

Authentic, meaningful learning can occur when art educators rethink the traditional, mimicry-based art lesson model and instead facilitate student-directed learning, encouraging collaboration and exploration of spontaneous creativity.

# *Smoke and Mirrors:* Art Teacher as Magician

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**E**very great magic trick consists of three acts. The first act is called “the pledge”—the magician shows you something ordinary, but of course, it probably isn’t. The second act is called “the turn”—the magician makes this ordinary something do something extraordinary. Now you’re looking for the secret... but you won’t find it. That’s why there’s a third act called “the prestige”—it’s the part with the twists and turns... (Nolan, 2006)

A time-honored and pervasive tradition has taken root in art classrooms. It goes like this: The art teacher plans experiences, often called “visual problems” (Vieth, 1999, p. 4), for pupils to execute. Students are then encouraged to “solve” these problems in their own way, but the end result, more often than not, is predetermined. Art teachers may contend that these assignments are open-ended and produce diverse results. And while variations on the theme are noticeable, it is an exaggeration to claim that each piece is unique. When hung together as a class set, sometimes even the student-artists who produced the work have trouble detecting which piece is “theirs.” Upon closer inspection, the artwork may in fact be recognizable as belonging to one particular artist. Unfortunately, that artist is the teacher. How can art projects, envisioned and designed by the teacher with predictable results, possibly nurture the kind of creative thinking considered essential for students to thrive in the 21st century?

Art teachers do a disservice to students when they assume too much control over their students’ work and perform a sort of magic act in the name of art education. A magic trick, discloses the master magician in the film *The Prestige* (Nolan, 2006), is performed in three acts: the pledge, the turn, and the prestige. By employing this metaphor, a parallel may be drawn between the deft skills of a creative art teacher and a magician’s sleight of hand. Both are masters of illusion and deliver well-rendered performances for their compliant audiences. But while the magician is rightly praised for nimble execution of skillful chimera, the act of deception practiced by the art teacher is cause for concern. When product trumps process, art teachers may be managing projects instead of facilitating learning. Shouldn’t children’s art be learning made manifest and not the product of smoke and mirrors?

## Student Art Produced in Three Acts

### *Act One: The Pledge (The Motivational Set)*

Joyful students tumble into the art room. This is the time of the school day they have been waiting for. “What are we doing today?” asks the first child through the door. “Find your chair please,” replies the sly art teacher, “I will tell you when everyone is seated and listening!” The reason for withholding this information is simple: the teacher wants to control the pace of the lesson to come, to dole out information in carefully structured parts, to build mystery, suspense, interest, and motivation. It is a performance, after all, and the audience will have to wait and see.

In a magic act, the “pledge” is the set-up. It is the introduction of a trick. A box is held up, turned to expose all surfaces, examined inside and out; the box is empty. In a typical art lesson, the pledge may be thought of as the overture offered to students that discloses what is in store for them. Some call this the motivational set. It is the time during the art lesson when the teacher presents some background information and an exemplar illustrating the desired outcome: “Here is a cubist portrait by Picasso; nothing up my sleeve.” The fact is, students know that there *is* something up the teacher’s sleeve, just as audience members attending a magic show know they are about to be tricked. But they like playing along. The teacher announces, “Today, class, **you** will produce a portrait in the style of Picasso!”

**Book Artist**—Skills and techniques, demonstrated in short lessons to the whole group, manifest later in learner-designed projects. Here a 6th-grade book artist creates a series of innovative book forms after learning some traditional bookmaking techniques.



It is very important not to give away too much too soon. If students learn too quickly what they are expected to produce, they will begin before all the instructions have been delivered and are likely to take a misstep. A skilled teacher knows to wait until just enough information has been provided so that students are straining at the bit, keen to start their work, before moving into the next act.

### *Act Two: The Turn (Project Execution)*

When a magician performs a trick, the “turn” is the moment when something extraordinary happens; the dove is covered with a silk handkerchief, the volunteer helps with the magic word, “abracadabra!” In art class, the turn comes when the tools, materials, and techniques are finally revealed. The parameters are set. Papers are handed out. Water cans are at the ready. Instructions and strategies for the project are detailed. “Students,” the art teacher exclaims at last, “you may begin!”

Finally, released from their role as audience, students spring into action. They know the expectations, they see the example they are to emulate, they understand that time is short. After an intense flurry of activity and a speedy cleanup, the task is complete. It’s Magic! The dove has turned into a rabbit! Twenty-three second graders have produced cubist portraits “in the style of” Picasso. Impossible! How did the magician **do** that?

### *Act Three: The Prestige (The Final Bow)*

For the art teacher, “the prestige” is the grand finale: the final bow. The project—so carefully engineered that all the problems have been solved (in advance, by the teacher), so precisely orchestrated that every student is guaranteed success (aided by

the teacher’s coaching)—is now finished. The resulting piece is ready for the school bulletin board, the art show, or the refrigerator door. It is suitable for framing. It is proudly displayed in online galleries or sent off to decorate coffee mugs and tote bags, to later sell back to the parents.

Sometimes a curious parent or classroom teacher asks: “How do you get the children to make such beautiful art? What is the trick?” These admiring adults observe that the work that comes from the art room doesn’t look anything like what children make back in their regular classroom or home at the kitchen table. It looks sophisticated, artful, in an innocent, charming, naive sort of way. What is the secret? Of course, a magician never reveals the trick. It’s magic!

Because of this practice, parents and other adults may come to expect and appreciate only art in the “school art style” (Efland, 1976, p. 37), a sort of quaint version of adult art that addresses an adult aesthetic. And why shouldn’t they? This practice has been part of the school experience for about 80 years (Gude, 2012)! Art carried home in the child’s backpack or displayed at school, frequently derivative, is often characterized by the art teacher as “in the style of” or “inspired by” famous well-loved artists. Matisse-inspired paper-cuts, Calderesque wire circuses, Aboriginal bark paintings crafted with Q-tips on paper bags, and sometimes a sly Banksy street-art stencil motif, decorate school hallways from Maine to California. Art teachers are expected to produce this type of art and garner considerable praise and respect from adoring adult art patrons. Who doesn’t love a mini-Monet for the guest room wall? However, parents who cherish the lively Monet-inspired lily pond, created by their



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firstborn, may wonder over the same lilies, in the same pond, with the same arched bridge, presented two years later by their second child. Parents visiting several different schools in their hometown may notice similar collections of eerily repeated children's art decorating the walls from school to school to school. Here giant orange flowers in the style of O'Keefe; there swirling blues and golds in a van Gogh starry sky. A discipline that touts creativity and individual voice may be at odds with accepted practice in the typical art classroom. When the teacher monopolizes so much of the creative process, what is left for the child?

### Behind the Curtain

It may be that the one who receives and benefits from the creative experience typical of a school art project is not the student but the teacher. The art teacher, not the child, is the inventor, the selector, the decision maker, the problem finder and the problem solver. She chooses the project, decides what materials are used, and plans how long students will toil. She may even choose the subject, color palette, style, and purpose of her students' artwork. Through careful study, thought, experimentation, and a period of incubation, a no-fail art activity is crafted by the teacher in which students are asked to perform. Students may function as shills in an artmaking magic act in much the same way as do volunteers in a magician's audience—invited to play along, cajoled to join in, but each action carefully scripted. Just as the magician instructs his eager volunteer to blow on the coin or select a card, students are offered their choice from an array of colorful construction paper or allowed to pick which relatives to depict in "their" cubist portrait. **These few choices are theirs, but creative control belongs to the teacher.**



**top**  
**Digital Self Portrait**—A learner-directed exploration of digital drawing media yields this expressive portrait.

**bottom**  
**Family Portrait Artist**—An innovative use of handmade paper.

The magic act in which many art teachers perform is well-intentioned but ill-conceived. The art lesson, upon closer examination, may have more to do with manipulation than with artistic or creative endeavor. The prestige, which results from exquisitely crafted and elegantly displayed artwork, holds a seductive allure for art teachers and is leveraged as evidence of expert instruction. Eye-popping, adult-pleasing art displays in school hallways are a proud testament to the ingenuity and expertise of skillful art teachers who blithely guide children through the steps and techniques required to produce this exquisite work. In this way, in art room after art room, year in and year out, well-meaning, creative art teachers engage in lively, imaginative chicanery at the expense of the creative development of their pupils.

Accepted, celebrated, and largely unchallenged art-magic acts, masquerading as best practice, are propagated in trade magazines and art lesson plan websites.<sup>1</sup> Slick product is peddled at the expense of first-hand inquiry, discovery, personal relevance, meaning making, choice and imagination. Has authentic, original, spontaneous, idiosyncratic children's art, no longer understood or appreciated, become a lost art? Seduced by the glamour of the stage and hallway gallery, applauded by principals and parents, have art teachers forgotten their purpose? What will become of these children when there is no art-guide to lay out the materials, provide inspiration, shore-up motivation and list the required steps toward success? Jaquith and Hathaway (2012) note, "In schools where every piece of the curriculum, including the arts, is prescribed, time for students to assert and develop their voices is compromised" (pg. 28).

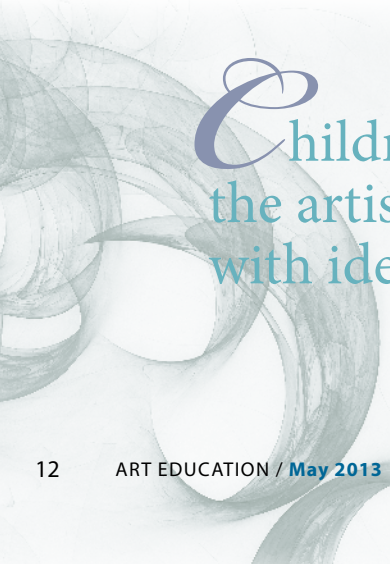
In order to implement the kind of thinking and learning that honors and develops the creative ability of each child, movement is needed away from teacher-contrived art problems toward more personalized, learner-directed practices (Jaquith & Hathaway, 2012). This adjustment addresses current directives for programs that offer students the opportunity to act as innovators, inventors, and collaborators; skills and abilities deemed requisite for their future success. Movement away from teacher-centric lessons toward student-directed learning can help guarantee that art, instead of being considered a dispensable "special," is essential. For this to happen, students must first "be given the opportunity to think like artists" (Douglas & Jaquith, 2009; Hathaway, 2009; Hetland, Winner, Veenema, & Sheridan, 2007, p. 4) and teachers need support to seeking and develop what McNulty (2010) calls "next practice."<sup>2</sup>

## Scrap the Tricks: Keep the Magic

When the classroom is redefined as a studio and the students are considered artists, authentic artmaking, with authentic purpose, results (Douglas & Jaquith, 2009). Art educators who adopt a constructivist, studio-based approach quickly understand the value of shifting creative control from teacher to learner. This sort of learning "takes place in a context of relevance, 'just in time,' rather than 'just in case.' And such learning offers... the opportunity to acquire knowledge and skills through learning strategies that are personalized and adapted to the learner's own learning styles and preferences" (The Partnership for 21st Century Learning Skills, 2009, p. 5).

Relevant, meaningful learning is facilitated in an environment where learners are encouraged to work in a manner consistent with professionals in the field, as first-hand inquirers (Chase & Doan, 1996; Renzulli, Leppien, & Hays, 2000; Tomlinson, Kaplan, Renzulli, Purcell, Leppien, & Burns, 2002; Westburg & Archambault, 1997). Doing the real work of artists in a studio, children experiment with media and techniques of the artist, work with materials they love, and engage with ideas in personally meaningful ways. Additionally, learners in a studio setting collaborate with other artists, explore, try, fail, practice, dream, and reflect. These experiences, practices, and behaviors define the work of the artist and may transfer to other disciplines and other areas of student's lives outside of school (Hetland, et al. 2007).

The value of art education, beyond acquiring specific skills and techniques, and in addition to learning about and connecting to the larger world of art, is the development of higher order thinking (Eisner, 2002; Hetland, et al. 2007). Eisner contends that the purpose of art education is to "promote the child's ability to develop his or her mind..." (p. 24). This is a powerful statement, one supported by Hetland, et al. in research describing "Eight Studio Habits of Mind... *Observation, Envisioning, Reflecting, Expressing, Exploring, Engaging and Persisting...*" (p. 7), which are artistic behaviors demonstrated by students learning in studio-classrooms. Discovery, essential understandings, creative flexible thinking, innovation and invention, practice and perseverance, finding, developing and communicating original ideas; these are the important things in school art programs.



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**Quilt to comfort a friend**—While other students are engaged in a variety of short and long term projects in other areas of the room, this fabric artist exhibits unusually strong focus and motivation as he completes a quilt for a friend who recently suffered a great loss.

### Authenticity: Teaching for Artistic Behavior

A promising approach for supporting student-directed learning is embodied in choice-based art programs, which utilize the concept of Teaching for Artistic Behavior (TAB). “Choice-based art education provides for the development of artistic behaviors by enabling students to discover what it means to be an artist through *authentic* creation of artwork” (Douglas & Jaquith, 2009, p. 3). Typically, teachers in choice-based studio-classrooms engage young artists through a multifaceted approach that trusts the primary development of artistic ideation, production and evaluation to the child-artist. Learners are expected to come to class prepared with a plan or idea, ready to seek and employ appropriate media or processes to bring that idea to life, or to arrive with the willingness to find inspiration through experimentation, discovery and interaction with materials, methods, and resources in the studio (Joseph, 2003, in Douglas & Jaquith, 2009). Through this approach to authentic art education, learners are poised to make connections between their own art and that of others, to learn from those who came before through the lens of right now, and to employ their art for disparate purposes and personal reward.

Now, in the new role of stage director, the teacher gives considerable attention to the layout of the studio and devises ways that it can function for diverse groups of students. Children need to move with ease around the studio, find spaces to work independently or collaboratively, see and access the materials and tools



**Soft sculpture artist**—Working in the “Fabrics & Fibers Center,” students acquire sewing and weaving techniques and design original projects that reflect idiosyncratic knowledge and interests.

they need. Materials, tools, and resources can be arranged in studio centers, which feature examples of children's art, reproductions of adult art, interesting objects, books, charts, and other pertinent information. Well-designed and maintained centers offer an entryway for young artists. The choice-based art classroom functions as a silent teacher, appointed to inspire, instruct and support the learning within. An efficiently run studio may appear to operate almost without the teacher's presence, but don't be fooled. This is a different sort of magic and does not involve trickery. It is through careful planning, astute observation, and practice that the teacher provides a setting that enables students to work autonomously. The teacher in a TAB studio is a "student of her students" (Tomlinson, 2005, p. 2), observing and learning from their behavior to inform the direction for each next lesson.

No longer responsible for crafting and implementing specific art projects, the teacher is able to target instruction in response to demonstrated student need and interest. Differentiated instruction can be initiated by the learner as well as the teacher, and students frequently take on the role of teacher or mentor when their specialized skills can benefit others in the studio. Teacher-directed, whole-group instruction focuses on those things the teacher deems everyone needs to know and is kept short to preserve most of class time for student-directed learning. As students work, instruction continues, but now the teacher's focus shifts to small interest groups or targeted

individual lessons. The teacher also watches for opportunities to assume the role of fellow artist within this community of artists. Now the teacher has the opportunity to learn alongside students, gaining valuable insights that help guide instruction while modeling the habits of an artist at work. A vibrant community of artists thrives under this construct, resulting in newfound opportunity for the teacher to identify and develop emergent curriculum initiated by students (Hathaway, 2009).

Emergent curriculum is sensible but not predictable. It requires of its practitioners trust in the power of play—trust in spontaneous choice making among possibilities... programs that are also good for teacher growth encourage teachers as well to become competent players, choosing among possibilities and thus constructing their own hands-on understandings of the teaching-learning process. (Jones & Nimmo, 1994, p. 1)

Emergent curriculum is that which springs from the interests, questions, needs and strengths of the students. It is by nature relevant, timely, and important to students. Local, state, and national model content standards remain as an underlying structure and provide touch-points for lessons and assessment, but it is the emergent curriculum that feeds the hunger children have to discover, extend, innovate, and understand. By maximizing emergent curriculum, the art teacher is energized by the implicit surprise, variety and novelty that idiosyncratic learning paths supply.



**Stencil Artist**—Students working as artists in a studio-setting find and develop preferred techniques, favorite tools, or follow a line of thinking over time. This student has been perfecting stencil cutting and use over a 3-year period.

**Using references to build skills**—The art room can be set up to promote student autonomy by offering access to needed tools, materials, references, and resources.

By respecting the child as artist, the art teacher sets the stage for creative exploration (Douglas & Jaquith, 2009). Studio-classrooms meet children where they are developmentally and artistically and support learning on a child-by-child basis. This model is flexible and successful with diverse populations in public and private school settings, with large and small class sizes, and has added importance for students who may be at-risk, notably those identified as gifted, special needs, or learning disabled (Hathaway, 2012). TAB classrooms reflect the populations they serve and the interests of the teachers designing them. Yet a choice-based kindergarten class in a small, independent school in Boulder, Colorado may not look all that different from a large middle school class in a public school in Waterbury, Vermont. The essential ingredients—student choice, autonomy, and creative freedom—are apparent in both settings, connected by the teacher’s desire to identify and support artistic behavior. By focusing teaching on artistic behavior, and not precious product, art educators can throw back the curtain of deception and attend to the vital role they play in the creative growth of their students.

## Conclusion

Meaningful, authentic art education demands that art teachers step down from the stage and hand the magic wand to the capable young artists in their charge. Topics from art history and issues inherent in contemporary practice are woven together in the studio structure, where students thrive in a space

carefully appointed and arranged to optimize learning. Learners are encouraged to act as problem finders, not just problem solvers, as they identify and evaluate interesting art challenges drawn from their unique knowledge base, interests, and intent (Jaquith, 2011). In a studio-learning environment all the components desired and expected in a comprehensive art program—skills, techniques, art history, approach to work, aesthetics and conventions, reflection and critique—are integrated in response to student inquiry and creative activity.

Art education should not be about tricks and deception. Art educators would better serve their students by stepping out of the spotlight to engage students in authentic, meaningful learning. Instead of smoke and mirrors, good teaching is more like a dance between teacher and student: a dance in which the **child** leads.

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## AUTHOR NOTE

For more information about Teaching for Artistic Behavior (TAB) and Choice-Based Art Education, please visit: [www.teachingforartistic-behavior.org](http://www.teachingforartistic-behavior.org)

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## ENDNOTE

- For example, see [www.artsonia.com/museum/gallery.asp?exhibit=282890&tindex=12](http://www.artsonia.com/museum/gallery.asp?exhibit=282890&tindex=12)
- “Next practice” (McNaulty, 2009) is experimental in nature, in contrast to *best practice*, which is supported by data to be proven effective. Next practice, usually originated in the classroom by innovative teachers, is essential for the advancement in the field of education.