

“Freedom To Explore Key To Teaching Art,” *Asia Life Magazine*, March 10, 2015

I'm an Art Teacher. Years ago, I taught Gifted and Talented Pre-Kindergarten to Grade 8 children at a public school in Yonkers, NY. One day while chatting with one of my Grade 7 students before class, I was given a rare gift. An insight so simple and yet so profound that it completely changed my approach to Art Education. My student simply stated what was normal for many students: “In school, we're told what to do and how to do it, all day long.” In a nutshell, that is what Education means to many students. This particular young boy wasn't complaining, he was merely describing how students are spoon-fed how and what to think. He was describing how they are rarely given the opportunity to discover on their own or invent, yet it is these opportunities that develop critical thinking skills and allow students to become personally invested in their own learning and education.

As an exhibited artist, I understand how necessary and integral the process of art making is to the final product. Without process, the product can't exist. But without a process in which students discover and play at their own rate, the product that is produced has no meaning. It is in the process of creating that thinking and problem-solving skills are developed. Inherent to the nature of creating is the aspect of play. One must play or experiment with materials and ideas in order to discover their own approach or vision. According to author Daniel Pink in his book *A Whole New Mind: Moving from the Information Age to the Conceptual Age*, “the ability to ‘play’, i.e. experiment, take risks, try new things, have fun, is the new sixth sense necessary to succeed in a changing world economy and market-place.”

Teachers are frequently told how we need to educate today's students for tomorrow's jobs, many of which might not yet exist. Pink argues in his book that tomorrow's careers will rely on 'right brain' qualities: inventiveness, empathy and meaning. Indeed, there are many studies that prove how the arts and creativity change the mapping of the brain. As Rachel Goslins, Executive Director of the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities states, “Creativity and innovative thinking are essential skills for success in school and in the 21st century workforce...All our research points to the power of the arts in schools to increase academic achievement in reading and math, engage more students in learning and build creative thinking skills.”

So why is play so important? More specifically, what can our students learn from playing? Art Education Professor Renee Sandell of George Mason University states in her article *What Excellent Visual Arts Teaching Looks Like: Balanced, Interdisciplinary, and Meaningful*, that play “...creatively engages problem-solving...risk-taking, curiosity,(and) inventive thinking.” She goes on to state “...excellent Visual Arts teaching helps make learning fun, collaborative, experimental, and assists learners in taking risks.”

There is no one-way to draw a horse. Nor is there one way to paint a portrait. Our students are not the same. On the contrary, as I'm currently teaching within the expat community at an IB World School where inquiry is fostered, my students come from all over the world, have studied under many different curriculums, and bring to my classroom countless thoughts, ideas, and understandings. It would be impossible to pigeon-hole them. But that is unfortunately what many schools, and even parents, want and expect within the framework of student art. “Cookie cutter” art, where sameness and perfection are praised and individuality and experimentation are discouraged, is alive and well in many people's minds. The idea that it 'has to be right' or else the work isn't 'high quality' or 'good', leads me to ask “by whose standards?”

A 7 year old child may be able to learn how to draw a self-portrait beautifully, but without the exploratory element of play, it won't have meaning for them. It is while playing that the child explores, makes mistakes and tries to solve them, that the work becomes their own. Children are very good at mimicking but without a personal connection, a sense of ownership won't exist. Dr. Burton, my old professor at Teachers College Columbia University, goes on to say "Rather than direct their pupils toward prescribed or a priori outcomes, effective teachers foster individual interpretations...this kind of exemplary teaching proceeds with rigor, inviting reflection in the exploration and sharing of ideas, and care and invention in using materials; it calls forth a kind of pride in working toward personal outcomes and assuming thoughtful responses toward others."

All of this doesn't mean that the Art classroom is a free-for-all, where children are doing what they want and how they want it, without any input from me, their teacher. But it does mean that I try to step back as a facilitator in my teaching, giving the students as much free rein as possible within the parameters of the lesson. As a consequence, every art work in a project looks differently. The hand of the artist, the individual, is obvious in each artwork. Burton also says, "Outstanding teachers intercede or stand back as they read the initiating cues offered by pupils...They ask questions relating to specific pieces of work and inspire reflection on problems and dilemmas, seemingly without guiding pupils to specific outcomes or telling them what to do or think."

It's not always comfortable for me. Sometimes it can be hard to take 'one's hands off the steering wheel.' Teachers are not always comfortable giving up control, but that is exactly what is necessary for a classroom to produce fresh and innovative thinking. As Pann Baltz states in the opening statements of *Harvard University's Project Zero: The Creative Classroom Project*, "Although most people might look for signs of creativity in the appearance of the bulletin boards...I feel that the truly creative classroom goes way beyond what can be seen with the eyes... Having a creative classroom means that the teacher takes risks on a daily basis and encourages his/her students to do the same." Risk-taking isn't always comfortable, but that's what I'm trying to do.

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