



Choice-Based Art Edited by Nan Hathaway

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. Learn more at teachingforartisticbehavior.org.

THE BOX

BY JESSICA KITZMAN

When I moved into my new classroom two years ago, I found a box labeled “special ed.” It was full of finger paint. I had just left my first teaching job after six years at a small charter school serving middle school and high school students with autism, and would now be teaching elementary students in a large public school.

Since then, that box has stuck in my mind. It’s not because I imagine the person who labeled it and stored it away was acting out of malice. I give that person the benefit of the doubt and assume they were unaware of the separate-but-equal kind of injustice created by this action. It was a simple label on a simple box, forgotten about in the back storage room.

TEACHERS LIKE THINGS TO HAVE THEIR PLACE, but not all things fit into predetermined categories. I think this box is a strong metaphor for how we, as a greater public-education system, treat kids and their needs within our classrooms. These needs are not simple, they do not fit in a box. And, no, they cannot remain on a back shelf, neatly stored away for someone else to find years later.

In my first years working with kids with autism, our strategy was to provide as much structure as possible. Kids with autism succeed in a predictable environment, so we worked hard to make art class predictable at every turn.

We created step-by-step packets for each project, including pictures with short prompts so students could move at their own pace. I spent hours scouring my brain and the Internet for that “perfect project” that would engage all unique interests.

No matter what I presented, it was never smooth sailing. I was adamant that if only students would follow my directions, they could learn the very important art skills I had to teach them. Without realizing it, my class had become all about compliance and not at all about art.

I FIRST HEARD ABOUT TEACHING FOR ARTISTIC BEHAVIOR (TAB) at our state art education conference. The concept could not have been more different from what we were offering. The seed was planted though, and two years later, I presented my first “choice” assignment to students: Make an artwork about something you learned this year.

I will never forget what one student made. He was a theatre buff and an improvisational actor, but fine motor skills were difficult and he struggled to finish projects. For this one, though, he made an entire Cyrano de Bergerac costume in just two weeks. He worked on it at school, at home, and even had his grandmother teach him how to sew.

I distinctly remember how proud I was at the end. Not proud because I had finally planned the perfect project, but proud because I got out of his way and trusted him to learn something important to *him*. It was the first time I really put the students’ goals before my own. That project was about art.

IN TRYING TO HELP, I had been putting my students in the same box the rest of the world had put them in. Help is a tricky thing between a teacher and student. Offer it too late and trust may be damaged. Offer it too soon, and you may snuff out the natural curiosity and resourcefulness we want students to carry on long after school.

It is far too easy to unintentionally foster learned helplessness. We assume that students receiving special education services need our help. But what if we could do more good by trusting them to take the lead? What if all our help is doing is making them helpless?

I am finishing my third year as a TAB teacher now, and I am no longer striving to be the one with perfect plans. I answer questions with questions and I go into each day not yet knowing what students will do with their time in their art studio. I believe in teaching kids of all ability levels to be their own artist. I believe in empowering them to find out how. TAB allows me to act on those beliefs.

If helplessness can be learned, then I believe the opposite is also true. Through TAB, I am able to embrace abilities and strengths for all kids who need the experience of feeling like the expert. This way of teaching gives kids a powerful voice in a world that labels them for their various needs and deficits. I want them to know they can trust themselves and that their ideas are important. With that compass, they can go wherever they choose. ■

FIND OUT MORE

- teachingforartisticbehavior.org
- groups.yahoo.com/group/TAB-ChoiceArtEd/
- facebook.com/Teaching-for-Artistic-Behavior-TAB-144118082280049/

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