

Best Practices in Visual Art Education  
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in collaboration with Connie Stewart

This paper reports a synthesis of the discussion held on 09 May 2009 among twenty-one visual art educators who convened at the Denver Art Museum and continued discussions via email about promising practices for visual art teachers.<sup>1</sup> The goal of the discussion and this paper is to demonstrate the alignment of best practices in visual art education with current research in pedagogical theory and practice. This paper articulates specific recommendations to support teachers, schools, school districts, and state boards as they make decisions affecting visual art programs. The panel represented a broad range of teaching experience from early career teachers to retired teachers, practicing in both public schools and charter schools. The participants teach at all levels, including elementary, middle, and high school; higher education; and museums. A list of participants appears at the end of this brief.

The discussion of best practices was guided by questions in the following categories: learning and thinking; media and processes; and administrative decisions. Arts programs teach vocabulary, conventions, skills and techniques that are specific to the discipline of visual art. Art making also teaches a specific set of thinking skills (dispositions) rarely addressed elsewhere in the curriculum, including persistence, expression, the ability to notice relationships and make connections, observation, envisioning, innovation, and reflective self-evaluation, (Eisner, 2002; Hetland, et al, 2007.) These dispositions produce “innovative leaders who improve the world they inherit,” (Winner and Hetland, 2007.) Colorado can pay special attention to supporting arts education as new research reveals that Colorado ranks 5th among all states for concentration of creative talent, generating approximately \$5 billion in payroll and benefits. The creative economy includes occupations in either a creative industry, “where products or services are rooted in emotional and aesthetic appeal” or non-creative industry in which “the work itself is inherently creative or artistic.” At present, 40% of these creative workers are imported from other states, (Colorado Council for the Arts, 2009.)

### Part One: Expression, Creativity, and Contexts

Art education develops students’ creative expression. Communication is critical to success in life skills, work skills, and all disciplines of education. In exemplary art classes, there should be opportunities for students to find their own voices and evidence of students crafting compelling visual narratives. In exemplary art classes, each student’s artwork is unique and looks different from others’ artwork. By recognizing and supporting diversity, art teachers foster students who find meaning in their own and others’ artwork. Opportunities for critique and artistic discourse

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should occur among students during art production and formally after completion of art assignments. Students should have opportunities to articulate and/or defend their artwork.

The art classroom develops creative thinking skills that support student learning and later success in the 21st Century workforce. One aspect of thinking creatively is knowing the rules and basic vocabulary of visual art concepts, so one can determine how and when to break them. Throughout the year, art curriculum should combine structured lessons with choice-based open-ended activities. Art teachers should explicitly teach and provide experiences for students to learn art vocabulary, concepts, processes, techniques, and aesthetics. Through guided discovery with art structures, students become comfortable broadening contexts. As art students develop comfort, opportunities are provided for students to challenge traditional boundaries in their art works. Students and teachers see “mistakes” as creative opportunities to explore alternative solutions. Active student engagement and personal pride are evidenced through body language and the production of high quality work. Art assignments should be age and culturally appropriate to sustain interest and support personalized interpretation and creative expression.

To foster creative thinking, problems to be solved in the art classroom should be presented in open-ended ways. Not only should students solve problems creatively, students should practice posing questions (Costa and Kallick, 2000.) Art teachers support questioning practices and problem solving by providing opportunities for students to learn from discovery. Classrooms with a clear understanding of expectations, rituals, and routines provide a safe atmosphere where students feel freedom to create. With safety and support, students will develop risk taking behaviors, solving problems from self-imposed questions with individual solutions.

## Part Two: Cognition and Connections

Visual thinking is developed in art classes. Because most teaching is presented through linguistic representation, (oral presentation), art teachers should communicate and collaborate with their cohorts to aid students in better understanding and remembering new learning through nonlinguistic representation. Using both systems maximizes learning, (Marzano, et al, 2001.) The education community embraces the practice of making connections as necessary for learning. People's minds think about and understand ideas and concepts in terms of schemata, (Cross,1999.) Therefore, embryonic learning and deeper learning are embedded into schema with time. Art teachers should connect to previous learning, both in and through the arts. Meaningful art making is inextricably interwoven with connections: a student's life, family, culture, and learning. Art teachers should help students forge links between disciplines and students' personal lives. Art curriculum needs to provide opportunities for students to respond empathetically to each other's artwork, (Costa, 1988 & 1997,) and to present a broad range of artwork from many cultures and subcultures: master works from around the world, ethnic artwork, folk art, and contemporary art, (Gude, 2000.) Rich art curriculum resonates with all students, providing opportunities for students to practice and succeed in making metaphor and visual narrative, and to understand that artists work in a variety of media, both traditional (paint and clay) and contemporary, (projection, performance, installation, and intervention.) Connected

art works are both meaningful and visual manifestations of students' learning. Student portfolios substantiate the transformation of a student as a person and an artist. Art teachers, especially those who have students for multiple years, should support students in building transformative evidence through portfolios, sketchbooks, and digital media.

### Part Three: Media and Processes

In exemplary art programs, all art students, regardless of age, receive a variety of age appropriate experiences in 2D, 3D, and 4D media. Repeated experiences with a variety of media give students the background to understand different media for creative expression. Learning in the arts should spiral upward, building on sensory experiences, skills, techniques, and concepts. Meaning develops from process and practice. As students develop praxis, they expand fluency, flexibility, originality, and elaboration of expression, (Snider, 2009.) Students should use sketchbooks to research, gather information, and try ideas before embarking on an artwork. Sketchbooks make thinking visible and show students' thought processes. Because young children are grounded in concrete expression, they, especially, should have access to a variety of 3D media, such as clay, blocks, textiles, wire, paper, cardboard, and found objects to understand and represent their world, (Edwards, et al, 1998.) Art teachers should consider 3D media when designing differentiation strategies. All students can benefit from exploring an art concept in a concrete 3D medium, before transitioning to 2D representations in drawing, painting, and printmaking.

Art lessons should begin with visual art standards and rubrics for quality. When appropriate, students should be involved in creating the rubrics, (Andrade, 2000.) Project schedules should be articulated, so students develop an understanding of time management. Deadlines should be flexible to accommodate slower artists. Students can be granted extra time (either inside or outside of class) to complete or elaborate a work of art. Extension activities should be provided for those who finish early. Safety should also be considered in each project. Not only must students feel emotionally safe to create, students should receive explicit instruction for using tools and media. Exemplary art programs articulate a system for clean up with students actively involved. Art lessons should end with student reflection. Reflection can take many forms, including critiques, art walks, presentations, and conferences.

### Part Four: Decisions that Support Learning in Art Programs

Federal legislation in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, (ESEA) defines the arts as core subjects. Because the arts provide form to express ideas, concepts, and lived experiences, the benefits of a quality arts education are often subtle, intricate, and not easily measured, (Jensen, 2001.) Though learning in the visual arts classroom may look different than learning in other disciplines, all students, kindergarten through high school, should be given high quality experiences to learn in the arts. The decisions made by state and local school boards, as well as individual schools, affect the quality of art education, (Seidel, et al, 2008.)

## SCHEDULES

General notes for scheduling:

If custodial time is defined by a school district, art rooms necessarily need more time than general education classrooms. In art classes, learning is dependent on messy hands-on materials.

Collaborative planning between art specialists and classroom teachers must be built into the elementary and middle school's master schedule for strong integration to benefit student learning. At the elementary level, classroom teachers should share with art specialists their current units of study, target objectives, and which students need extra support. Art specialists should share with classroom teachers strategies to individualize and expand learning of classroom content to visual and kinesthetic modalities through art. All students can benefit from expanded learning modalities, especially struggling students, English language learners, and visual/ kinesthetic learners, (Hanson, J. 2002; Marshal, J. 2006; McKean, B. 2008.) From collaborative planning, classroom teachers can incorporate visual and kinesthetic strategies into their practice, and art teachers can make connections to classroom content during art classes. Strong integration and collaboration should also occur between middle school art, humanities, math, and science curriculum. Integrated content connects students and disciplines to the world in an increasingly sophisticated manner. Through integration, a critical opportunity exists for middle school students to realize they are creative thinkers and visual poets before the separation in high school between fine arts and other disciplines.

Elementary schedules should be built to accommodate access to learning in the arts, with an equal rotation of visual art, music, and movement. Each discipline should receive a minimum of 80 minutes/week with a 5 minute passing period, (Virginia Art Education Association, 2009.) Regularly scheduled art classes support quality student learning by providing sufficient time for instruction, student connections, brainstorming, creative expression, (art making), and set-up/ clean-up. At the elementary level, 5 minutes is critical for art room clean up and set up for the next class. With only 80 minutes/week, every minute of contact time must be maximized for student learning. Access to learning in the arts includes a policy of no student pull-out during art classes.

At the middle school level, students learn best with art classes scheduled for 50 - 60 minutes every day, (Pennsylvania Art Education Association, 1992.) All students should take at least one semester of introductory art in their sixth grade year. An integrated introductory arts course offering visual art, music, dance, and drama for a full year also works very well for 6th graders. Mixing sixth graders with eight graders impedes learning. After 6th grade, middle school students should be offered integrated courses in 2D, 3D, and electronic media to deepen skills, techniques, and concepts. Middle school students are too young for specialized art classes.

High school schedules are often built around 90 minute blocks for a full semester. Art schedules work best if the blocks are flexible. Modified blocks support learning at the Art 1 level. Singleton classes should be offered either 45-60 minutes/session, once/week for a whole year or 90 minutes/session, once /week for a semester. After Art I, quarterly specialized classes offer a

greater variety of art experiences during a school year, while semester length classes develop higher levels of insight and technical skill. High schools need to articulate their goals when developing their schedules.

#### BUDGETS:

Art programs should reflect a consumable budget. Unlike workbooks which provide practice, consumables used in art classes provide opportunities for students to express and elaborate, to develop and expand critical and creative thinking, and to show evidence of learning. Art budgets must reflect the consumable nature of art materials with the understanding of “value added” consumable experiences. Schools and districts must develop cultural sensitivity when considering the budgets for schools with high numbers of students in poverty. Many schools rely on fund raisers and student fees to supplement art budgets. This creates inequities among “have” and “have not” schools. Instead of putting the burden of funding art education on families in need, schools should eliminate fund raisers. Districts must compensate Title One schools to make art budgets equitable across the district and provide adequate funding for meaningful art experiences. Developing a culture of resourcefulness, social responsibility, and discovery learning (through “mistakes”) will aid schools in keeping budgets reasonable. When students are encouraged to push their “errors” into new directions, they seize opportunities to improvise. They experience a new skill set of problem solving, including looking at new perspectives, revision, and evaluation. Resourcefulness develops from finding and “repurposing” cast offs into art materials. Teachers, schools, and districts need to develop networks for receiving and storing potential art materials. Reusing materials exponentially effects entire communities by developing social responsibility.

#### CLASS SIZE:

Smaller art classes are effective for creative exploration and the acquisition of skills. Practices of overloading secondary art classes and combining elementary art classes are not recommended. Art classes should be no larger than other classes for a given school. Beside the student/teacher ratio, art class size must reflect the physical size of the art room for both learning and safety. “Research on class size reduction, such as the Student Teacher Achievement Ratio (STAR) program, have demonstrated that smaller class sizes improve students' academic achievement, improve their behavior and discipline both in the classroom and outside of school, improve their citizenship and participation/engagement in and outside of school, and enhance their development into productive, humane, and responsible persons who can contribute to society.” (Achilles, C., 2003; Center for Public Education website) Beyond student/teacher ratios in the classroom, art teacher/student class loads must also be considered. Impediments to student learning arise when teachers, particularly elementary art teachers, are assigned large numbers of students at multiple schools. These include teachers knowing and assessing students; understanding/building/practicing school culture; and integrating/collaborating with other teachers. Elementary art teachers should be full time at one school. At the secondary level, 125 students/art teacher is effective for instruction and assessment.

#### TEACHERS:

Art teachers should be highly qualified, licensed art specialists. Art teachers should be the primary source for art instruction, but not the only source. Artists-in-Residence are beneficial in supplementing art and other core curriculum, when coupled with regular instruction by a highly qualified art teacher. Schools should partner with their communities to enhance learning in and through the arts. Community partnerships include family members, professionals working in the creative industries, arts organizations, museums, and cultural institutions. Students should have opportunities to exhibit and perform publicly and to attend professional art performances and exhibitions. Students need to be actively involved “in the preservation and promotion of cultural traditions and works of art in the local community,” (Pennsylvania Art Education Association, 1992.)

#### FACILITIES:

All levels of art should have a dedicated art classroom. “Art on a cart” can not be an option for today’s high stakes educational outcomes. Tanner, C. K., (2000), of the School Design and Planning Laboratory at the University of Georgia recommends a minimum 49 square feet per elementary student and 64 square feet per secondary student for a regular classroom, with extra space needed to accommodate the activity and safety of an art classroom. This is corroborated by other experts in the field, including the Montessori Foundation. Art rooms should be outfitted with sturdy rectangular tables, (no round or kidney tables), and stools. Stools allow student artists to stand and/or move away from their work to gain better perspective during production. Counter space, double sinks, hot water, and a water sprayer are imperative for material preparation and clean up. Adequate storage ensures an art program rich in media experiences, visual resources, and project storage. Authentic student assessment is ensured with portfolio, artifact, and sketchbook storage and a critique wall. Technology must include at least one computer, digital projector, and camera. Because elementary art rooms serve all students in the school and because technology is a visual medium, technology in an art room should be equal to or better than the regular classroom. As electronic student artwork becomes more sophisticated at the middle and high school levels, access to increased technology is recommended. Art rooms must be rich in visual resources, including a world map and timeline. Finally, art rooms must have an adequately vented, safely installed and partitioned kiln area to nurture 3D exploration and expression. At the high school level, 2D and 3D classrooms should be separate and designed to support that level of student artwork.

#### CONCLUSION

Developing students with creativity, persistence, expression, vision, and innovation necessitates the need for best practices and supportive decision-making in visual art education. Fostering students fluent in these visual art-based 21st Century skills ensures success when competing in a global economy. The following recommendations, developed through conversations with Colorado art educators and corroborated by educational research, support and guide K-12 visual arts programs in which robust student learning occurs.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROMISING PRACTICES IN VISUAL ART EDUCATION**

### **Expression, Creativity, and Contexts:**

Art making provides a form for concepts, ideas, and lived experiences. This process is often termed “Creative Expression” or “Art as Communication.” Participants identified the following characteristics of arts instruction that support personal expression and creativity, where students solve problems from self-imposed questions with individual solutions.

- provide opportunities for students to find their own voices to craft compelling visual narratives, (each student's work is unique and looks different from others’ artwork)
- recognize and support diversity
- provide opportunities for critique and artistic discourse before, during, and after art production
- design age and culturally appropriate art experiences
- combine structured lessons with choice-based open-ended activities, (opportunities for students to learn the rules and then to break them)
- foster discovery learning by presenting problems in open-ended ways
- develop and expand students ability to pose questions
- provide a safe atmosphere, (foster freedom for students to create with clear expectations, rituals, and routines)

### **Cognition and Connections**

Students make connections that enable learning in multiple ways. Participants identified these aspects of interdisciplinary learning important in an art classroom.

- present learning through linguistic and nonlinguistic representations
- connect to previous learning, both in and through the arts, and between disciplines, cultures, and students’ personal lives
- develop the multi-disciplinary role of metaphor and visual narrative
- present all types of art: master works from around the world and throughout history, ethnic artwork, and contemporary art; include accurate contextual information
- present traditional media including drawing, painting, sculpture, small metals , ceramics, printmaking, and photography
- expose students to contemporary media including projection, performance, protest, and social justice
- support students in building transformative evidence through portfolios, sketchbooks, and digital media

### **Media and Processes:**

The quality of an art program depends on the quality of the experience a student has with art media. Repeated experiences with a variety of media give students the background to make media choices enabling greater creative expression. The following “best practices” for teaching the skills and expressive potential of a variety of art media were identified.

- align learning with state and national visual art standards
- develop rubrics to define and assess quality work; when appropriate, involve students in creating rubrics
- design learning in the arts to spiral upward, building on sensory experiences, skills, techniques, and concepts

- provide sketchbooks for opportunities to do research, exploration, and show students' thought processes
- provide a variety of age appropriate experiences in both 2D,3D, and 4D media
- provide young children access to a variety of 3D media
- consider 3D media when designing differentiation strategies
- provide opportunities for students to transition between 3D and 2D media
- provide opportunities for students to integrate art and technology
- articulate project schedules; make deadlines flexible
- provide opportunities for elaboration
- explicitly teach safe and appropriate use of tools and media
- actively involve students in clean up; explicitly teach clean up procedures
- provide opportunities for student reflection, (use a variety of reflection pathways: critiques, art walks, presentations, conferences, etc.)
- ensure kiln area is adequately vented, safely installed and partitioned

### **Decisions that Support Learning in Art Programs:**

Administrative decisions determine schedules, budgets, class sizes, teacher qualifications, and facilities. These decisions are critical to supporting quality art education programs, which in turn develop superior learners.<sup>2</sup> The panel addressed recommendations in the following areas.

#### ***Schedules:***

- schedule adequate custodial time
- establish a policy of no student pull-out during art classes
- embed collaborative planning in the school schedule between art specialists and classroom teachers for strong integration at the elementary and middle school level
- build elementary schedules to accommodate learning in the arts, with an equal rotation of visual art, music, and movement
- provide a minimum of 80 minutes/week of visual art with a 5 minute passing period at the elementary level
- provide 50 - 60 minutes of visual art every day at the middle school level
- require all sixth grade students to take at least one semester of introductory art, (don't mix 6th graders with older middle school students)
- after introductory art, offer middle school students integrated courses in 2D, 3D, and electronic media arts to deepen skills, techniques, and concepts
- provide flexibility for high school art blocks, especially Art I classes
- articulate school goals before developing high school art schedules

#### ***Budgets:***

- fund art budgets to reflect the consumable nature of art making
- fund art budgets to reflect the development of creative learners

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<sup>2</sup> Opportunities such as coaching, co-mentoring, teaching networks, art making, and critique groups are recognized as some important avenues for professional development. Though the discussion group did not address the subject, professional development is another important element in decisions that support exemplary art programs.

- develop cultural sensitivity when funding art budgets, eliminate fund raisers
- supplement art budgets (at the secondary level) to compensate for low income families' ability to pay student fees
- develop student, school, and community resourcefulness

***Class Size:***

- ensure safe and creative working environments when determining art class sizes
- reflect equivalent art class sizes to other classes in the school
- assign art teacher/student loads to enhance teacher/student connections
- assign art teacher/student loads to foster effective instruction, assessment, integration, and collaboration

***Teachers:***

- recruit and retain highly qualified, licensed art specialists
- supplement art curriculum with Artists-in-Residence
- enhance learning in and through the arts with community partnerships

***Facilities:***

- provide a dedicated art classroom with a minimum 50 square feet per elementary student and 65 square feet per secondary student
- outfit art rooms with sturdy rectangular tables, student stools, counter space, and double sinks with hot water and water sprayer
- design and provide adequate storage for art programs rich in media experiences, visual resources, project storage, and portfolio storage
- provide adequate technology in art class rooms to reflect the visual nature of art and the state of visual communication today, (basic equipment: computer, digital projector, digital camera)
- provide access to increased technology as student artwork becomes more sophisticated
- ensure that kiln area is adequately vented, safely installed, and partitioned
- provide separate 2D and 3D classrooms at the high school level, well designed to support that level of student artwork

**PARTICIPANTS**

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Shannon May, Jefferson County School District

Anne Thulson, Odyssey School

Dale Zalmstra, Village East Elementary School

Barbara Gal, Jefferson County School District, retired

Pam Ferris, Deer Creek Middle School

Sharon Rouse, Denver Art Museum, Metro State College

Aubrey Garcia, Jefferson Academy

Sara Truitt, Niver Creek Middle School  
Janet Woelfle, Horizon High School  
Donna Samuels, Prairie Hills Elementary School  
Judy Kelley, Century Middle School  
Carol Jennings, Riverdale Elementary School  
Shelley Howard, Cherry Creek School District, retired  
Michael Gamer, Douglas County School District  
Debbie Brooks, Arapahoe Ridge Elementary

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