

Sixth Form Examinations in Art and Design

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Examinations — in any subject — at 'A' level form the major influence on teaching the Sixth Form and the backwash effect of this form of examination has its effect through the earlier years of secondary education. The main objections to the present system is that examinations in the Sixth Form are too specialised and syllabuses require much study in depth.

Contrarywise, when Art examinations are under scrutiny they are often criticised for lack of specialisation and depth of study. Often criticisms of art examination are vague and are simply side-swipes, which examining bodies are adept at parrying, whose power has been generated simply on the basis that certain students have not passed or gained the right grades, which a teacher believed they should have done.

If one is to find substance in allegations one must be more specific and I have tried to investigate the possibility of reliability and validity of art examinations at 'A' level. In order to do this not only do syllabuses have to be examined, but question papers, examiners' reports and, where possible, statistics have to be investigated. Reliability and validity I have taken as defined by Crocker for the purposes of this investigation.

Reliability — how reliable are these examinations, that is how consistent are they from year to year? The conclusions that I come to, without being able to use specific tests of reliability are that they seem to be reliable. There are no wild swings in the percentages of candidates obtaining different grades. There is considerable agreement among examiners about marking of 'A' level Art as Carline (1) has noted. Statistical procedures are used to ensure a balance between the marking of one paper and another. This notion of reliability is a general one when applied to all 'A' level examinations. If it were possible to delve further, some Boards may appear more reliable than others, but all within limits appear reliable.

Validity — there are several aspects of validity, predictive, concurrent, construct

and content, all of which help to pinpoint the weakness of 'A' level examinations. Predictive validity of 'A' level art is the measuring of present performance to predict future results in Art. In Higher Education in Art one hears so frequently that "we take no notice of 'A' level art". Furthermore, if one considers predictive validity in terms of achievement and aptitude one may admit that some students do well in these examinations and what they test, but that they are not good predictors of aptitude. I doubt if from concurrent validity we can infer artistic ability to any great degree or that from construct validity we can measure artistic ability because these last two qualities hinge on content validity. Does the examination measure what is tested? This question makes one consider if tests in drawing, pictorial composition and or a craft, with a test sometimes in art history are real indicators of artistic ability. The examination may measure candidates' abilities in these subjects, but they themselves may not be indicators of artistic ability.

The reservations that I have about validity brings me to the conclusion that although 'A' level art examinations are reliable they are not really valid. Reliability seems to be sphere of the organisation of the examination by various G.C.E. Boards, validity is to do greatly with the content of the syllabus, which for most Boards rely on the expertise of the various subject panels and which also receives and is influenced by the criticisms and comments of teachers.

To return to the examinations, one should look at syllabuses to see if the examinations have a clear set of aims and statements or and describe what they set out to examine. Very few Boards do this properly. The Associated Examining Board makes distinctions between different types of candidates it proposes to examine and the Joint Matriculation Board states certain qualities that

are required in the work presented. But the real objectives or what is considered impor-

tant can be found when one reads examiners reports. These for every board do not appear annually, but in 1964 the Cambridge Syndicate Report on 'A' level art was quite specific:—

"From the point of view of general education for which this examination caters, some evidence of imagination and feeling, of the power to observe visual effects and retain them in the memory of an appreciation of art and the instinct to create are of greater value in the papers that test drawing or painting objectively than the acquisition of facility in execution with some command often superficial of proportions and perspective".

One may wish to debate the points made in the reports, but the report quite clearly reveals many points about the examination which are missing from the syllabus. This is not the only example of this practice, another board tells teachers to read through the past papers to find out the range of subjects that are offered in a history of art appreciation paper. Why examining boards are reluctant to disclose in their syllabus, what they consider to be important as aims and objectives or the content of their examination appears a mystery. To those who are not knowledgeable of examinations all these practices can only add to the idea that examinations are conducted in mystery and are rituals esoteric in origin.

To reliability and validity one may add 'description', meaning, does the syllabus describe the examination? Art examinations are not well described, one has to infer too much rather than being given specific qualities to consider.

If these examinations are to be revised where should one start, but with curriculum development. There is little to be found in current literature concerning development for a sixth form art curriculum as a step towards devising a new examination. The gleamings that one has obtained however may prove to be significant. Allinson (2) suggests that the model of the artist for all

students is inappropriate. If one tries to identify students' aims of this age group, for a great majority 'A' level Art is not the first step towards an artistic career but the fringe examination of formal art education. Perhaps teachers ought to be concerned with what art should a potential bank manager or engineer experience and/or know at this level, which would seem to indicate a model of the discriminating consumer rather than of the artist. How are they to cater for a growing majority of interested students in art and at the same time hoping to fully involve the potential artist? This is a problem which could be solved by the idea of F & N examinations which proposed to be the replacement for 'A' level Art.

Once again I find I have compiled a paper which has placed great emphasis on art and I have not dealt with either craft or design examinations. As this is a paper which is because of its nature very generalised one may continue with these generalisations and say that craft examinations follow very similar lines to art examinations in their reliability and validity.

Design examinations, that is design in its own right, as opposed to the rather 'design for a craft' examination which still features in some 'A' level examinations shows more evidence of contemporary teaching and syllabus making, so the examination has a better description, but there is only one published — another is available, for only interested schools — and appears more thorough and lays emphasis upon a variety of experience and team teaching. This poses a question, should an examination be restricted to schools which have a wide range of equipment and whose teachers are amenable to team teaching and whose timetable (and Headmaster) will let this operate? The problems of preparing candidates are difficult enough without having to establish a special framework of organisation which is not common to all schools. Are they candidates and teachers who could become very successfully involved in a design examination, but

whose schools restrict them by the nature of their size?

I realise that what I have written is full of generalisations and my findings may appear too subjective for some, but length of space will not permit me to be more specific. There is a lot of re-thinking to be done about Sixth Form Art and Design examinations and there is not an unlimited amount of time for this.

In conclusion, I would add that this contribution is an extension of a previous one which appears in Vol. 7 No. 1 of the Journal. It was written at the beginning of a year's leave of absence to research into art in the Sixth Form, and this article has only dealt briefly with some of my findings.

Note

For those unable to obtain A.C. Crocker (1964) "Statistics for the teacher" Penguin pp. 41-47, may like to have his definitions of reliability and validity, which I have pruned considerably for brevity here:—

"The measure of consistency that a test has is called reliability".

"Validity — this means truth of fidelity. In short — does something measure what it claims to measure".

References

1. Carline, R. (1968) "Draw they must, a history of teaching and examining art. Arnold.
2. Allinson, B. (1973) "Sequential Programming in Art Education in *Readings in Art & Design Education*, Davis-Poynter.

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