



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.

VISIT TO A CHOICE-BASED ART CLASSROOM

BY KATHERINE DOUGLAS

It's easy to find the choice studio; outside the door is a table covered with newspaper where papier-mâché sculptures, silk-screen prints and tempera paintings are drying. As you enter the room you see the teacher finishing her 5-minute whole-group demonstration.

TODAY SHE IS INTRODUCING STITCHING and embroidery to second-grade students. She measures the yarn as long as her arms stretched out, cuts it and carefully threads the large-eyed needle. After making both ends the same she pulls the needle through a square of burlap, pulling the yarn through. The students remind her that she needs to tie a knot at the end of the doubled yarn—it is like a period at the end of a sentence, which says STOP!

The teacher points to a large drawing of the needle, yarn and knot and reminds the children that stitching is like drawing with a needle. "If you would like to learn some ways of stitching you may stay here at this table. Otherwise you may go to your centers."

Seven children stay to try the running stitch, the back-stitch and French knots on small burlap pieces. The remaining students move to the studio centers, some stopping at their class box to pick up unfinished work.

BY THE DOOR, FOUR STUDENTS BEGIN DRAWING; one looks closely at a dinosaur model and tries to draw it accurately with pencil. Next to him a girl continues work on

a comic page, using nine-panel paper. Sitting across from them, another boy experiments, mixing colored pencils.

Next to that center is a puppet area. Color-coded boxes contain "bodies" such as socks, sticks, tubes and boxes. Other containers offer buttons, beads, yarn, fabric and tools. The teacher will be asking puppeteers about the moves and personality of their newly created being.

Students in the collage and sculpture centers share scissors, punches, fasteners, tape and glue. While collage artists search for colors, textures and patterns that are just right, and move them around on their papers, the sculptors also search for the perfect box, bottle cap or cardboard for their dragon or boat. A group of three starts work on a dollhouse that may take several weeks and visits to several centers to complete. One puppeteer suggests that her puppet could live in the house.

NEXT TO THE SINK IS A NEWSPAPER-COVERED TABLE for painters. Trays of tempera paint (black, white, magenta, turquoise and yellow) were poured before school. Coffee cans for water, brushes in a wide range of sizes, sponges and palettes are stacked and ready. Students set up their own spaces using small laminated menus listing everything they must gather before painting.

The teacher circulates, asking and answering questions, and noting students who need more help and others who can share their expertise as peer coaches. She gives a "5-minutes-till-cleanup" warning; when the cleanup music starts, students store their work and put away their own materials quickly. Sharing time allows the students from the sewing table to show their work in progress and invite others to try the new materials.

IN CHOICE-BASED ART CLASSROOMS

Students ...

- work from their strengths.
- work at a comfortable speed.
- go "deep" with a material, technique or subject if they choose.
- do the artists' work of generating ideas.
- learn from and work with peers, while forming positive cooperative groups.
- take responsibilities for set up and care of materials.

Teachers ...

- make observations to determine instructional directions.
- work with small groups while others work independently.
- offer special help to struggling students.
- get to know students through their individual work.

For more information, visit:

TAB Webpage: teachingforartisticbehavior.org
 TAB on Facebook: [tinyurl.com/2extz79](https://www.facebook.com/tinyurl.com/2extz79)

IN THIS CHOICE-BASED ART CLASSROOM, the students move comfortably within an organized structure of space, time and materials, managed by the teacher. They are well aware of their responsibilities and their possibilities.

The teacher helps them to mine their lives and interests for the content of their artmaking, as she observes and makes notes to plan for future demonstrations and one-on-one facilitation.

Classroom conversations often focus on idea generation, self-evaluation and why the artist has made a particular choice. Higher-order thinking is at work, even in the first-grade classes! ■

Katherine Douglas is an education consultant retired from K-6 teaching. She is co-founder of Teaching for Artistic Behavior, Inc. (TAB) and co-author with Diane Jaquith of "Engaging Learners Through Artmaking."