

Transitions in Art Lessons

by

Dr. David Burton, Associate Professor of Art Education,
Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA

While we were watching a practicum student teach a lesson, a veteran art teacher remarked to me, "This one will be a great teacher!" "How can you tell?" I asked. "She has great transitions," was the answer.

Transitions are strategies that segue the action smoothly from one phase of the art lesson to the next. They are the connective sinews that hold the body of the art lesson together yet allow for smooth, flexible movement. Transitions are especially critical in teaching art because almost every lesson requires complex logistics. Weaving the concept effectively through the entire art lesson, and dealing efficiently with materials, tools, and techniques all demand special transitions. They are essential for good classroom management.

Done well, transitions seem fluid and natural. Done poorly, the art lesson bucks and kicks along clumsily. Effective transitions are never guesswork or spontaneous improvisations. They need to be consistent, well planned and very clearly stated. Written instructions and appropriate visuals posted in the art room support transitions by reminding visual learners about procedures and purposes.

Transitions include greeting the students, warm-ups, management review, anticipatory sets, checks for understanding, instructions for distributing materials and cleaning up, extensions, and other cues that signal students when one phase of the art lesson is over and another phase is beginning.

GREETING students as they come in the room sets the tone. It lets the group as well as individuals know you are happy to see them, gives the art teacher a chance to notice anyone who might be having a bad day, and reassures students they are entering a supportive, creative learning environment.

WARM-UPS are activities or instructions written on the blackboard before the students come in the room. The students should immediately start work on these simple game-like activities while housekeeping chores, such as roll-taking, occur. Warm-ups often foreshadow the art lesson's concept or artistic activity.

MANAGEMENT REVIEW involves briefly restating the level of behavior expected in the art room, and if necessary, any rules. Management review is emphasized during the first few meetings with each class (until the students accommodate to it) and may then be soft-pedaled.

ANTICIPATORY SET occurs at the beginning of the art lesson and essentially asks the students to remember what they learned during their last art class. The concept and their learning should be emphasized; remembering the artistic activity is not enough. Consistent use of the anticipatory set develops continuity from lesson to lesson.

CHECKS FOR UNDERSTANDING follow most of the main parts of the art lesson. Their intent is to determine the extent to which the students really grasp what was said just previously. If they don't, go over it again, perhaps in a different way. There is no point of going on with the art lesson if the students don't understand. "Does everyone understand?" is not a check for understanding. They may answer "yes," even if they don't. Checks for understanding require the students to recap the information in their own words. "What is the first step?", "the second step?", "and then...?"

CHECKS FOR UNDERSTANDING AFTER MOTIVATION may ask the students to restate in their own words the information that has just been presented, but the main point is to determine to what extent the students are in fact excited, interested, intrigued, and primed for the art lesson. How full is their motivational gas tank? Are they ready to go on to the next phase?

CONCEPTUAL CHECKS FOR UNDERSTANDING seek to determine to what extent the students understand the lesson concept at a cognitive level. They are not likely to grasp intuitively or personally at this point because they have not yet done the art activity. Asking broad, open-ended questions that require the student to think, interpret, and answer in their own words makes for the best checks. Encourage a variety of student views at this point so many options flourish going into the art activity.

CHECKS FOR UNDERSTANDING AFTER THE DEMONSTRATION are very important. The students should be able to explain in their own words each step in the process just demonstrated, as well as their correct sequence. It's a good idea for different students to address each step: "What is the first step, Joey?", "What comes next, Mary?", and so forth. Spending a little time clarifying the artistic process can save a lot of headaches and heartaches during the actual artistic activity.

This check for understanding may take the form of a guided practice in which the students make a quick version that will not be saved. In this case, the teacher "walks" the students through the hands-on process, perhaps receiving step-by-step prompts from the students.

ASSIGN CLEANUP DUTIES at this point *before* materials are passed out and the artistic activity begins. There will be too much confusion and too little time at the end of the activity to do it properly then. This transition requires crystal clear instructions so the helpers know exactly what they are supposed to do. A check for understanding the instructions clearly is also in order here.

Many art teachers have systems for rotating duties among students, which simplifies the selection of helpers. Over time, the students develop regular cleanup habits and share the duties equally.

ASSIGN HELPERS TO DISTRIBUTE MATERIALS AND TOOLS. Like cleanup, these instructions must be quite explicit and clear. Usually only a few helpers are needed. But make sure there are enough: an overloaded student is an accident in the making.

The art teacher should not distribute materials herself. Her job is instruction, not quarter-mastering. Moreover, it takes too long for the lone art teacher to hand out materials and tools to each child. Waiting for their supplies makes them bored and antsy. It is much better to involve them in this logistical process and encourage their sense of responsibility, while the art teacher continues to ask questions and talk with students.

SIGNING the back of their work before they begin work signals the beginning of the artistic activity. Later on, the front of the work may be too wet with paint or ink, or the students may not remember. The teacher's name, grade, or room number can be written down too. It's also a good idea to have the students write out the lesson concept (which is posted, of course). This reinforces the content of the concept to the students, and clearly informs parents and classroom teachers what the concept is and that the art lesson is conceptually-based.

EXTENSIONS provide those students who finish fast and first with a related activity to occupy them productively until the rest of the class completes their work. Extensions should elaborate on the art lesson concept, carrying it another step

higher. They should *not* simply repeat the assignment: Bor—ing! Extensions require planning, and sometimes, preparation, but they can really click for a clever student.

5-MINUTE WARNING to the end of the artistic activity allows the students to finish up the day's work without an abrupt and disruptive slamming on of the brakes. Earlier warnings may be necessary for more involved materials, such as clay.

DISENGAGEMENT may be the most difficult transition because it involves finishing up the artistic activity and easing into cleanup and closure. Again, an emphatic reminder to "put your last three brushstrokes on the painting" is more comfortable than a frantic "Stop!" Some art teachers ask their students to write a sentence or two about their creative experience, their thought process, or their art work, on an index card while their peers are finishing up. This begins to settle students down, minimizes socializing, and segues nicely into the closure.

CLEANUP PROCEDURE should be briefly reiterated to the assigned helpers who begin collecting artwork, materials, and tools. In most cases, a few students can carry out cleanup while the other students remain in their seats for closure. If hands need to be wiped off, have a student pass out *previously prepared, damp* (not wet!) paper towels, which the students can dispose of on their way out the door. Washing hands at the sink is rarely necessary. It creates a chaotic logjam and makes closure next to impossible. Cleanup should definitely be completed before the class can be dismissed.

BEGINNING CLOSURE is another demanding transition because it requires redirecting the group's energy without shutting it off. They must shift from exuberantly making art to thoughtfully reflecting on it. The teacher centers attention once again on herself and her questions. Looking at a few newly-created masterpieces, offering praise, and asking for student comments gets the ball rolling in the right direction. Selecting work by students who are sometimes inattentive or too social can help focus their attention.

CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING DURING AND AFTER CLOSURE tries to determine the extent to which the students consciously link their experiential artistic activity with the cognitive concept. When this clear connection occurs, permanent learning is most likely. Have the students express their own understanding in their own words. Praise the art and the students genuinely and enthusiastically!

DISMISSAL should be a consistent procedure with which all the students are familiar. Some teachers have students line up; others dismiss by tables.