

GENERAL CONCEPTIONS ABOUT ART: PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

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Introduction

Any viewer, and not only those with specialised training in art, can establish a relationship with art (Housen, 1983). We were interested in exploring how people would answer to the question: What is art? Our goal was not question any existent definitions of art, but to explore the meanings that this concept can have for different people. Using an interview, Freeman and Sanger (1995) tried to explore how young children developed their theories about art. According to the authors, children gradually construct an art theory (they construct a personal meaning for art) that they use to express their understanding. Kindler, Darras and Kuo (2000) compared and contrasted general conceptions about art by young in a variety of cultural contexts. In order to accede to these meanings they used an interview script.

Inspired by these two studies we undertook the task of developing a structured interview script to explore, compare and contrast general conceptions about art in a Brazilian and a Portuguese sample (4th, 7th and 8th graders). Because of time constraints allied to the unavailability of some children, we transformed the interview script in a small questionnaire containing open-ended questions («What is art?»), closed questions («Can unattractive things be considered art?» Yes/No) and exploration questions («Why?»). We collected data from 312 children (158 in Brazil and 154 in Portugal). The findings showed that Brazilian and Portuguese children have different definitions of art, $X^2 = 83.402$, $df = 10$, $p = .000$ (Rocha & Coimbra, 2004).

Objective and Hypothesis

Following the same research interest we develop a second questionnaire to explore general conceptions about art but also art associated meanings (we asked pupils to write words, ideas that came into their mind when they think about art). We controlled subjects' exposure to art. Our goal was to assess the influence of education in the development of general conceptions about art. From this objective we formulated three hypothesis: 1) students from different grades express the same conceptions about art; 2) students from different study areas (in the Portuguese secondary courses there are four study areas: Natural sciences, Arts, Economics and Humanities) express the same conceptions about art; 3) students with different levels of exposure to art express the same conceptions about art.

Methodology

Sample: we collected data from 195 students with a mean age of 15.8 years. 60.5% were female. The pupils attended the 9th grade of Portuguese basic education (29.7%), the 10th (26.2%), the 11th (24.6%) and 12th (19.5%) grades of Portuguese secondary education. The pupils attending secondary education were enrolled in three different study areas: Natural sciences (18.5%); Arts (27.7%); and Humanities (24.1%).

Questionnaire: the questionnaire had four different parts: a) socio-economic characterization; b) exposure to art assessment; c) exploration of art-associated meanings; and d) exploration of general conceptions about art (open-ended questions).

Data analysis: the open-ended questions concerning the exploration of general conceptions about art were qualitatively analyzed. Each sentence was divided into thought units, «self-contained units of intended meaning» (Housen, 1983, p. 52) and scored in one of the nine categories defined in previous research. Each word students associated with art was registered. We counted 290 art-associated meanings. Pearson's X^2 analysis was used to test our hypothesis.

Findings

Hypothesis 1: the findings did not support our hypothesis. The data indicated that students' conceptions about art were significantly different, $X^2 = 72.123$, $df = 36$, $p = .000$. For the older students (10th to 12th grade) art is the expression of feelings while younger students consider art as a gift that only a few have.

Hypothesis 2: the findings did not support the hypothesis. The data indicated that students' conceptions about art were significantly different,

$X^2 = 70.837$, $df = 36$, $p = .000$. For students attending Arts and Humanities art is the expression of feelings, instead students attending Natural sciences see art as something beautiful that people can invent.

Hypothesis 3: the findings support the hypothesis: students with different levels of exposure to art had conceptions about art that were not significantly different, $X^2 = 10.636$, $df = 12$, $p = .560$.

We found 290 words students associated with art. Here are the meanings pointed out by at least 20% of the students: Creation/to Create (45.1%); Beauty (33.8%); To imagine (29.2); To see (26.7%); Creativity (26.7%); Feelings (20.5%); and Liberty (20.0%).

For the meanings Creation/to Create, Creativity and Liberty we found level year (grade) effects. Thus, students from different grades elicited differently the aforementioned meanings. Students from the 11th grade elicited significantly more the meaning Creation/to Create ($X^2 = 10.196$, $df = 3$, $p = .017$) and the meaning Creativity ($X^2 = 13.923$, $df = 3$, $p = .003$). Students from 10th to 12th grades elicited significantly more the meaning Liberty ($X^2 = 9.074$, $df = 3$, $p = .028$).

For the meanings to Imagine, Beauty, Creativity, Feelings and Liberty we found study area effects. Thus, students attending Arts and Humanities courses elicited significantly more the meanings To imagine ($X^2 = 13.579$, $df = 3$, $p = .004$), Beauty ($X^2 = 8.973$, $df = 3$, $p = .030$) and Creativity ($X^2 = 20.291$, $df = 3$, $p = .000$). The meaning Feelings is significantly more elicited by Humanities students ($X^2 = 18.863$, $df = 3$, $p = .000$), and the meaning Liberty is significantly more elicited by Arts students ($X^2 = 14.378$, $df = 3$, $p = .002$).

Effects of exposure to art were not found.

Discussion

The effects of level year (grade) are significant for the definition of art as well as for meanings, such as Creation/to Create, Creativity and Liberty. It seems to exist a gap between 9th grade (last year of basic education) and the years of secondary education (10th to 12th grades). Students attending secondary education see art as a way of expressing feelings and elicited meanings that call attention to the artist's and beholder's interiority. This is consistent with Parson's (1987) stage three of art understanding (Expressiveness) and with Housen's (1983) interpretative stage (stage four): the creativity of the expressed feelings are extremely valued; this stage is built upon a new conscience of the interiority of others, a new capacity to apprehend personal ideas and feelings, and in a new awareness of the personal experience as something intimate and unique (Parsons, 1987). If we

take Freeman and Sanger's (1995) net of intentional relations of Artist, Beholder, Picture and World, we can say that after perceiving the relationship between Painting and World, the students see the relationships between Artist and Painting (the painting as an expression of the artist's interiority, creativity and liberty) and the relationships between themselves and the Painting (the beholder is aware that he is giving meaning to the painting). The analysis of the general conceptions about art can give us insight of the subjects' level of aesthetic development. These conceptions are formed in very early stages of life (Freeman & Sanger, 1995; Kindler, et al., 2000) and can influence the relationships each one of us can establish of objects of art. Their importance should not be overlooked when designing or implementing syllabuses in art education.

The effects of study area are significant for the definition of art as well as for meanings such as to Imagine, Beauty, Creativity, Feelings and Liberty. In general, students attending Arts and Humanities gave more importance to the expression of feelings and elicited more often the above-mentioned meanings when compared with Natural sciences students. It is possible that Arts and Humanities students have more experience of contact with art, the first with visual arts, the seconds with theatre and literature. This different level of experience derives from their different scientific areas, from their different disciplines and school curricula. In this sense, it is possible that Arts and Humanities students are more aware of the relationships between Artist and Painting and Beholder and Painting.

Students enrolled in Humanities elicited significantly more often the meaning Feelings. Perhaps the importance of literature, and specifically poetry (considered a sublime way of expressing feelings) in their syllabuses can help explaining this finding.

Students enrolled in Arts elicited more significantly often the meaning Liberty. Many of these students will be future artists. Their identity as an artist is been formed and Liberty (of action, of expression) is traditionally (at least since 19th century) a characteristic attributed to artists.

Housen (1983) points out the exposure to art as one of the variables with more impact on the aesthetic development. Having that in mind it was interesting not founding any effects of art exposure on personal definition of art nor on any meaning associated with art. This variable influences the relationship anyone can establish with art objects, namely paintings, but it seems to be innocuous in what concerns general conceptions about art, perhaps because these conceptions are less sensible to the experiences of contact with art and less sensible to change. Nevertheless, there are other reasons for this finding. Perhaps the indicators used for determine art ex-

posure were not sensible enough. In the other hand, our sample is not very differentiated in terms of art exposure.

References

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