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## ENHANCING CRITICAL THINKING THROUGH ART CRITICISM AN OBJECTIVE METHOD

Betty Oliver Seabolt  
Southern Polytechnic State University

### INTRODUCTION: OBJECTS AND SUBJECTIVE METHODS OF ART CRITICISM

Methods of art criticism are basically either objective or subjective. A review of methods of art criticism reveals that methods developed by Edmund Burke Feldman, Ralph A. Smith, Terry Barrett, and Gene Mittler "all deal with individual subjective perceptions after an initial objective survey of the art work...[in an] attempt to achieve a more objective, informed judgment by withholding subjective evaluation until the end of the process" (Seabolt, 1995, p. 43). Margaret Hess Johnson (1989) explains that these methods are analytic, linguistic methods of vertical thinking, emphasizing developing concepts before dealing with perceptions. Proponents of the objective methods of art criticism argue that evaluation is valuable only when based on informed judgment.

Other methods examined, those by Louis Lankford, Eugene Kaelin, Karen A. Hamblen, Per Johansen, Robert Clements, Jim Cromer, and Tom Anderson, "either deal simultaneously with objective description and subjective perception or seek perceptual reaction to a work before informing this reaction with conceptual information" (Seabolt, 1995, p. 43). Tom Anderson (1988) explains that "what *really* happens in art criticism relies heavily on that flash of insight based on gut feelings, life experiences, and perceptual information coming together just right" (p. 29, and "coming together just right" happens when no restrictions are placed on observations and reactions to a work of art. He and others would argue that allowing early subjective evaluations of an art work increases the commitment to continued perception of the work.

### THE OBJECTIVE METHOD OF ART CRITICISM AND NON-ART MAJORS

Edmund Burke Feldman's (1994) method of art criticism is particularly appropriate for use by students whose disciplines emphasize objective, vertical thinking. For these students the more intuitive, subjective approaches to art criticism violate established thinking patterns based on discovery of facts. Unfamiliar with art, the student finds the question, "How do you feel about this work?" unanswerable. Feldman's initial step of description, on the other hand, is easily answered asking simply for a list of visual facts. For these reasons, non-art majors from objective disciplines seem to respond more readily to Feldman's method of art criticism, since it represents a linear process that moves from fact-finding and analysis to generation of hypotheses.

Feldman's method provides a perfect framework for developing critical thinking skills in art appreciation and is especially useful for teaching non-art majors how to talk intelligently about art. Feldman's first step, description, instructs the viewer to objectively inventory visual facts, avoiding speculation. This step allows the viewer to assess what is known and to determine what is not known. The second step, analysis, or extended description, explores relationships between the visual facts already noted. Only in the third step, interpretation, does Feldman allow his viewer to speculate, to uncover meaning, to hypothesize, to suggest implications of the relationships uncovered in step two. Even then, interpretation finds its basis in objective observations. The fourth and final step of Feldman's method, evaluation or judgment, draws on information gathered

in the previous three steps, to support an informed judgment of the work.

### **USING A MATRIX TO ILLUSTRATE CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS & ART CRITICISM**

To help introduce Feldman's method and to graphically illustrate the process of critical thinking, comparison exercises were developed based on the structure provided by a matrix. The Matrix which provides a natural visual structure for both growth and comparison, represents an ideal teaching tool. While presenting a visual step-by-step framework for critical thinking, it also develops a visual record of information about an artwork and provides a vehicle for comparing that information with information about other works of art. A complete series of matrices provide introduction to and practice using the different critical thinking skills that make up Feldman's method of art criticism: description, analysis, interpretation, and evaluation.

### **INTRODUCING DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS; DEFINING AND ANALYZING THE PROBLEM**

The first series of interdisciplinary exercises develops a vocabulary that allows the student unfamiliar with art to describe its parts and to analyze the relationships between these parts. The first matrix exercise introduces the elements of art, the main "parts," by comparing a painting first with a baseball game, then with a symphony, and finally with a poem. Students listen to commentary of a major league baseball game and describe it by listing the parts of the game. By analyzing how these "parts" are put together by rules, students discuss how these rules affect the outcome of the game. On the same matrix students then disassemble a painting to list its essential elements and compare how these elements are put together by certain "rules" called principles of design. In the same way that no two baseball games are ever the same, two works of art, while using the same elements (parts) and the same principles (rules), never look the same. The student assumes the role of the sports commentator, audibly bringing the work of art to life.

The second matrix in the series compares the elements and principles of art to a Beethoven symphony. Students listen to National Public Radio commentator Peter Schickle's narration of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony* (From Vanguard's "The Worst of PDQ Bach") and again compare, within a matrix, the elements and principles of music with those of art, discussing how these determine the outcome of the composition.

The third matrix in the interdisciplinary series compares a refrigerator note with a poem and finally with a work of art. Students examine a note left on the refrigerator and compare it with William Carlos Williams' poem "This is just to say" (1986, p. 372). After discovering that the refrigerator note is actually taken from Williams' poem, students compare the two to discover that while they share similar parts, the structure and format, the rules and relationships of the parts are very different. In a similar comparison, students discover that an ordinary object (a Campbell's soup can) and Andy Warhol's 1962 "200 Campbell's Soup Cans" share similar elements but differ greatly in the format and structure of these elements.

### **PRACTICING DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS**

A second series of matrix exercises offers practice in description and analysis. The first matrix compares the way elements of art appear in three different artworks, a representative, an abstract, and a nonobjective work. The second matrix, building on the previous matrix, compares the use of

principles of design in the same three artworks. Students discover that all artworks use the same elements and principles of design, even though the compositions may look very different.

### PRACTICING INTERPRETATION AND EVALUATION

Having learned in previous exercises the objective process of description and analysis, students are introduced to the subjective processes of interpretation and evaluation with another series of matrix exercises. Using description and analysis generated from previous exercises, the complete process is experienced as students chart on a matrix their own personal interpretations of the artworks. Finally, using these interpretations, students evaluate the artwork based on interpretations reached. This process is repeated with two other artworks on a comparison matrix. In this way, comparisons can be made between artworks of different styles.

### VISUALIZING THE PROCESS OF THINKING CRITICALLY

These matrix exercises not only introduce the critical thinking skills involved in art criticism but also illustrate the processes. As the student creates a visual image of the examination of an artwork, thought processes are viewed vertically and relationships between artworks are visualized horizontally. Using Feldman's method keeps the exercise objective until all the facts are "out on the table," reducing intimidation by focusing on verifiable facts. The matrix makes critical thinking "real" by allowing the student an opportunity to "see" the process as an integral part of art criticism.

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