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Teaching the Concept of Style to Elementary School Age Students: A Developmental Investigation

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Abstract

Two questions were addressed by this study. First, will elementary age students' ability to recognize styles be increased with discussion of the styles of various artworks during 8 hr of instruction? Second, will their understanding of these styles increase as a result of this instruction? The distinction between recognition and understanding is seldom made in research or curriculum planning, yet the findings suggest that the distinction is a useful one. An educational intervention was designed to teach both recognition and understanding. The results indicate increases in recognition ability but no evidence that students could be taught to understand the expressiveness of style. The possibility of a structural interpretation is suggested.

A number of studies in art education have examined children's and adults' success in recognizing the styles of artworks (DePorter & Kavanaugh, 1978; Frechtling & Davidson, 1970; Gardner, 1970; Hardiman & Zernich, 1985; Walk, Karusaitis, Lebowitz, & Falbo, 1971). In these studies recognition is usually measured by how accurately subjects select paintings by the same artist from a larger group of paintings. Success on such a task seems to indicate the ability to discriminate perceptually among the kinds of things that constitute a style, but it does not tell us about subjects' understanding of the style. In the present study we were interested in promoting and assessing both recognition and understanding of style.

Recognizing Versus Understanding Artistic Styles

Style recognition is the ability to notice those characteristics of artworks that are typical of the style of an artist or group. A style is usually thought to have primarily to do with the way a painting is painted rather than with its subject matter. Subject matter is clearly an important aspect of paintings and not unrelated to style, yet style lies more in how a subject matter is handled than in what is represented. Style resides primarily in the way the medium is handled and can be recognized typically in textures, brushwork, the use of color, characteristic shapes, and formal arrangements. The significance of these factors varies with particular cases, but they are in general the kinds of clues by which we can recognize a style. To recognize a style by means of such clues is different from understanding the style, in much the same way as reading a word correctly is different from understanding its meaning. For example, we may identify the style of a Van Gogh painting by its characteristic brushstrokes. To understand the style would require something more: seeing it as significant in some way. For example, one might also see in those brushstrokes some aspect of his personality, perhaps his characteristic excited emotionality and turbulence of feeling or his rebellious unconventionality. This assumes that the way

an artist paints expresses something of his or her personality — what Sircello (1972) calls the artist's mind. To understand the artist's style is to see something of his or her mind expressed in it.

Style, in this view, expresses something characteristic of the artist. For this reason, we can say that the style has a meaning and that to understand the style is to grasp the meaning. This is a quite traditional view of artistic style; for more discussion, see Collingwood (1958), Danto (1981), Panovsky (1955), and Sircello (1972).

For the purpose of this study, it was assumed that this definition of style represented a sophisticated level of understanding, a level that will be called an *expressive* understanding of style. As with the learning of most sophisticated concepts, a progression from naive to sophisticated levels of understanding would be expected. Investigating such a development progression was beyond the scope of the present study. Yet discovering the kind of educational intervention that might promote a sophisticated understanding of style in elementary students is essentially a developmental question and might be restated, Can elementary age students be taught to understand style in a sophisticated way?

Related Studies

Most of the research on style in the visual arts has focused on recognition. A variety of sorting and matching procedures have been used to measure subjects' success in recognizing artistic styles. Two general findings have emerged. First, significant age differences have been identified (DePorter & Kavanaugh, 1978; Frechtling & Davidson, 1970; Gardner, 1970, 1972, 1973; Gardner, Winner, & Kircher, 1975; Hardiman & Zernich, 1985; Walk et al., 1971). Younger children attend more to subject matter than to style, and older adolescents and adults recognize aspects of style more easily and are less inclined to be distracted by subject matter when asked to identify group paintings by style. Second, studies have shown that subjects of all ages can be taught to recognize styles (Gardner, 1972; Tighe, 1968; Walk, 1967). Gardner calls the ability to recognize styles *style sensitivity*. Different instructional strategies to improve style sensitivity have been compared (Bengston, Schoeller, & Cohen, 1979; Rush, 1974, 1979; Silverman, Winner, Rosentiel, & Gardner, 1975). Some strategies have been shown to be more effective than others, yet even simple exposure to artworks in similar styles without any direct instruction or discussion resulted in gains in style sensitivity.

Previous research has not addressed the distinction between recognizing and understanding style. Most studies have assessed style sensitivity by asking subjects to identify or sort paintings painted in the same style and, therefore, have measured only recognition. Two studies did include assessment of subjects' reasons for sorting painting. Walk et al. (1971) found that sorting ability exceeded subjects' ability to explain their reasons for sorting. DePorter and Kavanaugh (1978) reported that more adequate justifications were given by children who were more successful in sorting paintings by style. In these studies, however, reasons are treated as behaviors to be counted rather than as means to assess understanding. Tabulating the kinds of reasons subjects give for sorting paintings identifies the clues they used but does not reveal how they understood the style. An assessment of understanding is an interpretive, rather than a quantitative, task. It requires in-depth discussions of paintings and then an interpretation of the meanings implied by a subject's responses. Understanding a style is related to the kinds of clues used to recognize it, but there is no one-to-one correspondence. More important, recognition of a style through clues does not imply an understanding of it.

This study investigated both subjects'

success in recognizing styles (measured by a sorting task and the reasons for sorting) and their understanding of these styles (assessed by interviews). Further, an evaluation was made of the effect of an 8-hr instructional intervention on both recognition and understanding.

Experiment 1

The first research question was whether an 8-hr instructional intervention would increase elementary school age students' ability to recognize styles in paintings. This part of the study was an attempt to replicate previous research (in particular, Gardner 1970, 1972). The second question was whether the instructional intervention would affect these students' understanding of the same styles.

In earlier studies, using semistructured interviews, Parsons (1987) found that elementary school age students typically discussed styles in ways that did not relate them to expression. In these interviews, it appeared that expressiveness was not seen in the style, though feelings were often seen as part of the subject matter, that is, as another *thing* that paintings show. Paintings depict people, animals, and landscapes, and in the same way they also depict happy and sad feelings, especially in faces and gestures. Paintings, in other words, were seen as windows on the world of things rather than as expressions of an artist's personality. Children expected paintings to depict things but not to be expressive and therefore seldom saw the style as expressive. They often could recognize styles, but the styles they recognized had very little meaning for them. The idea that styles express the attitudes and feelings of artists was an important part of the educational intervention. The objective was to promote students' abilities both to recognize the elements of style and to grasp their expressive character.

Method

Subjects. The subjects for this study were 40 children ages 6 to 8 (the younger group) and 40 children 10 to 12 years old (the older group). They were from four classrooms, one younger and one older group from each of two elementary schools in a metropolitan area. Both schools were in middle socioeconomic neighborhoods. Twenty children from each of the four classrooms were asked to volunteer and were given a painting sort test and a semistructured interview.

Test Instruments. Two tests, the Painting Sort Test and Aesthetic Interview, were given to all subjects prior to and following an 8-hr educational intervention. The Painting Sort Test was given again 4 months after the posttest. The tests were given to subjects individually during school hours.

The Painting Sort Test assessed subjects' ability to sort paintings by the same artist and replicated the method used by Gardner in his studies. It consisted of five sets of paintings with four or six reproductions in each set. The sets were constructed so that subject matter and style similarities pulled in different directions; for example, a set might contain a portrait and a landscape each by two different artists. (See Table 1 for a list of the test sorts.) This construction assessed whether subjects sorted the paintings in terms of subject matter (grouping portraits together) or of style (grouping paintings by artists). Eight sets were originally constructed and used in a pilot study. The five sets that provided the best discrimination among subjects were kept. For each set, subjects were asked, "Which of these paintings were painted by the same artist?" They were instructed to put as many paintings together as they thought were painted by the same artist.

In this test, both groupings and reasons for groupings were used to score each set. A sort was scored *subject matter* if the reproductions were not grouped

Table 1
Painting Sort Test Reproductions

Artist	Title	Content
Set 1		
Cézanne	*The Card Players*	Two seated figures
Cézanne	*Still Life*	Table with still life
A. Wyeth	*Ground-Hog Day*	Table with place and cup
A. Wyeth	*A Day at the Fair*	One seated figure
Set 2		
Buffet	*The River Dock*	Water, boards, and buildings
Buffet	*The Sad Clown*	Large single figure
Rouault	*The Old Clown*	Large single figure
Rouault	*The Old King*	Large single figure
Set 3		
Van Gogh	*Pieta*	Two large figures
Von Gogh	*The Prison Court Yard*	Many figures
Goya	Figure from *The Witchy Brew*	One large figure
Goya	Group of figures from *The Saint Isidore Pilgrimage*	Many figures
Set 4		
Brueghel	*Hunters in the Snow*	Small figures in a vast landscape
Brueghel	*A Peasant Wedding*	Numerous figures at a wedding
Brueghel	*The Wedding Dance*	Figures dancing and eating
Renoir	*Le Moulin de la Galette*	Figures dancing and eating
Set 5		
Gainsborough	*The Honourable Mrs. Graham*	Single figure
Gainsborough	*Mrs. Richard Brinsley Sheridan*	Single figure
Gainsborough	*The Painter's Daughters Teasing the Cat*	Two figures
Leonardo	*Virgin and Child with St. Anne and the Lamb*	Two figures

by artist and the reasons for sorting referred only to content. As sort was scored *style* if the paintings were sorted by artist and/or the reasons for sorting referred to aspects of style, for instance, to similar textures, brushstrokes, or color usage. Each subject's sorting of each set and the reasons for it were recorded by the interviewer. The test was also audio-recorded to ensure accurate scoring.

The tests were scored separately by two trained raters. Scores were compared and differences negotiated. Interrater agreement prior to negotiation was .84. After negotiation interrater agreement was .98.

The second instrument, the Aesthetic Interview, was a semistructured interview. It was used to assess children's understanding of styles. The interview was a short form of Parsons' aesthetic development interview, adapted to focus specifically on the topic of style. The two paintings used for the interview were *The Three Musicians* by Nicolas de Stael and Wassily Kandinsky's *Improvisation #30*. These paintings were painted in very different styles yet both have a significant degree of abstraction. In pilot interviews abstract styles proved more useful than realistic or nonobjective approaches in ascertaining subjects' understanding of style.[2] The interview questions were the following:

Tell me what you notice about this painting.
Do you notice anything about the *way* it is painted?
[Questions repeated for the second painting.]
How is the way the Kandinsky is painted different from the way the de Stael is painted? [Interviewer points to each painting.]
Could this artist paint in the way the other artist paints?
How do artists decide which way they will paint?
What feelings are in each of the paintings? How/where are those feelings expressed?
Can you tell anything about the artist by looking at this painting?
Why do artists paint paintings?
What does it mean to say an artist has a "style"?

These questions were followed by flexible follow-up questions to probe for the subject's reasoning. The interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed.

The interview was scored as either expressive or nonexpressive to indicate the type of understanding reflected in the responses. Scoring criteria were defined from the research definition of style and 20 pilot interviews collected from a wide age-range of students (8 to 25 years). See Table 2 for the scoring criteria. If an interview had any evidence of an expressive understanding, it was scored expressive; if it had no evidence, it was scored nonexpressive. Two raters were trained using the pilot interview data. Interrater agreement was established at .94 using a subsample of five interviews. The study interviews were scored blind by two trained raters. A delayed postinterview was not given because there was not sufficient change from pre- to postinterview to warrant a follow-up interview.

The Intervention

The intervention aimed at stimulating growth in both recognition and understanding of styles. It was a 4-week program with a total of 8 hr of instruction. Each 1-hr session began with a discussion of a style (impressionism, surrealism), a comparison of paintings with different styles, or a concept related to style (texture, expression). It include identifying the elements of a style and discussing the ways they expressed the feelings and attitudes of the artist or group of artists. The interview questions provided the structure for these discussions. The discussion leader often interjected an answer, that is, an expressive interpretation of the style, if such understandings did not come up spontaneously in the discussion. The discussions were followed by related hands-on activities. Table 3 briefly describes some of these activities.

Results

Recognition. The first research question was whether elementary school age children's recognition of styles would increase as a result of an 8-hr instructional intervention. Scores on the Painting Sort Test were analyzed by means of a two–way analysis of variance for repeated measures, two age groups by three test situations. The main effect for age groups was significant, $F(1,56) = 32,83$, $p < .001$. There was also a repeated main effect for testing time (pre-, post- and delayed-post-), $F(2,112) = 17.66$, $p < .001$. The interaction between age groups and test time was not significant. For both younger and older groups there was a significant difference between pre- and posttest means using the Newman-Kuels post hoc test ($p < .05$). An analysis of subject matter responses was not necessary because of the forced-choice nature of the test.

On the preintervention Painting Sort Test, the younger group produced more subject matter responses than did the older group, and the older subjects produced more style responses than did the younger subjects (see Table 4). These findings demonstrate that all students had some ability to recognize styles and that the older students could recognize

Table 2
Style Interview Scoring Criteria

In order to be scored to the *expressive* category, the interview must have evidence of at least one of the following understandings:

I. Expression (feelings) is identified in relation to style characteristics; this may include reference to subject matter but feelings must also be related to style, and the relationship must be more than identifying textures, lines, colors.

Examples:
The brushstrokes create an excited feeling.
The bright colors contrast with the faces and make it puzzling.
You have to consider the colors, texture, subject, even where things are placed, to figure out the feelings.

II. It is suggested that artists try or need to express their attitudes, feelings, or personality in their style.

Examples:
He wanted to say music is fun.
He needed to get out his ideas on war.
This is so varied it's really hard to see how everything goes together and what he was trying to say.

III. Abstraction is seen as the artist's way of expressing himself or herself, not just as *a way* to paint (i.e., something to confuse the viewer, a respite from realism, or the artist is not good enough to paint realistically).

Examples:
He paints like this because it's the best way for him.
It's how he can best express himself.

them more accurately than the younger ones. These findings concur with those of previous studies (DePorter & Kavanaugh, 1978; Gardner, 1970; Hardiman & Zernich, 1985; Walk et al., 1971).

The postintervention tests showed a significant increase in style responses for both groups. The delayed-postintervention tests showed little further change (see Table 5). This indicates that the change was stable over the 4-month period following the intervention.

In summary, these findings demonstrate that elementary school age subjects' ability to recognize styles increased significantly over the period of the educational intervention. Age-related differences on both pre- and posttests replicate the developmental trends reported in previous studies. The findings thus answer the first research question in the affirmative — that children's abilities to recognize styles increased with an educational intervention.

Understanding. The second research question was whether an instructional intervention could teach students to understand the expressiveness of styles. Neither the pre- nor postintervention interviews gave any evidence of an expressive understanding of style. No interviews were scored to the *expressive* category.

There are several possible explanations for this finding. The intervention may have been poorly designed or taught, the interviews may not have probed in sufficient depth to assess changes in understanding, or an expressive understanding of style may not be cognitively accessible for elementary school age students. This latter explanation suggests that such an understanding is part of a developmental sequence, such that instruction can be successful only at an appropriate level of readiness.

To investigate further this possibility, we did a small follow-up study. We asked whether the expressive understanding of styles that we tried to teach young chil-

Table 3
Descriptions of Sample Intervention Activities

Activity	Objective and Description
What's your style?	Objective: Students will understand how style (of handwriting and drawing) is something particular to and expressive of the individual. Activity: While everyone had their eyes closed, two students were asked to write a short sentence on the board. Students tried to identify who wrote the sentences. Two students were asked to copy the handwriting. We discussed why individuals have different styles of writing, why they were difficult to copy, and whether they expressed anything about the individual. (The latter question often led to discussion of handwriting analysis.) We asked each student to do two drawings, using pencil and crayons. One drawing needed to include a house and vegetation; the other, people and animals. In groups of six (two each from three students) the drawings were pinned to the bulletin board. Students were asked to identify which drawings were done by the same artist by identifying similar style characteristics in the two drawings. We discussed how it is possible to identify an artist's style and whether it was possible for one artist to draw like another artist without just copying. We talked about whether we could describe *why* we draw the way we do and if we could do it differently if we wanted; in other words, Is style an arbitrary choice we make or an expression of a more permanent part of our personality?
Is your tree happy or sad?	Objective: Students will be able to recognize differences in individual styles even though the expressive character of the drawings is similar. Activity: After discussing what kinds of things, of both content and form, create happy and sad feelings in paintings, students were asked to make two drawings of a tree. One was to express happy feelings and one was to express sad feelings. The drawings were discussed to identify ways students used line, color, and compositional arrangements to express sadness or happiness. We also discussed how the individual artists, in this case the students, had produced drawings in different styles even though they all started out to do the same thing — to do a sad and happy tree.
Choose a style	Objective: Students will be able to recognize characteristics of style in four paintings in different styles. Activity: Four portraits in different styles (Gainsborough, Klee, Modigliani, Rouault) were discussed listing the style characteristics of each. Students chose one style and did a portrait of a friend in that style using pencil and chalk. Student portraits were each discussed to identify which style and how many characteristics of the style were evident. We then discussed whether the students had painted in the artist's style or in their own style and what the difference was.
What's my texture?	Objective: Students will be able to generate vocabulary to describe textural aspects of different styles and be able to distinguish between visual and tactile texture. Activity: Paintings with varied textural qualities were discussed. Students used magazine pictures to create texture collages. The only stipulation was that the collages had to be constructed to show varied textures without using a textural surface in the same way it was used in the magazine. For example, the smooth, glassy texture of a pond could be used for anything that needed a smooth glassy texture except for a pond.

Table 4
Number of Responses Scores to Subject Matter and Style Categories

	Type of response	
Group	Subject matter	Style
Younger	113	72
Older	54	131

Table 5
Percentage of Style Responses for Three Test Situations

	Test		
Group	Pre	Post	Delayed
Younger	39	61	58
Older	71	87	87

dren would be found in an older population.

Experiment 2

Method

Subjects. The subjects were 10 volunteer undergraduate students in an education course at a western university. The age difference between elementary and undergraduate students was considerable. For the purposes here, however, any postadolescent subjects were suitable because the question was whether an expressive understanding of styles taught to elementary school age students would be evident without specific instruction in an older subject sample.

Measures. Subjects were given the same semistructured interview. The interviews were scored blind by the same two raters, using the same scoring criteria. Interrater agreement was established at .91.

Results

Seven of the 10 interviews showed an expressive understanding of styles and were scored *expressive;* 3 interviews were scored *nonexpressive*. These data indicated that the understandings we tried to teach to elementary school age students were found, without instruction from us, in postadolescent subjects.

Discussion

The difference between an expressive and a nonexpressive understanding of style is central to the study. This distinction is best explained through examples from the interview data. We will discuss the interview responses to one of the central interview questions — "What feelings are in the paintings?" This question probed subjects' understanding of style as expressive of something subjective, of attitudes, feelings, or personality. The elementary school age subjects responded to this question in several ways. The most common response was to relate feelings directly to the subject matter: "It's happy because they're playing in a band," "It's sad because the boat is sinking," "I kind of see war, it's mad," and "It's kind of sad because it looks like a war is going on." The point is that for most students subject matter was the only clue used to interpret expression. It is not that these responses are wrong; it is that they are limited in a particular way. Expressive qualities of art are linked to subject matter, but subject matter is only one aspect of expressiveness in paintings. Style is the other.

A few subjects were adamant that there were no feelings in the painting because there was no clear subject matter: "There's no feelings because I think it's too abstract, just a kind of painting," and "There's no feelings you get from an abstract painting, just big blobs of paint."

Many subjects described elements of the style but could not identify feelings. Typical responses included: "This is rough, this is smooth," "This is slow, this is wild," and "The colors are light, these are darker."

On the other hand, a few students did relate feelings to aspects of the medium, especially to the colors. For example:

Table 6
Percentage of Responses Relating Expression to Medium

	Test situation	
Group	Pre	Post
Younger	0	24
Older	7	22

"It's happy because the colors are light," "It has more dull colors, so it's dull and sad," and "It's crazy feeling because of these ziggly, wiggly lines."

This particular category of response was the only one showing an increase from pre- to postintervention for both groups (see Table 6). The increase in this category may be explained by the emphasis on discussing styles in the intervention. In this respect the intervention was successful: Students more frequently noticed elements of style, and more students connected elements of style with feelings. However, there was no evidence that students connected the style or the feelings with the artist's subjectivity. "Ziggly, wiggly lines" expressed "crazy feelings"; but they were not seen as the artist's way of expressing himself.

Our elementary school age subjects generally had trouble with the lack of a clear subject matter in the interview paintings. One second grader's response illustrates the frustration many exhibited when trying to describe the feelings in the paintings:

> Q: What feelings are in this painting? [de Stael]
> R: It's hard to see any cause there aren't any faces.
> Q: What about the second painting? [Kandinsky]
> R: It gives me weird feelings. It's a weird painting.
> Q: What makes it weird?
> R: It's got all kinds of jumbles of colors and weird lines.
> Q: Are there any feelings in the paintings?
> R: I don't see any.

The child looks for both content and stylistic clues, but they give him little help. He does not connect them with the expression of feeling. It seems not to occur to him that the weirdness might be seen as expressive. When asked why an artist would do such a painting, subjects gave a variety of nonaesthetic reasons, such as, "He was tired of painting realistic paintings" or "He made a mistake and then just finished the painting that way."

Some of the students demonstrated a beginning awareness of a link between the artist and the expressiveness of the painting. This link was a very direct one in which an artist felt a feeling and painted a painting with that feeling; for example, "He was sad so he painted a sad painting." Six percent of the younger group and 23% of the older group recognized an artist's immediate feelings as a possible motive for painting. This way of understanding expression is a step forward in connecting the feeling of the work with the artist. However, it limits an artist to the expression of a mood that is presently felt — one cannot express more enduring emotions or aspects of personality one is unaware of. These numbers did not change from pre- to postinterview. This may be because in the intervention we discussed expression as reflecting an artist's personality rather than as the catharsis of immediate feelings. If we had discussed the more immediate sense of expression, the intervention might have been more effective.

On the other hand, an expressive understanding of style was evident in 7 of the 10 undergraduate interviews. These students understood that artists have ideas, attitudes, and feelings that were reflected in their work. Their paintings were seen as expressions of these ideas, attitudes, and feelings and as more than a simple expulsion of a current mood. For example: "Artists many times have a feeling or an attitude toward something and they want to express it on paper." Another undergraduate explained: "They have something inside of them they want to share with other people. They want to

show a mood or something. They want to express themselves, show something they've been thinking about or something they care about.''

When a painting was difficult or ambiguous, the college students frequently searched for clues to what the artist was trying to say. This searching is exemplified in one student's discussion of Kandinsky:

R: The colors are duller in this one. They're muted. There are more distinct lines, different directions in the painting. These buildings — it might be an earthquake. A little chaos but also some order, I think it has different feelings.
Q: Why would an artist paint a painting like this?
R: Probably to make you think. I think I'd have to examine this a little bit more. I'd have to think about why he painted it. There's more than what you see at first glance, just buildings and cannons.

We tried to teach this kind of searching in our intervention with elementary school age students. But we had little success.

Summary

In summary, the focus on this study was on style. Style is a concept essential to understanding the arts and has long been included in curricula designed to promote appreciation. A sophisticated understanding of style requires the ability both to recognize the elements of style and to grasp their expressive character. This study and others have shown that the recognition of styles is teachable at any age level, but when an expressive understanding can be taught is less clear. There are two reasons for this lack of clarity. First, the distinction between recognition and understanding is seldom made in research or curriculum planning. Second, research to date has focused on recognition abilities. The findings from this study suggest that the distinction between recognition and understanding is a useful one in deciding when and how to teach about styles. We were not able to teach an expressive understanding of style to elementary age students. One explanation is that such students are not ready for that level of understanding, although other explanations are possible. Further research, including longitudinal studies and comparisons of instructional strategies, is needed to investigate the questions raised.

Notes

1. The theoretical outlines of a developmental progression from a naive to sophisticated (or nonexpressive to expressive) understanding of style is given in work by Parsons (1987, in press). On this account, children at Stage 2 of aesthetic development (as most elementary school children are) understand paintings primarily in terms of their subject matter and make sense of other aspects of paintings (such as style) primarily as they can be related to subject matter. At Stage 3, by contrast, the focus is on the expressiveness of paintings, understood as their embodiment of subjectivity, and styles are understood primarily in these terms. This reference to a background theoretical structure is not necessary for the primary point of the study, which has to do with the empirical difference between recognizing and understanding styles, but we acknowledge the influence of this earlier theoretical work.

2. Nevertheless, the findings of this study are limited by the semiabstract styles of the interview paintings. Studies with more realistic and nonobjective styles are needed before any generalized conclusions can be drawn.

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