

# **A Bit of History**

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My name is Maryellen Picker. I have been teaching art for nearly three decades. I've taught in many different situations. I started my career as the only teacher for nine elementary schools. I have taught art from a rolling cart, and art on a classroom floor. I have taught at poorly administered schools with inadequate budgets and I have taught at schools where my every need as a teacher was more than met. I taught teacher directed art projects that were multi-layered, where all children had choices within the project and all succeeded. I sent home beautiful portfolios from students who loved art. You might wonder then, why at the end of my teaching career I changed the way I teach.

## **Why Choice?**

I would look at a child's artwork and think to myself, "I love this outcome but I just wish they would have added a little more of this or a little less of that." It felt judgmental to be so concerned with the product. At this time a little girl in my classroom brought in art that she had made at home. She built a three dimensional bird that slipped up her arm so she could move it up and down. Quiet little Adia suddenly had so much to say. She was overwhelmed with excitement and was anxious to share her discovery with the class. Her final product was crudely constructed, but she used her ingenuity to solve problems and create something truly original. I wondered how Adia's independent project would compare with projects that I assigned. My students have always been excited about coming to art class, but this girl showed me a deeper level of practice. It forced me to look again my teaching and to examine my beliefs. At that time I was reminded of the book by Katherine Douglas and Diane Jaquith; *Engaging Learners Through Artmaking: Choice Based Art Education*. It was on my shelf and I decided to revisit it's ideas. I started feeling the angst of change.

I had to ask myself if my beliefs paralleled my teaching and what method fits those beliefs best? I had to look at myself and look at the times I was most creative. I came to wonder if I was teaching backwards. In my art life, when I had a desire or idea, only then did I seek out the skill that I needed to complete my idea or desire. I wondered how do I could help students find that spark of creativity if it is not by first teaching skill. In my own artful experiences, it is always about play, experimentation, passion for an idea, or desire to learn something new. When students have the idea, they will ask for the skill and it will matter to them far more because they will be invested personally in the outcome. If I gave up control of product quality, would I loose the pride that I felt in displaying beautiful work?

It is easy for me to teach kids how to make beautiful art simply by direction...but should I? I decided to make the big, scary, change.

## **How To Scaffold Learning to Choice Art**

### **Spring & Summer Before Choice**

Have support when trying something new

Talk with your principal

Talk with peers

Talk with parents

Help parents understand that the art will look like children's art, not adult art

Send a note home to parents explaining the change

Present your ideas at a curriculum night

Talk with your students

### **Room Set Up**...sit quietly in your art room and decide how you can:

Create mini studios

Set up materials so that children have minimal movement between studios

Provide instructions and resources in each studio

Make every studio simple for clean up

Set up bins for each class and clothes clips with each child's name on it (makes for easy storage for works in progress)

Create plan sheets, which include reflections/assessments

Provide hanging folders in crates for plan sheets and assessments (assessments can align with your report card)

Display simple directions for each studio.

Put tape on each table to divide working space

Create a coding system so that you know which studio a child has chosen

Establish a meeting area for reflection and direction (I use an area where I put a copy of Rodin's Thinker. We come to *The Thinker* to think)

Send a note home asking for parent volunteers in your studios

Create a sheet listing expectations for each studio and prompts that can be used to help engage students (for volunteers and visitors)

Choose a clean up song approximately four minutes long

Use a gong (When the gong is struck, students stop, freeze, and look at me)

Choose a "silent" song. When the song comes on students are silent (an artist needs quiet to think, to enjoy the color of the paint, the rhythm of the marker etc.)

# **When School Starts**

When the Students come back in August they do *not* do Choice. We prep for it. They see the mini studios set up for Choice, but they still sit in assigned seats. These are some things that happen:

**A drawing assessment is administered (draw a human being) which is glued to the front of their sketch file. I can easily look at the assessment and get an idea of skill level. This helps me to get to know students.**

**We do a school wide painting project. This is based on a theme, perhaps a poem, quote or idea. This creates community building.**

**We do a project for our PTA fundraiser (usually a grade level project with a single completed piece for auction).**

**I direct teacher driven projects, which highlight skills from each of the Choice Studios.**

**We brainstorm how artists find ideas for their work.**

During this time I tell the students that I am watching carefully to see when they are ready to start Choice. I tell them that I am watching to see if they work with each other as respectful artists. Do they work independently, take care of their space, and follow the procedures for coming in and leaving the studio? By this time I have implemented the clean up song, silent song and the raising of the hands when the tables are clean. I am setting in place all of the skills that I expect for Choice Art.

I tell them that in Choice Art I will have to trust that they will work as artists. I remind them that when Choice begins they will need to be able to think about what they want to do. If the teacher doesn't take the time to establish routines and expectations, he or she will have to remind students repeatedly. If students do not follow routines, I stop the class and re-teach the skill. If only a few students do not follow routines they are re-taught individually. When students are prepared and have internalized the routines, they have a better understanding of why they are important. I ask students to leave their art space better than they found it to encourage pride and respect in their studio.

# Implementing Choice

The day we begin Choice Art is always very exciting. Students are ready for the preview. *We do not make any art that day.* As a class, we move around to each studio where I show them where everything is and how to use and care for materials. We go through every part: choosing a studio, marking a studio, getting out a plan sheet and getting their workspace set up. It is a time for students to ask questions. We talk about safety and the importance of putting everything away in the right place. I start with four studios: drawing, painting, collage, and sculpture. Later, I will add a “T” studio, which is a temporary studio that changes (origami, wire, architecture etc.)

The following art class we start with our studios, beginning with our first mini lesson. Lessons should never be skipped. Students need to keep with the routine. I alternate girls/boys to decide who gets to choose their studio first. Students stay in a line to choose their color-coded studio bracelet made of yarn or stretchy loops. They must have a first and second choice in mind. Each studio includes a set of planning papers. Students write down a beginning idea and after their work is completed they write a short reflection. There is a yellow sheet for key stage one (1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup>) and a green for key stage two (3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>). Key stage two is aligned with their report card. The older students literally do their own report cards.

One difficulty about Choice Art is that an artist doesn’t work just one hour every week. It is frustrating to have only a short time to work on something that you feel passionate about. For this reason, I allow students to come in at recess time. I keep track of those students with a sign in sheet. I give those numbers to my principal at the end of the year to help in negotiating my budget. I do not allow multiple projects going at the same time because I do not have room for masses of unfinished work. I want them to be able to learn how to persist. At the least, I want them to realize why something did not work. I cannot expect children to accept learning from failures if I expect their work to look perfect and finished. I have a size limit in the sculpture studio, but sometimes a big idea must be built big. I have limits as to how many students are in a studio, but sometimes I make exceptions. Generally, my students cannot change studios, but again, there are exceptions. When I make that exception, the students are thankful and must know it is a privilege.

The students are taught that when the clean up song comes on they must make the decision as to where their projects go: drying rack, counter to go home or back in the class storage box. At the end of the song, they must be standing in their studio with their hands up waiting to be checked. If not, I stop and direct students to do what they need to do. We all wait so that everyone can see how each studio should look. We then go to the *Thinker* for reflection. I have a picture of Rodin’s Thinker posted in the communal area, this is a place to sit and think. A sign is held up to prompt students, it reads, “do you have a question, comment, art thought, suggestion, advice” This is also a time for students to share their completed work.

**Note:** I never close a studio. Students who cannot work quietly or follow directions are removed from their studio. They are told that if they cannot follow directions in that studio they can do art “the other way”, teacher directed, reading or reporting...all good but not as much fun.

**Note:** Kindergarten does not do choice art. They spend the year getting ready. They practice getting supplies independently, returning their supplies, learning where their work space is, how to wring out a rag, clean out a paintbrush. They learn how to put completed work away retrieve their sketch files. They learn required skills that they will carry into the choice studios the following year. The second half of the year they start doing the clean up song and have conversations at *The Thinker*. They learn attachment skills and how to generate ideas for art. Kindergarten is where essential procedures are born.

## **Results of Choice Learning**

**Choice teaches how to find ideas.**

In the beginning you will see some pretty bad stuff. Be patient, but very firm on procedures and routines.

They take the time and do the practice to think for themselves.

Student collaboration...even from year to year.

Students learning from each other

**Kids find relationships with materials that are unconventional**

Students are helpful to each other and celebrate each other's accomplishments

Students work independently and become empowered

**Conversations are artist to artist not teacher to student.**

The skills taught are life skills

Students are accountable and trusted to create.

**Students do work that is important to them.**

**Students do not compare their skills to each other because they are working on different problem.**

Students respect each other's individuality and skill level.

Kids are emotionally and intellectually satisfied when they come up with their own ideas. They are vested.

They learn ways to combine materials by using different studios.

**They want to learn a skill so that they can follow through with an idea.**

Students learn to be organized, because it is necessary.

Students learn to be flexible because they can't always work where they want or with the materials they would like.

Students learn time management

**Kids are problem solvers, critical thinkers, engineers and inventors.**

**Kids have time to become confident with the skills that they learn.**

**Students not only learn vocabulary but also are given the environment to use it.**

# And In The End...

One day I brought a human brain into the classroom. I prepared my students to see this brain by telling them what they were about to see had a lifetime of thoughts, feelings and ideas in it. I asked them to look at the brain as an artist would...to see the lines, shapes and textures and to give their interpretation of it.

One of my second graders, Gabrielle, sat down to draw the brain. She was drawing so small that I could hardly see it. I proceeded to tell her to draw larger. She argued with me. She was good at it. Her mother was a lawyer. I asked her to write down her ideas about her drawing. Ten minutes later she grudgingly gave me this:

*These silvery rivers are called Mind Streams, and the small pool of silver is their source. Little spirits travel along the Mind Streams. These spirits are what we call Thoughts. There is a Thought called the Soul and that is the essential of life.*

*There is a waterfall connected to the source of the Mind Streams on the opposite bank. It is small but goes on and on and on forever, always going down. When the person has to die, the Soul goes out in a tiny boat across the source. It is silent and grey and there are no Thoughts. They have all left and flown away. When the Soul reaches the waterfall it leaps off the boat and down. The person then dies.*

*On a lighter note, when the person is happy and well, the brain is too. The mind Streams chatter and create bubbles that float around called Dreams. Many Thoughts travel from all over, coming and going, always glad to stay. There is color and light in the brain, and there is a wispy rainbow-like haze of all the best Thoughts and Dreams in the world. And that is the imagination.*

After reading Gabrielle's response to her art, I wondered how I could ever teach her? How could I teach students how to use their imagination, to explore their creativity, and it make it all richer. It is easy to underestimate a child. A student like Gabrielle may not come along very often, but all children have their strengths, desires and experiences to express in art. Gabrielle did not benefit from Choice Art. What would she have created? I am sorry to say, I will never know because I thought I had so much information to give *her*. I wonder how much of what I taught her she actually remembers? Her definition of imagination is beautiful and I passionately feel that it is my responsibility to make sure that I create spaces where children can freely create, nourish and explore their imaginations.

I cannot remember where I heard the question, but it is worth asking yourself. "If you had a classroom full of Picassos, Miros, Rembrants, Rothkos, Okeffes, would you teach them differently? "I think so.

Thank You!

