

*Dr. Christine Davis, Editor*

## 4:00 am Thoughts About Teaching High School Art...and What Experience Has Taught Me

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### **Thoughts about teaching art...**

Over the years I have made many decisions about what to teach and how to teach it. Many times those decisions were based on the current research available in professional journals. Sometimes it was because of an exciting workshop or a presentation which I attended. Many times, it was just hit or miss and trial and error. Sometimes it was out of desperation.

In my early years of teaching, I always felt there was something lacking in either what the students were doing, or what I was doing, in facilitating instruction for them. Over the years, after much experimentation, gnashing of teeth, beating of chest, and crying to the heavens, I discovered the following: *Students do not automatically arrive in an art class knowing what to do or how to do it (earthshaking revelation, right?)* Nor are the majority of the students spontaneously creative or so excited about making art that it “just happens” for them. Thirty-two years in the classroom have taught me that teaching needs to be meticulously planned and premeditated but with lots of flexibility for the “Aha” moment to happen (and some luck in being able to recognize the “Aha” moment when it happens!) Sound simple? One would think so.

In my current role as an art supervisor, it is not very comforting to realize that a lot of art teaching relies on the “search and self-discovery” method. This by itself is not a bad thing **if** coupled with direction by the teacher and elements of choice and decision making for the student. However, that is not what usually occurs and the “search and self-discovery” process works for only the “talented few” who are highly self-directed.

For the vast majority of students in schools, the “search and self-discovery” method is not very effective. The teacher who presents and demonstrates a process, for example, watercolor, and then says, “That’s how it’s done, what do you want to paint?” is presenting lots of choice but very little direction. Materials are distributed and, at that point in the class, it falls to the student to figure out what to do and how to do it. This is also the part of the class where discipline problems and social interaction begins to occur and students are quickly off task (lots of talking but a minimum amount of art work being accomplished.)

I have observed this scenario replayed countless times in classrooms where undisciplined students are the rule and teachers are wondering why the students can’t create. It seems fairly obvious to me. No operational procedures are in place; no standards have been set; no rubrics; no expectations for creating the artwork and very little direction for the student in accomplishing whatever task is assigned. Comments from the teachers are usually complaints about the students who “don’t get it” or “don’t have the ability to do art.” These teachers spend the majority of their time with classroom management and discipline, becoming disillusioned with teaching rather than experiencing the joys of what teaching the arts can do to help children learn and be successful at whatever they want to do.

### **And what experience has taught me...**

- **Two things keep students from learning: motivation and lack of success.**

It is up to the teacher, as the instructional leader in the classroom, to plan and organize so that students are motivated for involvement in the arts and taught the skills necessary to make

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successful art work. At this point in the game, I'm not even talking about being "creative" or inventive if they don't know how. Along with the production of art work, the creative process needs to be taught. Thinking along those lines brings us to lack of success. Motivation by itself works for only a select few, and even fewer are self-motivated. It is up to the teacher to design experiences that promote the students' understanding of the creative process, develop skills, and allow for successful achievement.

- **Students work hardest at those things that give them success.**

Since the inception of the video game, I have based some ideas on my teaching by what occurs when these games are played—speed, timing, skill development, more than one chance to achieve success, and increasing difficulty. I have watched my own children spend hours in front of the television playing the game and trying to beat the game. I've also listened very carefully when they describe a game that is not good to play—"not interesting," "too easy," "no difficulty," "no challenge," and so forth.

The concept behind these games is that success is reached by (1) understanding the strategy of the game; (2) timing; (3) developing the necessary skills; (4) increments; and, (5) multiple chances for achievement. Each time the game is played, there is some success and an opportunity to achieve more success. As the player works through the levels, more difficulty is apparent as more success is met. (A little like sequential learning, don't you think?)

- **Think big, start small.**

Target the end result of the problem or assignment or the larger goals for the end of the course. The bottom line is: *What is it you want to accomplish? What do you need to have the students learn to accomplish the task? What are the steps, skills, and knowledge needed to achieve that end result?*

Begin with assignments or parts of an assignment that have to be completed within a set time limit. Remember figure drawing sessions you have attended with series of 2 minute, 10 minute, or 15 minute timed drawings? Students should **not** talk while working. Begin to develop self-discipline, concentration, and focus in students from the beginning. I know many professional artists and none of them carry on conversations while seriously working. Why then do art educators prompt "talking quietly" while working? Focus and concentration should be on the artwork. Encourage students to work quickly and efficiently. Time them!

- **Assessment must be an integral part of the instructional process.**

Assessment must happen every day, in every class, as an ongoing part of the teaching process. In the beginning, students should not completely finish an art assignment before an assessment takes place. **Assess every day.** Determine what is going well; what is not going well. Make rounds in the classroom. Check progress or lack of progress with each student. Standards for assessment should be set both verbally and visually by the teacher. If there is a certain way a process or technique looks when completed, students need to be able to see what they are working toward. Throughout the class, students should be aware of their accomplishment both successful and unsuccessful. There should be no surprises for students or parents at the end of a grading period. In an art classroom where assessment is ongoing, students should be able to translate their accomplishments into a grade and have it be the same as the teacher's assessment. Assessment must be a source of information for the teacher and student. Assessment should tell what has been done well and what has not been done well. This must be followed by corrective instruction immediately.

- **If students "don't get it," it didn't work.**

In most instances, when students don't accomplish the desired results or the immediate task, it is an indicator that problems exist in the classroom. Before placing total blame on the students ask yourself questions first. Why didn't it work? Were my instructions clear? What can I do differently to insure that the students do "get it?" There is no sense in moving forward until the situation is rectified, reteaching is done, or procedures for successful classroom operation are established.

- **Not all students learn the same way.**

Present the information in different ways. Understand that students have multiple intelligences. Provide a diverse set of experiences to help students learn by using a range of visual and verbal techniques and strategies. Develop a curriculum that provides for multiple ways of learning. Presenting information in a variety of ways provides all students, with varying intellectual abilities, effective and efficient vehicles for problem solving.

- **Students must be given more than one chance to show improvement.**

Design problems for the students to solve that allows them to improve while solving the problems. In the beginning, don't make long assignments. Break them down into segments so that each segment can be improved upon. Explain why something isn't correct and make sure there is an opportunity for redoing or reworking the problem. Raise the level for success every time success is met. Make every attempt to motivate the students to accomplish higher and higher levels of improvement. There is a quote, whose author is unknown to me that sums up everything that experiences in the classroom have taught me—"Spectacular achievement is always preceded by unspectacular preparation."

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## Part II: Translating thoughts and Experience into Concrete Reality

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What does it mean to you when you're standing in front of a classroom packed with 30 students whose expectant faces are turned toward you filled with the conviction that they are going to be the "world's next great artists?" It means addressing the issues so that students develop their thinking skills, increase their technical skills, meet with success, and get inspired to continue to develop their creativity.

**The first three or 4 weeks at the beginning of the school year are probably the most crucial time of the whole year in the classroom.** Those first few weeks are the time to establish a solid foundation that will last the students, not only through that particular course but throughout their high school art career. It is during this time that students develop their powers of observation; drawing skills; learn to utilize the creative process; and establish working procedures for the classroom.

It is imperative that you as the teacher give clear instructions and offer them what they need to know and be able to do. Where are you going in class? Show examples of what you consider the students' goals to be. Make sure instructions are both visual and verbal. Keep in mind the framework in Part I, "4:00 am Thoughts About Teaching High School Art...and What Experience Has Taught Me," (*NAEA Advisory*, Summer 2001) which consisted of the following:

- Students do not automatically arrive in an art class knowing what to do or how to do it.
- Two things keep students from learning: lack of motivation and success.
- Students work hardest at those things that give them success.
- Assessment must be an integral part of the instructional process.
- Think big; start small.
- If students "don't get it," it didn't work.
- Not all students learn the same way.
- Students must be given more than one chance to show improvement in the classroom.

Most art teachers would agree that if students cannot draw what they see or transfer their ideas to paper, it's extremely difficult as the school year progresses to get "good" artwork from them. **This drawing skill is the basic foundation that will undergird everything else.** You as the teacher can decide on what you want the students to know and do in your program, but it has been my observation that teachers who have the most successful art programs have learned the importance of students being able to draw what they see, as well as being able to put their thoughts and ideas down on paper.

I've outlined the first three or four weeks in the following manner:

- Observation
  - changing points of view and context
- Studying Organic and Non-Organic Objects
- Drawing Processes
  - a. contour
  - b. flat shape contour
  - c. cross contour
  - d. continuous line contour

Watercolor markers are the suggested medium to accomplish these tasks at the beginning of the year. Watercolor markers make great marks, give good color surfaces, and can be used in a variety of ways—both wet and dry. The most important part for the student is that markers are a familiar medium, not frightening, and most importantly, give successful looking results. Plus, they cannot be erased! Students have to concentrate and focus to be able to accomplish the tasks at hand. (At this point remember two things: **Students work hardest at those things that give them success and students do not automatically arrive in class knowing what to do and how to do it.**)

**"Think big; start small"** for a minute. I know that later in the year I, as the teacher, will want students to be able to do large, complex drawings both realistic and imaginary. Starting small will enable the students to focus without being overwhelmed. It also offers opportunities for incorporating some creative operational techniques such as multiplication, magnification, minification, and fragmentation (Roukes, page 33). Starting small offers the necessary success for further progress.

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**Studying organic and non-organic objects.** To develop drawing skills in a beginning class, students need to practice drawing. The best way is to set up problems that allow for practice that are incorporated into the assignment. Divide an 18" x 24" paper into 4" grids. Newsprint or white drawing paper can be used. Unless your room is equipped with light tables to be able to transfer drawings from newsprint, working directly on the final drawing paper will facilitate the next step in the process without having to redraw or transfer through tracing the newsprint drawing to the final paper. Applying a grid to this paper gives the student 24, 4" squares in which to work. There is a 2" strip left over at the bottom of the paper.

Explain observation and contour drawing. Talk about outside edges and inside edges. Set up the procedure and manner in which drawing is to be done. Students need to focus, look carefully, get involved in their subject matter, and draw. **This means no talking. Talking and drawing do not mix.**

This also means working within a time limit for each drawing. Force the issue about the time limit. If you set the time limit for a drawing as 10 minutes, then 10 minutes is all they have. That is all part of setting the parameters for working within the classroom. As subject matter, use small organic and non-organic objects—shells, bones, seed pods, nuts, bolts, screws, etc. Make sure the objects have interesting textures. Smooth, white, non-textured shells are not the best starting point. Students should have their own selection of objects in order to be able to study them carefully. Students need the objects right in front of them.

In each 4" grid have students work edge to edge to fill the space. The drawings should be completed just in contour. No texture, value, or shading of any kind should be used at this point. Walk around the room as the students are working and offer comments **to each student** about what they are doing correctly and incorrectly. In a gridded drawing like this, the students have more than one chance to show improvement. By the end of a 90-minute block, or two 45-minute class periods, the student will have done 24 small drawings. If you have assessed throughout the procedure, every student in the classroom will be working to potential and showing improvement in skill level. **(Assessment must be an integral part of the instructional process.)**

I have observed classes where students have spent the first three weeks working on the same drawing (erasing and redrawing, erasing and redrawing) with no visible improvement in their skills at the end of the time **(if the students "don't get it," it didn't work.)** What is happening in classes like these is usually more social than work. Working with the procedure I've described allows more opportunity to develop skills. **(Students must be given more than one chance to show improvement.)** Contour drawing is an extremely important concept for beginning students to master.

Where do we go from here? Assess what has occurred. Make an evaluation from the assessment data. Change the assignment or procedure to reflect the evaluation. Do the gridded drawing again but assign both organic and non-organic subjects. Have students select the objects and do multiple views on the object. If more time is needed on contour let the first row of grids be the review, then add flat shape contour to the assignment. Follow the same procedure of timing the drawings and assessing progress.

In the third class period, have students select the best of two drawings they have done. There will be rough areas to the drawings but remember this is only the beginning of the year and they have already done 48 small drawings! Their selection will be used for the next step of adding marks, surface treatments, and color theory. (If more drawing time is needed, do another gridded drawing—and change the dimensions of the grids.)

The next steps can be outlined as follows:

- Drawing as a System of Making Marks
  - a. hatching
  - b. crosshatching
  - c. pointillism, stippling
  - d. ruled line
  - e. unruled line
  - f. pattern
  - g. quality of marks
  - h. light to dark marks
- Surface Treatments
  - a. flat color
  - b. graduated color
  - c. color transition
  - d. color intensity
  - e. color value
  - f. layered color
  - g. color washes
- Color Theory
  - a. primary
  - b. secondary
  - c. intermediate
  - d. complementary
  - e. split-complementary
  - f. analogous
  - g. monochromatic
  - h. warm
  - i. cool

The basics can be found in many different pieces of artwork examples in all kinds of media. Look at a variety of artists, historical and contemporary, to see how they have handled the techniques. Students will begin to understand that these basics are the same regardless of media—it is the look of the technique that changes with the media used. For example: hatching with a pen is a series of fine lines; with a brush it becomes a bolder broader series of lines dependent on the brush size and shape but it is still hatching. These are basics that need to be learned or reviewed.

Equally important for beginning students is the study of the creative process. It also needs to be incorporated into the first few weeks. During this time the students are in the process of learning how to draw and how to handle techniques. They also need to know where to go from there. What options are open to them to utilize their newfound skills. Teaching students about the procedures, techniques, and other strategies that are used to develop images and ideas is a very important and valuable part of their training. Two very good resources are *Art Synectics* and *Design Synectics* authored by Nicholas Roukes. Both books offer insights into the synectics teaching model which prompts creative thinking.

Variations on learning to draw, mastering basic techniques, and studying the creative process should be the primary focus for the first three or 4 weeks of school. Accomplishing these tasks will give students a solid foundation of work habits, self-discipline, and body of knowledge necessary for the creation of art works.