

In a choice-based art program, the classroom becomes a “studio” and students are treated as artists. Individual students are responsible for designing and implementing their “art problems,” and initiating their own projects. This system honors individual learning styles and preferences, enabling children to work from their own strengths and interests and to draw on prior knowledge and experience.

Students may work alone or with peers, may “specialize” or may sample from a wide array of options. Students can persist with one project over many weeks, or try a variety of activities during a single class period. In this way, multiple learning styles and preferences are served.

Discovery learning and emergent curriculum are integral and ongoing. In a choice-based classroom, students are engaged in the real work of artists, from the inception of the idea to the display of finished work.

**1 TEACHER-DELIVERED WHOLE-GROUP MINI-LESSON** Most classes begin with a brief (five-minute) lesson—a demonstration of a new material or technique or an introduction of a new artist or style. The lesson addresses concerns of interest or importance for the whole class, but is kept short to allow maximum studio work time.

What are the basics that everyone needs to know? A short hands-on demonstration often suffices when introducing a new art material or tool. Asking an essential question (“What do artists do?”) might be a way to provoke discussion and raise awareness about art-related topics. Sometimes an interesting object is displayed and considered.

Often, original art (student or adult) is viewed and discussed, as are art reproductions or video clips.

Introducing topics this way assures that standards are addressed for all students. Most students will move off onto their own work following the whole group lesson, while others stay and work with the new concept, material or technique. Students know they have the option of further exploring this new material at any point during the year. Since the classroom is set up for students to access on their own, they can

think about what they’d like to do ahead of time and arrive to class ready to work.

**2 TEACHER-DELIVERED SMALL GROUP LESSON** Sometimes clusters of students have similar needs or interests, or work together on a single project, dividing and sharing the work. When this occurs, specific lessons can be designed and targeted to support this type of learning in a small-group setting.

An observant teacher is poised to fit appropriate lessons to the emerging needs of students. More detailed or complex demonstrations can advance students’ skills.

Organic groupings of this kind benefit students with varied abilities but similar interests; in essence, this is differentiating activities by student interest without regard to ability. Students choosing to work alongside other students with similar interests often elevate each others skills or extend ideas.

**3 TEACHER-DELIVERED INDIVIDUAL LESSON** The art teacher in a student-centered program is the school’s own “artist in residence,” with special skills, training and knowledge that combine to produce a sort of human reference resource. By noticing individual student art direction, the teacher can target lessons to support individual inquiry and pursuit. Noting and illustrating ties between student art and the art of others, across time and across cultures, the teacher can address art history and aesthetics in a way that is personally meaningful.

For example, if the teacher notices a student is using big blocks of color in a large-scale painting, a picture of color-field artist Mark Rothko could be shared. Constructing this sort of personal connection between student-generated art and that of the larger world of art can have a high impact.

**4 INFORMAL PEER-TO-PEER TEACHING** The art room provides opportunities for students to attain specific, sought-after skills. Often a student becomes an expert with a certain material or procedure and can



**Strategy #2: “Teacher-Delivered Small-Group Lesson.”** Since students in a choice-based classroom are accustomed to working independently and self-sufficiently, the teacher is often free to work with small groups who may need extra support. Here, 5-year-old Zanni and Graham get a semi-private lesson on the potter’s wheel.



**Strategy #4: “Informal Peer-to-Peer Teaching.”** Less experienced artists often team up with students with more developed skills in collaborative projects. There is ample opportunity for leadership and innovation in these self-selected groupings, this one comprising Jackson, Max and Adam.



**Skyler. Strategy #5: “Student Experts Teaching Whole Group.”** Sometimes through both practice and passion, students develop specialized skills with specific materials or processes. Students who attain a high level of proficiency make enthusiastic teachers in their area of specialization.

# 10 TEACHING AND LEARNING STRATEGIES

“peer coach” students with less developed skills. In a student-centered classroom, peer teaching frequently occurs spontaneously. Children know who knows what and who is good at something they want to know how to do.

When the classroom is set up as a studio, artists naturally learn from one another. The teacher may, however, encourage peer-to-peer learning, and in so doing, can positively highlight the skills a particular student has acquired.

Peer teaching also provides opportunity for classroom leadership. Students who are strong in visual art may not stand out in the regular classroom.

Go to [artsandactivities.com](http://artsandactivities.com) and click on this button for links to Web sites with information about choice-based art education.



**Strategy #6: “Classroom as Silent Lesson Plan.”** Each “center” or “studio” is appointed with the tools, materials and resources for students to access in support of individual inquiry and practice. Here, Linnea selects an animal model to inform her drawing, and Tristan has chosen a photograph from the “image file” as a reference for his painting.

Being good at something that is valued by others, and being in a position to teach what one knows, can be a reinforcing activity for students with alternative learning styles who thrive in art.

## 5 STUDENT “EXPERTS” TEACHING WHOLE GROUP

Often a student’s skill or knowledge can benefit the whole group. Offering an opportunity for students to take over the group lesson acknowledges individual accomplishment and expertise.

Students can demonstrate their own innovations or discoveries. They can offer insight and advice and highlight “what works.” Sometimes students work “in series” and create a body of

related work. A body of student work can be viewed and discussed through a whole group “artist’s share.”

Creating a “community of artists” is an important goal in a choice-based art program. Recognizing what each artist has to offer the community is an important role for the teacher to embrace.

## 6 CLASSROOM AS “SILENT LESSON PLAN/TEACHER”

The classroom can be set up in numerous distinct “centers” or “studios,” each appointed with the materials and tools needed to make art. Here students can also find related references and resources (books, prints, examples of student work, etc.).

“Menus” are created and displayed, describing procedures for setup and cleanup, or other essential information. Students sometimes add to the menus, leaving information behind they deem important for others. These centers include written information, pictographs and real art objects, all of which help get necessary information across to students with various learning predispositions.

Most centers are available for students all year, after they have been introduced.

This system frees the teacher from routine setup and cleanup chores. Students who use and maintain learning centers feel a sense of ownership and control in the classroom. Students are responsible for correctly using and maintaining these centers gradually, so that a clear understanding of expectations can be developed. If the centers become unmanageable, the natural consequence is restricting their use.



**Strategy #6: “Classroom as Silent Teacher.”** “Discovery Learning” is an exciting reality in a studio setting. Some artists fit materials to their ideas while others, such as Kaly, find inspiration from the materials themselves.



**Strategy #9: “Individual Inquiry.”** In his third year as a student in a choice-based classroom, Ethan has developed into an accomplished sculptor who is able to think three-dimensionally and manipulate materials with skill. His personal interest in, and knowledge about, space travel and fantasy serve as inspiration for his work.

## 7 GUEST EXPERTS

The art teacher should seek out and cultivate a network of artists and experts to call upon to enrich learning. Based on student interests, guests can be invited to speak about their own work. Exposure to adults passionate about their own art informs and supports the work done in the classroom, broadens horizons and presents new possibilities. Targeting these guests to the meaningful and important work being done by student artists can validate the student as an artist.

Guest experts can be found in the school community, possibly other teachers or parents. Student teachers in the art room can be highlighted and asked to bring in their own work to share “artist to artist.” Teachers can

see **TEN** on page 53

# in a “Choice-Based” Art Program

by Nan Hathaway

## TEN

continued from page 37

benefit from attending their area's open studio nights and other community art events, and may have a mentor of their own who could be shared with students. It is enlightening for students to find that their teacher is also a student.

Artists of all ages need to talk about their art with other artists. This sort of exchange is both inspirational and nourishing for all involved.

**8. FIELD TRIPS** Planning trips to art museums, events and galleries heightens awareness and exposes students to the greater world of art. Guided tours and demonstrations provide exposure to adult experts, offering students variety in perspective. It's a time-honored fact that artists find inspiration in the work of other artists.

In one scenario, visiting an art museum with students allows the teacher to share favorite artwork or specific knowledge and to act as an expert "tour guide" for students. In another setting, the teacher may stand shoulder to shoulder with students, seeing artwork for the very first time, making discoveries together and engaging in dialogue about the art experience.

**9. INDIVIDUAL INQUIRY** Through individual exploration, practice, research and presentation, students may act as their own guide and teacher. Mastery is a real possibility in this setting, since students may work with the same medium, idea or tools over an extended period of time. One doesn't often see that sort of artistic growth and continuity in traditional school art programs.

While exposure to a variety of options exists in a choice-based classroom, provisions are made for students to have art experiences that develop at their own pace, over time, going deep into areas of interest and gaining true proficiency with their selected medium.

Students with a passion for clay, for example, can return to this medium time and again, gaining knowledge and skill. On the other hand, some students may never be inclined to work with clay. In fact, some students are "sensory defensive" when touching clay or other "messy" art materials. Although these students would not be forced to manipulate a material they find abhorrent, they would still have received a basic introduction to clay during the whole group lesson, and benefit from watching classmates

indulge in its use.

One of the greatest joys of teaching in a student-centered art classroom comes when a student produces something that would never, ever have been "assigned" as an art project. In these cases, the student's vision is so free of convention that it defies traditional "school art" familiarity. In fact, relearning what authentic child-created art looks like is a challenge for many adults who have come to view teacher-directed art as the norm.

### 10. CLASS DISCUSSION/REFLECTION

Students are invited to talk about their work at the end of each class during an "artist's share." This is a time to highlight the day's work and to celebrate innovation, craftsmanship and ideas. Students practice being respectful about the art of others, and learn to talk about their own art. Students are guided in providing thoughtful feedback for classmates and in ways to discuss art beyond a simple "show-and-tell" format. Where did the idea come from? How did you surmount difficulty? Is the piece done? Did it "turn out" the way you expected? Although there are usually only a few minutes at the end of class reserved for this activity, it is highly valued by all involved.

As students talk about their art, there is opportunity for the teacher to frame student work using pertinent art vocabulary and to reinforce artistic behaviors. "Artist's share" is a vital assessment tool, an opportunity to evaluate the day's work while looking toward a broader context, asking "what if?" and "what next?"

**SUMMARY** In a choice-based art classroom, students are doing the authentic work of real artists every day. The focus is squarely on learning. It is acknowledged that all learners of all ages and at all levels can also take the role of teacher, and that teachers are also learners. The environment is carefully designed and appointed to facilitate diverse learners and to provide multiple entry points.

The 10 teaching and learning strategies outlined here combine to form a multifaceted, elegant environment for student learning. In this setting, individuality, flexibility, personal relevancy, independence and accountability are valued and supported. ■

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