

## Developing Art Appreciation in Students of Education from Different European Countries

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### Abstract

In the framework of special didactics, students in study programmes in the field of education develop a range of skills and abilities needed for teaching the content prescribed by the curriculum. Art is one of these subjects.

In a qualitative empirical research study we examined the efficacy of a method for developing art appreciation. The sample in the study consisted of students from five different European countries. Students observed J.R. Gera-da's artistic work systematically, concurrently recording their findings. The empirical study confirmed the adequacy of such an approach, since most of the students were able to experience, internalise and individually interpret the artwork.

**Keywords:** *art appreciation, higher education, study programmes in education, experiencing visual artwork*

### Introduction

Modern higher education art pedagogy is based on developing students' productive artistic abilities-creative skills – and their receptive abilities. The latter includes art appreciation, where students are introduced to the acts of perceiving and receiving, thus evaluating and internalising works of art. "The development of artistic design, sensitivity to artistic language and the aesthetic experience in the process of expression, obtaining technical experiences, work with different mate-

rials, etc. have a beneficial effect on the development of art appreciation abilities” (Duh, Čagran, Huzjak, 2010, 640). Art appreciation, thus, deals with emotions and feelings about art at the affective and cognitive levels, while including the knowledge and understanding of the latter (Seabolt, 2001). One’s own perceptions are also linked to associations that in art classes are manifested as a self-understood way of thinking, primarily because “as a component of creative visual art activity they refer immediately to the subject visual art and to its receptive, productive, and reflective treatment” (Seumel, 2001, 8). Today we know that art appreciation abilities are equally present in students as are all their other abilities. This means that all normally developed students have these abilities, and that they can be cultivated with adequate education (Duh & Korošec-Bowen, 2014). In addition, we know that appreciative abilities are better developed in older students.

Students can respond to one and the same work of art in three ways: (1) response at the emotional level (in viewers, an emotional response is aroused by the work of art); (2) response at the associative level (it is linked to associations that emerge in observers after a formal analysis and interpretation of an artwork); (3) response at the formal intellectual level (refers to responses one has after a formal analysis and interpretation of an artwork). The three types of responses vary and change, because they depend on the on-looker and the work of art. In other words, “art appreciation is highly idiosyncratic and seems to be in the eye of the beholder” (Leder et al., 2012). Observing and reception of artwork, and thus the development of art appreciation, go through distinct phases that authors interpret in different ways. A group of authors (Anderson 1988; Clark 1960; Feldman 1987; and Mahon Jones 1986 – as summarised in Arts Education 1996) describe seven steps or phases: (1) preparation for viewing; (2) first impression; (3) description; (4) analysis; (5) interpretation; (6) background information; (7) informed judgement. These seven steps form the basis for the design and performance of our study.

## **Research Methodology**

### **The Purpose, Goal and Research Questions:**

The purpose of the empirical research was to verify the efficacy of methods for representing a visual artwork to students in educational study programmes from different European countries. The goal of the empirical research was to find a method for evaluating artworks that will pass from the perception of the work of art to its reception and internalisation, and therefore to find an efficacious way

of developing art appreciation. In the empirical study, we posed several research questions. General descriptive questions:

- How will the students get acquainted with and experience the presented artwork?
- Will the students' first impression of the artwork be positive?
- Will the students accept the presented artwork, once they have become more familiar with it?
- Will the students learn how to observe a work of art, perceive it, accept and internalise it, and also to verbalise their feelings?
- The specific explicative research question was as follows (ExRQ):
- We are primarily interested in the change between the first impression and the final opinion of a work of art.

We applied *case study methodology* in the qualitative empirical research, of which an interpretive paradigm is characteristic.

### Research Sample

The relevant purposive sample for the empirical research consisted of 37 students in educational study programmes (preschool education, elementary education, and pedagogy) from five European countries (Bulgaria, Belgium, Spain, the Netherlands, and Germany), who participated in the International week on STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics), which was co-organized by the AP University College Antwerp (Belgium) and Stenden University of Applied Sciences (the Netherlands). The study was performed at the Stadelijke Academie voor Schone Kunsten in the town of Lier near Antwerp. Four (10.8 %) male and 33 female (89.2 %) second- and third-year students in Bachelor's degree programmes took part in the study. A purposive sample was selected, since the informedness of individuals included in the education process about this topic was in the forefront. The study was carried out in November 2015.

### Research Instruments

The research instruments consisted of the presentation programme (Microsoft PowerPoint) and the observation protocol (an A4 sheet with personal data, instructions and support points for the record). The presentation programme comprises 69 slides with photographs of Jorge Rodriguez Gerada's artwork, with basic information about the artist and his work. Screen images follow each other in a time sequence of 3 seconds. Presentation of slides with written information

is longer, to give the study participants a chance to read the information provided. After stages 2, 3, 4, 5 and 7, the participants are given enough time to enter their thoughts into the observation protocols.



Figure 1. Jorge Rodriguez Gerada creating a drawing on the façade of the building of the Šiška municipal offices. The photographs were taken on 13 October, 2009.

### Course of the Research

The ideographic approach was applied in the research, where the development of individual elements of the situation was monitored. The research was carried out in seven stages, during which the students were systematically provided with in-depth information about the artist, J.R. Gerada, and his work, and got a deeper insight into his artistic production. As an independent technique of data gathering, analysis of documents, which is non-intrusive and non-reactive, was selected for the research. The documents consist of written materials (an observation sheet), which the students filled in during the individual phases of the research.

1. Preparation: In the phase of preparation for watching the artwork, the students were acquainted with basic information about the course of observing a work of art, the observational protocols were distributed, and it was pointed out that observation is a process of exploration.
2. First impression: The students had systematically received information about Jorge Rodriguez Gerada's artistic work. They were told that they would see a work of art that had been created on the façade of the building of the Šiška municipal offices in Ljubljana in October 2009. The watching of a short film (6.55 minutes) showing the artist at work was preceded by the

instruction: “Observe the artwork well.” After that, at 3-second intervals, 9 screen images followed, with photographs taken on 13 October, 2009. On the last slide in this section, the students were informed that on the wall of the building of the Šiška municipal offices the internationally acknowledged American artist of Spanish descent, Jorge Rodriguez Gerada, drew a charcoal portrait (nearly 16 metre tall) of Tina – a native of Ljubljana. Then the students were asked to briefly write down their first impressions of the work of art.

3. Description: When all the students had finished their written responses, the process of exploring and thorough observation of the work of art continued. 7 screen images of 12 photos taken on 21 November, 2009 were shown to the students. They learnt that Rodriguez Gerada is known for drawing portraits of anonymous townspeople on the walls of buildings in world metropolises, as he believes that it is people who create the soul of cities. In the last screen image, the date 3 February, 2010 appears next to the photo of the portrait on the wall of the building of the Šiška municipal offices, along with an invitation to the students to write a short description of the work of art.



Figure 2. J.R. Gerada's drawing (A and B taken on 21 November, 2009, C taken on 3 February, 2010).

4. Analysis: The first screen image in this part pointed out that the shots had been taken over an extended period of time and the students were asked whether they noticed anything. Eight screenshots with photographs of the

artwork taken on 3 February, 2010 and 5 screenshots with 7 photos taken on 8 September, 2010 followed. The inscription next to the portrait on the last slide stated that the artist had decided before coming to Ljubljana that this time he would draw a woman of 20 to 30 years old, one living in Ljubljana. An invitation to students followed to attempt an analysis of the work of art.

5. Interpretation: The exploration process continued, and the students became acquainted with even more facts; first a few more recent photos of the artwork were shown. 4 screen images followed, with 2 photos of the work of art taken on 16 December, 2011, 2 photos taken on 1 February and 7 on March 14, 2012, two photos taken on 24 July, 2012, and 2 photos taken on 21 October, 2015. The last screenshot informed the students that the portrait was 16 metre tall and over seven metre wide. They learned that it had taken more than five days for the artist to finish the portrait and that he had used about 300 pieces of charcoal. With the question “What do you think this work of art speaks about?” the students were asked to interpret the artwork.

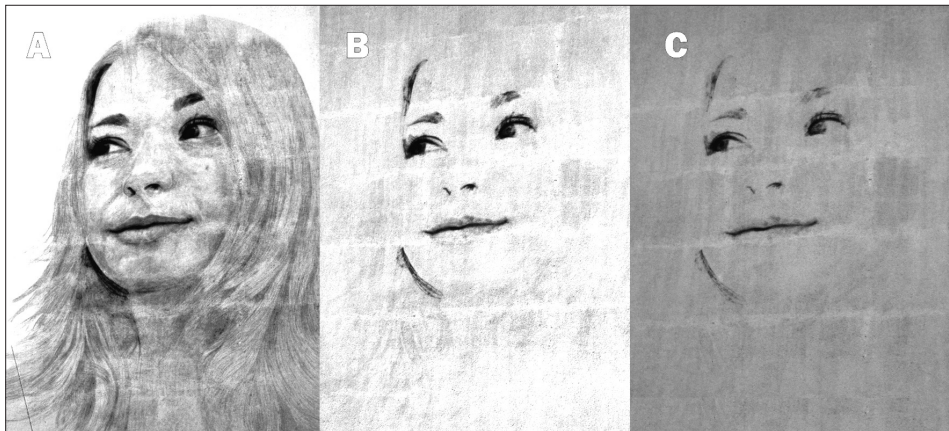


Figure 3. J.R. Gerada's drawing over time (A taken on 21 November, 2009; B taken on 24 July, 2012; and D taken on 21 October, 2015).

6. Background information: The students were provided with more information. They learned that Gerada's project had at least two connotations that were worth mentioning: (1) the artistic quality of the production and (2) the use of charcoal as the drawing material. Since charcoal is in itself impermanent, over the course of time it will be washed from the

façade. Thus, the artwork will change until it disappears completely. In this idea, the aspect of ecological awareness can be recognised. In next 8 screen images, the students were presented with photographs of the artist's project *The Urban Analogies* (Spain, 2002) and two short films (24 and 58 seconds) and a longer film (7.30 minutes) about the creation of the 2004 project *Identity* (Maria), which provides an excellent survey of the artist's artistic creed.

7. Instructive opinion: Writing the final opinion followed. The students were invited to briefly record their opinion of the work of art. At this point, some additional support points were provided for the students' assistance.

For the interpretation, we analysed the students' written responses and established the message of these texts from the author's perspective, using the framework of objective hermeneutics. In the study we tested all four criteria for determining the quality of documents such as authenticity, knowledge about the emergence of the document, the message and comprehensibility, and found that our written materials fulfilled all the requirements. In the qualitative research, we followed ethical standards in all respects: voluntary participation in the study, information about the research study, protection of the identity of the individual, confidentiality, privacy and respect for the truth.

## **Research Results and Interpretation**

By carefully observing and experiencing the artwork in individual phases of viewing the work and of systematic acquisition of information about it, all the study participants recorded their feelings in their observation protocols. They recorded their feelings and findings after the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, and 7<sup>th</sup> phases of the presentation. As expected, none of the students included in the study had previously seen the artist's work; they were all encountering it for the first time.

Below, we will first analyse the impressions of one particular student (student A, a female student of Preschool Education from Belgium, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of a Bachelor's degree programme), who after watching the short video and the first set of screen images, recorded her first impression as follows:

*(2) It takes a lot of time to draw this picture. You have to see it close, but also far off everything is perfect. You can see every detail of the picture (shadow). You can see any percent. Because it's so big you have to be very careful not to make a mistake. The full side of the drawing.*

Student A's first impression was rather superficial. She limited herself to an analysis of the technological features and observed that the production of such a drawing required a lot of time. She did not recognise any deeper meaning in the portrait. Moreover, in her first impression the creative and communicative layers of the work were relegated to the background. After watching the next set of screen images, student A wrote:

*(3) The details of the sketch are very beautiful. Also the message behind the sketch is very beautiful "The people make the city". The sketch is so real it looks like a photo. That is amazing.*

Analysing this piece of text, we see that, in this phase of observing the artwork, the student dealt with the quality of the drawing and with the projection of the social situation in the artwork, thus with the sociological layer of the artwork. When she wrote: *"The people make the city"*, she reinterpreted and simplified the artist's statement about people being the ones who create the soul of cities. She did not recognise the creative and communicative layers of the work. Student A wrote the following analysis of the artwork:

*(4) The sketch is so big and it's so cool that he can draw so many details in a sketch of this size. The way to draw this sketch is only with lines and a thing to draw. So many details with one thing and one line, is very curvy. I like it a lot.*

We can see that, despite new information about the artwork, student A still focused her attention on the starting point of the artist's work. The response gradually passed from formally intellectual to more emotional, as the student recorded that she liked the work. In this section, photos were presented that had been taken over an extended period of time. We can classify the student's observation as superficial, since she failed to notice the differences that had emerged in the appearance of the portrait as time passed.

*(5) If you don't take care of it, then it will go. That's also what happens with the city, if the people don't take care of the city, it will go. As the artist says: "The people make the city", that's his message behind his artwork.*

The present interpretation indicates a slightly stronger focus on the communicative layer of the artwork. The student related the associations derived from the noticeable fading of the drawing with disappearance, with transience. The student was also



able to link the artwork to the thoughts of the author, and again reacted more at the intellectual level. It seems that she was still mentally occupied with the sociological layer of the artwork because she advanced a thesis about the transience of people and places. After this student A wrote her final opinion in the following way:

*(7) My first thought was: "you spend so much time at you artwork, but it will go away after time, why would you do that?" But now we see the whole, now I understand his message and it is beautiful. I love the way he makes it; he draws something so special that gives the places that are a little bit abandoned a special look. Also the message "the people make the city" is very nice to see. I want it too in Belgium.*

We can deduce from student A's final opinion that gradual observation and delving more deeply into the artwork led to complete reception of the work of art. From the remarks in the student's observation protocol, we can infer (ExRQ) that the systematic acquisition of information about the artist and the artwork guided her from marginality to the core. The student's explanation expressed in the final opinion differs quite considerably from her first impression. She changed from an initial passivity without recognising the deeper meaning of the drawing to an awareness that even the simplest drawing can have a deeper message, which in this case is wonderful. The student's initial response was of a more formally intellectual nature, while later it becomes somewhat more emotionally coloured, with a strongly expressed social note. The experience, memory and associations aroused in the student while observing the artwork, which can be read in her written remarks, created in her the wish to have a similar project in Belgium. We find that student A learnt to observe a work of art and to perceive, accept and internalise it. She was also able to verbalise her feelings.

Based on the recorded texts, we will follow the opinion of yet another student (student B, a male student of Preschool Education from Spain, in the 3<sup>rd</sup> year of a Bachelor's degree programme). Due to space restrictions, only the first (2) and the last (7) descriptions in his protocol will be shown:

*(2) Art is about expression. My first impression is related to raising the voice of the artist (or someone) to complain about one situation or to celebrate a kind of action to save an issue. It is a beautiful woman and a nice drawing.*

*(7) I, actually, really like the artwork and my opinion has changed a little bit. He wants to tell stories about unknown people. His artwork is like life and relationships, everything finally ends or disappears, that's the "golden rule" of living.*

Based on student B's responses, we can answer the questions (ExRQ). While observing the artwork and with the assistance of gradual acquisition of information, the student progressed from superficial perception of the portrait to its essence. The original responses, which primarily started with the beauty of the depicted portrait, passed to the essence the student identified as vanishing, transience. In view of the ExRQ we can say that the change can be perceived, and in a positive direction. The originally extremely emotional responses gradually became responses at the associative level. Each opinion about and explanation of a work of art is always personal and dependent on the person's own associations and experience. Via associative memory, the student identified visual information in an idiosyncratic way. We can conclude that the student observed, perceived, accepted and internalised the artwork. Through the verbalisation of his feelings, he also presented his view of the world.

We detected similar changes in the responses of other students, irrespective of the country of their origin. From the final opinions of the majority of them, it is clear that the artwork convinced them that they were able to experience it and that they established a positive attitude toward it.

## **Conclusions**

This study has established that the gradual acquisition of data about the artwork heightened the students' motivation. All the students achieved – each of them via their own acceptance and associations – individual acceptance and internalisation of the artwork. The students also knew how to put into writing their established positive attitudes toward the artwork. Stout points out that artistic writing is one of the most powerful ways of strengthening critical responses to art and developing personal abilities in art education. Writing is an important link between language and visual images (Stout, 1993). Results similar to the ones in this study were also obtained in research involving secondary school students and using similar instruments (Duh, 2014). In that study, too, the students accepted the visual artwork to which they were exposed and could verbalise their feelings appropriately.

In our study we started from the premise that developing art appreciation is based on the cultivation of as subtle a perception of an artwork as possible. "A percept is the product of a perceived image on the one hand and of the imaginary world of the observer on the other hand," says Bering (2001, 43). So, not only what the student sees, but also primarily what is associated with it, is important in observing an artwork. Students' attention, therefore, needs to be oriented towards

the concrete elements and structures of a work of art. Some layers of a work of art can more readily be brought closer to students, some with more difficulty, some sooner and others later, but certainly not all at once. In this respect, students' age and experience in the field of visual arts must also be taken into account. Art appreciation can help to clarify the problem of valuing a work of art as either positive or negative, depending on the perceptive and receptive abilities of the student. This requires practice and initiative and helps to develop the ability to describe what is seen, using the most appropriate words (Barrett, 2007).

The purpose of our empirical research study was the verification of the effectiveness of the presentation of a work of art to students. We wished to find a way of evaluating works of art that would pass from the perception of art to its reception and internalisation, and thus to find a successful method of cultivating art appreciation. The way of presenting the artwork that was examined in our empirical study proved to be appropriate because the vast majority of the students reached the purpose and recorded a positive response.

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**Photographs and films displayed:** Portraits of Tina: videos and photographs - photo archive of the author.