



Choice-Based Art

Choice-Based Art classrooms are working studios where students learn through authentic art making. Control shifts from teacher to learner as students explore ideas and interests in art media of their choice. This concept supports multiple modes of learning to meet the diverse needs of our students.

A QUESTION OF CLAY

BY NAN HATHAWAY

Q: *I am only just starting out with choice-based art part-time this year so have not figured out some major things such as how do you do the kiln firing when you don't have a consistent quantity of clay needing to be fired? Do you encourage the kids to glaze (which you then have to fire), or to paint their pieces?*

A: **GOOD QUESTIONS! IN MY CHOICE-BASED ART CLASSROOM,** the “clay center” is one of several media centers available to students each day. Each center “opens” in turn after an introduction to the tools, materials and references available, set-up and clean-up procedures, and expectations for use.

The clay center usually opens last, after several other centers are up and running. Because there is not enough room for everyone to work at the clay center at once, there needs to be several other choices established when clay finally opens.

STUDENTS FIRST HAVE TO DEMONSTRATE that they understand how to conduct themselves as responsible artists within a community studio-setting and can take care of the other centers. Once students can set up their workspaces, work independently, and clean up on time at the end of class, the clay center opens!

In my classroom, there is room for six students to work at the clay center at a time, although for the first few days of clay, I provide a few additional spots nearby to accommodate high interest and enthusiasm. Moist clay is offered “self-serve” from a lidded plastic box containing small pre-cut chunks.

THE RULE FOR CLAY IS: FINISHED WORK must be “no thicker than your thumb and no thinner than your pinky” in order to be fired. Clay that is too thick may not dry to the core and risks exploding in the kiln. Thin bits are at high-risk of breaking before they even get to the kiln. Not all clay work is kept, but students make that determination, as long as the rule for thickness is met.

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- teachingforartisticbehavior.org
- groups.yahoo.com/group/TAB-ChoiceArtEd

When a clay object is ready to dry, the student places it on a near-by shelf where scraps of paper and a sharpie marker are available. Students write their name and class on the scrap of paper, and place the paper under their clay piece. Later in the day, or whenever I have a moment, I turn the piece over and transfer the name and class onto the clay. This way I can read the name when I unload the kiln.

AS SOON AS A PIECE IS DRY, I PUT IT RIGHT INTO THE KILN, and just keep the lid open, loading work as it is ready until the kiln is full. I am fortunate that my kiln is right in my room, so I can do this easily. Loading as pieces dry keeps the clay shelf open to receive more pieces as they are made throughout the week and minimizes breakage.

Once the kiln is full, I fire. It could be once a week when things are moving right along, or once every two weeks when things are just starting up. Near the end of a quarter it could be twice a week to get everything done before the clay center closes.

STUDENTS LEARN THAT I DON'T PUT ANYTHING in the kiln until it is bone dry, or the clay might crack or even explode. They also know that I don't start the kiln until it is full, because the load will fire more evenly and efficiently if it is full. Clay artists learn to be patient!

The fired clay is unloaded into class boxes (the lids from copier paper boxes work really well for this). At the start of the first class after the bisqueware is ready, students gather around the clay table. Various considerations for surface-treatments are described.

“Functional” pottery that will hold food or liquid must be glazed and fired a second time. Sculptures can be painted. The qualities of each type of paint are briefly highlighted: Tempera for bold, matte color, acrylic for a shiny, opaque finish, watercolor for a subtle, transparent look. Some students choose to leave their clay as is, and others explore less expected decorating techniques such as markers or colored pencils.

When the first clay pieces are ready to go home, class is halted a little early so I can show everyone how to wrap the fragile objects in crumpled newspaper, secure with masking tape, and label with a marker. Students are expected to do this for themselves next time. ■

Nan Hathaway is a middle-school art teacher in Vermont. She is a member of Teaching for Artistic Behavior, Inc., authors studio-learning.blogspot.com, and is co-editor, with Diane Jaquith, of “The Learner-Directed Classroom: Developing Creative Thinking Skills through Art.”