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# Welcome to the Choice Studio

**Where students choose how to express their art ideas**

*by Katherine Douglas*

Come into my art room where the children are busy making their personal artworks. For 20 years, the ideas and energy of these elementary students have fueled my teaching in the setting of our choice-based art classroom. Although it might seem impossible, nearly 700 students per week use this studio/classroom and all of them can choose the materials that best express their art ideas!

The classroom is a beehive of activity, yet the noise level is conducive to thought. All students are on task, working alone or in small groups. Children know where to find materials and how to set up their own work spaces. At class end, each child is responsible for clean up, which usually takes less than five minutes. Various forms of sharing, reflection and celebration of amazing discoveries take place at the end of each 40-minute class.

This smoothly operating classroom is the result of a well-developed structure: carefully organized centers for painting, printmaking, mask-making, fiber arts, collage, sculpture, book-making, puppetry, digital imaging and drawing are set up for use by all students.

Menus of materials, simple directions, examples of student work and art reproductions are displayed in each area, along with pertinent vocabulary. Each material and concept in the centers has been introduced in a five-minute whole-group lesson/demonstration. All students watch this demonstration at the beginning of class and then go to the center of their choice.

The small group of students who choose to explore the new material or concept work directly with the teacher as needed. After clean up this group shares its progress with the rest of the class. These “experts” agree to coach others who wish to work this way in the future.

There are many wonderful outcomes for both students and teachers using the choice concept of teaching:

- 1.** The choice teacher is freed from trying to think of a “clever” idea that will engage every student. Instead, students are told that artists make art about things that fascinate them. When doing the work of the artist, students will be expressing their own ideas.
- 2.** When students choose the work they are self-motivated; most behavior problems disappear and the quality of the finished work is quite good.
- 3.** When students are working independently, the teacher has time to observe students, determining needs that can be met in future demonstrations.
- 4.** Students can work at their own speed. Some students work on a painting or weaving for four or five weeks, while others may use more than one center in a class period. Students have the opportunity to try something over and over again, leading to mastery.
- 5.** The choice teacher can introduce something new every week, even though some artworks will take much longer to complete as the students work independently.
- 6.** Students see an enormous variety of ideas and techniques at the end of class when amazing discoveries are shared.
- 7.** Choice teaching encourages independent thinking, persistence and risk-taking, all qualities valued by practicing artists.
- 8.** Where supply budgets are slim, the choice teacher can order just a few of each item. For instance, there are rarely more than six students painting at any one time. We can offer these painters 90-lb., 2' x 3' paper and better-quality brushes. This would be impossible if every student had to paint.
- 9.** Most students choose experiences in each of the centers over the time that they are in our schools. However, even if a child never makes a tapestry weaving, he or she has observed the teacher

demonstration, seen the vocabulary and background material in the fiber area and perhaps watched his or her best friend creating a piece of fabric. There is a lot of learning going on there too!

**10.** When students have chosen their work, they can discuss it easily, can describe their working process and false starts, and usually evaluate the effectiveness of the finished work.

**11.** Time is used very efficiently; the initial five-minute demonstration and the brief clean-up time leaves more time for student work. Additional detailed instruction is given to the small groups choosing the demonstrated topic as they work.

## **TIPS FOR STARTING OUT**

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### **USE WHAT YOU HAVE!**

Your supply base and your local curriculum and standards can determine what you decide to demonstrate. Your brief demos may be similar to what you have done in the past; the difference is that not all the students will choose to try them.

### **START SIMPLE!**

First centers might be drawing, painting, collage and perhaps sculpture with simple materials such as wire, expanded polystyrene (EPS) foam, cardboard or construction paper. Materials in these centers should be the easiest to manage at the start (i.e. crayons, markers, colored pencils, watercolors, assorted papers, scissors, glue, brass fasteners, etc.) The size of your room and the sort of furniture you have will help you determine how your centers are arranged.

### **ONE AT A TIME!**

Introduce one center at a time: “This is what you find here, this is how you use it, this is how you put it away.” Discuss signage and references found in each center.

### **EXPECT STUDENTS TO BE ACCOUNTABLE!**

Be clear about expectations of behavior and work habits. If students show us by their poor behavior or haphazard work that they do not

care about what they have chosen, then we are prepared to provide them structure and choose their work for them.

### **CATCH THEM BEING ARTISTS!**

Because you have time to observe students you will notice and celebrate artistic behaviors: “I see that Robert is working in multiples in the paint center—look at all of his small paintings. Here are some reproductions by Claude Monet: notice how he painted these haystacks over and over in different light.”

“Sheila has created little wire figures — look how she makes them move. Alexander Calder once created a circus like that; here is a book about his work.”

### **COMMUNICATE!**

Parents, administrators and other teachers will need information on the changes in your classroom. A source of research on student-centered learning can be found at [knowledgeloom.org/tab](http://knowledgeloom.org/tab).

### **ENJOY YOURSELF!**

Every day, every class will be totally unique. You set up the circumstances for art to take place—the students are the artists and will continually amaze you with their wonderful ideas.

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