes. In in-person

settings, participants reported asking questions as a regular part of their interactions with students, but found it more difficult to implement in a virtual setting. Kate found that online interactions failed to develop the relationships needed for questioning to be effective, and she confessed to “struggling” with making those connections.

### ***Peer to Peer Formative Critique***

Participants in this study were responsible for the design, implementation, and documentation of formative critique in their classrooms. However, each interviewee acknowledged that the impact of insight gained through formative critique practiced between peers could be as influential as teacher feedback, and in some cases more influential. Participants understood the power of these interactions, and worked to cultivate environments where students had the knowledge and the confidence to critique the in-progress work of their peers.

In Samantha’s room, in in-person settings, students were arranged at tables. If a student at a table needed feedback on in-process work, Samantha would enlist the help of other students at that table. Specifically, Samantha reported that:

I might come upon a student who was struggling and didn’t know what to do next with a piece. And I might say, “Why don’t you get some ideas from everybody at the table? Everybody, so-and-so is not sure what to do next.” So [the student will] show [their] work and I’ll ask each person at the table, “Give this student an idea for what to do next”.

Because of the subjective nature of artwork, no one assessment is final, and Samantha remarked that when she was critiquing students’ artwork, she was careful to remember that, “I am one person with one opinion and one way of looking at it,” which allowed space for peer responses to also be validated. This created an

environment where students learned to use their peers as resources, which built the confidence of all students involved.

Similarly to Samantha, Rachel indicated that she had wondered if she should be the only person in the room providing formative critique feedback to students. Rachel recalled that she occasionally questioned the need for more structured, time intensive formative critique activities, where she would place students into groups, and have them assess each other's progress:

I start thinking, is it a waste of time? Could I just give them that feedback? Or could I look at them and say, "Why don't you talk to her?" You know? And sometimes, it's kind of an odd thing, but you know, "Talk to Sally." 'Cause last time she did a really cool thing with her coil pot, and maybe you guys can work together on some ideas.

Rachel found that her advanced students were more comfortable with initiating formative critique conversations with classmates, and that it was often more effective when feedback came from peers.

Responses from Joyce and Luke regarding students' reactions to peer generated formative critique illustrated a contrast in student reactions which depended on the source of formative critique. Joyce reported experiences with her advanced students in which she would make suggestions to students about their artwork that would be ignored. However, when that same insight was provided by other students, the reaction was more positive, which led Joyce to remark, "Hearing something from a teacher, that's one thing, but whenever you hear it from three of your peers in a reasonable way, it means more." In contrast, Luke found that students listened to his feedback more than to that of peers because he was grading student

work. He revealed that he wished students would utilize peer suggestions more often, especially more advanced students with the skills and confidence to synthesize outside ideas into their artwork.

While all respondents experienced at least some instances of peer to peer formative critique, Quinn related multiple insights into how impactful this process was in his classroom. He described students joining conversations, either prompted by Quinn, or of their own accord:

Sometimes I'll call the person from across the room to come over, too. Then sometimes kids just start to walk over because they hear us talking about artwork. I think those are the ones that are the most beneficial. I do have some real successful critiques in the other formats as well. But I think that those impromptu formative critiques are the best.

Additionally, Quinn explained that when students assessed peer work, it caused them to “reflect on their own [work] and assess what they were doing well.” Allowing student artists to take on the responsibility of practicing formative critique in the art room provided benefits for all involved, by encouraging both outward assessment and inward reflection.

Despite the potential benefits, participants also experienced difficulties with the implementation of peer to peer formative critique. Luke described a detrimental interaction in his room when a student said something negative about a classmate’s work due to a history of conflict between the two. Additionally, in virtual settings, participants attempted to find ways for peers to give each other feedback, with mixed results. When discussing online peer to peer formative critique procedures, Kate admitted that, “I'm struggling with that. Right now, a lot of their formative critiques

are coming from me.” Luke also sought to include more peer to peer feedback, “because I think it would be good for students to hear from students about their plans and their decisions and what could get [them] from point A to point B.” However, the logistics of fostering student interactions in an online environment were difficult, and this was evident in the lack of responses outlining successful formative critique in virtual settings.

### **Visual Art Teachers’ Perceptions of Guiding Concepts Regarding Formative Critique**

Participants described a variety of methods used to intentionally integrate formative critique into their classrooms. Responses provided by interviewees indicated that successful formative critique relied on strong relationships and a supportive classroom atmosphere. Participants believed that it was their responsibility to provide students with a positive experience in their courses and formative critique played a key role in this experience. Formative critique was also integral to participants’ curriculum because it allowed individualized interactions.

### ***Teacher-Student Relationships***

A big thing for me in my classes is relationships. I really want to know the kid and the kids, by the time they leave my classroom at the end of the year, they know my family history, they know all this stuff, because I share it. I want them to feel comfortable with me. And that formative critique puts you in a position to create stronger relationships with those kids. And at the end of the day that's what you want. You just want a stronger relationship with the kids. So regardless of perhaps what the formative critiques goal was academically, relationship-wise, it could have a much more profound effect.

– Quinn

This reflection by Quinn was indicative of how participants experienced their relationships with students, and how that played a large role in determining the

manner and success of formative critique methods used in class. Teacher-student relationships can affect student engagement and achievement (Roorda et al., 2011), and the experiences of the participants in this study revealed that. Interviewees shared experiences of the roles performed by teachers in formative critique, as well as obstacles that inhibited the formation of bonds necessary to a reciprocal dynamic.

When approaching student artists to give feedback regarding in-process work, many respondents took on the role of a peer. To facilitate conversations between teacher and student, teachers sought to make students feel comfortable. This led to Kate to attempt to enter conversations in a non-confrontational way, as a peer, which she believed made her students “feel welcome and at ease, because it is a stressful situation” where students were “vulnerable”. Rachel explained that recently she had taught a student, Jenny, whose skill level was at such a high level that she stopped giving technical feedback as an instructor. Instead, Rachel took on the role of a fellow artist and worked to help Jenny to grow conceptually in her work.

In contrast to the role of peer, many participants simultaneously inhabited the role of teacher as expert. Participants wanted to include student voices in formative critique, as seen previously, but they were also intentional about establishing themselves as instructional leaders in the room. Samantha made it clear that while effective formative critique could be student generated, she also noted that:

I do have more experience probably, than they do. And there are certain things I want them to learn. And I do want to push them to go a little bit beyond what they might do on their own and think a little bit more deeply about it.

Although she did not consider herself a professional artist, Joyce found that students were more inclined to take teacher suggestion from formative critique because “they’re getting professional feedback from somebody they trust”. She indicated that a teacher-student relationship must be developed for students to view their teachers as experts, and likened it to working with experts in fields like athletics or construction and learning from their experiences.

The use of multiple outside experts was an innovative component of Rachel’s integration of formative critique. Rachel inverted the teacher as expert model in her room and described instances where she used local artist-experts as teachers to provide formative critique. One example included Rachel’s husband, a professional artist, who would occasionally comment on her students’ work, which she would then relay to students in class. Rachel remembered students reacting positively to this “vicarious artist’s feedback” about their work. In addition to this, Rachel worked with artists in the community to create authentic feedback for projects. This included a collaborative jewelry project in which students created designs were assessed by a local jeweler, and the strongest designs were produced. Rachel’s students also worked with artists from a local college to create murals in the community. Rachel remarked that for students, “they get some artist’s critique formatively in their artwork. And I would say, if anything, that would probably be the most motivating to a student”. Rachel also related that the feedback from professionals tended to be harsher than the formative feedback she gave as an educator. She felt that her relationship with



students required her to find positives in student work and guide them toward paths to success.

Teacher-student relationships were highly individualistic, according to Luke, as were the recommendations given during formative critique sessions. He found that as he learned more about students and their abilities, he was able to tailor his feedback to what each student required for success. As the semester progressed, and Luke's assignments became more open-ended:

You may hear me give you completely different advice than the person sitting beside you. Because by now I see your tendencies, I see what you're good at and ... I would say once you get to know students, from your own experience too, you've probably done the same thing. You're trying to push them into different things where you wouldn't even think of it.

Luke also noted that as relationships with students change over time, formative critique can become more personalized, and he found, more effective.

To build relationships with students, respondents found that building trust was essential. Joyce indicated that when students were new to her class, and unfamiliar with the process of formative critique, they were often unwilling to participate. However, she found that usually students would gradually come to trust her over time and became more eager to participate in formative critique. To foster trust, Joyce found that she needed to foster a relationship with students, and as an example related an experience about:

A deaf student last year in ceramics and she had her translator there with her, but I couldn't stand talking to the translator, to the signer, or I couldn't stand talking to the student with the translator just going and going and going. So, she and I would have a written conversation instead, to give her feedback...And that was really cool because, the signer said, "You're the only one that's even thought about doing this", which, I was surprised. But I told [the student],

“Listen, I want to have a relationship with you. I don't want to feel like I'm having a relationship with your signer. So, here's our little notebook and me and you, we're going to talk through this notebook. ... And we would have conversations through that notebook, and I could give her feedback on her ceramic works through that.

Joyce found this to be a positive experience, even though she circumvented accommodations put in place to assist the student. Despite the fact that using the translator was more efficient than a handwritten conversation, the desire to build an authentic relationship compelled Joyce to find alternative solutions while working with this student.

Overcoming appearances was essential to Quinn building trust with his students. He admitted that many incoming students were apprehensive at first. He believed that this was connected to:

The fear of the unknown. I mean, they don't know me yet. I mean, I look like a redneck, but I teach art, and I work in the [Visual Arts Department at his High School]. So, they don't know what to expect of me yet. And we just start talking. And they develop that trust in me. Like we said, it's just a thing that develops over time and they're afraid. I guess they're afraid of what their peers are going to say. They're afraid of saying something wrong and embarrassing themselves in front of me. And then it gets to the point where they see me talk so much and embarrass myself that they have nothing to lose.

The ability to be patient and secure in his persona allowed Quinn to use conversational methods to build relationships with students. Additionally, by modeling participatory behaviors, he fostered an environment where students were encouraged to take risks, a skill that will be discussed later in this chapter.

Building and maintaining relationships with students in an in-person setting required numerous interactions in the classroom and took time to develop. In a virtual setting, teachers struggled to form these bonds through online interactions.

Participant experiences with online instruction required them to rethink their relational dynamics with student and modify their approaches.

While teaching an online ceramics course, which entailed its own technical challenges, Rachel found that building a relationship with a student was made more complicated because of parent involvement. One of Rachel's student's:

Mom used to work at [a professional pottery studio]. So, the critique actually got pretty intense at home on her side, because mom was like, "No, you've got to do this." And finally, I told her, "Don't talk back to your mother. Don't do that. But do remind her it's low fire clay<sup>1</sup>" ...So [the student's mother] was trying to teach her, you know? Anyway, it was good, because she was getting it from both sides. I talked to mom online a few times. And she was like, yeah, we're going to keep the expectations. I liked that.

Even though the outcome was positive, this interaction illustrated the complexities of teaching in a virtual setting. Participants noted that it was difficult to transmit all necessary information and they struggled to build genuine relationships with students. Referring to the realities of teaching students virtually, Luke stated "Right now with our goofy world we're in, I'm mostly just trying to be a cheerleader. Go, go, go, go, go!"

### ***Safety and its Relationship to Positive Experiences in the Art Room***

When discussing the daily implications of formative critique, interviewees noted a number of practical concerns that were essential to producing desired environmental outcome. Respondents were clear that creating a safe environment, where student work was validated, was essential if formative critique was to be used effectively. When expectations of student safety and validity of student work were

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<sup>1</sup> Low fire clay, usually found in a typical K-12 setting, and high fire clay, more often found in professional studios, have significantly different technical properties, and require different processes and skills.

established in interviewee's classrooms, providing a positive experience for students became achievable.

Respondents agreed that it was necessary to have a safe environment in which to practice formative critique. They mentioned that students, especially students new to the art room, were "embarrassed" (Samantha), "vulnerable" (Kate), and "scared to death" (Quinn). To alleviate this spectrum of apprehension, participants had to establish an environment that would allow for appropriate, beneficial formative critique. Kate intentionally "trained [her] kids. We're not mean, we don't cut each other down. We're constructive" so that her students would not feel threatened by formative critique. Early in a school year, Quinn also established expectations of a safe environment for his ninth graders with the use of writing. Initially Quinn's students used written assignments to develop ideas for formative critique, rather than verbally, because:

They don't want to offend anyone, but once you build some trust in the classroom and those relationships are built, and you've had experience writing about it, and reading what other people have written, then you, can feel more comfortable speaking.

This approach paid dividends later as Quinn's 10th and 11th graders "prefer to just speak what's on their mind." Because his classes often included multiple grade levels, Quinn also found that students who are confident and comfortable practicing formative critique verbally could model it for younger students:

My ninth graders are still figuring it out. Some of them are ready to speak and they do, but it's mostly the 10th, 11<sup>th</sup>, and 12th graders that do. I often will tap a 10th grader in my [High School's] classes, or a few of the 10th graders, to

come over and critique with the ninth graders just to get that ball rolling. And that's been super successful.

Because Quinn taught at a high school with a strong fine arts program, he believed his students expected to receive feedback on their artwork. His procedures provided an intuitive path to allow students to build the skills needed to participate in, and benefit from, formative critique.

Designing an environment where students felt validated was a contributing factor to a safe classroom environment. Kate explained that all students were welcome in her class, noting, "I don't want to make them feel like they're not worthy to be in my room, you know?" When students felt that they belonged and were in a supportive environment, Kate found that they were more willing to discuss their work and were more enthusiastic about the process. Rachel also avoided exclusionary practices and from categorizing techniques or styles as inferior. She believed that student artists needed to be able to work through their creative process without judgement:

I would never want them to feel like they weren't valid in the arts, that they have to do something that's formal. You know, I think it's just fine. If your grandma draws at the kitchen table every night, she's an artist. There's nothing else that needs to validate her. Like, no, she doesn't need to go down and take a class.

This validation was meant to encourage students to pursue their interests, but it should not be interpreted as a lack of rigorous assessment. Participants validated student work, and then used that as a framework to critique in-progress work. When

students felt that what they were creating was valid, the process of formative critique became a constructive part of the creative process.

Safe workspaces and support for student generated artwork were used by participants to create positive experiences for student artists in their courses. Kate's experience indicated that creative students "tend to be very hard on themselves" individually, and used group formative critiques as a way to raise class morale. After recommending that a student review the works of Robert Arneson and Willem de Kooning, Luke wondered, "Maybe it doesn't yield better artwork necessarily, but I think it could yield a better experience in the art room". While all participants attempted to use feedback and student interactions to build a supportive classroom community, it was not always successful. Quinn offered this assessment of some difficult formative critique moments with students:

I know I've made a couple of students cry, but my intentions were never to make them cry. It makes you feel horrible. I'm not a college professor, so I don't need to make you cry to make you better. I'm talking high school art here. I can build you up. There's been a couple of times that that's happened.

High school students who are engaged in the creative process in a classroom are in a vulnerable position. Participants understood this and endeavored to build systems to protect students and enhance their experience.

In a virtual setting, participants still worked to provide support, foster validity, and create positive experiences. This was complicated by the lack of a physical space for most interviewees. The art classroom provides both educational and material supports that cannot be replicated online. Joyce was pragmatic about her situation:

I'm like, you use whatever you have. If you don't have ink, don't use ink. Figure out another way. I can provide you with it and put it up at the front desk, but if you can creatively solve the problem using yarn, use yarn. I don't really care. I just want stuff. I just want you to do stuff and have fun doing it. And then don't forget to hit "turn in".

Joyce wanted students to enjoy the process of making, but struggled with not being able to be as supportive as was typical for her classes.

It was instructive to hear Luke describe the type of experiences he hoped students would have in his classes. He wanted students to gain understanding of concepts and develop skills in his course, even if the end products were of inconsistent quality. He recognized that not every student will go on to study art after high school, or work professionally in the field, but, like all interviewees, he worked to build safe, supportive environments where students could feel validated and have positive experiences.

### ***The Problem with Rubrics***

We don't do a lot of cookie cutter assignments.

– Kate

According to Andrade (1997):

A rubric is a scoring tool that lists the criteria for a piece of work, or "what counts" (for example, purpose, organization, details, voice, and mechanics are often what count in a piece of writing); it also articulates gradations of quality for each criterion, from excellent to poor. (p. 1)

Rubrics can be a useful tool to standardize scoring for students, teachers, administrators, and parents, and can provide a sense of consistency in courses.

Methods ranging from the grid-like analytic rubric to the more binary checklist, are

routinely implemented as formative and summative assessments of student produced work (DePaul Teaching Commons, n.d.). The uniformity of rubrics makes them an ideal tool for assessing uniform student work, but participants experienced a wide range of production output from students that was not easily standardized. The preceding quote from Kate illustrated the challenge of assessing student artwork, especially in her advanced classes, where she noted that many of her students were designing their own projects. For Kate, this made formative critique:

Super important because everybody is doing something different. How am I supposed to assess them? What are their goals? They set all of that stuff up and it changes from project to project, and student to student.

Because the curriculum in her advanced class was so individualized, traditional rubrics would not have been as effective as one-on-one, in-progress assessment of student work.

Other participants noted that they encountered students who wanted formative critique to act as a verbal rubric, in which suggestions made by teachers, and their subsequent implementation by students, would equal a set number of points on a final grade. Luke in particular, had this experience with students, and related this anecdote:

I had an argument with a student yesterday. She's like, "but I added the focal point. I added color, and I made a focal point. Just like you asked, why am I getting B's in art? That's sad that I'm getting B's in art." And she said it so the whole class could hear. And I'm thinking half the class doesn't have a B in art right now. Cause some of them aren't even turning a damn thing in. I said, "Well, it's good. A B is good. I'm not punishing you with this B." She's just all upset.



The student found the resulting grade disappointing, and Luke found the experience of providing feedback and assessing this student's artwork complicated. Later in the interview, Luke explained:

I think I really needed to be clear with this student that these will help the drawing. But she wanted the in-progress feedback to improve the grade, and I get that, students want good grades, but it really didn't make the overall drawing all that much more interesting. A little bit here and there, but it didn't go from average to excellent just by adding some color here. And I could tell she was frustrated, and she said three times, "But you've told me to do this. You told me to do this." And so, I think in that case, I would need to either know the student better, and hopefully that'll come with time, but also try really hard to not characterize my feedback as "You improve this section, it's 10 points. You improve this section too, then it's a 15 point increase." I really want to make sure that my feedback is not linked to a certain grade.

Kate and Luke illustrated how assessing student artwork tends to be a holistic experience that was not easily quantifiable.

The opportunity for student expression and synthesis is a feature of assignments in visual arts courses that is less common in core content classrooms (Eisner, 2002). While many students were invigorated by the freedom provided by visual arts assignment, participants found that some of their students wanted to be given explicit direction on how to make artwork. Although she often used rubrics to help guide assignments, Rachel found that in her classes:

Some people want [formative critique] to be so tight and rigid with our subject. It's real hard sometimes, it's almost like, "What do you want me to do?" And it's not a formula. So, it's hard for me, in the kid who doesn't get the 100% because they got a 97, because you had something to say about their creativity... Sometimes that formative critique becomes "What do you want me to do?"

Rachel's assignments required students to think creatively for their work, and she described the difficulty in striking a balance between helping students generate ideas

and giving them overt directions to produce their work. Rachel also found that practicing formative critique in a virtual setting highlighted the difficulty of using formative critique to score student work:

I've just recently been grilled about, "Did the kid get the rubric before they started this project?" And I had to kind of go, "Well, unfortunately we're doing things different this year, and maybe no." They know generically how they're going to be graded, but did they get a thing saying you're going to get two points for this, and five points for this? No. That's what I was saying to the parent, through the formative critique and the comments, instead of verbally, commenting on Google Classroom. We know where the weight lays in a project, obviously.

As responses from interviewees illustrated, the creation of artwork is not typically a formulaic process. However, respondents used formative critique to provide unique assessments to students as they developed unique concepts.

### **Visual Art Teachers' Perception of Student Outcomes Related to Formative Critique**

Participants in this study implemented formative critique using a variety of activities and spoke clearly about what beliefs informed their application of those methods. This section will investigate how participants perceived the effect of formative critique on student artists and their artwork. It is necessary to separate students from their work, as many participants indicated that they felt formative critique had a large impact on student behaviors and mindsets, distinct from its effect on student artwork. The effect of formative critique on student growth and student artwork are explored, as is its effect on developing risk-taking behaviors and grading student work in regard to effort.

#### ***Growth***

Whenever I'm giving formative critique, it's mainly just to see what more can they do, how can they push themselves further?

– Joyce

The preceding quote reflected participants' collective agreement that individual student growth was a significant theme in their classrooms. Previously in this chapter, participants detailed experiences with assessing unique student artwork and how attempting to systematize this process was problematic in their classrooms. Interviewees understood that formative critique cannot, and should not, produce standardized results. Instead, the visual arts teachers in this study explained that comparison is not an effective method for individualized work, and instead focused on qualitatively measuring student growth.

Resistance to the comparison of student work was an essential concept that participants sought to instill in students. Interviewees did not expect student artwork to be homogenous, but students, especially students in introductory classes, were insecure about their work in the face of diverse artistic products. Joyce gave voice to this by noting:

If a student says, "Well, so-and-so is such a better drawer, this doesn't look like so-and-so's", I'm like, "Well, you're not so-and-so, why should you care? You're here to get yourself better. She's here to get herself better. If we were already all perfect, it'd be boring." So that's where the guidance comes in. How can we make ourselves better?

Echoing this experience, Luke attempted to teach students that:

Everyone doesn't have to make art the same way. And maybe there's this realization that [a student] can go, "Oh look, this is kind of cool. I discovered something. And my work kind of relates to all these expressionist approaches to this [drawing]."

The experiences of Joyce and Luke illustrated that students need to have this specific background information and instruction, often transmitted during formative critique, about diversity in order to promote student artists to create unique works of art.

Once students internalized the idea that artwork would diverge at multiple points, participants cultivated an atmosphere of growth into their instruction. For participants, this was not a stand-alone lesson, but an ongoing aspect of interactions with students. Samantha referred to the philosophy of her curriculum, which:

Parallels the whole growth mindset thing. That's big now, where you are constantly, you're learning to think in a way that is always improving. It's like a continuous process of improvement, and a way to think about it, and to get there.

This motivation to foster student growth was repeated by Luke, who described working with a student in the middle of an assignment, and trying to “[figure] out what's making your thing tick and then push that as far as you can go”. Some participants were willing to apply this growth paradigm to themselves and their teaching, as a parallel to student expectations. Reflecting on becoming a more effective instructor, Joyce stated:

If there's somebody out there that's a better teacher than me then, by all means. I know I said *if*, I know there are, but you know, I'm going to pay attention to what they do so that I could make myself better. Because if not, what's the purpose? Beyond getting better?

Interviewees observed that using formative critique to encourage student growth was not always successful. Disengaged students, were often not interested in seeking, or implementing, feedback that might result in stronger results. Speaking in the voice of these students, Rachel lamented:

And quit trying to push me to a higher level, or more work, or more engagement because I'm done, and I'm good, you know? That's probably the most resistant, especially when they get to the end, or what they deem as the end.

Participants also experienced instances when students with strong skills were unwilling to engage in the formative critique process. Occasionally, teachers found that talented students were resistant to suggestions made during formative critique sessions. In Luke's class, he found that some students "might be annoyed with you if you're not giving them the feedback they wanted to hear." Similarly, Joyce reluctantly related that:

Students who've been told for a really long time, "You do this really, really great. You're such a wonderful this, that, or the other". They might feel like they're already the best. That they don't need to grow, because they've been told for forever, "Well, you're just the best little artists", you know? "You just draw so well!" They might've been good when they were nine, which is great, but you gotta evolve and can't still be drawing like you were when you were nine, being 14.

Joyce went on to explain that she had experienced this with a student whose parents had fine arts backgrounds but was resistant to receiving feedback that encouraged growth.

In both in-person and virtual settings, the practice of allowing students to resubmit work was prevalent in participants' classrooms. This raised the question of the semantics of formative versus summative assessment. Formative critique processes have been documented in this chapter, but interviewees also routinely allowed work that had already been submitted to be modified, usually according to teacher initiated "summative" critique, and then resubmitted for reassessment. This

created a situation where summative and formative critique became nearly indistinguishable. Luke, in his virtual setting classroom, allowed students to:

Remake things a lot. I'm not one of those people who's like, it's a hard deadline. We're done. We're moving on. I'm like, no, we can revisit that. I mean, you don't want to have them just do the same project the whole time. But, especially this semester, I'm letting them resubmit things.

In both in-person and virtual settings, Joyce gave students feedback on in-progress work. When the final work was submitted, she would tell students:

Okay, I'm giving you this grade because, if you remember, you're supposed to have this. So maybe put this additional element in there, maybe put this additional thing in there. Why not clean up the color, because it looks a little streaky and then resubmit a picture and I'll regrade it.

This had the effect of turning a summative assessment into a formative critique.

Samantha expanded the idea of summative as formative critique to encompass multiple projects in her courses, noting that her final feedback to a student is:

More of a summative, but also, in terms of the whole body of work that the student might be working on, I guess you could sort of consider it a formative because they're going to go on to make more work. And all feedback, because you're the artist, kind of impacts or influences the work that you make subsequently. So, I guess that's more of a semantic thing about formative and summative.

Considering that some students will continue to make art, in high school classes and beyond, this overarching view of the assessment of student artwork allows for the possibility that all critique could be viewed as formative. Assessments, and re-assessments, of single artworks, bodies of work, and entire careers can continue to build and inform each other, despite the occasional summative critique. If the lines between summative and formative critique become blurred, then it might be more useful for teachers to use growth as a comprehensive objective.

### ***Stronger Work***

[Formative critique] helps me out in the long run, push them further, to make them impress themselves.

– Joyce

In addition to the development of student skills, participants felt that formative critique did lead to students producing more accomplished artwork. It is difficult to quantify what makes artwork objectively stronger, precisely because it is an objective process. However, an assumption of this study was trust in participant responses, and participants were clear in their estimation of the effect of formative critique.

The utilization of formative critique regarding in-progress student work was widely regarded as having a positive impact on student artwork. Samantha reflected that:

I think it improves their work. I think it helps them learn how to make their work better. I think it makes the work better and have higher quality and more skilled and conceptually more strong.

Samantha also experienced a reduction in the quality of student work when operating in a virtual setting, remarking that, “I feel like their work is a lot better when you meet in person and you see them day to day”. In her AP Art and Design class, Kate front-loaded ideas and concepts using formative critique, which created higher quality student work for student portfolios. Luke used formative critique to enhance student artwork by encouraging students to build on their strengths and giving them guidance regarding unseen weaknesses. In a very straightforward manner, Quinn noted that when he used formative critique, “I truly think that the student quality, it gets a higher

level of maturity". All participants expressed that the assessment of student's in-process artwork was a necessary component of successful outcomes.

### ***Risk Taking***

This is how I start my classes. And the kids always look at me like I'm a little bit crazy, because I tell them that when you walk into my painting class, you've got to be one of the bravest kids in the whole school. Because when you come in, and you sit down, and you start to work, sure it's between you and that canvas or paper or whatever it is, it's your painting and your idea. And it's also between you and me, but it's not like in math where you can just cover it up.

– Quinn

Rules help, but they're meant to be bent and broken, of course.

– Luke

When the terms *risk-taking behavior* and *high school student* are combined, the implications are typically negative (Steinberg, 2010). However, in visual arts classrooms, students engaging in creative risk-taking within the creative process is not only encouraged, but is often an essential part of the curriculum (Irwin & De Cosson, 2004). Interviewees created intellectually and emotionally safe art rooms using relationship building and formative critique procedures. This resulted in an environment where participants, as seen in the quotations at the beginning of this section, encouraged their students to take artistic risks. Participants were clear that teaching students to take risks in the art room was difficult, but did give examples of how formative critique could encourage this behavior. Instances of interactions with students who were able to take risks were also recounted by interviewees.

Taking artistic risks was a skill that many students struggled with, according to participants. Student vulnerability was a factor in many responses, and Rachel



experienced students who would disengage entirely if they knew their artwork would be displayed, with reactions like “I'm not even gonna try to do my best, because I know it's going up in front of folks”. Quinn commented that students were aware that their work would be seen and that, in class:

Everybody's going to see the work that you're capable of and what you're doing. And if you're doing your best, you're putting yourself on that paper and you're putting yourself out there for others to see. And that's an uncomfortable feeling....And I think that has more to do with it than anything else. It's just that, that fear of putting yourself out.

Luke reflected that he wanted students to “get to that place where they can throw out rules and not worry about grades” but admitted that this “can be probably hard. I wasn't at that place [in high school]. Certainly”. Quinn had students who avoided participating in formative critique, and therefore avoided “opening themselves up...because they're scared of it, still”. This aversion to risk by student artists was not uncommon, and participants were both frustrated by, and understanding of, students’ reluctance to take chances with their work in class.

To encourage risk-taking, interviewees relied heavily on relationships and formative critique, especially as the latter provided options for students to explore as they navigated the creative process. This was the experience of Luke, “especially for these open-ended assignments, and especially once I start to get to know some students, you can leave things a little vaguer and let them make the choices”. While he had designed a curriculum that allowed students the opportunity to make choices, Luke was conflicted about students who would repeatedly ask, “Is this right? Is this right? Is this right?”. To promote risk-taking, he felt he had to find “that balance of

giving them enough to go, but make sure they're really doing it on their own. You are not spelling it out for them". Quinn's strategy was to make sure students had "several different options, and then they can make the decision about it, and apply it however they like, or even combine a couple of them". Presenting different artistic possibilities to students through formative critique was a key aspect of Quinn's efforts to encourage students to take risks. This was similar to Samantha's method, in which she encouraged students to gather ideas from multiple peers which might then "spark an idea" or help move the creative process along in a new direction.

One inhibiting factor to student risk taking was student concern about receiving low scores if a risk did not result in satisfactory artwork. Quinn included written grades for formative critique assignments:

I use those really as a safety net for kids. So, if they respond and they give good feedback, then they earn this amount of points. I work hard to try to figure out what is a good quality statement for Jack, may not be the same quality statement for Alison, you know? So, I try to assess those types of things and I put points into the grade book on their level of participation and quality statements that they make.

Providing this "safety net" builds in extra points on which students can rely, and can ease fears of low scores if an experiment with an artwork does not go as planned.

Building students' confidence through feedback was an approach used by Joyce. She was intentional about giving positive feedback to students:

Whenever they might need trying something new, where they might be working with a new medium that they've never worked with before. A lot of times that fear factor comes in, and they don't know that they can do it, or they're feeling iffy about it and don't know how to go that next step with it. So, even those little bits of encouragement of, "You're doing that real good. Keep it up!" To me, that's feedback, even though there's no real suggestion with it.

Joyce believed that feedback did not necessarily need to have an explicit critique component, but that encouragement itself could promote experimentation.

Overall, participants felt that there needed to be academic space for students to take risks. This might mean intentionally subverting assignment requirements or rejecting suggestions from peers or instructors. Luke articulated an experience he had as a high school student that informed his current teaching and approach to encouraging risk-taking:

I remember, in high school, I went to a high school show and a whole bunch of students every year would get these ceramic awards. And they were making the same cups with faces on them every year. And you could tell that instructor was good at teaching that, and the work was technically sound and interesting. But when you see five or six students from the same high school, doing the same thing every year in that awards show, and, of course, I couldn't articulate why that rubbed me wrong exactly. At the time, as I'm thinking about it now, but it's just like that guy's teaching, "This is how you do it". There's not a lot of room for failure because this is how you do it. There's only one way to do it. But I never wanted to be that guy, I want to give enough structure. So, it's not a free for all, you know? And with every student there's a different give and take.

Allowing students to explore paths that do not inherently lead to successful outcomes was a procedure that participant teachers incorporated into their rooms to encourage risk-taking behavior.

When students had the confidence, support, and opportunity to take risks in visual arts courses, success was not assured. However, this made the risk-taking behavior authentic. This was evident in the experiences related from Rachel's ceramics courses:

There's been certain times when, through some critique, I'll kind of let [students] know, "If you're brave enough to do this, no matter what it looks like

when it comes out of the kiln, you're okay. This is going to be all right, if you do this, this and this." Because I feel like there's that unknown.

There is an aspect of unpredictability to ceramics as a medium, and rather than attempt to ignore or avoid that attribute, Rachel allowed the student to take a risk, knowing that the process might fail. Rachel continued:

Sometimes during a personal critique, you can look a kid in the eye and say, "I don't care what happens in the end with this project. You've got an amazing idea. You've got the materials in hand, let's just go for it. If it doesn't work out, it doesn't work out."

All of the skills of the student were brought to bear, with guidance from Rachel, and neither the lesson plan nor the instructor could guarantee a positive result. The moment described above delineates the difference between *student artist* and *artist*, and illustrates the possibilities available when formative critique is combined with "room for failure".

### ***Grading on Effort***

Grading students on their effort is a common idea in education, which requires that instructors assess the time students spend working on assignments in addition to the assignment products themselves (Swinton, 2010). The concept of effort is difficult to define and quantify, however, several respondents found connections between formative critique and student effort.

In Rachel's in-person setting classroom, formative critique interactions with students were informed by their level of effort. She spoke specifically of students who were doing little work and seemed to be uninterested in the assignment. For these students, her formative critique consisted of persuading them to work on a technical

aspect of the assignment for a short, set amount of time. Rachel felt that a significant amount of class time was spent encouraging students to “put forth a little more effort” based on her specific suggestions regarding the assignment. This approach was replicated in Rachel’s virtual setting, where she found that through interactions online, she was able to assess which students were implementing her suggestions from formative critique, and thereby assess the amount of effort put forth by students.

Joyce also made a clear connection between formative critique implementation and student effort. In her classes:

The value, I feel like [effort is], I don't want to say it's everything, but it's a lot. Because like I said before, effort for me, it goes a long way. When I give feedback to students, the measure of how much they listen and put forth that added effort, goes a lot into how much they care, their craftsmanship, their understanding. I mean, it's a lot for me, just because I know they're listening.

By linking the visible implementation of formative critique to the level of effort, Joyce has built an understandable, minimally ambiguous framework for the assessment of effort. This method demonstrates a strong connection to formative critique and helps to clearly define the tangible features of student effort.

### **Mid-Interview Teacher Reflections on Formative Critique Practices**

Finally, while participants’ reflection on their own classroom practice was not a guiding research question of this study, it was a significant theme in multiple interviews. During the interviews, participants occasionally paused and noted that (a) a new thought or idea regarding formative critique had occurred to them, (b) they had never considered some pedagogical aspect of formative critique, or (c) that they were unsure of some aspect of formative critique. Interviewees introspection and

uncertainty was significant for two reasons. First, all participants were veteran visual arts teachers, who were confident in their curriculum as well as their ability to effectively critique student artwork. Secondly, all participants practiced formative critique procedures on a daily basis, and formative critique was a clearly understood and implemented practice. Despite these two circumstances, early in our interview, Samantha responded that, “As we talk here, I'm actually getting some ideas for how I might do [formative critique], but I haven't actually done them”, and went on to detail a technique she had used for summative assessment and how she might modify it to assess in-progress student work.

In contrast to Samantha’s reflection on pedagogical practice, Quinn reflected on his personal interactions with students and the effect they had on his ability to implement formative critique. Near the end of our interview Quinn noted:

You just made me think of this, [about] the more impromptu formative critiquing that you do with the students. Because a big thing for me in my classes is relationships. I really want to know the kid and I really want the kids, by the time they leave my classroom at the end of the year, they know my family history, they know all this stuff ‘cause I just tell them. I share it. And I want them to feel comfortable with me. And that formative critique puts you in a position to create stronger relationships with those kids.

This response was significant because throughout the interview, he had presented numerous anecdotes demonstrating how he worked to build relationships with students, indicating that it was integral to his teaching practice. However, it was only after 40 minutes of our 52 minute conversation that he reflected on how those relationships were related to formative critique, and his response indicated that he had not previously considered that connection.

Participants also reflected on their relative ignorance of the practice of other visual arts teachers. This was illustrated in Luke's response when he said:

You know, I didn't realize we don't know what we're doing until we have this conversation. It's like, "Yeah, you're right. I don't know what other teachers do." You get little glimpses of it, but you really don't know the day-in, day-out of it, because maybe some teachers just introduce it and then there's no feedback whatsoever.

This unawareness is not surprising, considering most participants were the only visual arts teacher at their school and that prescriptive procedures for formative critique are not readily available from national or state teaching standards. Quinn's practice was also influenced by the lack of clear standards for formative critique:

My first year, in North Carolina teaching, I actually went to work at the high school that I went to and I replaced my old art teacher. I moved right into that and I was just going to do critiques the way she did. And it was, tell me something positive about the artwork, but you can't say, 'I like', that's the way I did it. It was pretty tough, and I did not know how to set an expectation of what's going to happen.

Quinn later explained that he went on to learn more formative critique practices from different teachers in schools where he taught. However, this was not a systematic building of skills and pedagogy, but a circumstantial progression that included large elements of geographic, departmental, and experiential chance.

These responses were not the result of the interview instrument, as none the scripted questions specifically asked participants to develop new ideas on the spot, make larger connections, or explain what they know about other teachers' practice. However, formative critique as a practice was both pervasive and relatively unexamined for this cohort. While these responses did not inform the research questions, it is significant data and will be further explored in Chapter 5.

## Written materials

Formative critique was almost exclusively a verbal interaction for participants in this study. All interviewees, except Luke<sup>2</sup>, used some form of written formative critique in class. Written formative critiques in class were often informal responses written from teacher to student, or student to student, often on Post-it Notes or on sheets of paper next to exhibited artwork. Kate's students used written reflection to build relevant vocabulary and develop the skills necessary to complete the written portion of the AP Art and Design portfolio. These written processes were fewer in number when compared to verbal formative critique practices, but the skills being developed in both formats were consistent.

Two participants in this study relayed digital copies of applicable critique forms. Quinn shared an analytic rubric (Appendix A) he used in class that used a 4-point scale and included a section for peer evaluation. His rubric was general enough to use for multiple assignments, but had clear criteria for evaluation. Quinn referred to this in our interview, noting:

I just figured, I'm not going to make it this big mystery or like, "Aha! I did this. It's magical." I'm just going to show the kids, this is what I hope to do with you guys. And we're going to do an honest assessment here. And we're going to just talk about artwork and then you just rate yourselves and I'll rate you too and then we'll go from there.

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<sup>2</sup> Luke did share a formal analysis form (Appendix C) that students in his class used to evaluate professional artwork, but it did not meet the requirements for inclusion in this study as it did not relate to in-progress student work.



This intentional transparency was evident in both Quinn’s rubric and his response in the interview. His formative critique instrument was reflective of Quinn’s pedagogical philosophy regarding formative critique as expressed throughout our discussion.

Joyce shared one formative critique document (Appendix B) applicable to this study.<sup>3</sup> This instrument was designed for peer-to peer formative critique and had two sections for positive feedback, two sections for suggestions, and one section for “Overall Comments”. Joyce had referred to this form in the interview, noting that she felt it worked, specifically in an in-person setting, because student artists were present during the critique, and their peers were mindful and respectful of the artist and artwork. This reflected the supportive atmosphere and positive student relationships that Joyce believed were necessary for effective formative critique to occur. The formative critique documents shared by Quinn and Joyce demonstrated concepts consistent with the methods, guiding principles, and expected outcomes expressed in each participant’s interview.

## **Summary of Findings**

### **Formative Critique Methods**

Participants’ responses indicated that multiple formative critique methods were regularly implemented in their classrooms. Informal teacher-to-student interactions regarding in-progress artworks were a daily occurrence for interviewees. Group formative critique sessions were also practiced by all participants; however, it

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<sup>3</sup> Joyce also shared three documents designed for formal analysis and three summative critique forms that were not relevant to this research.

was utilized less frequently. When interacting with students regarding in-progress artwork, participants described using a conversational approach which relied heavily on asking students questions. Respondents did suggest ideas and techniques for students to integrate into their work, with the understanding that students had the ultimate choice, and responsibility, regarding implementation of those suggestions. Finally, participants found that peer-to-peer formative critique was an effective strategy, as high school students valued input from peers as much as, and occasionally more than, feedback from teachers.

### **Pedagogy Guiding Implementation**

The instructional concepts that guided participants' application of formative critique to student artwork were student-focused and highly individualized. All interviewees spoke of the necessity of building relationships with students in their room, and indicated that these relationships were connected to the efficacy of formative critique as an instructional strategy. Teacher-student relationships also fostered an emotionally and instructionally safe classroom environment required for students to benefit from formative critique practices. To build relationships and create safe classrooms, participants worked individually with students enrolled in their courses. This individual approach was critical because of the variety of student personalities and student artwork. Interviewees found that universal rubrics were ineffective for assessing in-progress student artwork, which represented a broad range of completion, driving concepts, and techniques.

### **Intended Outcomes for Students**

Research participants sought to build the skills of student artists in their classes through the use of formative critique. Because comparison is difficult, and often counterproductive, when assessing student artwork, interviewees focused on student growth as an intended outcome resulting from formative critique. Participants also used formative critique to encourage artistic behaviors like risk taking in students. Formative critique was implemented by interviewees to develop student ability, with an end goal of improved student artwork. However, the production of high-level student artwork seemed to be secondary to the development of student skills and processes. Interviewees' focus on process was also apparent in their willingness to use formative critique, its implementation, and its outcomes, to grade students on effort, rather than only on the artwork itself.

### **Teacher Reflections**

During interviews, participants often considered their own practices regarding formative critique in a way that indicated that they had not done so previously. Many interviewees formulated and shared new formative critique concepts during discussions. Additionally, participants discovered insights about their own teaching methods as they discussed those methods. The cohort for this study was an experienced selection of teachers, yet many interviewees indicated that they were unaware of formative critique practices outside their classrooms. These data did not relate to an explicit research or interview question, but emerged as a significant theme that informed the participants' lived experience using formative critique.

## **Written Materials**

Formative critique is typically executed as a real-time, interactional exchange in the classroom; however all participants used some form of written critique in their classes. Interviewees provided examples of written critique materials, although most materials represented summative evaluation forms, or forms used for formal analysis of artwork. These written critique forms were key to providing a source for triangulation, and will be analyzed in Chapter 5. These materials demonstrated a consistency in participant responses when compared with their written materials, thereby increasing the validity of the data.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to identify how Kentucky high school visual arts teachers use formative critique to guide student artists in their classroom. This chapter includes an interpretation of key findings related to the literature of formative critique and its methods and implementation. Also included is an examination of the significance of formative critique in visual arts classrooms and the theoretical and practical implications for instruction. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the limitations of this study and suggestions for future research.

This chapter includes an interpretation of findings and suggestions for future research which address the following research questions:

1. How do high school visual art teachers use formative critique in the classroom?
2. What guides high school visual art teachers' methods of formative critique in the classroom?
3. How do high school visual art teachers describe the impact on student performance when they use formative critique?

Through the use of semi-structured, in-depth interviews, I examined the formative critique practices of six veteran high school visual arts teachers. Participants were recruited using purposeful sampling to increase the probability that their experiences would inform this study. Participants were then interviewed online via the Zoom digital conferencing application, and all interviews were recorded and transcribed. In addition to interviews, written materials related to formative critique,

in the form of worksheets and response forms, were collected from participants, which assisted in the triangulation of data and provided a fuller understanding of participants' instructional methods.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

This study examined the experiences of high school visual arts teachers regarding the implementation of formative critique. All participants involved in this research were aware of formative critique and utilized it in their classrooms. Additionally, all participants found the process of formative critique to be a positive and beneficial instructional practice for student artists. Interviewees' reflections on their experiences with the methods, guiding principles, and perceived student outcomes related to formative critique formed the context for analyzing the nature of in-progress assessment of student artwork.

### **Consistency of Formative Critique Methods**

Despite a lack of clearly prescribed pedagogical directives for assessing student artwork from national or state level visual arts education groups (KDE, 2015; NCCAS, 2014), visual arts teachers in this study were surprisingly uniform in their approach to formative critique. It was significant that each participant specifically mentioned conducting in-progress critiques with individual students on a daily basis, as well as incorporating group formative critique sessions, though the group critiques occurred less frequently. Participants also supported peer-to-peer critiques between groups of student artists. Notably, none of the previous methods were mentioned explicitly by

the KDE or the NCCAS, yet they were an essential part of each participant's instructional expectations and procedures.

Interviewees described using similar techniques when assessing in-progress student artwork. Interacting with students in a relaxed and informal way was a common strategy, and participants occasionally adopted the role of a peer to cultivate a more comfortable, supportive environment for student artists. Visual arts teachers in this study overwhelmingly favored a conversational approach to interactions with students that included asking questions and giving suggestions, rather than requiring students to alter artwork based on instructor comments. These tactics, while largely ignored by the KDE and NCCAS, reflected the desirable studio climates described by Hetland et al. (2013) and Barrett (1997). Additionally, asking questions about student artwork, in contrast to demanding that changes to the artwork be made, allowed student artists to make choices based on current conditions and expected goals (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Interviewees employed this questioning technique in their visual arts classrooms, echoing a practice that had also been successfully used in AP US Government and Policy courses (Parker et al., 2013). Participants consistently used a casual approach in their classrooms to build positive environments that benefitted student artists as they worked through the creative process.

Peer-to-peer formative critique was another common method used by participants to encourage assessment of in-progress student artwork. Interviewees described their experiences of facilitating peer interactions by actively engaging groups of students in formative critique, as well as passively observing and monitoring

exchanges between students. These types of interactions can be extremely beneficial to student artists (Andrade et al., 2014; Barrett, 1997; Hetland et al., 2013), and participants found that peer-to-peer interactions could be more impactful to students than teacher feedback.

The participants in this study did not have homogenous academic or teaching backgrounds, nor were they implementing clearly defined state standards regarding the use of formative critique practices in visual arts curriculum. Despite this range of professional experiences, visual arts teachers in this study independently and overtly referenced the use of the previously described formative critique practices. The interviewees' breadth of experience, and lack of access to unifying guidelines, made the consistency of techniques observed in this study even more remarkable.

### **Building Relationships with Student Artists**

Interviewees made clear in our discussions that formative critique does not exist in a vacuum. Because it is a highly individualized, and therefore personal, interaction between teachers and students in the classroom, certain prerequisite conditions must be met for formative critique to be effective. Participants spoke of building relationships with students in the classroom as necessary in order to create a sense of safety and trust. This was in contrast to situations surveyed at the university level, where research indicated that students often viewed critiques as a negative experience (Costantino, 2015; Sawyer, 2017). Visual arts teachers in this study who had experienced stressful, unconstructive critiques in college were resolute that the



practice of formative critique in their classrooms would not replicate their difficult post-secondary experiences.

Building an environment of trust in a visual arts studio is a difficult task (Irwin & De Cosson, 2004). Once interviewees established this foundation, they were able to effectively give relevant, constructive feedback to student artists. Student artists were also able to discuss their artwork in a confident and academically appropriate manner, which was an instructional goal of visual arts teachers in this research, and is seen as an enduring skill in visual arts courses (Barrett, 1997; Belluigi, 2018; Dannels et al., 2008). Participants created a baseline of positive, safe environments and the formation of relationships with student artists, thereby allowing formative critique to be effectively utilized.

Participants also recognized that due to its individualistic nature, comparisons of student artwork were not a valid form of evaluation in their classrooms. In place of scoring student work against a standardized rubric, interviewees indicated that they were more concerned with student artists demonstrating individual growth through the progression of individual creative processes. Teacher-led instruction regarding the creative process resists uniformity (Eisner, 2002; Hetland et al., 2013) and participants saw this style of personalized instruction as a feature rather than a flaw of formative critique. Relevant feedback has been shown to enhance student artists' ability to develop innovative solutions to artistic problems (Sawyer, 2017), a skill that participants believed was essential to the production of accomplished artwork. Participants encouraged student artists, asked them questions, and gave them options

moving forward. Interviewees used formative critique primarily to influence *how*, rather than *what*, art was created by their students.

### **Student Outcomes: Process vs. Product**

The visual arts teachers interviewed in this study saw formative critique as a practice used primarily to guide student artists through the creative process. Interviewees' focus on formative processes was supported by research (Coffey et al., 2011; Costantino, 2015; Hetland et al., 2013; Torrance & Pryor, 2011), but was in stark contrast to the majority of the academic literature regarding critique in visual arts courses, which focused primarily on student output and summative assessment (Dixon & Worrell, 2016; Glass et al., 2013; Elkins, 2012; NCCAS, 2014; The College Board, 2012). In interviews, participants rarely addressed concerns regarding the summative assessment outcomes of student artwork. Instead, visual arts teachers in this study focused on the growth of student artists' skills and the ability of student artists to take risks with their artwork. Interviewees regarded high-quality, student produced artwork not as a goal in and of itself, but as a byproduct of effective formative critique implementation.

Visual arts teachers in this study resisted a standardized formative critique approach toward student artists' creative processes and the resultant artworks. As such, there was nearly unlimited opportunity available for students to investigate and apply ideas and techniques, and interviewees were intentional about encouraging students to take risks with their artwork. The ability of students to experiment is valued at all academic levels (Hetland et al., 2013; Motley, 2016), and this was

reflected in participants' responses. Pushing boundaries can be difficult for students, for both technical and conceptual reasons (Barrett, 1997), and the visual arts teachers in this study understood this. Interviewees suggested that it was necessary to balance giving student artists complete freedom in the classroom against a totally restrictive, teacher dominated curriculum. Participants found that they were able more effectively guide student artists by evaluating their skills and intentions through formative critique. Interviewees sought to teach students to make choices about their artwork, with an end goal of increased autonomy for student artists.

Participants placed a high value on student artists' processes, but were also invested in the production of accomplished student artwork. Although students' creative process was the primary concern in participants' classrooms, the visual arts teachers in this study believed that there was a strong connection between formative critique and proficient artwork. Literature suggested that providing students with specific, individualized feedback often resulted in higher quality output (Belluigi, 2018; Crooks, 1988), and participants' related experiences echoed this assessment. Interviewees indicated that they felt some student artists avoided formative critique, and thus did not benefit from its use. However, visual arts teachers in this study overwhelmingly saw in-progress feedback as a driving force that had the potential to result in superior student artwork.

The literature, and my own biases, predicted that high school visual art teachers' primary instructional concern would be the production of high-level student artwork. However, interviewees in this study utilized formative critique to enhance the

student artists' experiences and promote studio specific behaviors: risk-taking, experimentation, and individual artistic growth. Previous research described formative critique and/or formative assessment as being *in service to* final artistic products and summative assessments, but participants in this study described formative critique as an independent phenomenon that was used regularly, regardless of the outcome on student artists' production of artwork. Interviewees consistently used formative critique to develop student artists' techniques with materials and conceptual skills during instructional interactions.

### **Implications**

The results of this study illustrated that formative critique processes are widely implemented by the cohort of high school visual arts teachers interviewed for this research. Interviewees believed that formative critique is a positive instructional strategy, and they used it regularly in their classrooms. The findings in this research suggest a number of implications for high school visual arts teachers to consider regarding their practice of formative critique.

#### **Positive Daily Interaction**

High school visual arts teachers should consider formative critique as an essential instructional strategy in their classrooms. The findings of this research indicated that daily teacher-to-student and student-to-student interactions had positive effects on student artists and the artwork they create. Visual arts teachers may not be able to provide feedback to all students every day, but equitable interaction should be the goal. Additionally, visual arts teachers should attempt to

create an appropriate, positive environment as a precondition to facilitation of formative critique. This may include building relationships, adopting a conversational approach, and presenting feedback in the form of questions, rather than directives.

### **Focus on Processes to Improve Products**

While the production of high-quality artwork is the ostensible goal of visual arts courses, the research indicates that visual arts teachers' curriculum could benefit from an emphasis on the artistic process through the use of formative critique. For visual arts instructors, well rendered artwork is sometimes a secondary concern to engaging student artists in the creative process (Barrett, 1997). Participants believed that the act of guiding student artists during the creation of artwork was as valuable as the resulting work itself. Participants' attention towards process was reflected in the responses recorded for this study, and applied to all student artists. Interviewees were aware that many of their students would not go on to study the visual arts after high school, and that some of their students were uninterested in the visual arts altogether. With this in mind they were willing to use formative critique to develop the processes and growth of student artists in their classes.

Participants indicated that an instructional focus on the creative process, informed by formative critique, could help students master technical skills and teach them how to take creative risks. Allowing students to make authentic decisions, and giving them space to fail, has the potential to inform student artwork, ultimately producing more sophisticated, technically skilled outcomes.

### **Summative Assessment in a Formative Context**

In an educational environment designed to promote life-long learning, no assessment should be considered wholly summative. Rather than look at assignments as independent from one another, it could be valuable for visual arts teachers to view instruction and assessment in a more inclusive context. A broader definition of assessment could demonstrate how individual lessons build to units, which build to semesters, which build to academic careers, which eventually build to a lifetime of artmaking. This may not be true for every student, and the importance of summative grades and scores should not be ignored. However, participant responses suggested that the conceptualization of summative assessment as a conclusion might be reinterpreted as merely one point in a longer timeline.

### **A Ubiquitous but Underexamined Practice**

The tradition of critique has a long history (Barrett, 1997) and all interviewees in this study had participated in the process as students, teachers, and peers. Participants averaged nearly 16 years of visual art teaching experience, plus a minimum of four years of college level instruction in art education, and most likely years of artmaking and discussions about artwork in their years as K-12 students. Despite what amounted to decades of experience with formative critique methods, respondents indicated that they had not considered formative critique in an intentional, academic way.

The literature on formative critique is incomplete, and its practice has not been clearly codified by the KDE or NCCAS. However, participants in this study practiced

formative critique daily, and based their techniques on a combination of college critique experiences, practices modelled after, or in contrast to, those of colleagues, and classroom experimentation. This ad hoc application of formative critique prevented a full understanding of its practice in visual arts classrooms, which obscures the categorization and understanding of common procedures and best practices. This study has the potential to begin to fill this gap, but more research on the methods and implementation of formative critique used by high school visual arts teachers is needed.

### **Leadership Implications**

In addition to implications for teachers, participant responses in this study could also inform the practices of administrators when assessing the performance of high school visual arts teachers. Administrators who may not be familiar with formative critique as an essential practice, or have visual arts experience, could be guided by the practices found in this research when conducting observations in visual arts classrooms. Interactions observed in these settings, like teachers moving through the room and interacting individually with students, could be a strong indicator of relationship building. An administrator might also be informed by the nature of the interactions themselves. Ideally, the visual arts teacher would work to build a rapport with the students through in-class interactions. If classroom rapport was already established, an administrator-observer might check that teachers are asking students questions about their work as it currently exists, and also what steps the student might make moving forward. Administrators could then incorporate visual arts teachers'

implementation of formative critique into a holistic evaluation of teacher performance. The examples of formative critique observed in this study could provide guidelines for evaluation of visual arts teachers' use of in-progress assessment, and assist administrators in supporting and leading those instructors.

### **Visual Arts Education Policy Implications**

The visual arts teachers interviewed in this study all implemented formative critique practices into their classrooms, utilizing a range of techniques specifically tailored to their students and instructional goals. Due to the phenomenological nature of this research, the data is not generalizable, which prevents any broad conclusions from being drawn about how formative critique is being used in high school visual arts classrooms. Incomplete data on teachers' formative critique practices, combined with incomplete national and state standards for formative critique, creates a scenario in which it is difficult to measure how, and if, teachers are using this essential and transformative technique. The data presented in this study could inform policy, specifically Kentucky visual arts instructional standards, to codify the practice of formative critique.

This study has shown that formative critique is integrated into the curriculum of the veteran teachers interviewed, but less experienced teachers might struggle with the assessment of in-progress student work, and may not appreciate its value. Rather than requiring inexperienced teachers to spend time developing curriculum and methods that may already be widely used, clear standards could allow those teachers to customize existing guidelines to suit their individual classroom needs. Additionally,



as described in the previous section, more comprehensive visual arts standards regarding formative critique could help administrators more effectively assess and guide teachers working in their schools. The data examined in this study, augmented by additional research suggested at the end of this chapter, could help design standards that might have a positive impact on classroom assessment techniques.

### **Limitations**

The findings of this study should be considered while noting some limitations. Anticipated limitations were associated with the phenomenological approach, as the data collected in this research relied entirely on participants' perceptions of their use of formative critique. Classroom observations were not performed, and there was no verification of interviewees' applied use of formative critique procedures with students. Furthermore, interactions with participants were limited to interviews conducted entirely via Zoom, and no in person contact with interviewees occurred.

As interviews progressed, unforeseen limiting factors emerged. The coding of themes related to the research questions achieved saturation. However, an increased sample size might have resulted in additional insights regarding the use of formative critique. During the process of coding interviews, it became apparent that no questions were asked, and no data were collected, documenting explicit formative critique instruction or training received by participants. This background information could have provided a clearer understanding of participant motivations and expectations regarding formative critique, and could have informed this study, as well as future research on this topic. Finally, all participants were currently working in

central Kentucky, and the cohort included no people of color. This geographic and demographic homogeneity may have produced a record of limited viewpoints and lived experiences from participant responses.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

Participants in this study were largely unaware of other visual art teachers' formative critique methods and many reflected upon their own practices mid-interview. This development reflected the scarcity of available literature and policy directives related to the formative critique process, as the current body of research regarding formative critique as practiced by high school visual arts teacher is limited. This study was informed primarily by the literature examining critique practices in visual arts courses at institutions of higher education and formative assessment methods in core content areas at the high school level. Formative critique was seen as a beneficial practice by participants, and in the relevant literature, but actionable educational standards and documentation of practical application could be augmented by further research.

An expanded survey, with a larger sample size, of formative critique as used by high school visual art teachers might provide a more generalizable assessment of procedures as practiced in classrooms. When conditions allow, investigations that triangulate classroom observations with participant interviews could provide a more accurate accounting of formative critique methods and bring to light any discrepancies between teachers' perception and observed practices. Additionally, the following

suggestions for future research could expand the academic literature examining formative critique in high school visual arts classrooms:

1. Participants in this study all indicated that they used formative critique with their students. However, few participants provided responses detailing what informed their practice. Some interviewees mentioned replicating techniques used by colleagues and/or former teachers. At the post-secondary level, many participants were influenced by negative experiences in college art courses. Further investigation into the amount of academic and/or professional formative critique training received by high school visual arts teachers could provide a more comprehensive understanding of its classroom use.
2. This qualitative study examined visual arts teachers' perceptions of student artist outcomes, but actual student artwork was unexamined. While the quantitative assessment of student artwork is a complicated issue (Eisner, 2002), organizations like the College Board (2012) routinely assign standardized scores to student artist portfolios. Research to determine if there is a correlation between students' AP Art and Design scores and teachers' formative critique methods and/or frequency could demonstrate the impact in-progress feedback might have on the quality of high school student artwork.
3. The disruption of traditional educational procedures by the COVID-19 pandemic influenced participant responses, and was noted in this study.

The lasting effects on visual arts teachers' pedagogical paradigms is currently unknown, but more investigation is warranted. Many interviewees had changed their approach to formative critique as a result of teaching in virtual settings, and a longitudinal study could examine the lasting effects of those changes. Research could document and analyze the evolution, and in many cases revolution, of classroom formative critique during online instruction. Further study could also detail which methods adopted during virtual instruction continue to be used by teachers, and which are discarded, when students and school personnel return to in-person settings in a post-pandemic learning environment.

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## **APPENDICES**

**APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT FORMATIVE CRITIQUE DOCUMENTS (QUINN)**

## Appendix A: Participant Formative Critique Documents (Quinn)

Student: \_\_\_\_\_

Subject: \_\_\_\_\_

Grade Level: \_\_\_\_\_

<b>Enduring Skill: Creating: Create a work of Art that has meaning.</b>				
Criteria	Not Yet	Approaches Expectations	Meets Expectations	Exceeds Expectations
	1 - 1.5	2 - 2.5	3 - 3.5	4
<b><i>Artwork Activity</i></b> <i>Student's ability to create a visual statement about a prompt that conveys meaning to its viewer.</i>	The student created a disconnected series of images that lacked meaning.	The student created image/images that connect. A purpose is apparent but not clear. The imagery is symbolic but disconnected from the meaning.	The student created image/images that connect. A purpose is clear, readable, and has definite meaning that is derived through the student's use of imagery.	The student created image/images that connect. A purpose is clear, readable, and has definite meaning that is derived through the student's use of imagery. The student's work evokes real meaningful conversation about the applied meaning to the art.
<b>Peer Evaluation</b>  Score: _____	Comments:			
<b>Teacher Evaluation</b>  Score: _____	Comments:			

Student: \_\_\_\_\_

Subject: \_\_\_\_\_

Grade Level: \_\_\_\_\_

<b>Enduring Skill: Responding: Evaluate and or infer how an artwork conveys the artistic intent and meaning to others.</b>				
Criteria	Not Yet	Approaches Expectations	Meets Expectations	Exceeds Expectations
	1 - 1.5	2 - 2.5	3 - 3.5	4
<b><i>Critique Activity</i></b> <i>Student's ability to identify aloud or in writing imagery within an artwork that contains meaning.</i>	The student was not able to read visual symbols in an artwork and assimilate or assign meaning to them.	The student was able to read visual symbols in an artwork and assimilate or assign disconnected or out of context meaning to them.	The student was able to read visual symbols in an artwork. He or she is able to assimilate or assign accurate well-constructed meaning from the art. The meaning derived from the work is based on the perspective of the artist.	The student was able to read visual symbols in an artwork to derive a clear understanding of the intent of the work. He or she is able to adapt and assimilate the meaning to critique, argue, or expand upon the issue addressed in the art.
<b>Self-Evaluation</b>  Score: _____	Comments:			
<b>Teacher Evaluation</b>  Score: _____	Comments:			



**APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT FORMATIVE CRITIQUE DOCUMENTS (JOYCE)**

**Appendix B: Participant Formative Critique Documents (Joyce)**

Your Name	
Artist's Name	
Title of Artwork	

“Good Thing” #1	
“Good Thing” #2	
“Thing to Work On” #1	
“Thing to Work On” #2	
Overall Comments (be honest, but courteous!!)	

## **APPENDIX C: PARTICIPANT FORMATIVE CRITIQUE DOCUMENTS (LUKE)**

## Appendix C: Participant Formative Critique Documents (Luke)

### How to Look at Contemporary Art

(a step-by-step form to help students thoroughly describe and interpret works of art)

In the [Location Redacted], right off the main lobby, is [Location Redacted]. [Location Redacted] is open most weekdays, but the hours can vary from semester to semester, so be sure to call to make sure there will be sufficient time for you to view and begin writing about the artwork. At a minimum, an hour is needed. [Contact Information Redacted]

**1. Explore the galleries and carefully examine the work of art that you find most interesting.**

#### **2. Basic Information**

What is the name of the artist?

What is the title of the artwork?

What is the name of the exhibition?

What is your initial reaction to the work?

Is there any contextual information known about the artist or the subject?

(Contextual information is background information that is relevant to the understanding of the artwork)

#### **3. SUBJECT MATTER** (the imagery)

Does the artwork depict anything? If so, fully describe the subject matter.

(For example: If there is a person depicted, be sure to describe if the person is old or young, male or female. Also include information about the pose, the clothing, etc.)

Be sure to explain if the imagery is realistic or abstracted.

#### **4. FORM** (the visual and physical structure)

What is the approximate size of the artwork and how is it displayed?

What materials and processes were used to create this artwork?

Describe the overall composition (the visual arrangement of parts).

Describe how has the artist used color, line, or value.

#### **5. CONTENT** (the meaning)

Now that you have described the artwork, please **interpret** the artwork.

(What does it mean? What ideas are expressed? What is it mostly about?)