



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.

DIVING DEEP

BY JULIE TOOLE

At the heart of a choice-based classroom is the principal belief that the children are artists and the classroom is their studio. *“If we wish for our students to do the work of artists, we must offer them the opportunity to behave like artists, think as artists, and perform as artists.”* (Douglas and Jaquith, 2009, p. 5)

IF WE THINK ABOUT HOW ARTISTS BEHAVE, one thing that is evident is their deep exploration of themes and media. Artists may spend years, or even their entire careers, focusing on and exploring a theme, medium or technique. Through this “deep dive” into their personal work, their art will change, grow, mature and develop over time.

This is the opportunity I want to offer my students. If students are constantly skipping from project to project and material to material, how will they ever discover what type of artist they truly are? Once-a-year clay projects will never allow students the time to explore, make mistakes and innovate to discover the possibilities of this remarkable material. Carefully controlled projects inspired by master works but designed by the teacher often don’t leave much room for exploration, self-expression and discovery.

WHEN GIVEN CHOICES, STUDENTS OFTEN GRAVITATE to a particular center or explore a specific theme over time. In my classroom I have painters, conceptual artists, toy designers, architects, illustrators, filmmakers and sculptors. Students understand and appreciate the unique talents and interests of their peers, and through this have a broad definition of what it means to be an artist. It is not just the student who can draw realistically who is an artist. This understanding could not develop if they were not given the time, space and support to discover this for themselves.

While diving deep, students may spend a large portion of their studio time simply exploring the possibilities of a medium. These explorations are not “gallery-ready” works of art, but necessary steps in the creative process. Choice allows students to work at their own individual pace. Some may take months to complete a single work of art while others are quite prolific.

ANOTHER BENEFIT OF DIVING DEEP is a student’s ability to “master” a medium. Peers watch these classroom masters work and are inspired. Their classmates seek out their advice and expertise when working with the same media.

Through this, rich and meaningful conversations about their art and technique are nurtured. The art teacher should not be the all-knowing art guru when the room is full of amazing artists.

By valuing and encouraging students to explore deeply, there are many chances for innovation. Although all media are first demonstrated and practiced by students through mini-lessons and skill builders, it is through experimentation and play that students discover novel and interesting ways to use them.

Diving deep supports and encourages mixed-media work to occur. As new techniques and centers are opened and demonstrated, students may layer these new skills into their choice work. Collage artists in my choice studio may begin to add paint to their compositions, and fiber artists may begin to print their own fabric to sew.

DIVING DEEP PROVIDES INSPIRATION for rich and meaningful self-reflection. Students write about their work through artist statements that accompany their display pieces. Students describe their inspiration, their creative process and challenges that occurred along the way.

Another choice students have is to develop their personal working style. Students with similar interests find each other and may dive deep together. Collaborative work can lead to deeper learning and more complex work as students share plans, problem solve and negotiate ideas.

BUT WHAT ABOUT THE SKILL DEVELOPMENT WITH ALL THIS EXPLORATION? A high level of intrinsic motivation is the key to this. It is common for students to work on ideas and plans at home and show up at the studio door with extra supplies, bursting with excitement to begin their work. When students are highly engaged in their art making and can independently find the materials they need, I am free to work one-on-one with students to mentor them on specific skills they want to learn.

Ultimately, with the precious and limited time I have with my students, my goal is to support them to discover who they are as artists, where their passions and talents lie, and to nurture a love and appreciation for the creative process. I want each one of my students to leave my class with a positive association with art and feel like their ideas are valued and honored. Diving deep helps take them there. ■

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