



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.

WHAT IS A CENTER?

BY NAN E. HATHAWAY

In a choice-based art program, the studio-classroom is arranged into various media “centers.” A center contains tools and materials, general directions and references for students to use independently. A center can be thought of as a silent lesson plan because it contains all the information a student needs to create art using any given medium.

For instance, the painting center, located near the sink, has palettes, brushes, aprons, water containers, a selection of paint, and paper in various sizes.

Displayed in the painting center are “set-up” and “clean-up” posters, an annotated color wheel, reproductions of paintings by both adult and child artists, related vocabulary, and suggestions to try various techniques, such as applying a wash, scratching through a layers of paint with the end of a brush (called sgraffito) or drawing first with oil pastels for an oil resist.

At the collage center students sort through a row of clear plastic tubs, set up in rainbow order and filled with the scraps and treasures brought from home. Today there is a new supply of green raffle tickets from a left-over roll, donated by the PTO. There are wallpaper sample books and a collection of magazines.

Scissors, glue, tape and staples are lined up next to the hole-punches and paper trimmer. A Romare Bearden reproduction is tacked up beside a collage left behind by a student who must love horses. There are books about paper art and a note card announcing “Ready-Set-Glue!”

STUDENT AUTONOMY Carefully designed and maintained centers provide autonomy for students. *“I love how I can see and get everything I need,”* remarks a student who joined a choice-based art classroom mid-year.

Another student declares, *“We have so many more materials than we did before!”* The teacher knows that the materials available are the same as she always had, but instead of being carefully stored under lock and key, they are now emancipated and arranged for efficient student access.

In fact, it is no longer necessary to have a class set of wash brushes for watercolor painting or brayers for printmaking because now only a few students use each center at one time. Now there is a little extra in the budget to spurge on items that were out of reach before, like a few fan brushes or a good set of pliers for wire sculpture. Donations from parents add novelty and are added to the appropriate center.

GRAND OPENINGS The class gathers at the start of class for the opening of a new center. The teacher describes what can be found in here and how the tools and materials are used and cared for. A photograph is posted illustrating how the center should look after clean up.

Students are invited to work in this new center, or choose from the other centers opened on previous days. Six are allowed to work in the clay center at one time, but there is room for eight in the sculpture center. The drawing center is always popular, and today the teacher has provided some clipboards so students can sit anywhere in the room to make drawings from different points of view.

EPHEMERAL CENTERS In most choice-based art rooms there is a drawing center, painting center, collage center and a sculpture center. If there is enough room, there might also be a fabrics and fibers center, a printmaking center and a clay center.

Some teachers offer ephemeral centers, designed to be temporary. These centers come and go, depending on material availability, space or student interest.

Perhaps a puppet-making center will pop up, or a book-making station. Tile mosaics could be offered in one classroom, an altered book area in another. A teacher’s special talent or the expertise of a visiting artist can spark a center. Sometimes students suggest ideas for centers and might even design and appoint the center themselves.

INCUBATION One benefit of teaching with centers is that students can rely on this arrangement and plan their work outside of class. It is not unusual for students to arrive for art with blueprints in hand or detailed sketches of their intended projects.

Students returning to their choice-based classroom after summer vacation may already know what they plan to do on the first day of art. Students planning for their work in this way are practicing the authentic work of artists in a community studio.

By providing inspirational, well-designed centers, teachers guide children to become autonomous learners and to transform from student to artist. For more information visit teachingforartisticbehavior.org ■

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