



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## Teacher Art Talk: What We Say Matters

Teresa L. Cotner

Visual Arts Research, Volume 36, Number 1, Issue 70, Summer 2010, pp. 73-84  
(Article)

Published by University of Illinois Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/var.2010.0006>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/398074>

## Teacher Art Talk: What We Say Matters

Teresa L. Cotner  
California State University, Chico

*This study examines art discourse from four elementary school art teachers who came to their classrooms with very different kinds of preparation: a student teacher, an artist in residence, a volunteer parent, and a credentialed art specialist. Two simultaneous and implicit functions of the teachers' spoken discourse are analyzed: an informational function and a social function. Findings illuminate strengths and weaknesses in art teacher talk, and suggest effective kinds of discourse that all teachers can utilize.*

Over 10 years of teaching art and preparing future teachers to teach art fuel my interest in classroom art talk (Cotner, 2000, 2001, 2003, 2009; Soep & Cotner, 1999). Talking is an important part of teaching (Taunton, 1983; Zander, 2003). What art teachers say and how they say it, contribute to students' development of art skills, conceptual understandings of art, and dispositions toward art. As a facet of my ongoing research on teacher talk, this pilot study looks briefly at what four different kinds of elementary art teachers said about art during lessons. Teachers included a student teacher, an artist in residence, a certified art teacher, and a parent volunteer. My underlying question for this study was, what curricular content and pedagogical approaches are discernible in excerpts of these different kinds of teachers' art talk?

### What Is Teacher Art Talk and Why Examine It?

Although the language we use in art classrooms is recognized to be at the core of constructing meaning in art (Parsons, 2002), naturalistic studies on art teacher

talk in actual classrooms is sparse. Linguists generally accept that language can affect patterns of thought and perceptions of reality (Whorf, 1956). Disciplines such as art, history, and science have their own vocabulary and styles of talk that can shape understandings (Lemke, 1990). The language of a discipline can affect dispositions toward that discipline and vice versa. Hanrahan (2006) observes that classroom discourse is dominated by the teacher and that classroom discourse should facilitate more socially just curricula. Teacher art talk is a semispontaneous part of teaching and learning threaded throughout art lessons. Teachers often have lesson plans, but seldom have scripts. Both teachers and students contribute to classroom art talk.

Classroom discourse has been examined in terms of patterns common to teachers' talk. For example, in invitation, response, evaluation, Cazden (2001) observes a pattern: The teacher invites the student(s) to respond, "What color is this?" The student(s) responds, "Orange," and the teacher evaluates the response, "Yes. That's right. The color is orange." Further studies have identified other teacher discourse strategies that focus on kinds of questions that can enhance student learning (Chin, 2007; T. Sharp, 2008). Critical discourse analysis seeks to understand large-scale social and political forces at work within the texts and subtexts of our lives. After the work of Cazden (2001), this pilot study briefly examines two simultaneous and implicit functions of talk, *informational* and *social*, as a foundation for further inquiry.

## Methodology

In this study, contents of teacher talk in their natural settings provide data for analysis (Creswell, 1994). Four teachers with varying kinds of preparation for teaching art were selected in order to provide breadth within a small data set. One teacher was of Asian descent, and the other three were Caucasian. One teacher was a man, and the other three were women. All four were between 40 and 55 years old. One was a student teacher, one was an artist in residence, one was a volunteer parent, and one was a credentialed art specialist. Each was observed during one 55-min class. The study is exploratory, serving as a pilot study for subsequent research.

Students in each classroom closely approximated the ethnic demographics of the state in which the study took place, California: White, 42.3%; Hispanic/Latino, 36.6%; Asian, 12.5%; Black, 6.7%; mixed race, 2.6%; American Indian/Alaskan, 1.2%; and Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 0.4% (<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/06000.html>). One classroom was in a public "gifted magnet" elementary school. The other three were in public (nonmagnet or charter) elementary schools.

One excerpt of teacher art talk was transcribed from audiotapes and field notes from each observation. Each exemplifies the talk of that individual teacher

on the day she or he was observed. Each excerpt is from talk during an introduction to a new project or new part of a project.

Each excerpt of teacher art talk is described, phrase by phrase, with regard to implicit informational and social functions (Tables 1–4). The *informational function* of the talk is categorized according to five basic domains that typify approaches to content-based or standards-based art instruction: (1) *art criticism*—description and/or interpretation of formal composition and/or content in art; (2) *studio*—discussion of skills, media, and/or processes of making art; (3) *art history*—discussion of artists, styles, time periods, geography, and culture; (4) *aesthetics*—judgment or valuing, and allusions to the existence and/or function of beauty and/or creative expression; and (5) *connections*—connecting any of the four aforementioned domains of visual art to other arts, nonart disciplines, and/or real-life contexts. Examination of the informational function of teacher art talk employed a deductive approach; in other words, the five domains were preexisting. They represent categories of desirable content for art classroom discourse examined in the transcripts.

*Social functions* of teacher art talk embody ways in which the teachers, as active speakers, and the students, as active listeners, establish and maintain kinds of relationships. This part of my analysis employed an inductive approach. For each phrase examined, I asked myself, “What is the assumed role of the speaker and of the listener implicit in this utterance?” The following five categories emerged as descriptors: (1) *director/directed*—the speaker states instruction on what to do, and the listener tries to comprehend and retain the information; (2) *supervisor/supervised*—the speaker states formative evaluation and acceptable behavior, and the listener differentiates between praise and suggestions for change; (3) *informer/informed*—the speaker states background information related to an activity, and the listener comprehends and retains deeper/broader understanding; (4) *practitioner/novice*—the speaker describes procedures and simultaneously demonstrates them, and the listener tries to comprehend and retain verbal and visual information; or (5) *contemplator/cocontemplator*—the speaker thinks out loud or asks a question for which the answer is not known, and the listener thinks about the speaker’s words and understands that a verbal response or change to the art project is not necessarily required, but rather left up to the listener to decide. Relationships 1–4 suggest a teacher-centered social structure and relationship 5 suggests shared power.

The excerpts of text selected from each teacher’s art talk are divided into short phrases (Tables 1–4). Each phrase is described in terms of its implicit informational and social functions. The short phrases of talk are in the column on the left and can be read one after the other in order to get a sense of how they flowed together at the time of the observed lesson. The middle column denotes the informational

function—(1) art criticism, (2) studio, (3) art history, (4) aesthetics, and (5) connections—implicitly communicated in each phrase. The column on the right denotes the social function—(1) director/directed, (2) supervisor/supervised, (3) informer/informed, (4) practitioner/novice, and (5) contemplator/cocontemplator—implicitly communicated in each phrase. Some phrases were considered to have more than one informational function, all were considered to have one social function.

## Results

### *Student Teacher*

The first participant in this study was a student teacher. The supervising teacher had not received training in teaching visual arts during her preparation for teaching, but the student teacher had. The student teacher taught first graders a lesson on making fish sock puppets. The excerpt of teacher art talk in Table 1 is typical of this teacher's teaching based on the lesson I observed. The art talk she employed suggests that she wanted the project to sound like fun to the students; for example, her use of words such as "wacky," "strange," and "cool." Close examination of her classroom art talk reveals that more than just a fun studio lesson was taught.

Concerning art content, or the informational function of talk, the student teacher's excerpt of art talk consists of talk that makes implicit references to studio,

TABLE 1. FIRST-GRADE CLASS WITH STUDENT TEACHER: SOCK FISH PUPPETS

Text	Informational function	Social function
1. Make an X, 2 X's where you want to make your eyes on your fish.	Art criticism Studio	Practitioner/novice
2. OK take your sock off,	Studio	Director/directed
3. and let it sit so the eyes can dry.	Studio	Director/directed
4. Now in front of you, you see different color foam.	Studio	Informer/informed
5. You'll share the colors.	Studio	Supervisor/supervised
6. You'll cut out wacky, strange shapes.	Art criticism Studio	Director/directed
7. Why? 'Cause your fish need fins to swim in the water.	Criticism Aesthetics	Informer/informed
8. Wacky shapes.	Art criticism	Director/directed
9. I have some really cool looking teeth [for the fish].	Art criticism	Contemplator/ cocontemplator
10. The wonderful thing about art is it's whatever you think it is.	Aesthetics	Informer/informed

art criticism, and aesthetics. While studio receives much attention in this short excerpt, art criticism and aesthetics add depth and breadth to the teacher art talk. References to art history and connections are not found in this excerpt.

The implicit social functions of the talk reveal that the student teacher was a director (relationship 1—giving instruction on what to do) much of the time. Her talk also indicates that she was supervisor (relationship 2—giving formative evaluation and monitoring behavior), informer (relationship 3—giving background information), practitioner (relationship 4—describing procedures and simultaneously demonstrating them), and contemplator (relationship 5—thinking out loud or asking a question for which the answer is not known). This teacher’s art talk exemplifies mostly teacher-centered pedagogy (relationships 1–4). However, the one instance of contemplator/cocontemplator (relationship 5, Table 1, line 9), “I have some really cool looking teeth,” creates an interlude of sharing power. The students, as active listeners, are invited to contemplate her remark along with her, but are not required to do or change anything. While her talk suggests that a certain material *can* be used to create “really cool looking teeth,” students are free to think for themselves and make decisions accordingly.

### *Artist in Residence*

The second participant was an artist in residence in a second-grade classroom. An *artist in residence* is a professional artist who is hired, or may volunteer, to teach art during the regular schoolday or in after-school programs. The artist had taught art at the elementary level for over 10 years. He had extensive experience as a working artist. His talk was filled with powerful concepts such as “want,” “choice,” and “rightness.” However, what is more impressive about the text of the artist is the variety in his use of the informational functions 1–4 and his frequent use of the more student-centered, social function: contemplator.

The informational functions implicit in the artist-in-residence talk contained utterances that pertained to art criticism, studio, art history, and aesthetics, but not connections. The inclusion of art criticism, art history, and aesthetics talk are a testament to the rich context he brings to the lesson. Connections talk—making connections between the drawing activity and activities outside of the classroom or in other academic disciplines—could have added even more breadth and depth to the informational aspects of this excerpt of teacher art talk.

The implicit social function of his talk includes four of the five categories of social functions that emerged in this study. There are no instances denoting the role of director (relationship 1—giving instruction on what to do). Instead, he employed the roles of supervisor (relationship 2—giving formative evaluation and monitoring behavior), informer (relationship 3—giving background informa-

TABLE 2. SECOND-GRADE CLASS WITH ARTIST-IN-RESIDENCE: DRAWING

Text	Informational function	Social function
1. We are inheritors of the Renaissance.	Studio Art history	Informer/informed
2. Keep it simple.	Art criticism Studio	Supervisor/supervised
3. The right answer is always simple.	Studio Aesthetics	Informer/informed
4. Make the line right.	Art criticism Studio Aesthetics	Practitioner/novice
5. Sometimes good art depends on choices.	Studio Art history Aesthetics	Informer/informed
6. All your lines will look different.	Studio	Informer/informed
7. It sits there.	Art criticism	Practitioner/novice
8. That's what artists say, "It sits there."	Art criticism Art history Aesthetics	Informer/Informed
9. I don't want to tell you, "Go fast,"	Studio	Contemplator/ cocontemplator
10. and I don't want to tell you "Go slow."	Studio	Contemplator/ cocontemplator

tion), practitioner (relationship 4—describing procedures and simultaneously demonstrating them), and contemplator (relationship 5—thinking out loud or asking a question for which the answer is not known). Supervisor, informer, and practitioner suggest a teacher-centered pedagogy, but this excerpt also shows that the artist in residence was comfortable in the role of contemplator when he talked to his students. The absence of director talk and the two instances of contemplator talk may suggest a healthy balance between teacher-centered and student-centered teaching.

### *Volunteer Parent*

The third participant was a volunteer parent in a third-grade classroom who chose to participate in her child's class by teaching art. She did not have formal training in art and was not credentialed to teach. In her lesson on folded and cut paper designs, she was enthusiastic. She appeared to enjoy teaching art to her son and his classmates and to want them to enjoy the class, as well. In this excerpt (Table 3), she describes the activities as "easy" or "not hard," and she describes student work and work habits as "nice."

The informational functions of the volunteer parent's art talk made implicit

TABLE 3. THIRD-GRADE CLASS WITH VOLUNTEER PARENT: FOLDING AND CUT-PAPER DESIGNS

Text	Informational function	Social function
1. I choose a hexagon because it's easy to make.	Studio	Informer/informed
2. I don't want to give you something that's hard to fold.	Studio	Informer/informed
3. All artists when they start out use newsprint.	Studio Art history	Informer/informed
4. Why? This one is easy to work with.	Studio Art history	Informer/informed
5. The corners need to touch.	Studio Aesthetics	Practitioner/novice
6. Nice and neat, nice and neat.	Art criticism Studio	Supervisor/supervised
7. I cut a half circle.	Studio	Practitioner/novice
8. Then, maybe, I want to do something.	Art criticism Studio Aesthetics	Contemplator/ cocontemplator
9. OK, we go step by step so nobody gets confused.	Studio	Director/directed
10. Very nice.	Art criticism	Supervisor/supervised

references to art history. These references were about artists at the point of their career when they are just starting out. It is very important for young artists to learn that all the great artists throughout time were also once novices like themselves. She made many implicit references to art criticism, studio, and aesthetics. This reflects her ability to think and talk about art in a variety of ways. For example, phrase 5 references corners as “needing to touch.” Phrase 8 implies that the demonstration artwork in her hands is speaking to her on some level and that she is trying to understand the message, “Then, maybe, I want to do something.” No references to connections are noted.

In the social functions implicit in the volunteer parent's talk, she acts as informer (relationship 3—giving background information), which may suggest her familiarity with the art project taught. She is also director (relationship 1—giving instruction on what to do), supervisor (relationship 2—giving formative evaluation and monitoring behavior), and practitioner (relationship 4—describing procedures and simultaneously demonstrating them), which further suggests her confidence in talking about the cut-paper art project and showing how it is done. Finally, in the instance of contemplator talk (relationship 5—thinking out loud or asking a question for which the answer is not known), she shows her willingness to invite students to think along with her.

*Art Specialist*

The fourth participant was an art specialist in a fourth-grade classroom and the only credentialed art teacher in this study. This teacher teaches several grades at more than one school site. The art specialists taught the second half of a lesson about pictographs. The students had already created their “rocks” out of papier-mâché (Table 4). In this excerpt of text, phrase 5 is an example of “classroom management” talk, which does not actually address art at all, so the informational function column is marked with an asterisk.

The informational function of her talk implicitly refers to art criticism, studio, art history, and connections, but not to aesthetics. The references to art criticism, studio, and connections imply notable attention to supplying the students with a variety of background context. The references to connections, the more explicit references to art history, and the lack of reference to aesthetics are a stark contrast to the other three examples of teacher art talk.

On the social level, the art specialist spoke as director (relationship 1—giving instruction on what to do) only in terms of classroom management, not in

TABLE 4. FOURTH-GRADE CLASS WITH ART SPECIALIST: PICTOGRAPHS ON ROCKS

Text	Informational function	Social function
1. OK, who can tell me—one, two, three—what we’re doing?	Studio	Supervisor/supervised
2. Rock art, good.	Studio Art history	Informer/informed
3. A pictograph is when they use a rock or a stone and paint on it with different kinds of dyes,	Studio	Informer/informed
4. and tell a story.	Art history Studio	Informer/informed
5. If you don’t find your name on your rock, bring them back to my table.	Art history *	Director/directed
6. OK, I think there are different kinds of stories, . . .	Art history Connections	Informer/informed
7. maybe friendship, . . .	Art history Connections	Informer/informed
8. or family, . . .	Art history Connections	Informer/informed
9. or, no? You don’t think so?	Art history Connections	Contemplator/ cocontemplator
10. Mammals, kinds of mammals . . .	Art history Connections	Informer/informed

\* An example of “classroom management” talk, which does not actually address art at all.

terms of creating art (line 5). Excessive use of classroom management talk during an art lesson can be considered an interruption to the flow of the lesson (P. Sharp, 1981). In the role of supervisor (relationship 2—giving formative evaluation and monitoring behavior) and informer (relationship 3—giving background information), she clearly appears to be in charge throughout the lesson. Nevertheless, in line 9, “or, no? You don’t think so?” she becomes a contemplator. She accepts that a student has a differing opinion, thus offering a verbal cue to all students that they are allowed to have opinions different from hers.

### Discussion and Recommendations

The excerpts of teacher art talk presented in this essay are representative examples that illuminate the informational and social functions of spoken discourse. They also capture a snapshot of each of the four teachers. The student teacher did talk about studio, art criticism, and aesthetics, but not about art history or connections. Having taken an art education course for preservice elementary school teachers, she was certainly aware of these domains of art. After the lesson was over, she told me that she had wanted to include art history and art criticism, but there was not enough time. The student teacher took on all five social roles in the example of her art talk. She was director most of the time, which may mean that she was telling students exactly what to do rather than giving them room to make creative choices. The roles of practitioner, supervisor, and informer can offer more decision making on the part of the students. The role of contemplator, as described earlier, is the one social function of teacher art talk identified in this study where each teacher, for a moment or two, invited independent thinking on the part of the students. The artist in residence appears to be a sophisticated speaker based on the excerpt of his art talk. The informational function of his talk is rich with references, implicit and explicit, to studio, art criticism, art history, and aesthetics, but makes no references to connections. He told me that he was not interested in the arts standards, that he taught art the way he felt it should be taught. Nevertheless, the excerpt of talk suggests someone who is quite capable of teaching the many domains of art. The social functions of the artist in residence’s talk, in comparison to the student teacher’s talk, show more willingness to let students think independently due to his lack of use of the director role and two strong phrases where he is contemplator. The volunteer parent talked mostly about studio in the informational function of her talk. Unlike the artist in residence, she also made only indirect references to the other domains of art. Like the student teacher and the artist in residence, she did not employ connections talk. In only one instance in the excerpt did she attempt to get the students to perform their work in lockstep (line 9 in Table 3). However, like the other three teachers, she could also suspend control

and use contemplator talk. The art specialist is the only teacher of the four to use connections talk and the only one to not use aesthetics talk. Her talk, however, reflects attention to arts standards that, in California, include the five informational domains discussed in this essay. Her talk also revealed attention to classroom management that did not appear in the other excerpts.

The examples discussed in this study show that these are functions of talk that anyone can add to their own talk. Making references to artists and art styles and making connections between art and other subjects will strengthen any teacher's art talk. Thinking out loud, or asking questions to which we do not have the answers, is likely to be a constructive way for teachers to help students to be active learners. The student teacher did a more substantive job than she may have thought. Nevertheless, her talk could be improved by adding art history and connections talk and more contemplator talk and by decreasing the use of director talk. The artist in residence employed all functions of talk except director and connections talk. The lack of connections talk may suggest that this pedagogical practice of making connections between art and other disciplines and to the world and the lives of students outside the classroom is not in the forefront of the mind of an artist-teacher. He also appears to have not felt the need to direct student art making or to have been more attentive to their creative and technical growth as artists. The volunteer parent's talk included all functions except for connections talk. Yet all functions of her talk and every teachers' talk could improve if they looked at examples of teacher art talk and added more substantive information and more opportunities for students to be creative, solve problems, think for themselves. If art teachers see similarities between this example of talk and their own, they might consider adding more contemplator talk to their classroom art talk in order to engage students in active, rather than passive, learning modes. The art specialist appears to have been more attentive to standards-based teaching. She also appears to have spent more time on off-task talk. Art specialists teach art in many classrooms, often in many schools. As a result, classroom discipline is a common concern. The art specialist's students had more trouble staying in their seats and listening quietly. This did not occur in any of the other observations. Too much talk devoted to norms of classroom behavior can be a distraction from teaching and learning in art. Art teachers can improve the focus and fluidity of instruction by separating "housekeeping" talk from art talk. The art specialist does not appear to have attended to matters of Aesthetics in her lesson perhaps because the role and definition of aesthetics in art education is, for many in the field, debated and controversial (Duncum, 2007; Tavin, 2007).

In this pilot study of teacher art talk, I have examined four short excerpts of talk by four very different elementary school-level art teachers in order to consider an array of qualities that are implicit in teacher art talk. On the informational

level, each teacher's talk touched upon important qualities of art, including those having to do with art criticism, art history, aesthetics, connections, and studio. On the social level, each assumed a variety of roles, and while most of the talk had a teacher-centered function, each teacher was contemplator at least once, thus practicing, if only for a moment, student-centered pedagogy. Each teacher's talk shows room for improvement, and my hopes are that this inquiry can serve as a tool with which teachers can examine, and consequently enrich, their own talk. Toward this end, the following three recommendations have been gleaned from this study: (a) Teachers should include implicit or indirect references, as well as explicit references, to art criticism, art history, aesthetics, and connections *throughout* studio instruction rather than just as activities in conjunction with, but separate from, studio instruction. (b) Including more contemplator talk in teacher classroom discourse is greatly needed to facilitate students' independent thinking. (c) Teacher credential (certificate) and MFA programs should include consideration of the nature and function of classroom discourse so that future teachers can teach with a heightened awareness of the role of teacher art talk in teaching art.

Classroom discourse tends to be somewhat spontaneous. Becoming more aware of the content of classroom art talk can help teachers recognize the extent to which they attend to different domains of art and to different styles of pedagogy. Through attention to the informational and social functions of teacher art talk, there is potential for teachers to enhance the quality of instruction. What we say matters, very much.

## References

- Cazden, C. B. (2001). *Classroom discourse: The language of teaching and learning* (2nd ed.). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Chin, C. (2007). Teacher questions in science classrooms: Approaches that stimulate productive thinking. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 44(6), 815–843.
- Cotner, T. (2000). *Classroom art talk: How discourse shapes teaching and learning in a high school art classroom*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Stanford University School of Education.
- Cotner, T. (2001). Why study classroom art talk? *Art Education*, 54(1), 12–17.
- Cotner, T. (2003). Talking art in the limelight. In S. Klein (Ed.), *Teaching art in context*. Reston, VA: National Art Education Association.
- Cotner, T. (2009). Teaching aesthetics: What my students taught me. *International Journal of Early Childhood Education*, 16, 45–54.
- Creswell, J. W. (1994). *Research design: Qualitative & Quantitative Approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Duncum, P. (2007). Nine reasons for the continuing use of an aesthetic discourse in art education. *Art Education*, 60(2), 46–51.
- Hanrahan, M. U. (2006). Highlighting hybridity: A critical discourse analysis of teacher talk in science classrooms. *Science Education*, 90(1), 8–43.

- Lemke, J. L. (1990). *Talking science: Language, learning, and values*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Parsons, M. (2002). Aesthetic experience and the construction of meanings. *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 36(2), 24–37.
- Sharp, P. (1981). *The development of aesthetic response in early education*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Stanford University School of Education.
- Sharp, T. (2008). How can teacher art talk support learning? *Linguistics and Education: An International Research Journal*, 19(2), 132–148.
- Soep, E., & Cotner, T. (1999). Speaking the mind and minding the speech: Novices interpreting art. *Studies in Art Education*, 40(4), 350–372.
- Taunton, M. (1983). Questioning strategies to encourage young children to talk about art. *Art Education*, 36(4), 40–43.
- Tavin, K. (2007). Eyes wide shut: The use and uselessness of the discourse of aesthetics in art education. *Art Education* 60(2), 40–45.
- Whorf, B. L. (1956). *Language, thought, and reality: Selected writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf* (J. B. Carrol, Ed.). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Zander, M. J. (2003). Talking, thinking, responding and creating: A survey of literature on talk in art education. *Studies in Art Education* 44(2), 117–134.