

## Chapter 62

# Cultivating Visual Analysis and Critical Thinking Skills Through Experiential Art

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Employing visual analysis in the production and critique of artwork is an essential task of an art educator. By encouraging the basic principles of Edmund Burke Feldman's Practical Art Criticism in the development of art making and art analysis, art educators can create a learning environment that guides students toward the practice of higher order thinking skills. Examples of immersive art education that activates space and invites participation from the viewer will be cited as systems for inspiring civic engagement in the classroom.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

In a post-internet society, human relations are often blurred between supreme separation and spectacular representation, but art has the ability to tighten the space of relations and produce sociability, even sociability that leads to social progress (Bourriaud, 2002). The ways in which educators engage their students in current events and pressing social issues has changed dramatically in the last two decades, but there are still a number of valuable lessons to learn from previous educational reformers and philosophers. At a time when a growing number of students are showing signs of alienation and various forms of social anxiety, bringing to light Nicolas Bourriaud's championing of relational art in the context of Edmund Burke Feldman's methods for teaching art criticism and John Dewey's conception of Art As Experience can inspire educators to demonstrate community engagement in their own art curriculum. Recently, scientists and psychologists have taken time to develop studies that help us understand the problem of alienation amongst primary and secondary students. In Psychology Today, Dr. Dawn X. Henderson's research relies on race and social hierarchy to largely explain problems of alienation amongst public school children (Henderson, 2017). Meanwhile, Swiss and Luxembourg researcher teamed up to devise

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a method for measuring school alienation, SALS, the School Alienation Scale and provide distinctions between three school related domains where they have concentrated their research – classmates, teachers, and learning (Greco, A., Hadjar, A., Hascher, T., Marcin, K., Morinaj, J., Scharf, J. Y., 2017).

In addition to assisting in the diagnosis of a student’s negative attitude toward classmates, teachers, and learning, SALS also provides data that tells researchers precisely whether students are alienated from classmates and/or teachers, and/or learning at school (Greco, A., Hadjar, A., Hascher, T., Marcin, K., Morinaj, J., Scharf, J. Y., 2017).

*Table 1. Descriptive statistics of school alienation scales. Reprinted from School Alienation: A Construct Validation Study by Greco, A., Hadjar, A., Hascher, T., Marcin, K., Morinaj, J., Scharf, J. Y., 2017, Frontline Learning Research: An official journal of EARLI, vol. 5, no. 2, 43*

Canton of Bern	Primary school (n = 486)					Secondary school (n = 550)				
	M	SD	$\alpha$	S(SE)	K(SE)	M	SD	$\alpha$	S(SE)	K(SE)
Classmates	1.48	.43	.79	1.27(.11)	1.45(.22)	1.52	.46	.83	1.45(.11)	2.50(.21)
Teachers	1.42	.45	.77	1.58(.11)	3.29(.22)	1.57	.48	.79	1.11(.11)	1.39(.21)
Learning	1.54	.52	.87	1.34(.11)	2.14(.22)	1.83	.56	.88	1.13(.11)	1.63(.21)

  

Luxembourg	Primary school (n = 503)					Secondary school (n = 534)				
	M	SD	$\alpha$	S(SE)	K(SE)	M	SD	$\alpha$	S(SE)	K(SE)
Classmates	1.56	.50	.74	1.29(.11)	1.58(.22)	1.60	.52	.84	1.25(.11)	1.30(.21)
Teachers	1.61	.59	.79	1.10(.11)	0.89(.22)	1.77	.59	.83	0.90(.11)	0.66(.21)
Learning	1.54	.56	.82	1.49(.11)	2.23(.22)	1.87	.60	.86	0.65(.11)	0.17(.21)

*Note.* M = mean; SD = standard deviation;  $\alpha$  = Cronbach's alpha; S = skewness; K = kurtosis; SE = standard error.

While the Swiss and Luxembourg researchers have developed tools for measuring levels of alienation amongst primary and secondary students, Dr. Henderson provides hypotheses for why alienation amongst grade school children exists and offers suggestions for ways educators can improve the curricular experiences of said children. One of the suggestions presented by Dr. Henderson is that educators promote inclusivity in the classroom by incorporating the cultural experiences of their students into their instruction. I point to SALS – the School Alienation Scale developed by researchers in Switzerland and Luxembourg alongside findings by Dr. Dawn X. Henderson in Psychology Today to affirm the serious nature of the roll anxiety and alienation play in the lives of grade school students. Secondly, Dr. Henderson’s assertion that promoting inclusivity through cultural experiences in the classroom can assist in alleviating some of the alienation experienced by students philosophically aligns well with Wendy Ewald’s *Literacy Through Photography*, the project I will discuss primarily in relation to the work of Edmund Burke Feldman and John Dewey.

Responding to a rise in the number of primary and secondary students that are experiencing alienation at school is a critical task for educators and requires that they conceive of new methods of instruction that allow for building cultural inclusivity and shared experience. Employing visual analysis in the production and critique of artwork is an essential task of an art educator, but what if art education could also be used as a catalyst for civic engagement by incorporating higher order thinking skills into assignments related to community and self-reflection? Visual literacy is a key element to guiding students through an artwork and ensuring they understand its relevance. It can be achieved by requiring students to reflect on every aspect of the creative process from start to finish through discussion and writing, though affording students time to think more consciously about what they see is critical to the achievement of higher order thinking skills and inspiring civic engagement outside of the classroom (Ewald, 2001). While Wendy Ewald is able to achieve higher order thinking skills and inspire civic engagement through her highly

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