A newly hired teacher wrote to us in a state of panic: “I have no supplies!” Although her situation was extreme, it is common to hear of severe art budget cuts. Fundraisers and grants are one answer to the supply money dilemma; however, choice teachers have many other options for creating a vibrant studio on a shoestring budget.

AS A CHOICE TEACHER, you know that not everyone will be working in the same center with the same materials during any given class, so you will never need a whole class set of any given tool or material. What you have and can get is what you will present. “Test drive” new materials or special tools in very small quantities. Try two new fan brushes in your paint center—if they are useful and popular, you can order a couple every year until you have enough.

A DRAWING CENTER can consist of a few each of pencils, crayons, erasers, markers, rulers, templates, and yard sale toys for still-life objects. Three “Centers” - Drawing, Construction (which can incorporate puppets and masks) and Fiber are a fine beginning for a choice studio. Finding paint can be a problem and it is not likely to be free. But the good news is that you only have to have enough materials for 4-6 painters at one time, as others can be using different materials. End rolls can be obtained from your local newspaper, and many other things like newspaper, maps, cardboard, grocery bags and wallpaper make good surfaces for paint.

SCOUR YOUR SCHOOL and go to the grocery for empty boxes. Frame shops have scraps they would likely share with you. Cut them and that cardboard on a paper cutter if you can: squares, rectangles, triangles, not too big. A box of those shapes, some string and cut-up wire, and you have a beginning to a construction center. An “attachments” demonstration can introduce these materials to your classes.

HAVE STUDENTS COLLECT small objects to bring to class. Sort these items by color into clear plastic shoeboxes from the dollar store, and you will have an ever-refreshing collection of art materials. A letter home to parents can result in such things as leftover yarn, fabric scraps, buttons, and more.

Most of the looms in my classroom were made from “trash.” Flat cardboard sheets with the corrugation going vertically, with notches on each end can be warped easily in various ways. Box lids and shallow boxes make wonderful looms as well, and can be warped ahead of time by the teacher. And, as mentioned above, the yarn for that can come free from the parents.

CHOICE TEACHERS OFFER the chance for their students to create the room with them. I envision your first class with students thusly: “Children! We have been given this wonderful space for making things. This is called a studio. This will be a place where you can discover what sort of things you like to make—what sort of artist you are! And I will be here to help you do this.

“We will be a community of artists here and we will all work together to make the studio come alive. I have collected some materials to begin filling this marvelous space. Do any of you have some of these things in your home that could be contributed to the studio? Artists are always searching for their materials and we begin that search today!”

FOR YOUR WHOLE CAREER, a choice practice will work the best because you use what you can get and never have to have enough of any one thing for everybody! And this encourages students to come to class with pockets full of things for art making. The artist search out in the world gets the brain going for starting the art at school.

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: Choice-Based Art Education in the Classroom.” Follow @twoducks on Twitter.