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**CRITICAL AND CONTEXTUAL STUDIES AT
THE PRIMARY LEVEL :
A TEACHING MODULE**

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Critical and Contextual Studies at the Primary Level: A Teaching Module

by Jane Chia, Singapore

1. Introduction

This module has been thought of as a teaching unit for use in primary schools. It is suited to upper primary students although material may be adapted for younger students. Indeed, it is in the lower primary years that some of the skills, understanding and concepts required for art appreciation will be developed.

Critical and contextual studies is an area of art teaching which is frequently not attempted in Singapore primary schools, largely because teachers have a lack of background in this area. Without such a background, teachers will not have either the means or the confidence to make this important aspect of art education central to their work.

The Singapore primary art syllabus certainly gives critical and contextual studies importance by stating that 20% of the time allocated to art should be for art appreciation and that assignments related to art appreciation should be incorporated in all lessons.

How then are teachers, with little or no preparation in this area, to provide meaningful art learning experiences for their students in critical and contextual studies?

2. Clarifying the Terms

Clarifying the terms used in the literature and elsewhere is a helpful beginning. With an international perspective on art which has certainly prevailed in Western art education discussion at least during the last decade, there is the acknowledgment that the visual arts have played a major and significant role in human activity and endeavour throughout world cultures. Art history, therefore, has come to be incorporated in many instances under the term 'Contextual Studies'.

This term recognizes that historical influences provide only one perspective as to how art is conceptualized, valued, produced and developed. And, as important as that perspective might be, other factors will certainly affect art processes in any given context, at any given time.

'Contextual Studies' therefore includes a study and understanding of a range of other factors such as cultural, religious, social, personal and political which influence art production.

'Critical Studies' on the other hand, is to many the preferred description for what has been previously called 'Art Appreciation'. In this instance, 'critical' has a quite specific meaning different to the one in common use. Usually, 'criticism' is used to mean:

- find fault with, blame, condemn, reproach, reprimand, censure, correct, disapprove, disparage, scoff at, to be negative, to be pejorative, to judge.

It is in the word 'judge' where another use of the word begins to emerge and is relevant to the term 'Critical Studies'. 'Criticism' in this context, takes on the other meaning of the word, namely:

- making informed judgments, expanding and elaborating perceptions, evaluating merit within a structure, analysing and reviewing.

It is in this sense that the word is used in an art context and clearly this is a broader and more focused concept than 'Art Appreciation'. John Dewey in 1958 in his work, Art as Experience, claimed that one purpose of critical studies in art teaching was "...the re-education of perception of works of art". This seems to be a good, working definition of the term for art teachers and one which can help them in their planning for this crucial component of art education.

3. Aims and Purposes of Critical and Contextual Studies

1. To enable students to become intelligent, knowledgeable and sensitive viewers of art works;
2. To enable students to construct meaning and interpretations from visual forms;
3. To give students a structure for analysing art works which includes appropriate language so that they can discuss their own art work and the work of artists;
4. To enable students to understand 'art works' in the widest possible terms to include processes such as painting, sculpture, and printing but also to encompass areas such as design, applied arts and architecture;

5. To give students an understanding and awareness of the historical, social, cultural, religious, political and other developments in art throughout the world which will include the art works of their own and other cultures.

From this list, it is clear that there is a great deal of emphasis on oral work. Children need to develop the appropriate language to enable them to discuss their own work and the work of well-known artists. Indeed, a good starting point for this kind of work with very young children is the discussion of their own art work.

This discussion needs to be relevant to the age and development of the child with the discussion gradually moving on to other art works and forms. Such discussions can be a part of every art lesson with other related activities being included throughout a programme which may require longer time.

4. Teachers Questions

Teachers frequently ask two main questions at this point which I will try to address

Q.1

What sort of questions can I ask children about either their work or the work of artists?

This has proved a particular difficulty for teachers and there are various models and schemes to help them. Basically, critical and contextual studies aim to help children to develop the skills to:

Describe
Analyse
Interpret
Judge

Obviously, the level of skill development in these areas will be congruent with a child's age and stage of understanding. Always, a major aim is to assist children in making informed judgments rather than to change preferences. Preferences may of course change as a result of such work through an increase in understanding although this is not an aim.

At the primary level, I frequently begin with two simple questions for young children:

"Do you like the work? (Preference) Tell me something about the work? (Description)".

Gradually, throughout the primary levels, I elaborate and extend this early work and have developed with a colleague a teaching resource we have called 'ARTIFACT' (Figure 1) for use by our student-teachers in primary classrooms.

Basically, this is a series of sequenced questions teachers can begin to ask their students. Not all questions need to be asked and teachers have certainly added to them. Nonetheless, I have found that 'ARTIFACT' has provided a good, initial focus for teachers beginning this kind of work with primary children.

Q.2

Should I begin with local artist and move out to the rest of the world or start with the rest of the world and move in?

My own experience and thinking on this point leads me to believe that this is not an either/or situation. Certainly, children need to have background and knowledge of artists in their own country and communities. And, for this reason, I like to involve local artists in art work in the classroom as frequently as possible. Sometimes, this might be an artist presenting a workshop in my school, or it might be a visit to an artist's studio or an exhibition. In this way, children come to realize the importance and value of art with the practising artists providing strong, positive role models.

Art teachers too, are important role models for children. As an artist and art educator, I find it difficult to imagine teaching the subject without being a practitioner. However, frequently I have to reassure my student-teachers that they do not have to be a Picasso to teach this subject well but they do need understanding, knowledge, concepts and skills to teach the subject effectively. They also need interest and enthusiasm and, by presenting these qualities and skills to children, art teachers are conveying a very important message about the subject: that here are adults who take the subject seriously.

But, this is only part of the work to be done with children as they also need to become aware of art as a universal activity. That art really does create a bond between all the people of the world past, present and

yet to come. And, for this to become a reality, children need the background information on art traditions throughout the world.

Some teachers I have seen, work on historical traditions separately and there may be good reasons for this kind of approach. I have certainly, on occasions, planned lessons in this way when I have wanted to emphasize something quite specific to children, for example the expressive use of colour. But, I also work in a thematic way and the module I have planned is an example of this kind of teaching strategy.

Again, it is not an either/or decision teachers have to make here as a varied approach I think is required to sustain children's interest and motivate them. What I certainly do not do at either the primary or early secondary levels is to lecture students for lengthy period of time on art history. The understanding and knowledge comes through discussion and practical activity which have been carefully planned to enable children to have experience of art ideas from around the world and through time. Two important aspects of art education are central to the teaching approach here, *making art* and *knowing about art*, and I believe that they can be incorporated in a variety of ways in all art lessons.

5. The Teaching Module

This teaching module is of eight-week duration and is divided into one-hour units which are planned to be cumulative. The theme of masks has been chosen so that children will be given the opportunity to understand about this universal art form from a range of perspectives: national, regional and international.

There are opportunities within the module for individual extension and personal development in the latter part of the programme. So, from being teacher directed and oriented initially, the module becomes more student centred with students having increasing control and choice in their work.

Initially too, students have flexibility within a structure and can make decisions for themselves about style and subject matter. In large part, these choices will be influenced by their experiences and it is a matter of professional responsibility that art teachers make these as wide and diverse as possible.

Four main art processes are covered: drawing and painting, card construction, clay modelling and mask-making. These are supported by two inter-related art education procedures:

- making artworks (*practical*)
 - finding out about methods and techniques
 - understanding qualities of materials
- knowing about art
 - finding out about related artworks and their contexts (*contextual*)
 - learning about some art concepts (*aesthetic*)
 - developing critical and evaluative skills (*critical*)

In summary, the eight-week module looks like this:

UNIT	CONTENT	CONCEPTS	MEDIA
1	(1) Observation drawing skills	line & form	charcoal
2	(1) Mask construction	form	card
3	(1) Mask elaboration	colour	paint
4	(1) Head modelling	form	clay
5	(2) Extension modelling	decoration	papier maché
6	(2) Final unit	devised in consultation with the children	

Details of resource material referred to in the module which teachers will find useful are included in the appendix.

6. The Units

UNIT 1

The first unit on observation and drawing skills is important as an introduction to the whole module as children need to understand the structure of the human head and its proportions. They also need to comprehend the flexibility and mobility of the human face. Facial expressions are important in mask making so children need some exercise to enable them to focus on this particular aspect. They can all make expressions! Slides are also useful here which show people making a range of expressions and the children being asked to imagine what the people are feeling and how this shows on the faces on slide.

The drawing exercise requires an introduction by the teacher which could include a few slides on portraits from different cultures and

historical periods. Structuring the drawing and use of the materials, in this case charcoal and tone paper, will also need to be discussed. Charcoal lends itself very well to large expansive drawings which makes it very suitable for primary children. Use of line is important in this observational drawing and children need to experiment with the variation in effects they can achieve just using line. After the initial introduction, children can work in pairs drawing each other's head and be encouraged to work on a large scale.

UNITS 2 and 3

These two units take up two weeks of the eight-week module. The teacher needs to provide a rich source of visual materials and create interesting displays for the children. Available for children's use should be books, slides, large displays and examples of actual masks. The teacher could introduce the session by using a small number of slides of masks from around the world to show their diversity. Ideally, children need to handle and examine real masks but, if these are not available then photographs and books can be used.

When asking children to respond to art works, children need to be as close as possible to the work itself to see details and to prevent them becoming distracted. Young children are often comfortable sitting on the floor near a display. Ideally, children also need opportunities to handle art forms and teachers need to create some learning situations where this is feasible.

During the introductory phase, children can be focused on the use and functions of masks initially and then moved on to consider the art concepts inherent in masks such as form, use of materials, design, subject matter and style.

In most cultures, people use materials from their environment to create masks. For that reason, we find masks made from many diverse materials. Some masks are made from wood, some are made of woven fibres and others made of metal. Decorative items for the masks also vary from region to region, depending upon the objects to be found. So, there are to be seen in the world, examples of masks decorated with feathers, seeds, shells, bones, leaves, straw, stones and many other items.

To reinforce this decorative concept, a first mask can be made of card which is cut into a mask shape determined by each child. For this exercise, the mask form needs to be based on the human head but there is plenty of room for elaboration here as a look through the resource material will show.

The card will form the basic mask shape but children need to prepare to extend their work outside of this shape by decoration. The initial shape needs to be painted carefully with children having a small range of colours available. By limiting colour choice for this stage of the work, children are then required to think about creating interest in their masks with the materials available. How can they create variation using a small range of colours? How will decoration be used to enhance and create eye-catching results? How much decoration should be used? What can be used to decorate the masks? How can they achieve textural qualities in their work?

The masks should have eye holes so that they can eventually be used and children can be encouraged to collect things from their environment that they can use to make an interesting mask. On mask-making day, children we need to select from the materials they have collected the ones which they will use to decorate their masks. The teacher will need to ensure that there is a wide range of such materials available to support this low relief work.

Discussion and use of the reference materials will provide an important stimulus to learning throughout these two and subsequent sessions. Children will need access to good quality visual materials which will enable them to generate ideas and encourage them to experiment.

UNITS 4 and 5

These two units are estimated to take about three hours. Children need to move gradually from two-dimensional work to three-dimensional exploration so this module has been planned to move from drawing, through low relief work and onto three dimensional modelling.

Again, children will need all the visual and resource materials to be available and, where possible, be given the opportunity for

handling mask forms. At this stage, is quite a good idea to focus on a few types of mask which children then have a choice of making in clay. Types of masks the children might select from might include animal, traditional, theatrical forms.

Children will need some introduction into the use of clay and its properties and be organized to work in quite large groups on one particular mask form. Within any of these groups, the flexibility and scope for individual interpretation are quite wide. The clay models, which need to be large in scale, will form the base for a papier maché covering and cast. The modelling and papier maché covering need to be completed in one session if the casts are to be dry enough for decoration during the next lesson.

Decorative qualities and features will need recapping for the children and their collection of materials for this purpose will require discussion and selection.

Sometimes it is helpful for teachers to read a short account of what somebody has done and found valuable. Here is a short description of a mask modelling session organized with primary children, at the Art Unit at the National Institute of Education last year.

A Classroom Experience

This session was the third in a sequence of four Saturday classes, organized for primary children, and which focused on the subject of mask-making within the overall theme of 'People and Cultures'. The four sessions incorporated *making art* and *knowing about art* activities. '*Making art*' aims were concerned with art knowledge, skills and understanding inherent in the three-dimensional art process itself. '*Knowing about art*' purposes included enabling the children to learn about people, cultures and places and helping them to develop an understanding about different cultural attitudes and beliefs.

Before the session began, a variety of resource materials were prepared for these primary children. A range of visual displays were mounted around the art studio which depicted the enormous diversity of the mask form on a global scale. Four different mask types, namely theatre, traditional, creatures from other worlds and sun god masks were

the focus of the initial phase of the lesson. We provided visual materials on as wide a range of these four mask types as possible.

So, for example, the theatre mask material was available as a resource package on the masks used in Kabuki and No theatre, classical Greek drama, Chinese opera, Indian drama, Javanese and Balinese dance. In addition to preparing the resource material, a teacher would need to learn something of the background to the particular mask forms so that s/he could answer and raise questions as to the cultural significance of the available art work.

The session began with the four groups of children being given a bag of various authentic masks and, in their groups, to handle the masks and think about the following questions:

- What is the mask made of?
- Who do you think would wear it and why?
- Have you ever seen such a mask before, or one similar to it? Where?
- Where do you think this mask comes from?
- What does this mask make you feel?
- Can you think of why this mask makes you feel this way?

After a ten minute discussion, a spokesperson from each group gave a short presentation which attempted to answer the list of questions.

The reporting back presentations were extremely insightful in so far as it made us aware of how much the children's confidence has grown over the course of the programme. Most were eager to respond orally as to what they had discovered in relation to their mask form and other children wanted to share their suggestions thereby contributing to the collective pool of ideas.

This part of the session lasted about twenty minutes, at the end of which time, the children were taken to have a close up view of the various display stands. After a further five minutes, the children had a demonstration on modelling their clay masks, which began as a form based on the human head.

Certain processes and concepts were emphasized during the progress of this demonstration which can be summarized as:

- *The processes* of adding clay, subtracting clay, drawing into clay with a simple tool and pressing and pushing clay and

- *The concepts* of raised and lowered shapes, round and wedge shapes and real and imaginary shapes.

Following the demonstration, the children worked on their mask type. They were encouraged to do some preparatory drawings of what they were aiming to achieve. Some children did this whereas others seemed to work out their ideas three-dimensionally in the clay itself as the work progressed. One child in particular, completely ignored the whole idea of drawing and worked on large-scale clay piece with confidence and assurance. Her finished piece showed skill and understanding of the medium which would not have been expected from an evaluation of her previous two-dimensional work. She confirmed that she had never used clay before, or any other three-dimensional material but stated that she had been waiting patiently for the programme to reach this point!

Towards the end of the session, the children assembled their models so that all could see the completed results and evaluate the work. The discussion was lively and the children seemed genuinely amazed by what they had achieved. All the children had completed their piece and the elaborations and extensions to the basic head form were imaginatively and sensitively achieved. The visual materials were used extensively by the children as a source of ideas but in a selective and mature fashion. There was no plagiarism where a child adopted a visual image wholesale, rather aspects of a range of masks were evident in some of the work.

UNIT 6

This final unit is planned to take two, one-hour sessions and designed to enable children to make choices as to both how they work and the focus of their art production. The intention of these units is for children (working in pairs or in groups of four) to produce a visual resource on the theme of masks for display in their classroom.

The size of the resource will be determined by the teacher who will specify also that the visual material needs to include an example of a mask made by the group or individual, together with some written material and drawings. Principles of layout will need to be discussed with the class as a whole and groups given a list of possible mask forms they could select from for this work. Such a list might include:

Aborigine Face Painting
African Masks
Animal Masks
Chinese Masks
Chinese/ Opera Masks
Egyptian Masks
European Masks
Festival Masks
Indian Masks
Indonesian Masks
Japanese Masks
Maori Masks/Tattoo Designs
Masks in Greek Theatre
Masks in the Theatre
North American Indian Masks
Polynesian Masks
South American Masks
Tibetan Masks

If children decide on a mask form not included here, and this list is not exhaustive, they should be encouraged to pursue this personal interest provided the research material is available for their use.

The culmination of this phase of the work is the display and children making short presentations about their work to the rest of the class.

7. Evaluation

Evaluation strategies will need to be developed for each stage of the work. Part of that process will involve students speaking about their work both to their peers and their teacher. As discussed earlier, this process is also important for developing the skills of informed judgment and therefore for critical and contextual studies work. Children need to be able to articulate their ideas and intentions in the form of a dialogue with their teacher so that their progress can be monitored and help given where needed.

In addition to this kind of evaluation, which can be apart of every art lesson, students may require a more formal evaluation. If this is the

case, then the teacher needs to establish the criteria for evaluation alongside of the content preparation and convey these criteria unambiguously to the students. As well as being clear to the students, criteria need to be appropriate to the work. So, for example, the art elements and principles involved in two dimensional work will vary to work in three dimensions and will need to be established in the assessment criteria.

Students too need to be involved in this more formal evaluative process and be asked for their opinions as to their own progress and development. Assessment needs to be on-going and something done *with* students than *to* them. Methods of recording need to be established which fit within a particular context and fulfill institutional requirements. More importantly, assessment and evaluation processes have to fulfill their primary function which is to assist students in their learning.

8. More Ideas

What I have discussed in this module is only one way of working with children in the area of critical and contextual studies. There are many other strategies and approaches, but here are some further suggestions on the theme of masks.

Other Mask Forms

Plaster masks

Vacuum formed masks

Two-piece masks

Fabric masks (eg sacking)

Double sided masks

Self-hardening clay masks

Clay masks for firing and decoration

Mosaic masks (eg Mexican Aztec masks)

Cross Curricular Connections

The theme of masks presents many opportunities for teachers to make valuable learning connections for children across the curriculum. Some suggestions for this kind of work are:

Drama, Music, Dance

Humanities

Language/Writing

ARTIFACT

FUNCTION

What is it for?

When was it made?

Who was it made for?

Why was it made?

Where was it made?

What is its context?

Is its function cultural/ religious/ functional/ aesthetic/ commercial/
personal or some or all of these?

APPEARANCE

What is it?

How would you describe it?

What does it look like?

Could you use metaphors?

What about its lines, tones, colours, patterns, shapes, textures, size,
contrast, movement, arrangement?

CONTENT

What does it mean?

Does it tell a story?

Does it symbolize, represent something or someone?

TECHNIQUE

What is it made of?

What techniques were used?

Was it made well?

How can you tell?

Who made it?

Does it have a style?

Is it machine-made or hand-made or a combination of both?

Figure 1

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