

# **TEACHING PRACTICES IN ART EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF COMPETENCES FOR LIFELONG LEARNING**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Problem-solving, critical and creative thinking, innovation, collaboration, engagement, and communication are common characteristics of learning aimed at developing key competences. Our literature review concludes that practices that are more focused on critical, multicultural, and student-centered approaches have a higher potential to support this type of learning. In addition, this paper examines traditional, dominant teaching practices in art education, how they are formed, and which attitudes support them. We find that art teachers must recognize the importance of emancipatory practices and a discursive environment in teaching, the multifaceted nature and role of art, the characteristics of the creative artistic process, and the contexts that influence them. They must be ready to critically evaluate the impact of positivist legacies in shaping the teaching process. Through collaboration with students, teachers can cultivate living knowledge and thereby shape teaching practices that contribute to the development of competences for lifelong learning.*

## **KEYWORDS:**

art education practices, critical education practices, lifelong learning competences, modern and postmodern approaches in art education, primary and secondary education

## **INTRODUCTION**

Problem-solving, critical and creative thinking, innovation, cooperation, engagement, and communication can be considered important learning characteristics that should occur in order to achieve the conditions for the development of lifelong learning competences. In this paper, we explore

different approaches to art teaching, which include a certain attitude toward learning and knowledge, and we emphasize the characteristics of teaching that have the potential to support lifelong learning. We can define the relationship of learning and knowledge as a developed awareness of the construction of knowledge and involvement in the practice of uncovering the value structures that are at the basis of both one's own knowledge and that of others.<sup>1</sup> The postmodern debate in art education starts from these premises by highlighting the potential of critical practices in the teaching of art culture,<sup>2</sup> multicultural education based on the aspiration toward social reconstruction,<sup>3</sup> and teaching focused on the student,<sup>4</sup> with the aim to nurture such an attitude toward learning and knowledge.

Competences represent a dynamic set of knowledge, skills, dispositions, attitudes, and values.<sup>5</sup> Dispositions are broadly defined as relatively permanent "habits of mind" or characteristic ways of responding to experiences in different types of situations.<sup>6</sup> In this paper, we start from the premise that, unlike knowledge or skills, a disposition is not an end state that needs to be mastered once and for all; rather it is a trend or a consistent pattern of behavior, and it is established

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1) Jovana Milutinović, "Critical Constructivism: Establishment of Open and Critical Discourse in Teaching," *Zbornik Matice srpske za društvene nauke*, no. 141 (2012): 583–594.

2) Connie Stewart, "The Dangerous Power of Art Education," *Art Education*, no. 6 (2019): 25–29, accessed March 9, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043125.2019.1648144>.

3) Arthur D. Efland, Kerry Freedman and Patricia Stuhr, *La educación en el arte posmoderno* [Postmodern Art Education] (Barcelona: Editorial Paidós, 2003), 35.

4) Delane Ingalls Vanada, "An Equitable Balance: Designing Quality Thinking Systems in Art Education," *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, no. 11 (2016), accessed March 9, 2025, <http://www.ijea.org/v17n11/>.

5) Sylvia Vitello, Jackie Greateorex and Stuart Shaw, *What is competence? A shared interpretation of competence to support teaching, learning, and assessment* [Research Report] (Cambridge University Press & Assessment, 2021), 11.

6) Lilian G. Katz and Sylvia Chard, "The project approach," (February, 1992), *ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED340518*, accessed April 23, 2024, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED340518.pdf>.

only by its repeated manifestation.<sup>7</sup> We believe that teaching practices should be shaped in such a way that they support the manifestation of a set of shared characteristics of learning enabling the development of key competences. In this paper, we start from the assumption that, in order to develop a critical attitude toward learning and knowledge, the teaching practices of art education should be built on critical foundations. To this end, we review the literature in order to define what constitutes a critical approach to shaping the teaching of general art education.

## **CRITICAL TEACHING OF ART**

We define critical practices according to Nicholas Addison's definition, in which he equates such practices of art education with teaching that fosters an integrated approach to joint research, interpretation, and reflection.<sup>8</sup> According to this approach, learning processes occur in cycles of creation and reflection, discussion, and interpretation through the joint creation of knowledge. This type of teaching is connected with the basic tenets of critical constructivism, which implies that teaching and learning should be connected with the act of research, engaging students in the process of knowledge production, i.e., in analyzing, interpreting, and constructing different types of knowledge.<sup>9</sup>

The way the teaching will be conducted in the art classroom depends on several factors, with the curriculum and context of the school and community being among the most significant.

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7) Ibid.

8) Nicholas Addison and Lesley Burgess, *Learning to Teach Art and Design in the Secondary School: A Companion to School Experience*, 2nd edition (New York: Routledge, 2007), 247.

9) Milutinović, "Critical Constructivism," 591.

Art teachers' artistic preferences, and aesthetic theories, and thus their conceptions of art influence the ways in which they shape their teaching approaches.<sup>10</sup> Another important factor shaping the teaching approach is the teacher's understanding of the learning and development of his students. For critical teaching, it is important for teachers to be aware of the ways in which these factors shape teaching, and, therefore, to reflect critically on their teaching practice.

The meaning of concepts such as child, development, and learning do not refer to natural entities or processes but are constructions within specific discourses that appear natural and are, as Dennis Atkinson states, "fictions-functioning-in-truth."<sup>11</sup> This author further explains that these discourses create norms, dictating expected behaviors and ways of understanding. In the context of art education, a key task is to examine how these processes of normalization influence the production and regulation of both teachers and students, to the point where conformity solidifies teaching and disregards the diversity of student responses.<sup>12</sup>

The term *critical* in the art classroom should be equated with the term *research*, with different interpretations and the examination of assumptions with the aim of discovering and analyzing the place and significance of visual and material culture. This promotes learning that goes beyond a shallow and superficial knowledge of art, craft, and design. It involves students in the activities of systematic reflection on the presented knowledge

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10) Brent Wilson, *The Quiet Evolution: Changing the Face of Arts Education* (Los Angeles: Getty Education Institute for the Arts, 1997), 31–32.

11) Dennis Atkinson, *Art in Education: Identity and Practice*, Landscapes, v. 1 (Dordrecht; Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 45, according to Lisa Blackman and Valerie Walkerdine, *Mass Hysteria: Critical Psychology and Media Studies* (Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2001), 103.

12) Atkinson, *Art in Education*, 45–46.

and reflection on accepted social practices.<sup>13</sup> Critical practices adopt many of the strategies from critical art pedagogy by accepting the postmodern concept of the value and meaning of art as socially contextualized and relational rather than autonomous, with the aim of creating and expanding critical awareness as a form of knowledge.<sup>14</sup> The essential goal of critical art pedagogy is not to cleanse knowledge of ideological influence but to decenter truth claims and to transform and reorient knowledge toward emancipatory ideals.

First of all, we believe that the complete absence of critical examination of the social and historical origins, and their influence on current knowledge, values, and practices characterizes practices that cannot be called critical. Uncritical art education, influenced by myths about the objectivity of knowledge and technical control, tends to promote myths about the stability of meaning and the objectification of value assigned to individual artworks. This can mislead students into thinking that art has fixed meanings and values, instead of encouraging them to think critically and question these assumptions.

## **POSITIVISTIC HERITAGE**

It can be said that the majority of today's teaching practices are based on modern understandings of art, characterized by a formalist perspective and practices of creative self-expression. Finally, it can be asserted with some certainty that this is the case in the Republic of Serbia and in most Balkan countries.

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13) Joe L. Kincheloe and Shirley R. Steinberg, eds., *Unauthorized Methods: Strategies for Critical Teaching*, Transforming Teaching Series (New York: Routledge, 1998), passim.

14) Richard Cary, *Critical Art Pedagogy: Foundations for Postmodern Art Education* (New York, London: Garland Publishing Inc., 1998), 184–188.

In the 1980s in the former state of SFR Yugoslavia, as part of the education reform, there was also a change in the art education program. The program is presented as a solution for overcoming the “neglect of artistic values” in the work of teachers.<sup>15</sup> The structure of the program consisted of topics regarding art elements and composition principles, accompanied by a corresponding proposal of works of art from art history to be explored during lessons. The program, with minor changes, has remained valid in the Republic of Serbia until today. As a major change, we can consider the introduction of outcome standards in 2013, which conceptually resemble the DBAE approach to art education (Disciplined-Based Art Education). Developed in the USA, the DBAE approach aims to ensure studying the structure of the art field rather than just facts about it. I consider these data significant when compared to the fact that in the 1980s, both the USA and the UK already began questioning the methods (still present today in Serbia) used to help students create and understand art, and that in the 1990s the debate about the relationship between postmodern and modern orientation in art became widespread. Therefore, the DBAE approach itself (at least its early versions) was criticized for its technocratic rationality, and uncritical implementation of modern conception and aesthetics, which, from a certain perspective, was close to ethnocentrism and elitism. The literature related to the aforementioned debate and criticism also provides important insights into the formation of teaching practices that are largely present even today.<sup>16</sup> In the following

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15) Zdravko Milinković, Bojana Babić and Slavko Šćepanović, *Orijentacioni raspored nastavnog gradiva likovne kulture: za V razred osnovne škole* [Provisional Schedule of Visual Culture Curriculum: for the 5th Grade of Elementary School] (Beograd: Zavod za udžbenike i nastavna sredstva, 1985), 3.

16) Arthur Efland, “Change in the Conception of Art Teaching,” in *Context, Content, and Community in Art Education: Beyond Postmodernism*, ed. Ronald W. Neperud (New York: Teachers College Press, 1995), 25–41.

text, we present some of the key influences of modernism on certain aspects of art education that shaped the ideology and resulting teaching practices.

Arthur Efland, Kerry J. Freedman, and Patricia L. Stuhr singled out the most important features of modernism and its influence on art and art education.<sup>17</sup> These authors associate the concept of modernity with the Enlightenment and the belief in the use of reason and scientific knowledge as the basis for progress, control of nature, and material well-being. Furthermore, they connect the ideology and belief in the progressive and evolutionary development of culture and society with the assumption of modern artistic discourse that each new generation of artists improves the expressive potential of their artistic media.<sup>18</sup> Likewise, the progress of art is identified with the abandonment of traditional conventions of representation associated with the academic art of previous centuries, which were seen as an obstacle to artistic originality. A related idea is that cultural progress is the work of the artistic and intellectual elite, the avant-garde, which generates new social forms or lifestyles, as well as new forms of art. The purpose of these innovative forms was to challenge the beliefs and assumptions of the public. It was therefore expected that, after an initial moment of incomprehension in the face of new ideas and new art, the public would gradually become receptive to these advances. Thus, the teacher's job was to bridge the gap between the public and the avant-garde through teaching.<sup>19</sup>

Cultural awareness in the era of industrialization, technological progress, and the movement of science toward increasing control and essentialism, among other things, contributed to

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17) Efland, Freedman and Stuhr, *La educación en el arte posmoderno*, 16–18.

18) Ibid.

19) Ibid.

the development of formalism, a pseudoscientific conception of aesthetics. According to Freedman, the perspective on art was based on positivism, the theory that all knowledge is derived from natural phenomena that can be studied and verified by the methods of empirical science. Formalism focuses on the analysis of the physical and perceptual characteristics of art objects, reducing form to the elements and principles of design.<sup>20</sup> Thierry de Duve explains that all the great modern art theorists devoted considerable energy to breaking down the language of art into its basic components. They also demonstrated the universality of its perceptual and psychological laws, and many artists were actively involved in the creation of art schools and curricula based on the reductionist practice of the “fundamental elements of syntax immanent to the medium.”<sup>21</sup>

The influence of positivism in art criticism is recognized in Clement Greenberg’s view on formalism, which he considers both revolutionary and progressive. Greenberg also considered the removal of content to be a breakthrough in the history of art.<sup>22</sup> Such art criticism focuses on the surface, emphasizing the formal and technical aspects of color on canvas, moving away from the illusions of representation and social meaning. “The atomism and predictability of formalism”<sup>23</sup> simplifies the art curriculum and its evaluation. The constituent parts of the visual form are neatly assembled into the structure of the curriculum by dividing it into teaching topics and units. This model does not tend to consider the sociocultural aspects of visual culture, nor

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20) Kerry J. Freedman, *Teaching Visual Culture: Curriculum, Aesthetics, and the Social Life of Art* (New York: Teachers College Press, Reston, VA: National Art Education Association, 2003), 27.

21) Thierry de Duve, “When Form Has Become Attitude and Beyond,” in *The Artist and the Academy: Issues in Fine Art Education and the Wider Cultural Context*, eds. Nicholas de Ville and Stephen Foster (Southampton: Hansard, 1994), 23.

22) Efland, Freedman and Stuhr, *La educación en el arte posmoderno*, 25.

23) Freedman, *Teaching Visual Culture*, (2003), 27.

does it promote the analysis of the creation of the model itself because it is presented as universal and timeless.<sup>24</sup> The search for pure formal relationships capable of evoking an aesthetic experience is the foundation of supposedly universal aesthetics, the common denominator of any art in the world. Although the validity of the aesthetic claim of universality has been radically questioned, this tradition still persists in many contemporary art education textbooks.<sup>25</sup>

Myths about the objectivity of knowledge are reflected in the evaluation of formal properties in relation to rigid standards established outside the learning process and most often based on the opinion of experts about how an artwork should be experienced, what it really means and what its true value is. Tamar Garb sees the influence of the modern paradigm in art in the art history teaching, particularly in teaching practices that are based on traditional notions of individual genius, with a focus on the study of the personality of the artist, whose intentions and experiences hold the key to understanding the work. Modernist teaching practices are based on the understanding of art as an autonomous, self-moving force isolated from the cultural context. This understanding makes a strict division between images of *high art* and those of *popular culture*, whereby the latter is excluded.<sup>26</sup>

Colonialism contributed to the formation of large collections of artifacts in ethnographic museums at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The exploitation of so-called *primitive art* was perceived as a new artistic beginning. Many modern artists wanted to identify with or looked for inspiration in primitive art and noticed its similarity

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24) Ibid., 27.

25) Efland, Freedman and Stuhr, *La educación en el arte posmoderno*, 27.

26) Tamar Garb, "New Methodologies in Art History: Implications for School Teaching," *Journal of Art & Design Education*, no. 3 (1984): 347–356.

to the sincere naivety of children's art. Efland, Freedman and Stuhr doubt that modern teachers are aware of the origins of the idea of free self-expression and the significance such practices had in the time and place from which they originated.<sup>27</sup>

Teachers often neglect both the concept of childhood and the image of the student because these concepts are strongly ingrained and taken for granted. Olga Ivashkevich explains that the majority of today's school practices, and therefore art education as well, are shaped by the ideas of the ideology of rescue. Ivashkevich connects this ideology with two related images of children and childhood, namely the view of children as mentally immature and the view of children as innocent and naive. The realization that children go through a process of development toward an improved stage of mental maturity and self-control is a direct product of the Age of Enlightenment and Immanuel Kant's philosophy, and is further strengthened by the Jean Piaget's psychological theory.<sup>28</sup> Today, these ideas still provide justification for educational intervention as an act of improvement, normalization, and rationalization of children. In art education, this can be seen through practices of introducing art culture to children in ways that can hardly be connected to the world that defines the reality of students' lives.

Olga Ivashkevich further explains that the second image, which depicts a child as naive and innocent, derives from the romantic ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, which prevailed in public and intellectual discourse at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when children became a symbol of adults' hope and nostalgia. Within modern educational institutions, children have limited

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27) Efland, Freedman and Stuhr, *La educación en el arte posmoderno*, 26–27.

28) Olga Ivashkevich, "Rethinking Children: Power, Pedagogy, and Contemporary Art Education Practices," *Art Education*, no.1 (2012): 40–45, accessed March 9, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043125.2012.11519159>.

access to issues that undermine their presumed innocence. Such depictions of children as innocent and immature produce hierarchical power relations in which children's ways of knowing are seen as "subordinate knowledge", that is, "knowledge that is naive, minor, disordered, fragmentary and subordinated to the redefined, theoretical discourse of teaching."<sup>29</sup> In this way, the concept of innocent childhood and educational interventions aimed at saving and preserving innocence dictate power relations based on modernist ideas about childhood and children, that is, adolescence and adolescents. The influence of these ideas dictates extremely predictable teaching practices, which avoid conceptual conflicts and do not include anything conceptually difficult.<sup>30</sup> The assumption is that certain original expressive qualities of the students' artistic expression prove the success of the teaching practice.

The pursuit of an objective scientific approach formed an attitude toward children's artwork as a form of art. Consequently, a significant number of researches were object-oriented and focused on the assessment of the aesthetic and formal qualities of children's drawings.<sup>31</sup> Assessing children's graphic development and/or artistic qualities based on their drawings and paintings places great value on the "artefactual remains"<sup>32</sup> of image production while generally neglecting the contextual complexity of drawing practice as a lived social and cultural experience.<sup>33</sup> Such a product-oriented research paradigm gives

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29) Ibid., 40.

30) Arthur Hughes, "Reconceptualizing the Art Curriculum," *Journal of Art & Design Education*, no. 1 (1998): 41–49, accessed March 9, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5949.00104>.

31) Olga Ivashkevich, "Children's Drawing as a Sociocultural Practice: Remaking Gender and Popular Culture," *Studies in Art Education*, no. 1 (2009): 50–63, accessed March 9, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00393541.2009.11518790>.

32) Ibid., 50.

33) Phil Pearson, "Towards a Theory of Children's Drawing as Social Practice," *Studies in Art Education*, no. 4 (2001): 348, accessed March 9, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1321079>.

children's artworks the status of independent visual artifacts and objects of analysis.<sup>34</sup>

Modernity is reflected in the curriculum as the aspiration to rationalize the discipline and the insistence on standardization as a mechanism for progress. Myths about technical control led to the establishment of a precise list of strict procedures designed to work in all the environments and with all students and teachers. This includes carefully planned curriculum content as well as precisely defined academically oriented standards that do not encourage research practices. In this way, both teachers and students might be excluded from the chain of living knowledge creation. The art program thus becomes a "hybrid, divorced from contemporary ideas in the spheres of art practice, critical theory, art history or museology."<sup>35</sup>

The aforementioned influences of the modernist view on art and education can be found to a large extent in the contemporary practice of teacher-centered teaching, in the emphasis on the Western canon as a model for the style and content of the subject, the use of prescribed rules for criticism and analysis, the exclusion of different ways of knowing and experiencing, as well as in the fragmentation of the curriculum.<sup>36</sup> However, awareness of these influences does not mean that we should now judge and reject past ideas in a modernist manner, but to build an understanding of how the practice got to where it is. Understanding is important for making informed decisions in the context of opportunities and for seeing more clearly the changing relationships between parts and the whole of

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34) Ivashkevich, "Children's Drawing as a Sociocultural Practice," 50.

35) Hughes, "Reconceptualizing the Art Curriculum," 41.

36) Garb, "New Methodologies in Art History: Implications for School Teaching," 347–356, *passim*.

the teaching process.<sup>37</sup> A meaningful and realistic analysis of teaching practice requires more than weighing the advantages and disadvantages of certain ways of working or singling out certain aspects of work.

## **POSTMODERN VIEW ON PAST APPROACHES**

A teacher must be familiar with the socio-historical contexts that shaped certain “truths” in art education and thus shaped the teaching practice. Teachers must engage their critical awareness of the historicity of subject pedagogy and the historical circumstances of traditional, modern and postmodern (and contemporary) artistic paradigms. Certainly, the teacher must be aware of patterns of bias, blind spots, and intentional exclusions, as well as of the inventiveness, intelligence, and ambition of past approaches.<sup>38</sup>

The past is studied to trace the genealogy of present-day problems. For example, the application of formalism in the curriculum represents a dualistic problem. On the one hand, formalism enabled abstract art, primitive art, and children’s artwork to be considered worthy of study, but on the other hand, this application prevented symbolic interpretation as a critical basis of art education. Freedman observed that Clive Bell’s formalist theory expanded the possibilities of art, promoting an appreciation of diversity in the visual arts, but also helped establish an artificial dichotomy between form

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37) Judith Burton, “The Practice of Teaching in K-12 Schools: Devices and Desires,” in *Handbook of Research and Policy in Art Education*, eds. Elliot Eisner and Michael Day (Mahwah/London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates; National Art Education Association, 2004), 553–575.

38) Neil Walton, “There Are No Formal Elements. Why We Need a Historicist Pedagogy of Art and Design,” in *Debates in Art and Design Education*, eds. Nicholas Addison and Lesley Burgess (London: Routledge, 2020), 72–81, accessed March 9, 2025, <https://research.gold.ac.uk/id/eprint/29683/>.

and content. The problem was exacerbated by the application of this theory in the curriculum as the only, or first, way of analyzing the image.<sup>39</sup>

Attitudes toward traditional arts, the Western canon, and traditional approaches to teaching should also not follow a single line. The practice of traditional teaching consisted of observing nature and imitating previous art.<sup>40</sup> Teaching art according to the traditional conception means passing on the heritage of culture, its forms, skills, and meanings. It follows that most of the art of traditional or indigenous societies is conservative rather than creative. The modern idea, instead of traditional orthodoxy, values new forms or those that the individual discovers anew. In the modern paradigm, teaching practice is based on guiding experimentation and discovery, in order to break the habits and conventions that obscure the sources of art. However, postmodern aspirations require an engaged study of the traditional. Tom Anderson and Melody K. Milbrandt emphasize the social functions of traditional art, which serve to reinforce and transmit basic cultural values and beliefs. Traditional art helps people clarify and consolidate their social relationships, history, customs, and values. The purpose of art or performance in traditional societies is to transmit values and beliefs from one person and one generation to another, and the purpose of the aesthetic element in works of art is to make people pay attention to that message.<sup>41</sup> Postmodern currents, therefore, challenge and reject the modernist emphasis on socially irresponsible individualism in art, which, unintentionally, succeeded more in strengthening certain dichotomies and exclusions.

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39) Freedman, *Teaching Visual Culture*, 30.

40) De Duve, "When Form Has Become Attitude and Beyond," 21.

41) Tom Anderson and Melody K. Milbrandt, *Art for Life: Authentic Instruction in Art* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2005), 4.

Postmodern and modern ideas are opposed in their understanding of tradition and change. Postmodern art education questions accepted assumptions about nature, children's artistic development, teaching practices, as well as ideas about aesthetic autonomy, normative, and definitive statements. Questions surrounding the social context of art creation and appreciation in the theory and practice of art education have become more legitimate, and therefore issues of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and multiculturalism are now considered essential for the discourse of postmodern art education.<sup>42</sup>

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CRITICAL PRACTICE**

Postmodern inquiry in art education is closely related to critical inquiry. Nicholas Addison explains that a critical approach should enable students to explore the purpose and meaning of their own and others' work, to study art through the exploration of additional and complementary meanings of immediate perception or personal judgment, meanings that are culturally specific and ideologically conditioned. Art, therefore, should be explored as a social and cultural practice, inextricably linked to its historical context.<sup>43</sup> As a way toward this, a significant number of authors emphasize the importance of including a wider range of visual and material culture, where no single example has a privilege in itself.<sup>44</sup> Visual artifacts are components of beliefs and values shaped by history, politics, and social context

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42) Ronald W. Neperud, *Context, Content, and Community in Art Education: Beyond Postmodernism* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1995), 4.

43) Addison and Burgess, *Learning to Teach Art and Design*, 247.

44) Doug Blandy and Paul E. Bolin, *Learning things: Material Culture in Art Education* (Teachers College Press, 2018), passim; Freedman, *Teaching Visual Culture*, passim.

and should not be studied in a vacuum. Critical pedagogy encourages the examination of these viewpoints and allows for the challenging of interest groups such as the state, the church, and other institutional authorities. Engaging with visual culture means broadening one's perspectives and asking questions that go beyond traditional norms. In this way, the perspectives and experiences of historically marginalized voices from different cultures, sexual orientations, and physical abilities can be more fully included in the larger discussion about how the world can be known.<sup>45</sup>

In order for the art teaching to be critical, the teacher should approach the design of the curriculum and the practice itself in the same way as a modern artist approaches themes or ideas. The practice and works of contemporary artists provide multiple experiences and multiple responses and raise the viewers' awareness of certain themes, ideas, and values. The practice of contemporary artists is interdisciplinary, aesthetically radical, inclusive, and multicultural. Contemporary practice in art, craft, and design blurs the boundaries between art and other forms of cultural production. The art object is no longer confined to the gallery, and the practitioner is no longer restricted only to the studio. Just as sites of practice can be anywhere from the natural environment to cyberspace, its methods can be interdisciplinary, spanning from anthropological to psychoanalytic.<sup>46</sup> Curriculum content, in the form of linear and sequenced formalistic content, can hardly support the introduction of such methods. A curriculum based on generative themes, the so-called big ideas, where the content in focus has the common functions of art in different cultures and the promotion of social change, builds space for the application of critical methods. The

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45) Burton, "The Practice of Teaching in K-12 Schools: Devices and Desires," 553-575.

46) Addison and Burgess, *Learning to Teach Art and Design*, 2.

Croatian curriculum of the subject Visual Culture in primary schools and the subject Visual Arts in high schools<sup>47</sup> is quite open and based on generative themes. However, the number of classes is limited, and if appropriate integrated teaching is not implemented, there is a risk that student learning will not be realized as intended.

A teacher using an interdisciplinary approach should consider the methodological resources from other subjects in the school curriculum, such as semiotics, media or cultural studies, geography, ecology, religious studies, and interculturalism. It is important to develop an awareness and openness to such possibilities and to learn to recognize the potential reciprocity between art and other areas of the curriculum. The contemporary conception of art is undoubtedly the most radical in the pedagogical sense because it questions all institutional frameworks. The application of the modern conception of art in teaching practice has the potential to democratize and merge the roles of teacher and student, making education a non-hierarchical, collaborative endeavor.<sup>48</sup>

Critical teaching requires a more constructive use of language as a means of communicating, developing ideas, thinking, and understanding the experiences that form the basis of creation. It is also important how artists and, therefore, students as well come to represent these experiences. Addison<sup>49</sup> advises teachers to help students recognize the ways in which artwork, craft, and design convey meaning differently from the way language conveys meaning, and to understand the

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47) *Kurikulum nastavnog predmeta Likovna kultura za osnovne škole i Likovna umjetnost za gimnazije* [Curriculum for Visual Culture in Elementary Schools and Visual Arts in Grammar Schools] (Ministarstvo znanosti i obrazovanja, 2019).

48) Burton, "The Practice of Teaching in K-12 Schools: Devices and Desires," 560.

49) Addison and Burgess, *Learning to Teach Art and Design*, 247–248.

significance of that difference. Discussing art and artists is an often-overlooked aspect of the art curriculum. Given the limited time available in art classes, the emphasis has traditionally been on practical work. When student work is grounded in personal experience and enriched by critical understanding, the creation becomes more meaningful to the student. Encouraging students to think, explore, and discuss the nature and purpose of art should be accomplished in ways that help students take responsibility for their own learning and support the creation of their own meaningful artworks. As artistic practice is an expressive, communicative and purposeful act, it is not surprising that people wanted to understand the social and cultural significance of such practice both in terms of the objects or events themselves and in relation to the purposes for which they were or could be used. According to Nicholas Addison, the social and critical act of discussion is a common means through which this takes place,

(...) a social process supplemented and extended through written and filmed discourses in which participants (in the contemporary field: artists, audiences, collectors, communities, critics, curators, historians) propose and defend, champion and critique practices that reach into every corner of people's lives (from the built environment to the digital screen). It is only through participating in discussion that pupils can begin to consider the questions that arise from these discourses in order to understand how their own practice relates to wider concerns and to enable them to contribute to contemporary debates in the field, whether they be on matters of aesthetics, economics, environmental sustainability, morality, purpose or taste.<sup>50</sup>

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50) Ibid., 247–248.

David Thistlewood proposed, as a criterion for inclusion in the critical canon of school art, “the notion of what, from the domain of experience, stimulates the creativity of the representative practitioner.”<sup>51</sup> The realm of experience, that is, the contexts in which creation takes place, is as legitimate a focus for critical inquiry as the work of art itself. However, teaching often begins with the work of art rather than its context, and therefore research tends to focus on formal and stylistic features. By shifting the starting point from the work of art to the contexts that determine and condition cultural production and the types of experiences and artifacts that can stimulate responses and form the basis for research, established practices can be radically altered. Such teaching can enable students to challenge the idea of a fixed solution and to explore the dynamic interactions of dialogue as they build ideas from different mutual responses. Instead of promoting the search for a single correct answer, where the teacher is the distributor of indisputable knowledge, critical practice should encourage awareness of different possibilities in terms of communication and the influence of each artist in their art-making.<sup>52</sup>

Because appropriate curriculum content is sometimes based on the idea of promoting consensus, teachers are often concerned that conflict in the curriculum will only confuse students, and teachers are careful not to teach about professional conflict in school. However, if education is to be intellectually challenging, educators must take responsibility for teaching about conflict because conflict often gives meaning. If cultural institutions in a democracy are to educate enlightened citizens who participate in political decision-making and work together to improve

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51) David Thistlewood, “Critical development in critical studies,” in *Critical Studies and Modern Art*, eds. Liz Dawtrey et al. (Milton Keynes: Open University, 1996), 1–8.

52) Addison and Burgess, *Learning to Teach Art and Design*, 247–248.

cultural conditions, then relationships and conflicts of meaning in the field of imagery must be addressed in the curriculum.<sup>53</sup>

The complexity of teaching about diversity or any other social issue related to visual culture, such as multiculturalism or ecology, requires a deeper understanding of all those involved in education, as well as the general public. The character of teaching and the institutional boundaries of schooling, even seemingly neutral aspects of schooling such as timetables, must be reexamined if such an understanding is to be achieved.<sup>54</sup>

When critically dismantled, hierarchy in classrooms and schools should enable real collaboration and collegiality. Critical pedagogy offers non-rule-bound, participatory instruction that involves the co-construction of knowledge between students and their teachers through careful listening and open dialogue, in order to explore the widest range of learning possibilities. In order to understand the different ways in which one's subjectivity, knowledge, and identity are formed as a result of existing in certain political, economic, and aesthetic environments, extensive study and sifting of competing hypotheses and viewpoints are necessary. In this situation, the teacher's role is that of an extremely knowledgeable member of the learning community.<sup>55</sup>

The art curriculum itself cannot be held solely responsible for the way the subject is perceived, valued, understood, and ultimately taught. Teachers' constructions and reconstructions of the notion of arts curriculum are shaped by the combination of experiences they encounter and reconsider, in various formal and informal settings and relationships, over a long period

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53) Freedman, *Teaching Visual Culture*, 124.

54) Ibid.

55) Barton, "The Practice of Teaching in K-12 Schools," 561.

of time. As for students, art is inseparable from the teacher, because the tasks, materials, goals, and lessons are imbued with the teacher's personal identity. Teachers' actions in art education are political in nature, as their decisions about whether to follow a disciplinary, socio/cultural, or other approach are ideological choices. Acting following an ideological choice is a political action. Awareness of differences enables choices to be made, while unquestioning and unreflective acceptance of a position makes choices impossible. Teachers can either be aware of the political choice they have made or act on unexamined assumptions, in which case choices are limited.<sup>56</sup> Making transparent how teachers translate their subject knowledge into practices that either support or hinder young people's learning needs to be the subject of discourse about the conception of the subject itself.<sup>57</sup>

## **CONCLUSION**

In the paper, we explored the issue of a critical approach in teaching, which draws a lot from critical pedagogy in terms of guiding principles, which we consider important for developing competences for lifelong learning. We consider the issue of art criticism in the classroom is worth exploring. George Geahigan has highlighted several important premises in the practices of art criticism, and his guidelines are consistent with what we believe is important in shaping critical practice. This author first tackled certain terms, emphasizing that they can have multiple meanings, and if not precisely defined, can create an intellectual problem. For example, he states that the concept of art criticism is linked to critical discourse, that is, the meanings

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56) Cary, *Critical Art Pedagogy*, 3–6.

57) Barton, "The Practice of Teaching in K-12 Schools," 571.

of critical research and discourse are mixed, so that students in art criticism classes observe works and talk or write about them. In this way, he leaves out what critics do in their work, which involves problem-solving in an effort to understand a work of art whose meaning is initially unclear. What is seen and understood in a work of art is always a reflection of the critic's background knowledge. And since it is, efforts to secure such knowledge must be recognized as an essential part of what critics do.<sup>58</sup>

In addition to clearly defining terms, George Geahigan argues that clearly defined procedures that apply to all classrooms and all conditions are not adequate, because in art criticism there are processes that go back and forth between interpretation and evaluation as the research continues. The problem of designing instruction for reflective thinking and inquiry in the classroom is not a problem of formulating a procedure for thinking, but rather of identifying the conditions that will encourage reflection and research. A key role here is played by what Dewey calls the "problem situation" in stimulating critical reflection. Reflection does not just happen automatically; certain conditions must be present. Reflection occurs when a normal train of thought or usual way of thinking is blocked or interrupted. Recognizing the problem depends both on the nature of the artwork and on the knowledge and understanding that the viewer brings to viewing that work.<sup>59</sup> Therefore, in critical teaching, the teacher does not convey universals, but looks for potentials for reflection and discussion. In order to do that, the teacher must be aware of the origin and place of certain knowledge and make certain choices, aware that those choices are shaped by their ideology.

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58) George Geahigan, "Models of Critical Discourse and Classroom Instruction: A Critical Examination," *Studies in Art Education*, no. 1 (1999): 6–21, accessed March 9, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1320247>.

59) Ibid.

There is also the possibility that the ideological choice is wrongly defined, that is, the teacher believes that they have made a certain ideological choice, but their actions and the practice say otherwise. This is why it is important to define terms and what such an ideological choice means in relation to the student during the course of the lesson, not in the assumed future. It is important to define choices in the context of what we expect to develop in students. The curricula define competences – what they mean and how they manifest in each student’s future. The task would then be to define what this means for the student in the context of art education at the present moment. What does the student do and know now? What can and what is the student allowed to do? And more importantly - how does the student feel and what kinds of relationships are built in art classes? Answers to these questions will give us a clear indication of whether we are on the right path.

It should not be hard to notice when someone enjoys, admires, and marvels at research and discovery. The motivation to communicate an idea or convey a message should not be invisible. Likewise, it should be evident that one is engaged, playful, and curious while experimenting, trying, and transforming, as well as when enjoying the joint venture, certain that one’s contribution will be valued.

Recommendations for critical practice presented by various authors, as well as for practices of art criticism in the classroom as advocated by Geahigan, require high competence from teachers, which in turn raises issues of additional training and changes needed in initial education. Reexamining the origin and influence of certain knowledge, the origin and influence of certain ideologies, and the reasons for the positivist heritage being deeply rooted in art education at all educational levels would be a significant step forward.