



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.

THE SCRIBBLE STAGE

BY KATHERINE DOUGLAS

Children create with whatever knowledge they happen to have at the time. The very act of creating is creating itself. Waiting until a good factual preparation can be obtained before taking action, or stopping children from creating until they know enough about the subject to act intelligently, may inhibit action rather than promote action. The opportunity for the child to create constantly with his present knowledge is the best preparation for future creative action.”—Victor Lowenfeld, *Creative and Mental Growth*, 1964.

Viktor Lowenfeld’s term “Scribble Stage” is not being used here in a literal sense, but to highlight how first efforts appear in student independent work. The “Scribble Stage” can describe the entry level of anything!

ADULT EXPECTATIONS FOR CHILD ART often conflict with natural developmental stages of growth. Teacher desire for attractive artwork can result in adult-pleasing pieces that do not always reflect students’ real abilities or interests.

“Teachers frequently ... encourage scribbling children to draw something ‘real’ to satisfy their own adult imagination. Such imposition of ideas that are far beyond the abilities of the developmental stage of the child can be disastrous to his further development.” (Lowenfeld)

Choice teachers learn to value the beginning work of newcomers in each of the media centers offered in studio classrooms. While many of us are familiar with children’s developmental stages in their early drawings, it is also important to recognize and support students’ first attempts in *all* parts of their learning.

A playful exploration of materials and techniques with the purpose of becoming familiar with these, supports deep learning and offers wonderful surprises. When the primary goal in art class is the production of a preconceived product, much of this important learning is bypassed.

Age does not correlate with “scribble” work as does experience; upper grade students and even adults will often approach new materials and techniques in an experi-

mental manner as a means to become familiar with them.

Students of any age who are new to clay need time to roll, squeeze, pound and pierce the clay body. Not *everything* has to be saved. Some attempts are ephemeral and provide important information and skill building for future clay work. Teachers can use Plasticine for practice work, and natural clay can be recycled if the student does not wish to keep a piece.

Beginning embroiderers of all ages are invited to practice on foam plates, giving them experience threading needles, making knots and pulling out parts they didn’t like without having to deal with bunching cloth. Some children are pleased with these early efforts, and after embellishing them with marker colors, consider them finished work.

A good place for weavers to begin is with small looms with large spaces between warps. Students practice and decide if they wish to work on more complicated pieces.

In the Sculpture Center it is easy to observe the “scribble stage.” Students gravitate to 3-D work with their tacit knowledge of support and strategies for attachment, often motivated by the desire to create a plaything. A box with a straw taped on may raise an adult’s eyebrow but just listen to the story that accompanies it!

EVERYONE IS A BEGINNER at the things they have never tried! Art class is a place where beginners develop facility with dozens and dozens of new materials and techniques, learning and growing with each new experience.

Look carefully at the “scribble stage” for authentic assessment of where each student is at a particular time. What are some ways of communicating about scribble stage work with parents or school colleagues? Here are some questions to ask when evaluating such work:

1. *Where is this work developmentally?*
2. *What is the child thinking here (was a statement given)?*
3. *Does the meaning of this work trump issues of craft/technique?*
4. *Is the student “stuck” here? If so, what are some supportive ways of moving the child forward gently?*
5. *What does this work suggest for possible future lessons?*

While beginners’ work is unpolished, it is often very individual, energetic and idiosyncratic. The daring and excitement of images and structures from this stage can be very compelling.

Supporting this work sends an essential message to students that their ideas are important and that they will be in charge of their art learning. ■

FIND OUT MORE

- teachingforartisticbehavior.org
- Lowenfeld, V. and Brittain, W. *Creative and mental growth*. Macmillan Publishers; 1957.
- artjunction.org/young_scribbling.php
- Douglas, K. and Jaquith, D. *Engaging Learners through Artmaking: Choice-Based Art Education in the Classroom*. Teachers College Press; 2009.

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