

RECENT RESEARCH IN RATIONAL-EMOTIVE THERAPY AND
APPLICATIONS FOR ART EDUCATION

by

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ABSTRACT

Thought as formative to emotions is the central concept of Rational-Emotive Therapy (RET). RET advances the idea that people can be trained to think more rationally by avoiding the use of absolutistic and over-general words, and thus alter their inappropriate emotions and behaviors. A form of language called E-prime, in which the use of the verb to be is avoided is also advocated by RET theorists.

Art educators may be able to more effectively manage some major problems which arise in art learning situations by implementing RET principles and language in the art classroom. This paper examines RET principles significant to art learning and advances specific applications of these principles and concepts for art educators.

INTRODUCTION

The salient premise of this paper is that language affects emotions and thus behavior. By the development and use of a rational language pattern art teachers can help students develop more rational belief systems, help students develop a rational system of evaluative behaviors with respect to art work, and positively affect the artistic quality of student art work.

In the past, creative ability was looked upon as either a mystical occurrence or a simple accident of heredity. Today many educators, psychologists, and philosophers are attempting to make definitive statements about the educator's role in the nurturance of creative ability. They believe that teachers have the power to elicit and enhance creativity by encouraging and discouraging certain responses and behaviors in their students. Art educators can utilize information from these other areas of learning to aid them in the enhancement of a creative environment.

How can a teacher encourage or discourage behaviors in an art learning situation? Dreikurs and Grey (1970, p. 26) state that "encouragement involves the ability to accept the child as worthwhile, regardless of any deficiency, and to assist him in developing his capacities

and potentialities." Although the concept of encouragement is widely embraced, many teachers misunderstand the principles of encouragement and inadvertently discourage their students.

Oral language is one of the primary modes of communication utilized for student encouragement. Learning theorists are just now uncovering the relationship between language and other kinds of behaviors, such as creative behaviors. Psycholinguists believe that language provides a system for programming our perceptions, our actions, and our emotions. Learning can take place only if appropriate internal language exists. In addition, many cognitive-behavior theorists believe that some forms of internal language generate emotions. One theory of human behavior with promise for changing creative behaviors is Rational-Emotive Therapy.

Albert Ellis originated Rational-Emotive Therapy (RET), a form of semantic psychotherapy, in 1955. In A New Guide to Rational Living, Ellis and Harper (1975, p. 15) state:

As human, you have four basic processes, all indispensable to your survival and happiness: 1. You perceive or sense--see, taste, smell, feel, hear. 2. You feel or emote--love, hate, fear, feel guilty, or depressed. 3. You move or act--walk, eat, swim, climb, and so forth. 4. You reason or think--remember, imagine, hypothesize, conclude, solve problems.

People usually experience these four basic life processes simultaneously or in some degree of overlap, instead of independently. Ellis emphasizes the failure to exercise control over one's emotions as the central problem or obstacle to the full development of our potentialities as human beings.

The primary consideration of RET is the possibility of altering inappropriate emotions and thus behaviors by semantic therapy. Can emotions be manipulated so that behavior changes? Ellis (1977, p. 4) says, "People invariably talk to themselves (and others) and the kinds of things they say to themselves, as well as the forms in which they say these things, significantly affect their emotions and behavior. . . ."

RET advances the idea that people tell themselves a variety of sane (rational) and crazy (irrational) things. One of the best methods that can be used to change behavior consists of one's being cognizant of and disputing his or her irrational verbalizations. Rational self-talk can be substituted for irrational self-talk. In addition, the use of rational language patterns can influence the behavior of others.

Children learn attitudes by observing and copying their parents, teachers, and other significant adults, much as they learn language. If children observe adults expressing their feelings in a constructive, positive manner

and using a language system which avoids overgeneralizations and absolutes they will likely adopt these behaviors. Consequently, children would probably be influenced to use this new communication system. If children are influenced to develop a more rational belief system and language their behavior would likely reflect this.

Art educators can benefit from the incorporation of many RET principles within their classrooms. Some specific areas where RET would prove beneficial are as follows: development of a descriptive art vocabulary, encouragement during the working period, evaluation of student work, and renewed motivation of discouraged students.

Four hypotheses will be investigated in this paper. Children who are exposed to the use of a rational belief system and language pattern (RET) by art instructors will exhibit positive changes in the artistic quality of their art work. Students exposed to RET will feel discouraged less often. Students can be remotivated more easily when RET is implemented in the classroom. The final hypothesis is that students will develop a rational system of self-evaluative behaviors with respect to their own and others' art work if they have experienced a learning environment where RET is practiced. Each hypothesis stated above will be explored by a review of the aims and methods of RET and applications made to art learning.

RATIONAL-EMOTIVE THERAPY THEORIES

In "Rational-Emotive Therapy: Research Data That Support the Clinical and Personality Hypotheses of RET and Other Modes of Cognitive-Behavior Therapy," Ellis (1977) discusses most of the major RET hypotheses and cites empirical confirmation on each. Four of these hypotheses are significant in the context of art learning.

Thinking Creates Emotion

Thought as formative to emotions is a concept central to RET. People frequently perceive, emote, act, and think in an overlapping manner. Emotions and behaviors are not simply reactions to something in the environment, but are influenced by thoughts and beliefs about the environment. In RET this is called the ABC theory; A = an activating event, B = beliefs and thoughts about A, and C = the emotional consequence of resultant behavior.

Peoples' emotions or reactions to an event in their environment are largely affected by the semantic processes and self-statements they utilize. Humans possess the ability to change their internalized attitudes and self-statements and thereby significantly change their behavior.

Irrational Thinking

Most people possess several irrational ideas about significant areas of their lives and these irrational ideas interfere with the attainment of appropriate thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. Some art students believe that abstract forms of art are worthless, for example, or could be done by any four-year-old. RET subscribers believe that people can be retrained to accept newer, more rational, and more empirical belief systems through a process of disputing, challenging, and questioning.

Another form of irrational thinking is absolutistic thinking, which consists of dogmatically believed shoulds, musts, oughts, and their subsequently emoted awfuls and terribles. People frequently believe such things as "I must do perfectly on my sculpture or it will be awful." Another kind of absolutistic irrational self-talk is characterized by such words as never and always. Students sometimes believe these over-generalizations, such as "I always do badly in art," thus dooming themselves to failure before they begin to work.

Self-Rating

People have strong innate and acquired tendencies to rate their feelings and actions as bad or good. In this process they inevitably rate their entire being or self as good or bad as well. RET strives to show people that their

actions and thoughts are simply actions and thoughts, and that they are separate from their inherent worth as a person. A student who frequently spills paint and makes messes might think that he or she is a bad art student and, thus, a bad person. He or she could be shown with rational methods that spilling paint is unfortunate but that it is not terrible, nor does it make him or her a bad art student or a bad person.

Locus of Control

When people view their behaviors and others' responses to them as being acts of fate or luck (external locus of control) they behave and feel differently than if they view aspects of their life as being within their control (internal locus of control). Many art students believe that they have no talent and so can never learn to draw. People who view events as externally caused tend to avoid some life situations rather than face self-responsibilities in life. With the use of RET people can begin to understand that, to a large degree, they can take control of their thoughts, feelings, and actions.

The Language of E-Prime

In recent years an attempt has been made to rewrite some basic RET texts in E-prime in the hope of extending their efficacy. Simply stated, E-prime is English minus all forms of the verb to be. Bourland (1966, p. 112) proposes

this semantically interesting alteration in the English language. "If we represent the whole of the English language as E, and the linguistic element 'to be' with all its inflectional forms by e, then this paper concerns the language E', defined as: $E' = E - e$."

One of the first people to warn of the use of the verb to be was Alfred Korzybski. In Science and Sanity he wrote:

For thousands of years, millions upon millions of humans have used a great deal of their nervous energy in worrying upon delusional questions, forced upon them by the pernicious "is" of identity, such as: "What is an object?", "What is life?", "What is hell?", "What is heaven?", "What is space?", "What is time?", and an endless array of such irritants. The answer, based on the human discrimination of orders of abstractions and so proper human evaluation, is definite, undeniable, simple, and unique; "Whatever one might say something 'is,' it is not." Whatever we might say belongs to the verbal level and not to the un-speakable, objective levels (Korzybski, 1958, pp. 408-409).

In A New Guide to Rational Living, Ellis and Harper (1975) note some advantages to the use of E-prime.

1. We eliminate some essentially unanswerable questions, such as "What is art?"
2. We eliminate some misleading abbreviations, such as "That is the right thing to do."
3. We reveal some usually hidden people to whom certain information and feelings are credited. Rather than "It has been found that"--which is

exceptionally vague--it is better to say that "In his study X found. . . ."

4. We expand our awareness of the linguistic environment and find ways to improve these conditions. "My teachers are the source of all my problems" can be seen instead as, "My teachers criticize me harshly; I take them seriously and therefore upset myself."
5. We eliminate the finality and completeness implied when we use the verb to be, such as roses are red, which strongly implies that all roses at all times possess redness.
6. We eliminate absolutistic, self-fulfilling prophecies and labeling, such as "I am a failure and I will always be a failure," or "I have never been any good in art."

Bourland and Ellis hypothesize that people will tend to hold more rational and sensible beliefs and will emotion-
alize in a less self-defeating manner when they become accustomed to thinking and speaking in this kind of language. When we practice this form of language we give up most of the passive voice, the subjunctive mode, and subject-predicate language (roses are red) becomes impossible. We thus become forced to use action verbs, which are more functional and straightforward.

APPLICATIONS TO ART EDUCATION

. . . talk can foster constructive change. . . But it must be the right kind of talk.

. . . certain kinds of messages have a therapeutic or healthy effect on people. They make people feel better, encourage them to talk, help them express their feelings, foster a feeling of worth or self-esteem, reduce threat or fear, facilitate growth and constructive change (Gordon, 1974, p. 59).

Most teachers can learn to communicate more rationally and become more effective helping agents. By instituting a series of RET practices in their classrooms teachers can facilitate many of the qualities Gordon mentions within their regular interactions with students. Some specific applications of RET in the art classroom are discussed in the following section of the paper: how rational belief systems and language patterns of art teachers can influence student art behaviors, minimize discouragement, aid in renewing motivation, and encourage students to develop self-evaluative behaviors with respect to art work.

Classroom Exposure to RET Principles and Language Fosters Behavior Change

Classroom exposure to RET principles and language fosters positive changes in the artistic quality of student work. When teachers demonstrate verbally a feeling of

acceptance for their students they possess a powerful tool for producing behavior changes. A student who feels insecure or threatened in an art classroom will not likely be capable of working to his full potential. Thinking habits which generate insecurity can be changed by the teacher. The first step toward changing thinking habits of students requires the establishment of a relationship in which the student feels trust and acceptance. With appropriate language skills teachers can help students learn to accept themselves, to acquire a stronger sense of self-worth, and develop and actualize their inherent potential.

Development of a responsive relationship with young people can be fostered by some good listening habits. Young (1974) says to allow periods of uninterrupted listening, and to accept the student's reality perspective regardless of how distorted or limited it may seem. Gordon (1974) states that acknowledgment responses, such as nodding, smiling, leaning forward, and verbal cues (oh, I see), tell a student you are listening. Some students need further encouragement to talk. The listener may say, "Sounds like that is important to you," or "I am interested, tell me more."

Once a trusting relationship has been established students feel less threat in the teacher's discussions or critiques of their art work. Remarks about work in progress can be approached with statements that help students question and confront some of their irrational beliefs about

the nature of art and good composition. Specific remarks can be worded semantically to avoid over-generalizations: it is usually better to place your center of interest slightly off center, or it might be better to use a cool color there instead of a warm color. When confronted with absolutes or over-generalizations many students become argumentative and irrational. Besides providing a model of rational communication the teacher can also avoid needless conflicts with the use of RET. It might be concluded that when art students work in an environment where they feel respected and worthwhile and where teacher comments are non-threatening and objective, they will spend an increased amount of time-on-task and the artistic quality of their work will be improved.

Discouragement and Remotivation

Discouragement is minimized and remotivation is aided by the use of RET concepts. The problems of discouragement and remotivation are closely related and will be examined together. According to Clements (1976), art students that require special attention during the working period fall into one of three categories: frightened, bored, or discouraged. The frightened student is fearful of censure or ridicule. The bored student needs more individualized direction from the teacher. The discouraged student feels inadequate and defeated. Clements (1976)

outlines plans for handling each of these problems once they are recognized. However, if RET is practiced in the classroom the problems could be dealt with in a preventive manner and possibly avoided altogether.

When a student ceases working remedial RET strategies are necessary. The teacher will probably find it necessary to encourage the non-working student to discuss his problem. Some messages which encourage discussion are these: "Looks like you are having some difficulty with this assignment," or "You seem to feel frustrated, want to tell me about it?" The teacher's next action is to listen to the student's disclosure. When the teacher receives the student's message he or she must decide what the actual problem is. The accuracy of the teacher's inference is checked or mirrored back to the student. Such a response might be, "You seem unhappy with the shapes you have drawn." Once the problem has been accurately described the teacher can suggest improvements. The teacher's responses at all levels will be most effective when absolutes and over-generalizations are avoided.

Developing a Rational System of Self-Evaluative Student Behaviors

Students who are exposed to RET principles and language in the art classroom will develop a rational system of evaluative behaviors with respect to their art work and ultimately, to all art work. Children learn value systems and language by copying significant adults. If children

experience rational objective criticism of their art work there is a strong possibility that they will emulate the language used by the teacher. They will probably learn to use self-evaluative behaviors which avoid absolutes and over-generalizations. A rational objective system of art criticism can be fostered at any level of education by the implementation of the following evaluative practices which emphasize RET principles.

All description and analysis of student art work will be done with active verbs. The use of the verb to be will be avoided. This practice will eliminate the student's tendency to begin an evaluation with a remark such as it is good, it is ugly, or it is interesting. This process will also help students sharpen their skills of observation and description. Better statements will evolve: "Mary's painting exhibits contrast and balance," or "It might have been better to include more detail in the center of the drawing."

Offer no criticism unless a suggestion of a way to remedy the problem can be offered. In addition, it may be helpful to mention areas of student work which are acceptable before mentioning problems.

Avoid the use of absolutes such as always, never, all, should, must, and ought; as well as negative emotion producing words like bad, awful, poor, terrible. Choose

instead frequent, seldom, it might be better, and inappropriate.

Students will require guidance in the use of E-prime language. A simple explanation to the class about the problems encountered when the verb to be is used, as well as a statement of what you hope to accomplish by the use of E-prime could precede any criticism assignments. A teacher-led oral evaluation of art work can serve as a model for students. Additionally, a written criticism assignment in E-prime will help older students become more comfortable with its use. Feldman's (1970) four stages of art criticism --description, analysis, interpretation, and evaluation-- provide a good model for secondary school students to work with E-prime language. The activity that follows suggests how to include the use of E-prime in a written art criticism assignment.

1. Description--Make an objective listing of every detail and feature that you see in the work. Avoid the use of the verb to be in your evaluation. Use instead active verbs such as, I see, exhibits, appears, seems. This phase of the evaluation process draws attention to whatever is worth seeing in the work. It forces you to pause and carefully observe before you make a judgment. Description gives you the opportunity to receive agreement from a group as to what you are seeing and evaluating.

2. Analysis--Describe the relationships among the objects and forms you listed in the above step. How do the forms affect each other? How do the elements of color and texture relate to the forms and to each other? As before, the use of the verb to be is avoided.
3. Interpretation--This stage of your evaluation is perhaps the most complex. Do not fear being wrong--there is no right or wrong answer. What main idea or goal seems to sum up all your previous observations? An interpretation can be the statement of some problem the work attempts to solve. The best interpretation of a work would be one that makes sense of the visual data observed and seems most pertinent or meaningful to its viewers. Avoid the verb to be.
4. Judgment--In this stage of the art criticism you must decide the relative value of the work of art. You may base your evaluation on the basis of the visual pleasure it stimulates, or the emotions it generates, or the effectiveness of its message. Your judgment or opinion about the work will require some substantiation from the three steps above. When you make your judgment use words or phrases which avoid absolute labels such as good, bad, poor, or average. Use instead statements such

as worth serious attention, seems very valuable, appears successful, or seems satisfactory.

Suggestions for Research

There has been little or no research undertaken by art educators on the effects of cognitive-causality and art behaviors. Thus the following suggestions are offered as possible issues for research:

1. Effects of the use of E-prime language on acquisition of descriptive vocabulary in art.
2. The use of varied forms in the artwork of students exposed to Rational-Emotive educational practices in the art classroom.
3. A study of student time spent on-task in an art room where Rational-Emotive educational practices are utilized.
4. Student modeling of E-prime and rational language patterns exhibited by instructor (would simple exposure to E-prime and rational language patterns be sufficient to implement modeling).

Research in cognitive-causality and art behaviors would probably indicate that the artistic quality of student work is improved in classrooms where RET activities, principles, and language are initiated. Children would most likely be found to model the art vocabulary, evaluative, and valuing systems of their art teacher. And finally, students

working in classrooms where RET principles and a rational language system are practiced by the instructor would tend to spend more time on-task than similarly skilled students in a control group.

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