WHAT ABOUT DEMOS?

BY KATHERINE DOUGLAS

In many choice studios, art class begins with a whole group introduction to something new, often called a demo. Because students need substantial studio time, this opening presentation must be brief, ideally between five and 10 minutes.

The teacher distills information into the very least that students need in order to get started. Visuals accompany the demo and are then incorporated into studio signage for future reference. Students decide when, how, or whether they will use the new information in their chosen work.

CHOICE TEACHERS GET MANY REQUESTS for lists of essential demos. Because studio classroom is unique, school to school and class to class, it is more useful to think about the characteristics of demos instead. For beginners of most any age I believe that demos should be concrete. Here are five sorts of demonstrations and some examples:

1. To introduce a new center
   • show where materials and tools are stored.
   • demonstrate how these are used.
   • run through cleanup process.
2. To highlight a technique or procedure
   • here is how to set up your painting space.
   • here are 12 things a #2 pencil can do.
   • here are various attachment strategies for cardboard construction.
3. To go deeper with previously introduced information
   • how to deal with a painting mistake.
   • how to mix colors while avoiding mud.
   • what-if’s for stick weaving to add variety.
   • strategies for practicing something that’s difficult to draw.
4. To key in to an observed interest in a particular class, which might end up being for more than one class, or not.
5. To improve or review something that is not going well.

This can include techniques and materials, but also care of the studio classroom, efficient use of limited time, and possible problems with class-wide student interactions.

ONCE YOU HAVE THOUGHT ABOUT THOSE CATEGORIES, look around your studio or your closet if you are on a cart: what materials and tools do you have for Drawing, Painting, Printmaking, Fiber, Collage, Construction, Digital Art, Architecture/Blocks? Will you offer instruction in all of these areas, or just a few?

Elementary teachers, in particular, deal with a very brief school schedule. Many have little more than 30 class meetings in a year. Keep your plans simple. Keep your demos relevant to observed student needs. In your Drawing Center, for instance, you will need an opening center demo and then maybe four more related demos at some point. Once you open the drawing center you will notice all sorts of strengths and weaknesses. These are your clues about what to offer in future whole-group demos.

For older or more experienced students who have become acclimated to studio routines, demos can be less concrete, more conceptual. Discussions can focus on idea generation, what constitutes quality, how to communicate with viewers through artist statements, and the like.

Teachers are able to embed many of the skills and ideas covered in traditional curricula, as well as district requirements, while still supporting student choice in applying these topics. It is not unusual for students to generate ideas for demos based on their interests and abilities—and these demonstrations can be presented by the students themselves.

INTERESTED STUDENTS WILL STAY WITH THE TEACHER TO EXPLORE the new tool, material or technique from the demo. Now you can go deeper with small groups or maybe conduct a private lesson. These students will be able to coach other students who become interested in their work at a later time. Reaching students at their moment of high interest can result in deep learning, and students coaching friends deepen their own learning at the same time.

While most choice teachers have a broad idea of a year’s demos, they benefit by seeing students’ independent work—successful or otherwise. Observation provides information to drive the next moves. What “just in time” demo might be needed to move your students forward? Informed by feedback and brief to the point, these demos set the tone for learning in the studio classroom.

“One of the things I love about TAB: It keeps conversations like ‘What are the children learning? How do I know? What are they ready for next? How do I know?’ front and center, rather than “What project will I do next?”” — Sarea Facetta

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.

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