



## What Excellent Visual Arts Teaching Looks Like

**What** does high-quality instruction in the visual arts look like? Researchers have begun to identify the characteristics of effective learning environments and the ways that teachers can engage students to develop visual arts knowledge, skills, and habits of mind.

As skillful educators have found, teaching students to be creative is a deliberate process, much like teaching students to be literate or to be able to solve mathematics problems. It takes more than simply handing out materials; expert teachers break down the creative process to enable students to identify the problem, gather relevant information, try out solutions, and validate those that are effective.

In their study of exemplary art classrooms in the Boston area, Hetland and Winner and their colleagues found that teachers fostered a relationship with their students that was like that of a master craftsman with an apprentice. Teachers engaged in demonstrations and lectures to convey information; they created opportunities for students to work; and they encouraged critiques of the student work.

In the process, the teachers not only enabled students to develop their artistic skills and understand the art world; they also helped them see patterns, learn from their mistakes, and envision new solutions. In contrast to the conventional view that art instruction is focused solely on creating art products, the researchers found that skilled instructors engaged student thinking; they helped them understand the choices they and other artists make and the implications of such choices. Students are taught what high-quality work is and how to evaluate their work and that of their classmates against emerging standards.

For example, Hetland and Winner note:

During class critiques, and one-to-one as students worked, teachers asked students to reflect: "Is that working? Is this what I intended to do? Can I make this better? What's next?" At Walnut Hill School, Jason Green questioned individual students almost relentlessly as they began a new clay sculpture: "What about this form? Do you want to make the whole thing? Which part of it?"

Perhaps not surprisingly, these techniques are similar to those found to be essential for high-level student learning in other subject areas as well. The 1999 National Research Council (NRC) report, *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School*, examined research on student learning and described the learning environments in history, mathematics, and science that produced student understanding in those disciplines. The report describes effective learning environments in language that could be used as accurately to describe excellent visual arts classrooms. Effective learning environments are:

- learner-centered, in the sense that teachers build on the knowledge students bring to the learning situation;
- knowledge-centered, in the sense that the teachers attempt to help students develop an organized understanding of important concepts in each discipline;
- assessment-centered, in the sense that the teacher's attempt to make students' thinking visible so that ideas can be discussed and clarified, such as having students (1) present their arguments in debate, (2) discuss their solutions to problems at a qualitative level, and (3) make predictions about various phenomena; and
- community-centered, in the sense that the teachers establish classroom norms that learning with understanding is valued and students feel free to explore what they do not understand.

As that report suggests, effective teaching requires an environment that is conducive for learning. Such an environment includes a professional learning community in which everyone—including adults and young people—is continually collaborating and advancing their own knowledge and skills. It also includes multiple means of assessment to enable students to demonstrate their abilities in multiple ways.

Effective teaching requires a substantial amount of expertise. It requires teaching by a skilled and experienced professional with extensive arts content background, a range of pedagogical approaches, and the patience and persistence to turn small advantages and unexpected events into major breakthroughs in learning. It requires the teaching of an arts education professional who is a continual learner throughout his or her career, and one who is an active member of the art, education, and arts education communities.

Regrettably, some states downplay the skills required for effective visual arts instruction by adopting alternative certifications requiring minimal professional development and requirements that underestimate the competencies teachers need in the classroom. It takes qualified professionals, with the ability to create effective learning environments, to understand art beyond the school and into the community and the contemporary world, and to engage students' thinking and understanding to help students learn in the ways the NRC study described.

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