ART HISTORY FROM THE INSIDE OUT
BY NAN E. HATHAWAY

One of the greatest joys of teaching in a choice-based classroom is observing students busy all over the studio, engaged in the pursuit of their own ideas and creative processes. On any given day, it is impossible to predict exactly what will be created, invented or discovered.

The teacher in a choice-based setting is always watching for ways to extend learning and occasions to “frame” emergent curriculum in response to student inquiry.

**EMERGENT CURRICULUM INITIATED BY STUDENTS** exposes the readiness, interests and knowledge of individual learners. This is “learning from the inside out” where the student leads and the teacher follows. Here’s how it works: The teacher observes a student applying black paint in straight lines to a large sheet of white paper. She divides the space with geometric precision, and creates large and small rectangles which she fills with primary colors. The painting-in-progress reminds the teacher of another painter.

As a square is filled with bright yellow paint, the teacher inquires “do you know of a painter called Mondrian? He liked to paint with the same colors you are using, and he, also, liked to divide his picture plane with bold black lines.”

The teacher makes a note in her lesson book to prepare a quick slide show of Mondrian’s work. This young student’s painting, displayed alongside Mondrian’s work, will form the basis for the “5-minute lesson” at the start of the next class.

**THE SCULPTURE CENTER HAS BEEN OPEN FOR THREE WEEKS** now, long enough for one fourth-grade boy to bring the boat he assembled out of recycled materials to the painting center for decoration. After some trial and error and help from a friend, a satisfying “battleship gray” has been mixed and applied.

The sculptor sets his project on a shelf to dry and returns eagerly the following week to retrieve it. Sadly, he discovers that there are places where the paint has flaked off. Disappointed, he brings it to the teacher and asks “what went wrong?”

“Oh dear,” the teacher commiserates, “that’s the same thing that happened to Leonardo da Vinci! Have you heard of him?” Just knowing that this kind of material malfunction can happen to one of the most famous artists in the world is some consolation and bolsters this young sculptor to try a different kind of paint.

Next week when students arrive the teacher will have had time to dig out her faded copies of da Vinci’s *The Last Supper* and will start class by asking “what do artist do when things go wrong?”

**A SECOND-GRADE MAKING A UNICORN** out of clay. She positions the creature lying down, because the thin legs cannot support the heavy clay body. “Have you ever seen a unicorn?” asks her teacher. “I’ve never seen one,” the young sculptor replies, “but I have heard a story about them—they wouldn’t get on the ark!”

The teacher leads the student over to the printmaking center. Together they examine a woodcut displayed there. It is a reproduction of Durer’s famous rhino. “This artist never saw the animal he made art about either—he made this after hearing someone tell about it.” After noting the variety of textures created by dots and lines, the student returns to her work and adds some finishing touches.

**AN EIGHTH-GRADE CARTOONIST IS WORKING** on the second page of a comic strip featuring minimalist figures in various states of ennui. This quiet boy has been drawing comics for two years in art class. Last year he made a series of altered street signs, warning of various disasters up ahead. This year’s work is more in the style of contemporary artist Layla Ali. His teacher decides to preview an *Art 21* clip featuring her work, to see if there might be a connection to be made.

**RELATING TOPICS FROM CONTEMPORARY ART** and art history in response to student work is a little bit backwards. This is not the usual way students learn about the art world. But the impact of discovering that another artist found the same subject, method or material intriguing, well, that is immediately relevant to students.

Students in a choice-based art class work with favorite materials and tools, explore themes important to their lives, and are interested, as any artist would be, in the art of others. A studio classroom is rich hunting ground for art teachers seeking to inject information to broaden and deepen art experiences and understandings about the world of art. For more information visit *teachingforartisticbehavior.org*.

**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.

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