The Feldman Approach:
A Catalyst for Examining Issues in Art Criticism Instruction
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In this discussion, I would like to address four issues in relationship to the Feldman (1981) method as well as to the larger concerns of art criticism implementation. I assume that a goal we have in common is to have art criticism be part of the curriculum. The problem needs to be looked at not just in terms of the Feldman method, although that can serve as a framework, but to the larger issues of art criticism instruction per se. There needs to be an assessment of what may be present or missing in literature on art criticism. The issues I'd like to discuss are (1) the efficacy of the Feldman method, (2) relating art criticism instruction to individual differences, (3) contextualizing art criticism instruction, and (4) the need for instructional specificity.

The Feldman Method

First, in terms of the efficacy of the Feldman method, I would like to say that I am personally very compatible with this approach. When I was a graduate student and introduced to this method of art criticism, I found it extremely helpful. It postpones judgment and opens up a tolerance for art forms that one might not initially appreciate. When I introduce this method of art criticism to my students, I call it the not-to-panic approach in that it slows down the whole process of responding to art. One's responses are put into a slow motion, thoughtful exploration. The temporal dimension of the Feldman method may be one of its strongest points.

As a general introduction to what art criticism can accomplish, the Feldman approach is excellent. This, however, has been my personal experience. Having students with a wide range of backgrounds and interests work with this approach is another matter. This is when
problems develop, not the least of which is that it takes some students numerous experiences with the format before there is a sense of ease and proficiency. So, even if an instructor is compatible with this approach, there seem to be some problems with implementation.

I would like to suggest that a compatibility with the Feldman format, or with any other particular art criticism approach, is based more on cognitive style and individual preference than on any inherent validity of the format itself. I've noticed that some students never really relate well to the Feldman approach. For example, I had one very bright student who literally could not deal with the Feldman method. For art criticism assignments, she would write poetry in prose style. She wrote very nice papers, but her work was certainly not conforming to the Feldman format. From this and other experiences with individual students who have had difficulty analyzing and interpreting art within the Feldman method, I finally concluded that the Feldman method needs to be considered as just one approach among many. Rather than trying to make any one format all things for all people and all situations, perhaps, just as has been done in regard to artistic expression for students, there is a need to look at individual differences as they relate to art criticism instruction. This leads into my second area of discussion.

Individual Differences

A compilation and description of available art criticism formats needs to be made available (Hamblen, 1985). This would allow us to look at the range of art criticism formats available and to see how specific formats can relate to students in terms of their personality types, cognitive styles, and aesthetic preferences—as well as different educational goals. The other option is to take any one format and see how it can be adjusted to individual needs. It is doubtful, however, that instruction in art criticism will ever be able to be individualized to the extent studio production has been. Art criticism is much more of a structured situation, and that structure itself can almost overridingly dictate what happens. The structure of the format can, in some respects, be considered the message.
Art criticism literature contains comments that students should be allowed to form their own conclusions regarding an art object, but the instructional methodology itself is not individualized. For example, in Approaches to Art in Education, Chapman (1978) presents four very different approaches i.e., inductive, deductive, interactive, and empathic. These approaches, however, are presented as alternatives in relationship to different interpretational outcomes of a given art form, not in terms of alternatives for students with different learning propensities.

Primarily, the art criticism format and the art critical process focus on the object. That is fine if one is dealing with professional art criticism, journalistic art criticism, or scholarly art criticism, but, in the educational setting, the character of the learner needs to enter the equation. There do not seem to be adjustments in art criticism literature for the student's life-world interests and learning style. There is little recognition of the fact that students will process and relate to art critical procedures differently, just as they express themselves differently in their art work. I would suggest that art critical approaches need to be related to personality types, cognitive styles, and aesthetic preferences of students—whether that requires multiple formats or whether singular formats can be adjusted is problematic.

Social Meaning in Art Criticism

The third area I'd like to discuss is the inclusion of social content in the art critical process. This seems to be one of the main criticisms of the Feldman method. It has been charged that Feldman has ignored social content, that his format is formalistic, that he does not take into consideration the life-world of the student, and so on. Actually, from a review of available formats in art education literature and in view of what Dr. Feldman (1970, 1973, 1981) has written in conjunction with his format, his is more socially contextualized than many others.

Feldman has a democratic approach to objects considered worthy of art critical scrutiny. A stated purpose is to understand the variety of
art forms in the environment. And, depending upon how the format is used, it is elastic enough to accommodate specific social content. Much of the formalistic problem has developed from using the second, analysis step, only for formal analysis. It is possible to add other types of analysis to this step. For example, there is functional analysis wherein the functions of an object are discussed; there is contextual analysis wherein the time and space dimensions in which an art object does exist or has existed are discussed. There can be an analysis of an object's medium as it relates to technical processes; there can be an analysis of audience reactions and interpretations of an object. Anderson (1985) has suggested that these considerations be covered in the third, interpretation step. That, however, is perhaps too late to deal effectively with aspects on which there has been no previous discussion.

Although there are statements in the literature that art criticism is not a substitute for the aesthetic experience, there seems to be a tendency to either equate the two or to consider art criticism as a preliminary or as a way of sensitizing the student to what are considered distinctly aesthetic qualities. Again, this tends to make the entire process overly formalistic. Feldman describes the critical process as an exploration. Unless one specifies that this exploration is going to be confined to intrinsic qualities, there is no need to preclude any information that is pertinent to understanding the art object.

The curriculum guide for the State of California has four instructional components: aesthetic perception, artistic expression, cultural heritage, and critical analysis (Visual and Performing Arts Framework, 1982). The authors of this guideline have separated aesthetic perception from art criticism. This is a very helpful educational distinction. As mentioned above, there seems to be a tendency to use the art criticism format procedure as a way of dealing aesthetically with an art object or as a means toward developing aesthetic, perceptual acuity. Accordingly, an art criticism format becomes not just a way of dealing with a particular object, but begins to take on a larger prescriptive truth of how it is believed people should relate to art per se. Such an approach unduly encumbers art criticism instruction with numerous strictures. First and foremost, art criticism should be considered an
educational procedure that results in expanded skills in exploring the meanings and values of various art forms. There is now the danger of confusing an instructional mode with the aesthetic response.

Mittler's (1982) distinction between art criticism as not requiring any information other than what is perceptually present and art historical approaches as requiring specialized knowledge is helpful and suggests that there could be some reworking of terminology to clarify this issue. As another example, Silverman (1982) differentiates between aesthetic perception, which does not require any specialized knowledge, and aesthetic criticism, which does. Possibly, if one wants a bracketed experience that is very much separate from subjective responses and from the object's social context, it could be called aesthetic criticism. Some other phrase could be used to describe a process whereby any information or experience that can feed into a greater understanding and appreciation of an art object could be included. No matter what terminology is finally chosen, some distinction needs to be made. Equating a particular educational approach with a panindividual and pansocial truth not only confuses the implementation of art criticism but also gives art criticism more weight than it actually deserves in the larger scheme of things.

Instructional Specificity

Fourth, and finally, there is the need for instructional specificity for art criticism implementation. A review of art criticism formats within art education literature that I recently completed indicates that this is crucial (Hamblen, 1985). I began my review with the question of "What would an art teacher find in the literature that would help him or her implement art criticism instruction?" After the review, my answer to that question was, "not an awful lot."

The paucity of information on methodologies for implementation has also been noted by Geahigan (1980) and Lankford (1984). In the literature, there appears to be a so-called assumption-of-good-intentions-attitude in the sense that since art criticism instruction should happen and that it is good for students, then somehow it will be implemented. This optimistic tone is not warranted by the realities of instructional requirements. In terms of teacher preparation, future
teachers have few ideas on instructional processes for implementing the Feldman format. But that problem is not particular to the Feldman method. I am finding that relatively few practicing art teachers have a background in art criticism instruction. I've used the Feldman method to give prospective and practicing teachers a general overview of art criticism, but I've noticed that if I leave them there, they feel good and they have that high that often comes in dealing with art but then as to what they are going to do with this approach is another matter. There needs to be very specific information on implementation and on methodologies that can be replicated in elementary and secondary classrooms.

**Summary**

To summarize, I have four major recommendations. First, art criticism formats need to be related to different learning styles. There needs to be made available a compilation of the range of formats from which an art teacher can select. Feldman's approach is basically a starting point; it is merely one option. To ask more of any one approach is tantamount to imputing Truth (with a capital T) to what is essentially a curriculum choice.

Second, art criticism formats need to be given an elasticity to allow for individual differences and the inclusion of different types of information, such as social content and meaning. Third, the literature needs to indicate a specificity of methodology so that teachers, initially at least, will have some guidelines that they can replicate in their particular settings. It would certainly also be helpful if specific lessons were provided that teachers could use. Feldman's approach, in itself, is not a lesson. This is probably why even those students in teacher preparation who become proficient with the Feldman format are unsure as to how it is to be used in the classroom. The steps of an art criticism format seem to dictate a method, but they actually do not. Instructional methodology needs to be looked at in terms of implementation rather than as the format of procedural steps.

Finally, it needs to be emphasized that art criticism instructional implementation is in its infancy. Although my data is not scientifically
generalizable, I would estimate from my work with classroom teachers, gallery teachers, and museum docents, that approximately 10% are familiar with a formalized art critical approach. These are individuals who are actively involved in the field and committed and interested enough to attend workshops or conferences. It can be surmised that for art educators in general an even lower percentage are knowledgeable of art criticism procedures. Perhaps at this time there needs to be some tolerance in terms of implementation and what art criticism instruction can accomplish. Maybe it is unrealistic to be overly concerned with purity of form and adherence to some ideal of what art criticism should be—rather, one should focus practically on what can be done. At this point, I would be very pleased if there were some or more art critical dialogues, irrespective of what format is used.
References


