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Start with the Students: Choice-Based Art Education

By Katherine Douglas

As we enter the studio classroom we are impressed with the busy buzz of young students. Near the sink five children are painting on 2 foot by 3 foot 90 pound papers. Occasionally one will pour her dirty water down the drain and refill the coffee can. Three of the students are using thick tempera paints. In their left hands are palettes containing colors they have custom mixed. Two other students are using liquid watercolors and chubby brushes. As each color is laid down, these boys sprinkle table salt into the wet paint.

At the next table two boys are using rubber stamps of alphabets and geometric shapes...they are stamping designs on the covers of small journals that they have created at a table across the room.

At table three two girls are making best friends masks from paper plates. Sarah is making a mask "portrait" of Emily...and Emily's mask portrays Sarah.

The fiber table in the corner is quiet, with two boys silently but contently weaving on looms made of old box lids.

The busiest part of the room is the construction area: a mixed group of boys and two girls is working on a four foot long model of the Titanic, designed by one of their classmates on paper the previous summer. The cardboard armature is being covered with plaster gauze. Other students are making their own, much smaller, constructions. Two more journals are being constructed at the mini book-making center next to the puppet center, where discarded tubes, boxes and clean socks are being transformed into "living" personalities.

At the drawing table large plastic toy dinosaurs are chosen for observational drawing; at the same table a group of students is creating a comic strip.

The children in this Teaching for Artistic Behavior classroom are eight years old, in a suburban public school of around 700 students. They have art class once a week in this small room for 40 minutes. On entering the room they sit as patiently as possible while the teacher gives a focused five-minute demonstration of a new material, technique or art concept. After that, students may choose to engage with this "new thing" or work in one of the studio centers described above. Everything in these centers has been previously discussed in a five-minute demo, so every child has received a brief whole group introduction. Studio centers contain visual references, simple written directions, appropriate vocabulary and menus of materials. These materials are arranged in organized fashion so that students can find them, use them and put them away without teacher input.

Students are provided with a structure that provides both responsibility and possibilities. Children are invited to bring their lives and interests into the art room and to find ways of bringing those subjects into their artwork. The structure allows the students to anticipate their choices, to work in a stable, safe and productive environment, and allows the teacher to observe student needs and plan for future demonstrations and one-on-one facilitation in the future. TAB teachers have a very good idea of what their students can and can't do well!

In a choice-based TAB classroom students can:

- Work at their own speed
- Work from strengths
- Follow a line of thought over time
- Learn from and work with peers
- Be “on task” for a great portion of the class—there is no waiting for materials to be passed out, for instance, and when finished, students can move on to another piece without assistance.
- Develop a working style
- Use what they know to show what they know: student interests can be explored in visual form.
- Form cooperative groups and engage in positive social interactions
- Take responsibility for care of materials and centers.

In a choice-based TAB classroom teachers can:

- Observe students working independently to determine strengths and weaknesses
- Work with small groups of interested students while others work independently, allowing for more in-depth instruction.
- Offer special “scaffolding” to struggling students
- Get to know students well through their very individual personal styles
- Expect students to come to class highly motivated and ready to work

For decades individual art teachers have taught in this student-centered manner; in the 1990's Massachusetts teachers began to collaborate and mentor each other in choice based practice. Forming Teaching for Artistic Behavior and creating an extensive Internet presence, we now connect and mentor over five hundred teachers nationwide.

For more information on TAB visit:

<http://www.teachingforartisticbehavior.org>

<http://knowledgeloom.org/tab>

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/TAB-ChoiceArtEd/>

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