

TEACHING SUCCESSFUL ART AND ART APPRECIATION COURSES FOR EDUCATORS

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I have been teaching professional development courses for six years. My main purpose has been to help classroom teachers understand more about visual art, children's art, and the creative process. Over time, art specialists and administrators have also attended. The educators study the work of famous artists, read, and discuss art education topics, examine children's art, and engage in studio work that develops their self-confidence, aesthetics, and skills.

Being a practiced artist as well a veteran art educator, enables me to guide the educators without undermining their professionalism. I have high expectations for their success, while respecting everyone's efforts. For many, it is the first time they are involved in recording their visual thoughts and ideas. They are amazed to find out that they can create paintings, drawings, and art objects of personal meaning and merit. Some derive so much satisfaction from the courses, they return four and five times. The educators learn to appreciate both the pleasures, and challenges of creative thinking, and the benefits that come from the hard work required to understand art, and make it. With this knowledge, and the increased awareness of their talents, they are inspired. They become more open to supporting their students' efforts and learning.

Initial Planning. In deciding to teach a particular course, I take into consideration many different things, which can include the time of year, current interests expressed by teachers, or what I know has worked in the classroom. When writing the syllabus and planning, I think many things out beforehand, and often visualize myself conducting the course. This practice allows me to fine tune the parts: from selecting art books, to sequencing the activities. To allow for new direction or learning style differences, many options are left open. The structure is in place to support creativity but does not limit it. There are many wonderful exchanges and happenings that occur along the way that I could never anticipate or plan. This is what motivates me as a teacher. In turn, the educators become excited and energized about their new discoveries. The courses become reflective of art experiences that they interpret and mold according to their individual needs and interests.

Preparation. Thoughtful selection and preparation of instructional materials, music selections, even the placement of tables and chairs, all create the tone for the course. The room's appearance reflects a vital, well-designed environment that has an immediate impact on the educators. It is informative and contains an abundance of books, art reproductions and objects, and children's art work, all intended to stimulate visual thinking. Quality supplies and tools, the best student grade affordable, that work well and hold up when used appropriately, are purchased.

To establish workable studio routines, the room needs to be functional for the purposes of the course. Organization in the working area makes everything within easy reach and view. Clear, clean tables, ample space for each participant, a large serviceable chalkboard, and comfortable access to the main demonstration area, all minimize frustrations or any confusion so that the art process runs smoothly. I outline the reasons for the careful orchestration. This supports the participants to set up successfully for their students' studio art and art appreciation experiences. I point out that during the studio time the room may appear disorderly and sometimes even chaotic by sight, but because of the built-in structure, there always exists an internal sense of order and a constructive flow to the activities and energy.

Introductions. The educators introduce themselves and their reasons for taking the course. This establishes rapport. Participating in a non-threatening group creative experience fosters mutual enjoyment, relaxation, and sharing. Many kids of individual abilities develop throughout the course: sensory awareness, patience, acceptance, and an ability to become inspired! Admiration of one another's working methods and art, educational ideas, and a spirit of camaraderie are exchanged.

Testing Art to Children. We list reasons why art should be included in the elementary school curriculum. It is a good introduction for the classroom teachers and promotes awareness. They are helped to understand that art is a discipline as important as any other, and a natural means of expression for children. Art, taught well, can help children to see and know themselves and others as unique individuals.

When displaying examples of children's art, I talk about visual elements, craftsmanship, the feelings, thoughts, and ideas the children were engaged in while creating. I point out the wisdom of guiding children to assist them in their search for artistic knowledge, adjusting the method of approach to suit their developmental levels and individual personalities. The educators begin to develop a broader conception of art for children and children's imagery.

The importance of modification is stressed so that the educators understand that, regardless of the teaching situation or background of the children, quality art instruction can thrive. For example, it is not easy to individualize when class sizes are large, but it can be done by making adjustments. It might mean keeping the paper size small, letting a small group of children paint while the rest of the class works with a less complex medium, or even coordinating and training parent volunteers to assist. Throughout the course we share our diverse knowledge from working with children so that everyone feels better prepared to advocate or develop strategies that can be adapted to offer children quality art experiences.

Demonstrations. When explaining procedures, the property of materials, or the use of tools, the educators gather together in close proximity so they can hear and see with total clarity. I go over the processes so they understand the basics. I set a focus or pose questions, which help them to identify personal ideas, but I do not provide answers through demonstrations of facile techniques or modeling a finished product. Everyone is motivated to grow in his/her own way. They proceed independently and learn by discovery. The course projects are a record of each individual's explorations.

Art Reproduction, Art Books. A large collection of art reproductions and art books are laid out attractively. The many different subjects are invaluable for sparking ideas, designing lessons, and building knowledge. The reproductions are inexpensive and portable; the educators take them to their working areas and often make important connections between what they are doing and the famous art works, especially as they grow in their skills and awareness. I insist that they spend time with the books. Reading about and looking at the work of people from a variety of times and places who devoted their lives to art, helps them to fully realize that art has always been an important form of expression in most cultures.

Display. Throughout the course I display a great deal of the art work that is produced. Whether the group is having a formal critique or not, it is meaningful for the educators to be aware of the work of others around them. At the same time this practice lessens any self-consciousness some may have. We discuss how a well-conceived display program can positively transform a school. It can help energize the children and staff, as well as uphold the art program. It is important that students know that their work, once completed, is still highly regarded, by being made visible for the school community to appreciate. Ongoing display is part of the creative process and critical to good art education.

Teaching the Courses. While the class participants are working I circulate and observe. I offer guidance, feedback, and encouragement. Since many of the educators are beginning artists, I choose my words prudently when commenting. As their teacher, I always maintain a genuine, non-judgmental, caring manner. They feel comfortable asking questions, expressing opinions, learning and moving on from any mistakes. The process is different for every educator, especially with their varying backgrounds; it takes some longer than others to get acclimated. One may lean towards a logical ordered approach, another will work spontaneously, even discovering by trial and error. I remind them not to compare their own results with the finished work of anyone else, because creative ability is not all inborn, there exists in everyone the capacity. It is a matter of desire, practice, a positive attitude, appropriate exposure and encouragement which unlocks it.

I take a systematic approach when teaching a medium. I introduce it and as experience and confidence are gained, combinations can be tried to expand the level of involvement. Although there are no absolutes, this initial experience usually proves necessary for later more developed work to be solid and satisfying. Question and discussion techniques which focus on the art in progress, encourage the educators to focus on their working methods. This awareness helps them to understand and be responsive to both the artistic process and the content of their work. Letting my intuition guide me, I try to recognize and deal with each educator at his or her level, accepting and promoting whatever strength each exhibits in attitude, approach, or imagery.

Conclusion. The courses are individually designed, intensive in format, and never stop being a rewarding challenge to plan for and teach. There are always new things to research in order to more fully understand the content of the discipline, and how to translate that content to the participants and then into the classroom for the children. At the core of these shared experiences is an excitement about discovery and learning. The result is an atmosphere in which everyone is learning together; there is constant renewal for me, while the educators are provided with opportunities by which they gain belief in the power of artistic expression. It is my hope that they leave the courses with a sense of inventiveness, purpose, and passion about art education—about the ways in which their methods of teaching the discipline can positively affect their students and instill lifelong appreciation and fulfillment.

References

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