

## PROMOTING THE UNDERSTANDING OF ART IN ART SCHOOL STUDENTS

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**Abstract.** *With today's expanding communication opportunities, new forms of visual art have emerged and a language of visual art has developed, which makes it necessary to examine the teaching methods for fostering art school students' understanding of art. This publication deals with the problem of art pedagogy – how to promote art school students' understanding of art in a contemporary way; accordingly, the aim of this article is to reveal pedagogical opportunities for promoting the understanding of art. The educators in Balvi Art School since 1996 have been involved in the development of the curriculum of the subject 'Fundamentals of the Language of Art', in order to promote the understanding of art in the interaction between the history of culture, art history and the practical creative process.*

*Studying the subject 'Fundamentals of the Language of Art' is one of the prerequisites of the development of an understanding of art. The topicality of the research is reinforced by the fact that teachers should endeavor to compare and understand the teaching of art in order to select the most suitable didactic approach, methods and forms of work adapted to the nowadays pedagogical reality.*

**Keywords:** *Subject 'Fundamentals of the Language of Art', teaching methods, art teaching, understanding of art, language of art.*

### Introduction

Art is an important part of culture that speaks to the human emotions, through feelings affecting the human mind. Work of art still plays an important role in shaping the personality in spiritual world and self-discovery; accordingly, art influences the development of culture. Viewing a work of art, the spectator originates their own questions – and this is how the dialogue between the artistic creator and the spectator arises.

The language of art is distinct, addressing a person with sound, color, text, and subtext. In order to be able to communicate in this language, a person needs to have an appropriate education; therefore, this article deals with the problem of art pedagogy – how to promote art school students' understanding of art in a contemporary way. That is why the aim of this article is to reveal pedagogical opportunities for promoting the understanding of art.

Research methods: questionnaire, teaching observation, semi-structured interview with graduates of art school and semi-structured interview with teachers.

Students of art schools in Latvia study the subject 'Fundamentals of the Language of Art' which unites different fields of art, offering an extensive view on the cultural environment – its visual and aesthetic values and stylistic diversity.

The educators in Balvi Art School have already, since 1996, been involved in the development of the curriculum of the subject 'Fundamentals of the Language of Art', in order to promote students' understanding of art in the interaction between history of culture, art history and practical creative process. By improving the curriculum, the learning process has been made contemporary:

- new study material in an environment making use of modern technology with innovative approaches and methods in education was created, that serves as a solution to the problem of the lack of modern and innovative course books and materials in vocational educational institutions in Latvia. The study material can be used and adjusted also for other art schools and those interested;
- within the - within the framework of the project 'A Variety of Methods in the Vocationally Oriented Educational Program 'Visual Plastic Art' in the Subject 'Fundamentals of the Language of Art', a methodological material for art teachers has been developed: 'Learning Objectives for Exploring Latvian Cultural Heritage 'Cultural Heritage in Modern Perspective' and Learning Methods – the Description of the Method, the Objective of the Teaching of the Subject 'Fundamentals of the Language of Art'. The material has been published in the digital book 'Methodological Teaching Materials for Vocational Culture Education Teachers', 2<sup>nd</sup> part: 'Methodological Materials for Art Teachers':
- while actively working in the working group of the Culture and Creative Industries Education Center on the guidelines project for 'Fundamentals of the Language of Art', the curriculum of the subject 'Fundamentals of the Language of Art' and creative task set has been developed that establishes the connection with the theoretical part of the program, because, based on the experience of Balvi and other schools, it was discovered that students understand and delve more into the process of the development of art if the learning of theory is supplemented with creative practical study tasks which students carry out in the facilities at school – in the classroom, showroom, or in an unusual environment – museum, artists' workshop.

Teachers are trying to compare and understand the teaching of art and to choose the most suitable pedagogical approach according to today's situation, accentuating that a student is not a passive receiver of knowledge but is an active subject of cognitive activity. Such a pedagogical competence on the part of the art teacher in the organizing and management of the study process is an important prerequisite for a successful learning process in art school.

## **Content of the Subject ‘Fundamentals of the Language of Art’**

Art is an expression of the culture as well as a means for distribution culture-connected knowledge. Every culture has its own unique artistic expression and cultural praxis. The diversity of culture and its creativity and artistic innovation is a proof of the existence of modern and traditional forms of human creativity that characterizes human civilization: dignity, heritage, beauty and unity. Information and knowledge about cultural praxis and art forms enhances personal and collective identity and values, as well as facilitates the protection of cultural diversity and its development. Art education helps to improve the understanding of culture and fosters cultural praxis, and with its help knowledge and understanding about art is transmitted to the next generations.

Art is an internal language which it is necessary to express without words. For instance, a painter has a need to express what he sees and thinks with the means of visual forms. It is a language that a painter speaks, it is unique, the same as words for a writer and movements for a dancer. Difficulties may be caused only by the means of language expression – in the way that the artist’s language is understandable like a written word and dance performance (*Eubanks, 1997*).

The language of the content of art includes becoming acquainted with the outstanding examples of visual plastic art, different art forms, genre, styles, the understanding and interpretation of trends, artistic means of expression, a diverse range of traditional and modern materials, visual art techniques and the acquisition and application of technologies in the creative work.

In the subject ‘Fundamentals of the Language of Art’, the main task for understanding art is to promote the familiarization with and internalization of a person’s system of values.

Value in this context is viewed as aggregate of positive characteristics which are connected with spirituality, culture, the moral, artistic and aesthetic sphere, and human relationships; it is a meaningfulness, a reasonableness – what is not yet created but what should be and what is worth striving for.

Such values are included in the subject ‘Fundamentals of the Language of Art’:

- the understanding of art that allows students’ to discover art and the diversity of visual culture industries, its historical development and current trends, the works of art and artists’ activities in the context of the era;
- the language of art that promotes students’ understanding of the significance of visual means of expression in art, and of the purpose of the work of art;
- creative and evaluative activity – interpretation of art and the processes of visual culture and evaluation; in order to be able to fully participate in the cultural and artistic life, students need to learn to understand and evaluate works of art that are made by their peers (artists), as well as explore and share their opinions about different aspects of existence.

While putting into practice the content of the lessons, the students develop:

- a critical and considerate attitude towards a variety of artistic expressions and values;
- an understanding about art and cultural values and their multiplicity in the world;
- the need for creativity;
- responsibility towards, and respect for, the significance of the preservation of cultural and historical heritage.

The best way to discover, respect and appreciate other cultures is to promote a person's self-confidence in a way in which the fundament is the understanding of their own cultural values. That is why it is especially important to acknowledge the continuous development of culture and cultural value in historical and contemporary contexts; thus we teach how to understand art and its different types of expression.

### **An Understanding of Art as a Result of Learning**

The understanding of art is the relationship between the spectator and the work of art that is determined not only by every person's knowledge, experience and needs but also by the intention of the work of art, its content and form. 'Importantly, that understanding about art is determined not only functionally but also structurally, i.e. representation schemes, ideas, general truths, elements of the meaning where the direction of the creative thought is reconstructed based on the previously mentioned elements. The understanding of art has a creative nature' (*Kincāns, 2001:280*).

The conception and artistic idea in the work of art manifests itself in a sensual form, the opportunity for a dialogue arises between the artist and the receiver, and therefore also the possibility for their mutual understanding (*Celma, 1988; Oborenko, 2010; Tīfentāle, 2009; Māksla kā valoda, gads nav minēts [http://filozofija.lu.lv/lat\\_intervija3.html](http://filozofija.lu.lv/lat_intervija3.html)*)

Art school students' understanding of art thus is an essential condition of their meaningful creative activities. 'The majority of people desire to understand art, it could be said – even all. The specifics of perception of the work of art obviously reveals the comprehension difficulties. On the one hand, the understanding is based on the knowledge, but on the other hand – it does not only mean to know' (*Kūle, 1989:9*).

The understanding of the work of art is focused not on the material thing itself but on its description, theory, analysis of causes. Understanding is identical with the activity of making sense. 'In the process of understanding the work of art it is important to be aware of how the artistic image is formed. It originates not in the sensuous and perceptible but in the emotional and spiritual sphere. The artistic image expresses not the apprehension of the artist but the perception about the objective reality of phenomena, objects, notions about spiritual

processes, meaning. The image is formed as objectivity of a meaning' (Küle, 1989).

In addition, during the learning process it is important to develop the artistic skills and knowledge that constitute the basis for the language of art (for instance, the understanding of color, line and form in the visual plastic art). Building artistic skills includes learning about different art styles and genres. Artistic skills are developed mostly depending on art concepts; for example, on knowledge about different means of visual expression or understanding of works of art in connection with the cultural environment of the artist (*Darcie Clark Frohardt, 1999; Kavacs, 1999*). With the help of artistic skills, the appropriate environment can be created and the corresponding praxis can be provided, so that students may get creative experience and actively participate in the creative processes and evolution (*Hibnere, 1998; Hibnere, Grasmane, 2000*).

Components of the understanding of art are integrated in every topic of the subject 'Fundamentals of the Language of Art', in the aim of teaching individual lessons, and in the expected result. The understanding of art is rooted in students' self-experience – the forming of cultural identity: students learn different culture forms in order to realize themselves as wholesome citizens and personalities. The understanding is promoted by ensuring availability of art works, visiting museums, exhibitions, manors and castles, and including in the curriculum the specific features of the work of art from a particular historical period, as well as learning about specific works of art.

The understanding of art arises if students fully participate in a cultural and artistic life, in that way learning to understanding and appreciating works of art that have been created by their peers, as well as cognizing and sharing views on different aspects of existence and coexistence (*Kavacs, 1999; Smith, 2014; Anspaks, 2004*).

In the learning process, the teaching 'through' art is significant – learning from the experience of creation that is organic, hence also an evolutionary practice. There one does not copy certain ideas previously thought or shapes given beforehand, but rather interprets things. Regardless of whether the person in the end becomes or does not become a professional artist, the most important thing is that the experience of art creation builds human personality (Hickman, 2005).

The purpose for such a deliberate involvement of students in creation or creative activities is an understanding about art gained in the art school which includes:

- *knowledge* about visual means of expression, values of art, types, genres, styles, techniques and their development in historical succession, and about the connection of the work of art to the cultural environment of the artist;
- *skills* to perform specific artistic action according to the quality and capacity required, creative exercises in various techniques and methods, using different elements of composition of art styles and directions;
- *attitudes* – the openness of feelings and reasoning, respect, tolerance.

## Analysis of the Research Results

In the research about the most significant didactical methods for promoting the understanding of art, conducted in the year 2013-2014, seven art schools participated (in Vidzeme, Latgale, Zemgale) – altogether 164 respondents (out of which 4 were art school teachers, 151 art school students and 9 graduates of Balvi Art School).

The methodology of the research proposed the usage of quantitative and qualitative research methods. The quantitative approach in the research was used to receive as many as possible views of respondents in order to determine the main tendencies of promoting the understanding of art in studies. With the qualitative approach general information was obtained, revealing the views of the respondents about the purpose of teaching the understanding of art (Table 1).

Table 1

**Qualitative and Quantitative Methods of Research**

	Method	Research aim
Quantitative methods of research	Questionnaire	To identify art school students' views on the subject 'Fundamentals of the Language of Art' learning and teaching.
Qualitative method of research	Teaching observation	To identify the methods of teaching for promoting students' understanding of art in the subject 'Fundamentals of the Language of Art'.
	Semi-structured interview with teachers	To clarify the views of art school teachers who are teaching the subject 'Fundamentals of the Language of Art' about the most important teaching methods for promoting understanding of art.
	Semi-structured interview with graduates of art school	To find out opinions of art school graduates about how their understanding of art has changed after finishing the school.

Analysis of the data from students' and graduates' questionnaires established the learning methods which students and also graduates found useful for teaching the understanding of art in the subject 'Fundamentals of the Language of Art'. Learning in the artwork exhibition was determined to be significant – in a museum or exhibition hall, workshop or master workshop, with some

professional artist of their sphere, as students improve their knowledge and create emotional experience while working in an unusual environment.

The results gained from the questionnaires are supplemented with an analysis of the didactic opinions of the teachers, in which, after the teaching observation and interviews, the teaching methods for promoting students' understanding of art are discussed.

The main, most frequently used teaching methods (based on the analysis of teachers' interviews) are portfolio, creative work, narration, and discussion.

The most successful teaching methods – developing a more profound understanding of art (based on the analysis of teachers' interviews) – are learning in an artwork exhibition, project work, master workshops, and the presentation of students' creative work.

By the teacher's teaching activities we understand a search for and discovery of fundamentally new learning methods and materials. These findings can be local, concerning a particular method, form, technique, as well as systematic, creating effective new learning and education systems.

Teaching methods that were recognized as successful cannot always be used in the study process: for instance the master workshop, because to invite an artist is a rather expensive process, which is why such a teaching method can be used in the study process two or three times in the academic year, during creativity weeks. Learning in the artwork exhibition is a more frequently used method that is considered as the most important because the students' understanding of art is fostered by getting to know the work of art in the original; also, the face-to-face meeting with an artist gives an opportunity for the student to learn in action, to understand the idea of the work of art, its content, composition, etc.

Evaluating the data gained from the questionnaires, interviews, and teaching observation, it was discovered that the understanding of art is promoted if in the process of learning such methods are used that are also included in the curriculum of the subject 'Fundamentals of the Language of Art' created by Balvi Art School (Table 2).

Respondents pointed out that the most common teaching methods are: narration and demonstration, learning in the artwork exhibition, portfolio, creative work, workshop – master workshop.

Current students and graduates share slightly different points of view about the most significant teaching methods in the subject 'Fundamentals of the Language of Art'; however, they agreed that the most important are precisely the interactive activities - learning in the artwork exhibition, creative work and creative workshops.

Table 2

**Teaching Methods for Promoting Students' Understanding of Art**

<b>Teaching Methods</b>	Students	Graduates	Teachers (according to teaching observation)	Teachers (according to interviews)	In the curriculum of the subject	Frequency
<i>Demonstration</i>						4
<i>Narration</i>						4
<i>Research</i>						2
<i>Learning in the artwork exhibition</i>						4
<i>Portfolio</i>						4
<i>Creative work</i>						5
<i>Workshop</i> <i>Master workshop</i>						4
<i>Game</i>						2
<i>Interpretation of the work of art</i>						2
<i>Discussion</i>						3
<i>Dramatization</i>						1
<i>Copying of works of art</i>						1
<i>Project work</i>						1
<i>Presentation of students' creative work</i>						1

In the teaching process of the teachers interviewed there can be seen different types of implementation of artistic ideas, while the teaching methods for promoting the understanding of art are similar; this is why it can be concluded that these methods are topical and develop students' abilities, skills, perception, thinking and creativity, and attitudes.

The results of the research verify that the teaching methods suggested in the curriculum of the subject 'Fundamentals of the Language of Art' created by teachers of Balvi Art School generally promotes students' understanding of art as they contain purposive didactic connections between teaching aim, result and teaching methods.

### Conclusions

1. The subject 'Fundamentals of the Language of Art' provides art school students the pedagogical opportunities to gain an understanding of art that consists in the knowledge about art styles, techniques and their development

- in historical succession, about the relationship of the work of art with the cultural environment of the artist; skills to perform defined artistic activity according to the necessary quality and capacity, creative exercises using various techniques and methods, in order to apply composition elements of different art styles and directions; the openness of feelings and reasoning, respect, tolerance.
2. The curriculum of the subject 'Fundamentals of the Language of Art' developed and approved by the educators of Balvi Art School contains an updated, modern teaching model in which didactical methods dominate that direct the student to investigate, experience, discover, work creatively and reflect upon the creative process.
  3. The understanding of art in students is most greatly fostered by teaching methods like learning in the artwork exhibition – in the museum or exhibition hall, in creative work and the creative workshop and master workshop together with a professional artist in some sphere.

### Summary

Māksla ir svarīga kultūras sastāvdaļa, kas uzrunā cilvēka emocijas, caur jūtām iedarbojas uz cilvēka prātu. Mākslas valoda ir īpaša, vērsties pie cilvēka ar skaņu, krāsu, tekstu, zemtekstu. Lai šajā valodā saprastos, cilvēkam jābūt atbilstoši izglītotam, tāpēc rakstā skarta mākslas pedagogijas problēma – kā mūsdienīgi sekmēt mākslas skolu audzēkņu sapratni par mākslu; raksta mērķis – atklāt pedagoģiskās iespējas mākslas sapratnes veicināšanai.

Balvu Mākslas skolas pedagogi jau kopš 1996. gada iesaistījušies mācību priekšmeta „Mākslas valodas pamati” programmas un mācību procesa pilnveidē, lai mākslas sapratne audzēkņiem tiktu veicināta kultūras vēstures, mākslas vēstures un praktiski radošā procesa mijiedarbībā.

Programmu pilnveidojot, ir izveidots mācību materiāls moderno tehnoloģiju vidē ar inovatīvu pieeju un metodēm izglītībā, izstrādāts metodisks materiāls mākslas pedagogiem „Mācību uzdevumi Latvijas kultūras mantojuma iepazīšanai „Kultūrvēsturiskie mantojumi mūsdienu skatījumā” digitālajā grāmatā „Mācību metodiskie materiāli profesionālās kultūrizglītības pedagogiem”, 2.daļā „Metodiskie materiāli mākslas pedagogiem”, izveidota mācību priekšmeta „Mākslas valodas pamati” autorprogramma un radošo uzdevumu kopa.

Mākslas sapratnes komponenti ir zināšanas par vizuālās izteiksmes līdzekļiem, mākslas vērtībām, veidiem, žanriem, stiliem, tehnikām un to attīstību vēsturiskā secībā, par mākslas darba saikni ar mākslinieka kultūrvidi; prasmes veikt noteiktu māksliniecisku darbību atbilstoši nepieciešamajai kvalitātei un apjomam, radošus vingrinājumus dažādās tehnikās un paņēmienos, pielietot dažādu mākslas stilu, virzienu kompozīcijas elementus; izjūtu un domāšanas atvērtība, cieņa, tolerance.

Sapratne par mākslu rodas, ja audzēkņi pilnvērtīgi piedalās kultūras un mākslas dzīvē, tā iemācoties izprast un novērtēt mākslas darbus, ko radījuši viņu līdzcilvēki, kā arī izzināt un dalīties viedokļos par dažādiem esamības un kopesamības aspektiem.

Pētījumā par nozīmīgākajiem mākslas sapratnes veicināšanas didaktiskajiem paņēmieniem 2013.-2014. gadā (164 respondenti no 7 Latvijas mākslas skolām - 4 mākslas skolotāji un 151 mākslas skolu audzēknis, 9 absolventi) ir konstatēts, ka galvenie biežāk izmantojamie mācīšanas paņēmieni (pēc skolotāju interviju analīzes) ir darba mape (portfolio), radošais darbs, stāstījums, diskusija; veiksmīgākie – izteiktāk veidojas sapratne par mākslu - mācīšanas paņēmieni (pēc skolotāju intervijā iegūto rezultātu analīzes) ir mācīšanās mākslas darbu ekspozīcijā, projektu darbs, meistardarbnīcas, audzēkņu radošo darbu prezentācija.

Pētījuma rezultāti apliecina, ka Balvu Mākslas skolas pedagogu izveidotajā un pilnveidotajā priekšmeta „Mākslas valodas pamati” programmā ieteiktie mācīšanas paņēmieni visumā veicina audzēkņu sapratnes par mākslu veidošanos, jo ietver mācīšanas mērķa, rezultāta un mācīšanas paņēmieni mērķtiecīgas didaktiskas sakarības.

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