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ADOLESCENTS' METAPHORIC INTERPRETATIONS OF PAINTINGS:
THE EFFECTS OF THE CLUSTERING STRATEGY AND THE
ASSESSMENT OF REFERENTIAL ADEQUACY

Lois Stockslager

If one concurs with Langer's thesis (1957) that art is a metaphor for what the artist knows about the life of feeling, then the study of metaphor is significant for Art Education not only for making art but also for responding to art.

Response to the environment may be understood as Symbolic Interaction, a theory posited by certain social psychologists (Manis and Meltzer, 1978). People, they claim, act on the basis of assigned meanings rather than acting in direct response to stimuli. New meanings can be formed and new courses of action taken when ability to select and interpret stimuli in the environment is developed. Since art is a vital part of the environment, this study proposes that response to art may be considered as Symbolic Interaction. Responses may be examined in terms of literal and metaphoric meanings that individuals construct in the process of interpreting art.

In translating Langer's idea of art as metaphor and the theory of symbolic interaction into the practice of teaching, it is important to consider some research in child development. In the field of Developmental Psychology, objections have been raised to some of Piaget's ideas from a contextualistic stance (Brainerd, 1983). The formal operational stage, occurring at adolescence, also is criticized for singular attention to sequential thinking and hypothetical reasoning as well as a Western bias (Dasen, 1973).

Gardner, a cognitive developmental psychologist, has similar concerns but with respect to adolescents' artistic activity. He describes a U-shaped model (1980) for understanding that artistic activity frequently is arrested at the formal operational stage. Gardner and Winner (cited in Strauss, 1982) compared developments of adolescents' metaphoric language and the production of drawings and paintings. The results of their work show that adolescents possess cognitive capability for metaphoric construction but negative influences induced by motivational factors hinder metaphoric use and development. Adolescents characteristically abandon metaphoric language while favoring realistic representation and literal language.

In the field of linguistics, language and its structure of transformation plays an important part in the way thinking is shaped (Vygotsky, 1962; Chomsky, 1968; Slobin, 1971). Metaphoric language subsumes literal language (Feinstein, 1982) and thereby expands meaning through the generation of multiple evocative referents. Metaphoric meaning, then, offers more options for symbolic interaction with visual forms.

Clustering is a strategy for constructing metaphoric meaning in response to art. Feinstein (1983, in review) developed and tested

this strategy with the interpretation of paintings. The results of her work show that by using the clustering strategy, metaphoric interpretations of paintings are increased.

The clustering strategy reflects some aspects of phenomenology (Husserl, 1952; Merleau-Ponty, 1962), and the philosophical base of Symbolic Interaction Theory (Manis and Meltzer, 1978). Adherents of phenomenology hold that it is possible to obtain insights into the multiple meanings of a phenomenon by first bracketing preconceptions and then investigating the phenomenon through systematic imaginative variations. When using the clustering strategy, students suspend preconceived notions of what the work means to be receptive to what else the work conveys. Feinstein (1983, in review) describes the clustering strategy in relation to the interpretation of paintings:

...the painting is scanned quickly for a dominant impression which is written as a word or phrase and circled. Radiating outward from the circled word(s) are clusters of other words, reflecting the paintings' qualities and feeling tones evoked. From the original dominant impression and clusters, a metaphoric phrase or statement is written which captures the interpretation of the painting.

The clustering strategy utilizes the concept of referential adequacy (Pepper, 1945). Interpretations are referentially adequate when they have referents to qualities of visual organization found in the art work. The use of referential adequacy focuses attention on visual qualities so that artistic, historical, cultural and interpersonal values embedded in metaphor may be revealed.

The purpose of the study is to teach adolescents a strategy for interpreting paintings metaphorically and to develop an instrument for assessing the referential adequacy of their interpretations. Two hypotheses are formulated: (a) if subjects are told to write interpretations of realistic paintings, their interpretations will be more literal than metaphoric; (b) if subjects are taught the clustering strategy, their written interpretations will be more metaphoric and more referentially adequate than subjects who are not taught the clustering strategy but are given an explanation of metaphor instead.

Method

Subjects

The subjects will be 120 eighth grade students enrolled in elective art classes at two middle class junior high schools.

Procedure

All subjects will view slides of four realistic paintings and write interpretations. Subjects will then be randomly assigned to groups for instruction, to be given by the experimenter. The experi-

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mental group will receive instruction in the clustering strategy and the control group, an explanation of metaphor. Subjects will then view four additional slides of realistic paintings and write interpretations. A total of eight responses per subject will be rated by a panel of trained judges. They will view slides used by subjects while rating all responses. Feinstein's literal-metaphoric scale will be used for rating. Another instrument, to be developed by the experimenter, will be used to assess referential adequacy of responses.

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