The Artistic Impetus Model: A Resource for Reawakening Artistic Expression in Adolescents

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The decline of artistic expression in late childhood is an ongoing and well-identified problem in the field of art education, yet it has been generally accepted as a natural occurrence and irreversible attribute of normative development. However, this foreclosure of artistic learning has serious implications to the concerns of emotional maturation, original idea formation, and global intelligence in the growing individual. This article asserts that artistic expression may be rejuvenated in adolescence by identifying its psycho-intellectual origins, applying these to the construction of an Artistic Impetus Model, and using it as the pedagogical basis for a painting course taught to urban adolescents. The article describes a qualitative case study of such a course in which findings indicated a re-enlivening of authentic artistic expression accompanied by growth in areas regarding original idea formation, studio engagement, development of artistic skills, understandings about formalism, and perceptions of art and artmaking.

The Problem: The Loss of a Natural Intelligence

A long-standing concern in the field of art education has been the seeming atrophication of artistic expression that usually accompanies the onset of late childhood and early adolescence. This decline has generally been accepted as a natural characteristic of development, and consequently, has not been well addressed in mainstream education. It has also been widely assumed that once atrophied, artistic expression may not be resurrected, and that the continued pursuit of serious artistic learning is most appropriate for those adolescents who demonstrate outstanding abilities in the area.

The apparent demise of artistic expression in late childhood is the result of several conditions which surround the growing individual. First, most pre-adolescents retain the perception that “good art” is characterized by technically astute, mimetic representation, and view this as an unattainable goal. Second, American schooling, with its emphasis on a narrowly-defined, cognitively-centered notion of intelligence, has largely neglected alternate ways of knowing which involve sensory and emotional processes (Dewey, 1934/1958; Erikson, 1963; Gardner, 1983; James, 1911; Kneller, 1965; Lowenfeld, 1947; Sarason, 1990; Scheffler, 1991; Winnicott, 1971). Third, the inward, reflective, and philosophical preoccupations that accompany adolescence are difficult to identify and depict through the more literal artistic repertoire established in childhood, so students may no longer recognize artmaking as a viable means of representing and communicating personal concerns.

The decline of artistic expression is worthy of our attention as it also signifies a foreclosure of a primal (Gadamer, 1975; Gilmour, 1986; Winnicott, 1971) and uniquely human form of global intellectual engagement (Dewey, 1934/1958;
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Erikson, 1985; Read, 1963; Schaefer-Simmern, 1948; Witkin, 1974). This engagement involves an integration of sensory, emotional, kinesthetic, and cognitive ways of knowing and can lead to introspection and truth-producing processes (Cassirer, 1944; Gregory, 1995; Shipley, 1990). The adolescent’s sensory-emotional system and life experiences are more multifarious than ever (Izard, 1993; Werner & Kaplan, 1963; Zajonc, 1984). Artistic engagement naturally accommodates the needs of these individuals, who are seeking homeostasis and self identity while experiencing a period of dramatic physical and emotional change accompanied by confusion, internal unrest, and unbalance (Erikson, 1963; Hall, 1904; Kroger, 1996; Marcia, 1980).

The Central Question

These concerns have led to the following question which drives this study: Once seemingly atrophied, can a pedagogical process be constructed through which authentic artistic expression may be resurrected in all or most adolescents? In response, this article will demonstrate that (a) authentic artistic expression emerges from a specific set of conditions, (b) these conditions may be identified in the form of an Artistic Impetus Model, and (c) these conditions can be systematically re-created in the studio classroom to re-enliven artistic expression. To establish these understandings, I will discuss the question’s significance to art education, summarize existing literature which supports the construction of an Artistic Impetus Model, describe a case study in which the model is used as the pedagogical basis for a course, and note conclusions and implications to the field.

Significance to the Field of Art Education

Art education, as a general practice, has made little progress in formally identifying the origins of artistic expression as critical underpinnings which guide its own epistemology. Consequently, many educators preoccupy themselves with a linear, formulaic teaching of studio techniques, skills, history, and formalism, and then verbally beseech their students to “be creative” and to “use your imaginations,” as if these complex aspects of thought and feeling are outside the parameters of instruction and may be evoked upon command. The overarching assumption has been that once technique, skills, history, and formalism are taught, creative thought will somehow flow into the student’s artistic repertoire. Hence, art class often becomes more of a rehearsal for making art than an actual artistic experience (Roberts, 2005). Contemporary theorists continue to stress the need for authenticity in artistic learning (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2004; Andrews, 2005; Lampert, 2006) and call for a deepened understanding about the artistic process on the part of art educators (Bransford, Brown, & Cockling, 2000; Marshall, 2005; Walker, 2004).

The conditions described here have led to a prevalent approach to art teaching in our schools. Instead of art classes re-creating the natural flow of events that comprise the “authentic” artistic process (in which personal experiences are represented through individually constructed technique and clarified through an idiosyncratic integration of formalism), a reverse, rather unnatural procedure has generally taken root. Curricula have been largely based upon the teaching of technique and formalism (often achieved by having students emulate qual-
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...ties found in pre-viewed, historical works of art), and then personal voice (if addressed at all) is made to adapt to these established criteria. It would call for an explanation indeed if creative thought, artistic authenticity, or related “habits of mind” (Burton, Horowitz, & Abeles, 1999) emerged out of such a simplistic, derivative, and delimiting process.

In contrast to the rather linear teaching approach just described, authenticity in artistic expression has been equally misaddressed by educators who feel that it can be elicited merely by providing students with a wide variety of materials and encouraging them to “make art.” While this approach may offer some degree of effectiveness within an isolated lesson, it is unlikely to hold up when an ongoing sequence of structured classroom experiences is required in any long-range sense. To compound the problem, there exists a persistent myth (especially among more linear-minded teachers) that student-centered, materials-based learning necessarily signifies a rather loose, unstructured teaching approach. To the contrary, we shall see that such teaching requires a complex, sequential structure in which developmentally appropriate themes, motivational dialogues, sensory processes, and a gradually expanding repertoire of materials are all factors which play co-informing roles in artistic learning.

Given the assertions made above, it seems that neither a formulaic, snugly applied, discipline-based approach nor a loosely administered exploratory approach are, in and of themselves, reliable conduits to artistic learning. Art education must transcend such methods in order to guide students towards a realization of artistic expression as a meaningful and life-changing facet of education. However, the field has been woefully neglectful in providing its teachers with grounded and cogent understandings about the psycho-intellectual complex which underpins the artistic process. This continuing problem was well identified by Robert Witkin (1974) when he wrote: “The arts teacher rarely involves himself in the process of developing or evoking the sensate disturbance within the pupil which is to be the origin of the pupil’s self expression” (p. 36). Witkin likened such teaching to the work of a gardener who does not concern himself with time, geographic location, temperature, fertilization, and the machinations occurring beneath the surface of the soil, but simply waits for a plant to emerge “from somewhere.” In the following section, these concerns are addressed by identifying the “origins of the pupil’s self expression” and positing them within the framework of a concrete model.

Constructing the Artistic Impetus Model

Any extensive treatise of existing literature supporting the notion that artistic expression emerges from a specific set of conditions would be beyond the scope of this article. Therefore, I will provide a broad overview of research from the areas of psychology, philosophy, and education, augmented by the words of established artists who have reflected upon their own creative process. This overview will demonstrate that artistic expression necessarily involves sensory, emotional, kinesthetic, and cognitive ways of knowing which operate as a highly afferent, co-informing whole and represents an embodiment of the “global intellect.”
The primacy of sensory knowing to artistic engagement is well supported by theorists who trace its significance from childhood through adulthood. Margaret Mahler (1975) proposes that, beginning in utero and extending throughout childhood, rapidly evolving, highly sensory-based stimuli provide experience and knowledge. Kosslyn (1980) is among those who suggest that children rely mainly on concrete, sensory images for coming to grips with the world. Cohen and MacKeith (1992) bring the activity of play into the discussion, asserting that it stems from a need for kinesthetic activity and the stimulation of the sense of touch (e.g., running, jumping, and mucking around in the sand). Aside from these contentions, one need only watch a child joyfully splashing in the water, eagerly reaching for colorful objects, reacting happily to the taste of ice cream, or moving in rhythm to a song, to find sensory-impelled, emotionally charged, expressive activity. In line with this thinking, Joan Mowatt Erikson (1985) presents a particularly compelling argument for the primacy of sensory knowing and its relevancy to the creative intellect. Erikson clarifies her concerns about the constrictions placed upon sensory learning in American schooling and the resultant truncation of creative idea formation through a pointed metaphorical example. She describes her own observation of a toddler’s imaginative sensory-impelled explorations of beach sand and notes how quickly these investigations were abandoned after his father disrupts this activity to instruct him in the proper use of a pail and shovel to make a sandcastle. Erikson cautions us that sensory stimulation through genuine play can lead to creative habits of mind only if not obstructed by conventional, outcome-based goals which can stifle the motivation to explore.

Herbert Read (1963) draws a salient connection between sensory stimuli and artmaking when he writes that “The arts cannot escape their sensuous basis: their whole purpose is to extract perfection from experience…” (p. 164). The reflections of preeminent artists also support the notion that sensory processes initiate artistic expression. Kandinski (1912/1947) sees sensory, emotional, and rational processes of artmaking as integrative and filtered together in a layered and actively moving manner. Stravinsky (1947) referred to the need to make order out of this sensory stimuli and emotional responsivity by creating art. Mondrian (1945) goes so far as to suggest that formalism in art is a naturally occurring consequence of the artistic and expressive process. It is particularly significant to note that Mondrian’s assertion disrupts the popular, previously described notion that has shaped curriculum construction in many art programs, specifically that elements and principles must be taught prior to the advent of personal expression. As this article will show, Mondrian was remarkably on point in his assessment.

In addition to the sensory system, emotions are major driving forces in all forms of expression, whether artistic or otherwise. The construction of a strict and formal definition of emotion would be ultimately distracting from the purposes of this article, for considerable argument persists as to its nature and precise relationship to sensory stimulation and cognitive regulation. However, based upon the majority of findings, it is reasonable to conclude that sensory stimulation is most likely followed by (or perhaps integrated with) emotional response. William
James (1884) supports a close correlation between sensory and emotional phenomenon when he writes, “My theory … is that bodily changes follow directly the perception of the exciting facts, and that our feeling of the same changes IS the emotion” (p. 190). According to Izard (1993), emotions are the “primary motivational system for all levels of behavior, including free drive exploration and creativity” (p. 84). Heinz Werner (1978) is among those who draw direct linkages between sensory engagement, emotional reaction, and resultant visual symbols, each of which is “through and through a work of art” (p. 18).

In concert with the assertions made above, there are several additional theorists whose descriptions about the origins of the artistic process suggest a translation into a visual model. Read (1963) notes that the artistic process is circular in nature and may be set in motion by responding to an image, feeling, precept, idea, material, or even the handling of a tool. Klee (1956) views artmaking as a cyclical process involving both time and movement when he writes, “A certain fire of becoming flares up; it is conducted through the hand, flows to the picture surface and there bursts into a spark, closing the circle whence it came; back to the eye and (back to the centre of movement, of volition, of the idea)” within the context of his “Creative Credo” (pp. 76-80). Dewey (1934/1958) neatly reinforces the above postulations when he describes artmaking as “the union of sense, need, impulse and action characteristic of the live creature. The intervention of consciousness adds regulation, power of selection, and redisposition” (p. 25). Richard Gregory (1995) provides a diagrammatic account of the interfacing of sensory stimuli with perceptual/conceptual knowing and the influence of accompanying cognitive regulators as a conduit to artmaking.

The assertions drawn by the theorists cited above suggest that the artistic process relies on a more formal understructure than has been generally considered in education. This process unfolds within the “domain of human experience,” which includes psychological, social, and cultural components, each of which has a continual impact on the senses and emotions of the individual. This complex may be visualized as an “Artistic Impetus Model” (Figure 1) which necessarily (or generally) begins with sensory stimulation, is followed by emotional response, and leads to an expressive impulse. Once the expressive impulse has been evoked, it plays itself out through a kinesthetic engagement with provided materials. This engagement with materials introduces the added ingredient of media, which incites further sensory stimulation, thereby re-igniting the process at its point of origin and initiating a second, cyclical series of events. As this circular procedure continues to repeat itself, it is further regulated by cognitive intervention, which contributes to the formalistic decisions about the work at hand. It is also likely that, with each cyclical revolution, the natural interplay between sensory, emotional, kinesthetic, and cognitive ways of knowing becomes more fluid and harmonious, leading to a state of “intellectual rapture.” This state may be characterized by the deeply engaged artist’s proclivity to transcend all awareness of time passage and pedestrian concerns when in advanced stages of the creative process.
Methodology

This qualitative case study examined the efficacy of the Artistic Impetus Model as the pedagogical basis for a painting course intended to reawaken authentic artistic expression in a class of urban male adolescents. The study was conducted at Hudson High School for boys in the New York metropolitan area where I served in the dual capacities of course instructor and researcher. The methodology for the study was informed by the work of Robert Stake (1995), Sharan B. Merriam (1998), and L.R. Gay (1992).

Participants

Located in a gritty area of Jersey City, Hudson High School accommodates a wide variety of students, and the rather streetwise participants in this study were representative of many backgrounds, ages, and dispositions. The 20 participants included 5 sophomores, 6 juniors, and 9 seniors who were highly diversified ethnically, academically, and behaviorally. The ethnic breakdown of the students was as follows: 4 Caucasians, 3 African-Americans, 6 Hispanic-Americans, 2 Filipino-Americans, 2 Asian-Americans, and 3 of mixed ethnic backgrounds. The students were all from lower- to middle-income working class families. Two students were reputed discipline problems, and one was exceptionally strong in traditional academic studies. Only one senior had a previous formal art course, while the others exhibited no outstanding preparation, interest, or abilities in
the area. Several took the course simply as an elective towards satisfying requirements for graduation. Apart from this class, the students were surrounded by a traditional school system based heavily upon dualistic practices.

The diverse nature of the participants utilized in the study was beneficial in suggesting some initial insights about the effectiveness of this teaching approach with students of varied ethnic backgrounds. Nonetheless, it is important to clarify that this study does not purport an undertaking of the topic of diversity as a driving aspect of its inquiry. It is also pertinent to state that a limitation of the study rests in the fact that it does not include adolescent female participants. However, subsequent pedagogical applications have been made within multi-ethnic and co-educational settings which are referred to in the final section of this article.

**Procedural Framework**

The 16-week course met each weekday for 45 minutes. In keeping with the tenets of the Artistic Impetus Model, all lessons or units of study began with sensory-based exercises usually linked with developmentally appropriate themes, followed by studio artmaking, and concluded with reflective dialogues. Following an initial *pre-instructional session*, the course was divided into three stages, each gradually intensifying in sensory work: the *direct-sensate stage*, the *sense-memory stage*, and the *sensory-affective stage*. The sensory exercises were advanced progressively, accompanied by guided modeling and verbal coaching from myself, and administered with careful attention to the students’ reactions. Early sensory exercises were conducted with all participants seated in folding chairs, however, many assumed reclining positions on the floor as the process intensified (Figure 2). Paints and other materials were provided for the making of art which typically followed the sensory work.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

As teacher-researcher, I retained a daily, on-site field journal in which I recorded thick descriptions of students’ studio engagement, the artwork they produced, and the ensuing class discussions. Color coding facilitated the identification of emergent patterns and themes. Videotaped class sessions and audio taped individual interviews provided further referential information. Succinct pre-instructional and post-instructional questionnaires, based upon the Likert scale, imparted quantitative data regarding students’ changing perceptions about art and artmaking. This allowed for some degree of interplay between categorical data/quantitative measurement and direct interpretation, thereby lending further confidence to the study. In formulating a final analysis, a method of triangulation was applied in two ways: first, by comparing students’ actual perceptions about art with their perceptions as described in literature and with my own past observations of adolescents as artmakers, and second, by comparing various aspects of the course including the students’ studio processes, their resultant artwork, and their assertions during group discussions.
The Field Course

This section provides a broad overview of the course as it unfolded, accompanied by an account of students' developing abilities, practices, and perceptions regarding artmaking and art.

*The Pre-Instructional Session.* In order to provide information about incoming students' pre-existing perceptions and abilities, the first day of class was devoted to creating paintings with very minimal instruction, and minus all sensory work. The brief pre-instructional questionnaire revealed that more than 80% of the students felt they had little capacity for original idea formation, that good art should "show a feeling" but, more importantly, should "look real," that formalistic concerns were irrelevant, and that making art was not important.

As the students gathered around the studio tables to begin their first painting, most indicated considerable trepidation. Many offered disclaimers about their artistic abilities with comments such as "I can't draw" and "don't expect much." One student noted that he "only took the course as an elective because it sounded better than anything else." Without instruction, I asked the group to create 9x10-inch self portraits using tempera paints. The students anxiously scrambled to obtain visual references, fishing through their pockets for photo id cards or quickly confiscating small mirrors from the side shelving. Once seated, some blankly stared at their papers, reluctant to commence painting. When painting did begin, it was tenuous at best, characterized by moans of "I can't do this," accompanied by feeble paint dabbing which lacked purpose or conviction. Within just a few minutes, most were sitting in front of cartoon-like paintings and declaring "I'm done!" We displayed the paintings and they were met with
much laughter: “This one looks like Mr. Potato Head!” and “The heads are like flat pans!” Most students concluded that their paintings were “not good art because I can’t make anything look real.” Many lamented that they “just don’t have good ideas,” and “have a hard time getting started on a painting.” Several stressed that they might do better if allowed to “copy from a good artist.” Their lack of understanding or appreciation regarding formalism was evident in comments such as, “I don’t know how to fill the whole paper” and “background is not really important anyway.” When asked about the use of elements such as line, shape, balance, etc., they replied, “those things are not important … anything you make is art.” Taken together, the pre-instructional questionnaires, the studio work, and the students’ comments indicated their belief that “good art” must be technically astute in the mimetic depiction of a subject, that they have no abilities by which to accomplish this goal, and that they are incapable of original idea formation—all convictions which likely contributed to their self-conscious, stilted, and truncated approach to making art.

The Direct Sensate Stage. Formal course instruction began in the second class session with three weeks of “direct sensate” work. This work was intended to familiarize students with the sensory process by guiding them through an exploration of an actual hand-held object (in this case, a brown paper bag). To create a sublime, introspective atmosphere, the classroom lights were turned low and the students’ chairs configured into a circle. I seated myself in front of the group to guide them through the process. With our eyes semi-closed we took a few slow, deep breaths, and after some initial laughter, a sense of calm was established throughout the room. Together (and with some additional laughter), we slowly and methodically began investigating our bags: we crinkled them, tore them, tapped on them and listened to the sounds they made, bit them, tasted them, smelled them, and touched them against various parts of our bodies. We put them over our heads, manipulated, reshaped, and ripped them, and further investigated their possibilities. I encouraged the students to continue the process, to look for patterns and allow the material to “speak” to them in ways that impelled further action. In time, each bag was transformed into an intricate, rather organic, non-mimetic sculptural form. In upcoming classes, we repeated sensory explorations of malleable and non-malleable materials including cardboard boxes, pieces of fabric, driftwood, scrub brushes, burlap, and branches. Each sensory exploration was followed with the students creating 15 minute, 6 x 8-inch artworks about the qualities found in the explored objects by integrating paint with other materials such as coffee grinds, glue, and salt. The direct sensate work continued for 2 weeks as the students explored more complex objects such as tricycles or skeletons which they reinterpreted as larger, more extensive artworks (Figure 3). The consensus of the newly enthusiastic group can be summed up in the comments of one student: “I never thought about making art from my senses…I see that ordinary objects can give me great ideas to make interesting paintings…and they don’t always have to look like something!”

The Sense Memory Stage. The second stage of instruction involved 5 weeks of “sense memory” work, designed to guide students towards accessing remembered
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(rather than physically present) objects or simple activities as sources of sensory stimulation. The approach taken was much the same as that used in direct sensate work, with myself modeling the process for the students. Early exercises were based upon simple themes about everyday activities such as putting on sneakers or eating a piece of fruit. These led to more sensually enlivened themes such as playing in the mud or walking through a thunderstorm. One student lovingly cradled an invisible pear in his hands, feeling its weight, texture, and temperature, cutting it with an imaginary knife, and letting the juice touch his fingers and tongue. As before, following each sensory exercise, the group created small works of art about their remembered objects or activities. However, at this stage, the students commenced painting without hesitation and with remarkable fluidity of movement. It was clear that they had decisive and detailed stories to tell. Interestingly, many transformed their simple remembered objects or experiences into more complex paintings having extended personal meanings. For example, the student who explored the pear transformed it into a “snowman toy that I used to have when I was little.” Another student painted about a hot, sticky day in the park inhabited by a girl with “too much sweet perfume.” He reflected, “I thought this would be a happy painting, but something else happened … it’s about fear … not fear of the dark or a monster, like when I was a kid … I was afraid of the girl … I was stuttering because I wanted her

Figure 3. Direct Sensate Work: A Tactual Observation of a Skeleton. This sophomore agonized over his perceived inability to make art and was certain of impending failure before his perceptions about “good” art changed. While blindfolded, he tactually explored the skeleton to create a drawing. With the blindfold removed, he then revisited his drawing, integrating paint with found materials to create this detailed, dimensional and deeply engaging visual orchestration.
to like me … That's why the paint is shaky and the lines start and stop. That's
the stuttering. I didn't mean to show it … it just happened.” (This significant
comment suggested two important benchmarks regarding the student's artistic
understandings. First, he was constructing ways of representing inner, non-
literal concerns in his artmaking. Second, he was developing an understanding
that technique and formalism can emerge from salient qualities of the experi-
ences he wished to represent).

The Sensory-Affective Stage. The final stage of the course involved 8 weeks of
“sensory-affective” work. This was the most complex sensory activity to date as
it is based upon highly personalized themes though which students' remem-
bered experiences are revisited, sometimes leading to enhanced emotional
responses. Throughout the first few weeks of this stage, innocuous themes such
as “a happy place,” “being with great friends,” or “having a surprising or embar-
rassing moment” served as springboards for sensory work and the making of
art. Eventually, additional themes were introduced which suggested stronger
affective associations such as “a time of fear,” “getting in trouble,” or “a time of
anger, nervousness, or surprise.” In time, more complex and personal themes
such as “a childhood friend,” or “a self portrait” were explored.

A particularly effective theme was “a person I don't see anymore” in which
the students, eyes closed, were guided through a sensory exercise in which they
revisited a childhood place where they would find a remembered individual. As
with our previous work, sensory recollection played a crucial role: “Now there's
a person in the place with you…. What are they wearing?: Do they see you?…
Are they smiling?: They are walking towards you…. What is their clothing
made of?:… Is it wrinkled?: Old?: New?:… Look at their fingers … What
is the skin like where their fingers bend?:… Reach out and touch their hand…
Do they have a scent?:” As the sensory exploration deepened, the students
continued to respond intently. They were somber, serious, and focused as they
investigated nuanced details about the remembered person for another fifteen
minutes, after which I slowly guided them out of the exercise.

As the students emerged from the activity, the room was silent and the
moment poignant. They were emotionally moved, serious and pensive. After
several minutes, they began to softly verbalize: “I got the place and the person
… I saw details that I never remembered before.” “I could almost hear her voice
… kinda gravelly.” “I… I don't want to talk about it.” “Strange … I want to
stay in here … I don't feel like going to my next class.” I offered some words of
assurance, and complemented them on a very successful class session. As the class
drew to a close, I asked, “Does anybody need to talk for a few minutes?” Sublime
replies followed, “No … no … it's ok. This was good … this was good.”

When the students came back the next day, they were refreshed and eager
to begin their paintings about the remembered person. With very little verbal-
izing, but a clearly dedicated enthusiasm, they readily seized the provided acrylic
paints and large canvas boards. Their studio engagement was extraordinarily
immediate, focused, and determined. Unencumbered by conventional painterly
methods, they integrated a variety of available materials into their work including
twigs, toothbrushes, cotton, burlap, sandpaper, and bubble wrap. They moved
in kinesthetically dynamic and exploratory ways that belied their earlier, stilted approach. With fervent devotion, they worked on these paintings during class time and throughout free periods for two weeks, while I assumed the role of a largely peripheral bystander.

With only one week left to the course, I assigned a deadline for the completed paintings, which the students met without exception. The final displayed paintings were rich in content and strong in formalistic concerns. The artworks were largely about their friends, lost loves, grandparents, and parents (Figure 4). The group was extremely enthusiastic about the finished body of work: “These are all totally different!” “Lots of ideas!” “I can’t believe how cool they are … they are wild … deep … they mean something!” The ensuing discussions were rich in nuance and each student adroitly described the ways in which salient aspects of his narrative shaped formalistic decisions. This recognition of the connectedness between narrative and formalism was further emphasized with statements like “The whole canvas is important, you need to use all the space to tell the whole story!” “The details of our stories influenced the way we used materials… I think that’s where technique comes from” and “Everybody used art elements to make the stories stronger and clearer!”

On the final day of class, the students entered the studio pensively. I distributed the post-instructional questionnaires, which they intently completed, adding copious written comments as I urged them to finalize their thoughts and collected the papers. As we gathered for a closing discussion, they became warmly reflective, lamenting that they will greatly miss our time together. One student’s words expressed the sentiments of the group when he said, “I’ve changed because of this class. I’ve learned a lot … not just about art … but about myself, life, and other people.” As an instructor and researcher, my own reflections were equally profound. I realized that, for myself and these courageous students, this was not merely a course, but rather an intellectual journey which we took together—one which led us to deepened and life-changing understandings about the complex relationship of art and artmaking to the human experience.

Findings

When considered together, the studio performance, artwork, discussions, and post-instructional questionnaires indicated specific areas of artistic and intellectual growth in all students. These areas were identified as follows:

**Ability to Represent an Authentic Adolescent Voice in Artmaking**

The narratives, imagery, and visual devices used in the students’ artwork (Figures 5 and 6) suggest a connectedness with certain developmental characteristics of the adolescent as they have been identified by various theorists. At the onset of adolescence, individuals are beginning to grapple with abstract questions about self and world, becoming fledgling philosophers (Kohlberg & Gilligan, 1971). They are preoccupied with conflicting thoughts about family, relationships, sexuality, good, evil, life, death, and afterlife, among other matters (Burton, 1981; Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984; Keegan, 1982; Tanner, 1971). They are simultaneously housed in rapidly evolving bodies undergoing dramatic changes over which they have little conscious control. Taken together,
these factors each contribute to a disconcerting state of unbalance and internal unrest as the adolescent searches for self identity (Blos, 1962; Kroger, 1996; Marcia, 1980) and pursues a natural preference for homeostasis (Bernstein, 1983; Burton, 1981; Storr, 1972; Varela, 1991; Winnicott, 1971). The qualities identified here were clearly embedded in (or strongly suggested by) the images produced by the students in this study as evinced by the fact that their artwork was characteristically:

- populated by evolving forms and images depicted in a constant state of ebb and flow.
- preoccupied with themes of love, hate, family, relationships, and death.
- typified by visual references to alternate worlds, afterlife, and other dimensions.
- concerned with symbolism and visual metaphors.
- suggestive of multiple identities, often depicting figures having many mouths, faces, and eyes.

**Changes in Perceptions About Art and Reality**

Upon entering the course, most students felt that good art necessarily “looks real” in a mimetic sense. By the completion of the course, they had developed more complex understandings about both art and reality. They now acknowledged the presence of an “inner reality”4 which was accessible and important to explore through artmaking. Consequently, their appreciation for interpretive, abstract, and non-mimetic types of art was dramatically heightened.

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4The adolescent’s “inner reality” refers to the abstract, philosophical, and reflective concerns which permeate their world and influence their artmaking, in contrast to the more literal “reality” of outward activities generally depicted in children’s artwork. Csikszentmihalyi and Larson (1984) similarly identify the adolescent as having an “internal landscape” characterized by shifting emotional states and influenced by differing activities, companions, and environments.

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Figure 4. *Sensory Affective Work: A Portrait of a Remembered Person.* A senior’s sensory re-experience of visiting his cancer-stricken father in a hospital served as the basis for this rather disturbing painting. Formalistic concerns such as balance, direction, color, and shape emerged from the salient qualities of the story being told.
Capacity for Idea Formation

Upon entering the course, students had great difficulty with creative thinking and original idea formation and typically sought references for their artmaking. However, as the course progressed, their propensity for individual idea formation was dramatically heightened. The general consensus of the group was reflected by one student who commented, “I used to sit in front of my paper waiting for an idea to come … now I am full of ideas!”

Studio Working Process

Students initially experienced great hesitation and consternation when commencing the act of painting, often making weak, worrisome marks which lacked purpose and conviction. In time, they entered studio work confidently and freely, demonstrating a controlled fluidity in handling the medium.

Ability to Create Technique

In order to clarify or emphasize salient aspects of the stories they wished to represent in their artwork, the students developed a broadened and idiosyncratic range of painterly approaches, supporting the notion that technique is born out of personal voice.

Formalistic Understandings

Students who once expressed frustration about “filling the whole paper” began handling orchestral concerns with a natural, intuitive ease. They used colors, lines, textures, and spatial devices such as proportion and repetition to clarify their meanings and achieve a general sense of homeostasis in their work.
Conclusions and Implications

This study provides evidence that an authentic form of artistic expression can be reawakened in adolescents through a sensory-based method of teaching. As the students moved through ever-deepening stages of learning, their artistic understandings evolved and each experienced an enhanced engagement with his own internal reality, transcended preconceived notions about art and artmaking, became trustful of personal expression, demonstrated an enriched propensity for creativity and original idea formation, and developed understandings and sensitivities about formalistic concerns. Interestingly, this stratified method of artistic learning recapitulated the multi-layered nature of the sensory-emotional system as it has been articulated by the aforementioned researchers and embodied in the Artistic Impetus Model.

This research offers significant insights which may shed light on problems that have confronted art education for decades. As contended earlier, art education’s failure to identify the psycho-intellectual origins of its own practice has contributed to nebulous and disparate forms of teacher preparation. This study suggests an approach to teacher preparation which (a) finds grounding in the origins of the authentic artistic process, (b) places these underpinnings into a highly structured, systematic, and academically justifiable framework, and (c) signifies the efficacy of art education to the development of global intelligence in young people. Consequently, this study imparts a kind of “intel-
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lectual weight” to matters of sensory-emotional knowing, reframing them as identifiable, important, and accessible components of formal education. Taken together, these concepts stand to redefine art as an area of study which engages the full human intellect, thereby repositioning its status as a truly “academic” subject. Further, because the sensory-based approach re-ignites the creative process at its points of origin, this research discredits the erroneous belief that artistic learning is pertinent only to children and “gifted” adolescents and reasserts it as an important and viable component in the education of all students.

In addition to the above, the studio/classroom processes advanced in this study have implications towards developing a more democratic educational arena through which adolescents may engage with the process of transformation (Friere, 1970/2000), characterized as an evolving act of inner growth and revelation. As evident in the artwork produced, this experience can enable them to integrate social, home, and school life in ways that make meaning out of individual situations and develop contextual thought processes, qualities which strengthen one’s abilities to contribute to personal and communal change. It should be noted that subsequent applications of this teaching approach have been applied in school districts of varying cultural, ethnic, and economic complexions, including co-educational urban and suburban settings. Empirical evidence from these applications suggests that, while the students’ narratives, subject matter, and story lines may differ to accommodate these varying factors, their entry into artistic engagement primarily remains philosophically motivated, reflective, and indicates many of the developmental, psychology-based qualities previously identified in this article.

I would be negligent in concluding this discourse without marking its implications to matters apart from classroom instruction. In point, its premise challenges the very roots of a narrowly defined, cognitively centered American educational system, in which the senses and emotions have largely been dismissed as unreliable, hedonistic, and potential threats to the status quo. The tragic incidents at Columbine, Virginia Tech, and other arenas of education are overt manifestations of an emotional illiteracy which insidiously exists beneath our erudite professional radar every day in schools, and for that matter, in adult society as well. Society expresses both shock and bewilderment when confronted by these violent and news-breaking episodes, yet given the historic negligence of our schools to integrate emotional matters into the educational process, one might speculate as to why such occurrences are, auspiciously, not more commonplace. Regrettably, the more subtle manifestations of emotional illiteracy including bullying, teasing, ostracism, bigotry, vandalism, intolerance, and similar behaviors and attitudes receive relatively little public attention, yet are infectious throughout many educational arenas (Goleman, 1995). This study raises questions about the critical role that art education can play in providing the rapidly evolving adolescent with a means by which to identify, reflect upon, and impart organized, intelligent voice to elusive, confusing, and often disturbing concerns in ways that may contribute to a sought-after homeostasis and a stabilized emotional complexion. Isn’t this what education should also be about?

5 Although not directly pertinent to the purposes of this study, it is relevant to note that, in continued applications of this teaching approach, instructional units are concluded with culminating discussions in which students draw connectives between certain aspects of their own work and those of established artists and genres. Such artwork is introduced after the students complete their own studio work. These discussions foster a familiarity with current and historical artists, and an analytical engagement with formalism, critique, and aesthetic concerns.

6 The students’ artwork suggests topics which seem to embody the assertions of Peter McLaren (1993) when he identifies the street corner, the student, the sanctity, and the home as critical “states” for adolescents. Additionally, the pedagogical practice which underpins this study resonates with McLaren’s call for an approach to education which is applicable across varied ethnicities and one which is creative, generative, and physically engaging.
References


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