

Art Education Is School Reform

BY

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At long last, the educational community has been caught, tried and found guilty of: emphasizing content instead of context, teaching learning as a product instead of a process, rewarding conformity, not candor, isolating subject-matter instead of integrating the curriculum, downgrading self-experiences for emphasis on the external world, not making allowances for guessing and divergent thinking, placing too much emphasis on analytical, linear thinking (at the expense of visual arts), and lastly, by supporting a "textbook only" philosophy and disregarding John Dewey's "learning by doing." On the other hand art educators have for the most part: emphasized context over content, showed more interest in the process, rewarded creativity over conformity, always allowed their students to express themselves and take risks, and certainly, have encouraged "hands-on" projects as opposed to only reading about the arts.

Even with all of this, I suppose art teachers aren't any more aware of children's intellectual abilities, learning styles or their own teaching strategies than other teachers. But we are aware of, and have steadfastly clung to the mandate that what we have to offer is very unique, and that visual arts teachers have always managed to permit students access to their most primitive intellectual outlet, creativity. As we are aware, children enter school with abilities and skills that more closely resemble fine arts and physical education than reading, writing and arithmetic. When art is given an equal role in the curriculum, it adds to and complements the educational structure.

This change can most easily come about through curriculum revision and assessment. To do this art teachers must decide upon a set of outcomes that represent important learning in visual arts, teach to those outcomes and make systematic observations of students and their performances, and use the findings to make improvements in art instruction in their classrooms. Although a few might disagree, most art educators will concede that pencil and paper tests for art literacy (e.g. historical, critical and technical aspects) is attainable. After all, this kind of assessment is used all the time in visual arts.

On the other hand, art educators should not dwell on trivial things merely because they can be easily observed and assessed. This defense will not be easy. Witness the portfolio. It has been used almost exclusively by art teachers for years. But some time ago it was considered to be an inappropriate evaluation tool. It didn't have a high accountability factor and couldn't be measured against any norm or standard of the day. Using a tool to record student progress over a period of time in a specific subject area wasn't considered to be an effective approach to assessment at all. This much maligned instrument which requires a student to keep a record of all (or most of) their work in various stages of development has come of age, again. Today it's embraced by the educational community and called *holistic assessment*.

This presents a new dilemma. Art educators will have to reestablish themselves as accountable and seize this

opportunity to maintain the lead in this kind of assessment. We should not allow test makers from other disciplines to initiate influence in the portfolio process. This is our flagship assessment instrument, and we can ill afford the intrusion into this domain as was done in other areas of the curriculum.

On a more personal level the art teacher has always practiced “instinctive” assessment. This assessment is made on a daily basis, working with either the entire class or an individual student. This is truly the most humanistic approach to evaluation and teaching. It produces the innate responses, moment to moment, that combines the real and imaginative properties of visual arts with the immediate needs of the student. Whether it’s called guided practice or not, it’s the basic ingredient of common communication between human beings, between learner and teacher.

The art teacher has always used guided practice simply because this instinctive assessment, although rarely written down, has multiple indicators to allow student progress and includes teacher discernment and judgment. This assessment allows the student to engage the teacher in immediate criticism and aesthetic judgment of their work or the work of others. It allows the student to take risks and the teacher to restructure questions that further engage the student’s mind. This truly holistic assessment cannot only tell what students have learned, but it can instantly determine what they can do with what they have learned. The obvious option of this kind of measurement is the immediate feedback provided to the student, and truly unique function is, only the certified art teacher can provide this.

It has been my observation that students given instruction of this nature (in addition to producing art) do better on skills tests than students in other disciplines who just practice the skills. Art also allows the student to assess their own direction after considering several concepts (abstract notions) outlined by the teacher. By making more decisions about the assignment, students contribute more to its completion because of their ownership in the process. Students who do more than seat work, those who perform and/or exhibit their art works, seem to have the right stuff to become lifetime learners. *This* is the origin of higher order thinking skills and creativity.

Creativity cannot be predicted, and each teacher will view it differently. It’s precisely for this reason that when students are provided timely feedback, outcome-based objectives can be identified as real properties of the art field; properties that make art pertinent to the students’ everyday life. Students at all grade levels learn more

effectively if they can see the connection between things they are being taught and those they already know.

Portfolio and instinctive assessment can serve both teaching and learning because they clarify and focus on intellectual and creative models that are continually in flux. Using these together will also insure that the parameters of testing will expand constantly so that teaching the test will not imply teaching only what has been predetermined. Besides, pencil and paper test-driven curricula can take creative decisions out of the teacher’s hands at a time when it’s most pivotal. Art teachers must not be concerned with just raising test scores because that appears to distort instruction which in turn undermines the creditability of the scores. Teachers must insist on measuring what is educationally significant, not what is technically convenient. Art assessment must enable the student to make progress not only by memorizing facts, responding to word recognition or solving complex tasks. More importantly, students must be allowed to create complex problems as well. Consequently, art educators must insist that there is much in art that cannot be quantified and, therefore, cannot be assessed.

Assessment in the arts, of some form, is a reality. The question is, do art teachers want to become involved in the process or not? I think the answer is obvious, because if we don’t “they” will, and when the test maker is someone other than visual arts educators, it reduces the creditability of our discipline.

If real reform is to take place for visual arts, then we need to take the lead in the assessment of our own discipline, and invest the time and effort to determine what’s going on in art classrooms across the state, nation, and the world. What we need is more dissemination of information that teachers can use in their classrooms rather than cold statistics. Teachers need to use assessment results to add to the knowledge base, not be manipulated by it. Assessment should be done to enhance research, not solely because of political pressure.

The art education community, as a whole, must actively participate in this endeavor, for if we don’t, political expedience may be more influential than technical expertise. Anything less on our part is a failure to meet a fundamental professional responsibility.