



Choice-Based Art Edited by Nan Hathaway

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. Learn more at teachingforartisticbehavior.org.

I'M INTERESTED IN MAKING ARTISTS

BY IAN SANDS

As an art teacher I long embraced the mantra, “Make Art.” I had these words emblazoned on T-shirts, a coffee mug, my classroom blog banner, even the license plate on my car. I had good reason for accepting this catchy slogan. After all, my job was to teach my students to make art.

One day while looking over my students’ art, I noticed that their work all looked the same. In fact, their art looked more than similar, their work was unrecognizable as individual pieces. When I laid it out on a table, I couldn’t tell which work belonged to which student. Though I had been teaching my students to make art, I hadn’t been teaching them how to be artists. It was at this point I realized a paradigm shift in my thinking was required. I would no longer be interested in “making art” but, rather, “making artists.”

This difference in my thinking can best be understood by comparing the product vs. the process. As an art teacher who was interested in making art, I incorporated a product-based mentality. My old way of thinking leaned heavily on a desired and predetermined outcome. In other words, I was interested in what students’ project would look like when they were completed.

As I switched to being a more choice-based teacher, I became interested in making artists. My focus now turns to a set of artistic behaviors my students will acquire while creating art. I want to make sure they understand steps artists take and decisions artists make when creating art. In other words, I became interested in the process.

In order to implement my newfound desire to teach students to work like artists, I enlisted the help of fellow Apex High School art teacher, Melissa Purtee. Together we sat down and developed a list of ideas, not based on making art, but on being an artist. We considered what artists do, how they think and how they work to create art. From our very long inventory of topics, we scrubbed our list of artistic behaviors down to our top seven. This set of units would become our semester roadmap.

Here is our list of artistic-behavior units including short descriptions.

1. ARTISTS OBSERVE: This unit covers observational drawing and possibly painting. It incorporates still-life drawings and nature drawings, as well as architectural drawings, urban sketching or even plein air painting.

2. ARTISTS STEAL: Discussions revolve around artists such as Lichtenstein, Shepard Fairey and Damien Hirst. Themes are based on concepts such as appropriation and intertextuality.

3. ARTISTS COMMUNICATE: This unit covers the many ways art is used to communicate ideas and thoughts. It covers a range of art works from contemporary artists to commercial fields such as advertising and illustration to video and animation. This unit culminates with a theme-based project.

4. ARTISTS COLLABORATE: This unit introduces the concept of working together to build something bigger than the sum of its parts. Consider discussing and contrasting different ways artists collaborate, from Jeff Koons, who hires people to create his art, to teams like Christo and Jeanne-Claude, who worked together.

5. ARTISTS CURATE: This unit covers how museum and gallery exhibits are conceived and works are assembled in groups. It covers everything from artist styles and collections to how museum curators pick topics for shows. This unit also explores how artists create individual style.

6. ARTISTS SOLVE PROBLEMS: This unit examines how artists work with limitations and constraints. Students research the limitations artists overcome such as; Henri Matisse working with compromised vision, Chuck Close painting from his wheelchair, or Phil Hansen’s TED talk, “Embrace the Shake.” Students explore self-inflicted limitations from materials to working in difficult situations.

7. ARTISTS ARE SELF-LEARNERS: This unit provides students an opportunity to experiment with new materials, styles, skills and techniques. It encourages them to utilize tutorials, and to create tutorials themselves. They are also encouraged to share what they learn with others.

Making the shift from product-based to process-based thinking opened avenues of creativity, originality and personal voice in my students’ work that I had not previously seen. Where before I couldn’t tell two works apart, I now see projects that are created in a style unique to each student. Their works no longer resemble exercises in the elements and principles of design, but rather, art that is personal and meaningful to each individual artist. ■

Ian Sands teaches visual art at Apex High School outside of Raleigh, N.C. He is passionate about student choice, supporting diversity and creating pathways for authentic self-expression. Read more from Ian at: www.artofapex.com