



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.

BEGINNINGS & ENDINGS IN THE CHOICE STUDIO

BY KATHERINE DOUGLAS

Brief, precious moments at the beginning and the end of art class, when used carefully, support positive behavior, looking at and talking about art, and help students remember and use new information.

In the choice studio classroom, we plan not just for efficiency, but to create a positive spirit that brings our students in and out of their weekly art experience. In 40-minutes-a-week elementary classes, this requires planning and thought.

Consider welcoming your students into the studio by meeting them in the hallway. This allows you to glance along the line to read the temperature of the group as a whole. What sort of energy is there? Sometimes it is useful to hold up an interesting or ambiguous object that connects with the opening demo. As each child enters the room, try for eye contact and a smile, and for some, a quick comment. This transition is important to remind children that they are entering the space that differs from other places in school.

The children know that their first stop is their listening place. In some classrooms this is a work table, a spot on a rug, or gathered around a demonstration table. Students know that as soon as they are settled the day's brief demo begins. Some teachers refer to this mini-lesson as "the five-minute-demo." The point is to keep the new information to "the least you can say" which allows for maximum studio time afterward.

THE END OF CLASS IS AS CRITICAL as the beginning. After cleanup it is important for students to share, reflect and think again about new information from the opening demo. Students need a lot of practice to do this but time is very limited.

I invite beginning students to collect their work, find a friend and ask "what did you make today?" That simple

sentence initiates a "pair/share" and really helps young students to look and converse.

After a few weeks of this routine, I invite students to bring their work back to the tables to do a "table share." Now, five or six children converse with each other, as I rotate around the room, sometimes preparing for incoming classes.

The next level of sharing starts when I observe that students are ready not only to talk about their own work, but to begin to look carefully at the work of others. This does not happen automatically, but increases with practice.

In a class where stitching is introduced, I invite those who chose this new technique to bring their work-in-progress to the front of the room. I might refer to this group as the "stitching club" and invite others to offer comments or questions for these artists. I also announce that these experienced students are available as coaches for newcomers to stitching in upcoming weeks.

Still later in the year, sharing and listening to others is more flexible. We do not have a formal share every week, but because by this time so many pieces are multi-week affairs, students approach me when they reach a culmination. They often find a respectful audience for their sharing.

EVEN WHEN THERE'S NO TIME for formal sharing it is important to prepare students for a smooth transition back to their classroom teacher. After children find their artwork and return to their seats, I ask for "one true fact" from the day's new demo. A hand goes up and a student states something about stitching, such as "don't forget to tie a knot!" Then that student is asked to start the line at the door. Lots of hands go up and one by one, children join the line after remembering something about the new lesson.

Classroom teachers often arrive midway through this closing activity and get a feeling for new information and vocabulary as they reclaim their class in an orderly manner.

I have a collection of lining-up questions that I might use with any grade level: "Who had a struggle today?" "Did you find a way to overcome the difficulty?" "If not, does anyone here have a strategy to help this artist?" "Who was helped by another student today?" The child who answers and the helping student are invited to lead the line.

Well-planned beginnings and endings, no matter how brief, support the climate of respect and reflection that is central to art making and learning in the choice-studio classroom. ■

FIND OUT MORE

- Douglas, K. and Jaquith, D. *Engaging Learners through Artmaking: Choice-Based Art Education in the Classroom*. Teachers College Press; 2009.
- Jaquith, D. and Hathaway, N. *The Learner-Directed Classroom: Developing Creative Thinking Skills Through Art*. Teachers College Press; 2012.
- teachingforartisticbehavior.org
- groups.yahoo.com/group/TAB-ChoiceArtEd

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