

Summary of

PARTICIPANT OBSERVER AS CRITIC

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Participant observation is a term used to denote a group of research techniques which anthropologists, sociologists, other social scientists, and, in this case, critics, use to collect data in natural settings. By critics, I mean educational critics who utilize the paradigm of aesthetic criticism in their evaluation of educational situations (Eisner, 1979; Alexander, 1980). From the several appropriate techniques for gathering data for educational evaluations, many educational critics choose participant observation techniques. This paper centers on 1) the similarities and differences between critics' and other researchers' use of participant observation techniques and 2) the differences between their research products.

Participant observation techniques are observing, participating, interviewing, and analyzing artifacts. Informants who tell more than they were asked and respondents who answer only the questions on a questionnaire are both helpful (Pelto & Pelto, 1978; McCall & Simmons, 1969; Douglas, 1976; Spradley, 1979, 1980). Different roles are adopted by the researcher in each educational situation. Participant observers seeks structures and regularities which they attempt to validate through experience in the situation and through confirmation or disconfirmation by fellow participants through interviews and informal chats.

Participant observers often derive the categories for observation from meanings and categories provided by participants in the situation (known as emic); others bring categories in from outside (known as etic). Wax (1971) and Alexander (Note 1) suggest that a stance between the emic and etic is possible where the outsider grasps the logic of insider's configurations although the insider may not realize their existence.

Although the critic, the anthropologist, and the sociologist use participant observation techniques in much the same way, there are a number of differences in the final product and the way the total research effort is conceived. The first difference is in the foci of their research. Anthropologists focus these techniques on cultures, sociologists focus on societies, and critics focus on educational situations which need to be evaluated or assessed. Unless hired specifically by contract for an evaluation project, anthropologists and sociologists do not evaluate. The critic's goal is a coherent evaluation of a situation which draws on both the logic of the insider's configurations and the outsider's background.

The second major difference between the critics on the one hand and the anthropologists or sociologists on the other is a philosophical one--

they use different models. The critic uses aesthetic criticism from the artistic paradigm as a model; the anthropologist uses either the scientific model based on physics or the naturalistic model based on investigative journalism (Guba, 1978; Eisner, 1981; and Alexander, 1981). The most widely used model of aesthetic criticism includes description, interpretation, evaluation or assessment, and sometimes prescription.

A third difference is that the educational critic often attends to the qualities in the classroom which often correspond to elements and principles of art, e.g., line (as in "line of thought"), shape, rhythm, balance, or repetition, etc. Classroom events and structures are then analyzed much like works of art.

A fourth difference lies in how the individual critic conceives of the writing task. The language of criticism must, according to Sherman (Note 2) and Eisner (Note 3) convey the emotional qualities of the situation. The affective qualities of classroom life are communicated well through educational criticism. Unlike other researchers, educational critics consciously aim to construct forms which communicate affective information.

Alexander (Note 1) argues that artistic language--language which uses colorful nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs, and which attempts by its structure to convey meaning as does poetry--is well suited for use in educational criticism. Artistic language, particularly metaphoric language, conveys most strongly the emotional qualities which color an educational situation such as a classroom. In the descriptive passages, the metaphoric mode is utilized to portray the situation and to evoke the qualities that made that situation unique. It is in this stage and the evaluation phase educational criticism most differs from those parts of anthropology and sociology which use participant observation techniques.

Thus, the educational criticism draws on participant observation techniques for data gathering in the field--in an elementary or secondary classroom, and art classroom, or perhaps a museum. The critic analyzes the data. The data is then presented using the model of aesthetic criticism--description, interpretation, evaluation and, sometimes, prescription. The critic attempts to construct a form that communicates the qualitative, affective, and cognitive meanings of the situation. The result is an understanding of the situation which is as in depth and comprehensive as the best criticism of film, television, literature, or visual art.

Reference Notes

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Summary of

WHY ART EDUCATION LACKS SOCIAL RELEVANCE: A CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS

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Contemporary art education is individual -- focused (i.e. self-centered) to the almost complete exclusion of larger social concerns. This is true whether the art education is child-centered, discipline-centered, Rockefeller (Coming to Our Senses) - centered, or competency-based. The primary concern, notwithstanding differences, is on individual artistic productivity and, to a lesser degree, on personal aesthetic response. The enormous untapped potential of art education - and ninety-nine percent of us will be viewers and consumers, not artists - is in the social dimension. Critical understanding of the dominant visual culture--often dehumanizing in its effect, multicultural understanding through art, and the democratization of our visual culture (i.e. culture of, by, and for all of the people) are major social goals largely ignored by art educators.

This presentation takes a critical look at contemporary American society, our particular social context, in order to help us understand why our culture, art, and art education are the way they are. By so doing, I hope to reveal alternatives to the deeply engrained definitions of art and art education which we have all inherited, put into practice, and all too rarely questioned. Analyzing the major components of our society - capitalism, democracy, and technocracy - leads to an understanding of why art education is so: individual-centered; upper class "high art" in its content and concerns; asocial or antisocial in its avoidance of contact with the larger visual culture which shapes the form and content of our daily lives.

Capitalism, our economic system, has had the most decisive influence on our culture, art, and art education. Its deepest values and inevitable socio-economic class divisions define art and art education from head to toe. Capitalism's encompassing values and goals of private property, private profit, individual freedom and competition, and dynamic production of ever-changing, new, and unique commercial products promote extreme forms of self-centeredness, self-seeking, and atomistic individualism. Self-realization is ever at the height of our concerns while social realization is barely in the ballpark. A balance is clearly needed. That the fine artist and work of fine art are most highly esteemed when most individualistic, unique, and original comes as no surprise. That privacy and subjectivity command a near monopoly on artistic creativity and aesthetic response in art education programs is likewise understandable.

Capitalism also creates inevitable socio-economic class divisions through an unequal distribution of wealth and power. Specific upper class groups, because of their wealth and power, gain the capability of supporting, defining, and advancing the arts and consequently, art education according to their class-based values and preferences. Inasmuch, we have a self-centered art education whose content revolves around the male-dominated, upper class European-American fine arts tradition. Wealthy and powerful museum trustees and boards of directors, art collectors, gallery directors,