Art Curriculum Authenticity:

Elevating Secondary Student Voices in the Creative Process

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"For me painting is a perpetual adventure. Each time I begin a canvas, I never know how it will end. In those conditions, what could I teach?" (Braque as cited in Danchev, 2012, p. 102).

There is a growing chorus of voices advocating for the increased intrinsic motivation and personal engagement in artmaking achieved by giving students more choices in their art curriculum (Buffington, 2014; Gates, 2016). When given a curriculum and assignments that make all of the decisions for them, students are not learning the skills necessary to be literate in the 21st century (Richardson, 2012). We as art educators must then move toward a quality art curriculum that elevates student voices, giving them more ownership over the concepts they investigate and the processes they use as artists. In this way, students can engage in authentic art-making—that is, art that is true to the student's own personality, spirit, or character. (Authentic, 2019). I have witnessed firsthand in my classroom that when students have a personal connection with their artmaking, they become the driving force of their learning. And with the internet, students can become active investigators in finding the knowledge necessary to solve their problems. Giving students more autonomy in their artistic journey furthers students' exploration of their own ideas as unique artists (Douglas & Jaquith, 2009). While student control over the content, materials, and timeline of their artmaking is a defining feature of choice-based art education methods (Gates, 2016), students still require guidance in how to investigate and communicate meaning in their work, otherwise "they tend to fall back on hackneyed, kitschy image-making techniques." (Gude, 2013, p. 6).

How, then, do we prepare students to be the driving force of their artmaking while still challenging them to grow as artists in ways they never imagined before entering our classrooms?

How do we allow them the creative freedom to investigate and explore their own ideas as unique artists while helping them to critically explore the world around them?

Designing an art curriculum that achieves this—that emphasizes authentic art-making, empowers students, and elevates their voices—requires rethinking the way we, as art educators, teach. We must develop curriculum and instruction that embodies three key concepts: (1) inspire student thought, (2) assess students in ways that encourage artistic growth beyond the initial art-making moment, and (3) facilitate an environment of respect to embrace uniqueness. What follows are the conceptual tools developed over ten years as a secondary art educator to build an environment of creative investigation in the secondary classroom.

Inspire Student Thought

Students need to be challenged to reach beyond what they are capable of and to try new things. A strong student-centric curriculum can challenge students to develop questions that will inspire deep reflection instead of outlining and restricting what their solutions can be, as is typical in teacher-centric classrooms. A restrictive design removes individual choice, which inhibits discovery and experimentation (Bonawitz et al., 2010). To grow as individuals and as artists, our students must investigate and question the world around them. Art educators can facilitate this by designing lessons to follow development of a concept rather than a prearranged series of steps. Let's face it, those prearranged steps are closer to a complex paint-by-number than they are to an authentic art-making process. So, how do we design lessons to encourage students to authentically develop a concept?

Choosing an effective topic.

First, as educators, we need to inspire student thought. To accomplish this, I like to start a new lesson by discussing a topic that is part of our common human experience. Effective lessons

are designed around our common human experiences connected to ideas that are complex, ambiguous, and contradictory (Sakatani & Pistolesi, 2009). Two of my favorite discussion topics are our relationship with death and the arbitrary structures that inform our understanding of gender, but almost any serious topic salient to students can inspire discussion. One fruitful lesson began with a discussion of returning from winter break. While "winter break" may not seem like a serious topic, our discussion evoked complex emotions about maintaining friendships, stressors at school and at home, and complicated relationships with blended and distant family members. This discussion gave them an opportunity to verbalize their feelings as a launching point for processing those complex emotions through artmaking.

Presenting the topic.

To introduce any concept to students, I assemble a diverse collection of media reflecting the topic. This can include poetry, YouTube videos, newspaper articles, magazine ads, songs, or a variety of artwork across disciplines; even in a painting class, the students view sculpture, installation, performance, and any other media on the topic. For example, in the class discussion on the societal formation of gender roles, students searched our classroom supply of collage material—primarily magazine print advertisements—to identify and evaluate the differences in those geared toward men versus geared toward women. They also reviewed digital media reflecting gender roles, such as the satirical hyper-masculinization found in recent Old Spice advertising (Old Spice, 2010) and the work of such artists as Barbara Kruger and Wangechi Mutu, who repurpose advertising imagery in their work to discuss gender. In this way, the conversation is focused on a concept, not a medium.

Initiating discussion.

Once my students have reviewed the collected reference works, we discuss their impressions. How does the topic manifest itself in their personal life? How does it affect them? To initiate conversations when students might otherwise be hesitant to provide meaningful responses, I occasionally provide digital platforms for students to respond to preliminary questions anonymously. In that way, student thoughts are presented and engaged with respectfully and positively by all members of the class—including the teacher. Students connect to the material better if they believe you are thinking critically about it as well, and that you care about their voices (Greene, 1978). When students hear their own voices amplified and validated by their teacher, and hear so many of their peers' vocalizations of thoughts similar to theirs, they are willing to speak up in class and engage in a real discussion. They are given time to talk for as long as needed. In this way, students learn to reflect on concepts and formalize an idea that they can use art to communicate. When the conversation concludes, they are assigned to make a work of art that communicates how they feel about some aspect of the previous discussion. I try to add as little else to the assignment as possible.

While new materials and techniques are introduced at regular intervals in the course through daily in-class assignments, students are not limited to any specific material or approach. Even if we are in a painting class, if the concept drives the student to work dimensionally, they are encouraged to do so. Most of the material and technical instruction given to the whole class is over foundational skills like color theory or composition. Techniques that only apply to a specific media or approach are given one-on-one or in small groups. Students are also encouraged to find tutorials online. This promotes autonomy and the ability to grow in skills that their teacher might not possess. During this guided practice, we delve deeper on responses to our conceptual discussions, helping students verbalize complex ideas they might not have felt comfortable

discussing with the whole group. This process gives students space to find the material that will

best serve their needs, and the time and resources to grow in their knowledge of that material in a

way that serves the concepts they are working to communicate.   Through this practice, students

experience personal artistic growth, both through technical skill building and development of self-

knowledge (Ohler, 2000).

Assessing Artistic Growth

The public school setting is a system that requires grades, and teachers typically have no

individual authority to avoid assigning grades in the classroom. What teachers can do, however,

is not allow grades to become punitive and stress-inducing to their students. As a new teacher, I

thought grades were a tool. I can remember a voice in my head thinking, "That kid thinks he can

goof off all week and pass? Not in my class!" That was counterproductive. I realized that using

grades as punishment is a horrible idea, mostly because the students in need of this "punishment"

were not particularly motivated by grades in the first place. Detailed, specific feedback given

throughout a student's progress can increase a student's performance, while grades alone can

actually halt growth (Lipnevich & Smith, 2008).

What has worked well in my classroom is to reduce the focus on grades and to increase the

use of personal feedback through frequent critique. There is a fitting quote from Doug Reeves

(2009) on this topic:

> The Class of 2013 grew up playing video games and received feedback that was
> immediate, specific, and brutal – they won or else died at the end of each game. For
> them, the purpose of feedback is not to calculate an average or score a final exam, but to
> inform them about how they can improve on their next attempt to rule the universe. (para.
> 18)

A single, summative letter grade given at the end of a project is not specific – it says nothing about

the qualities of the concept or finished artwork. Nor is it immediate – the grade is assigned after

the project is completed, and thus does not contribute to the act of student learning. A basic letter grade or numerical score on an Advanced Placement (AP) portfolio does not show a student how to succeed; there is not enough information for the student to know what to do next.

The limits of the rubric.

One potential evaluation mechanism is the rubric, which is intended to clearly communicate the potential levels of student achievement along a success continuum in a number of performance areas (Center for Educator Development in Fine Arts, n.d., p. 77). A rubric that Texas student artists encounter regularly is the Texas Art Education Association's Visual Arts Scholastic Event juror rating form, intended to be an "authentic assessment rubric and to align with the AP Art rubric" (Texas Art Education Association [TAEA], n.d., para. 12). The juror rating form contains, for example, an evaluation of "Purpose"; to do so, the juror assigns a value of 2, 4, 6, or 8 points for the criterion "Purpose - Execution of intent (State of research & Application to work). There is evidence in the artwork of the student's effort to achieve the stated purpose" (TAEA, 2019, p. 22).

Now imagine receiving the feedback, "There is evidence in your artwork of your effort to achieve the stated purpose at a '6' level; next time, display effort to achieve your stated purpose at an '8' level." Would you have any idea what this feedback meant? You would have no information about how to proceed, just knowledge that what you did could have been better. Detailed feedback is the most effective tool in improving students' work (Lipnevich & Smith, 2008). To that end, a better use of your evaluative effort than providing a number on a continuum of performance is to sit down with your students multiple times throughout the ongoing project. In my class, we as a group will schedule a critique, and all of us will state how we would proceed if tasked with resolving the artwork presented, given the artist's purpose. The artist presenting is then given a

variety of different solutions from a group with a range of creative approaches that they are free to accept, reject, or synthesize. In that way, students are continually provided with opportunities to engage in deep, reflective thought on the messages they are conveying in an artwork while maintaining artistic authorship. One student, Edith, reflected on her experience with continued opportunities for growth in the classroom: "Not only would you give us assignments that would challenge our artistic abilities, but you made sure that each assignment pushed us outside of our own parameters."

Grade the work, not the due date.

Whenever possible, individual project grades are not set in stone. The only person who benefits from fixed grades that need not be updated throughout the course is the teacher; the student, however, benefits immensely from grades that can be improved and which provide continued opportunities for growth and learning. Telling a student that his or her work is "D" work, without the ability to resubmit that work for a higher grade, gives the student no hope and tells him or her that improving the work has no real value. Allowing and encouraging students to improve and resubmit work, however, emphasizes the value in the work itself.   The artwork my students create is highly important; it is their personal expression of their own identity. It's important today, and it is just as important tomorrow. The skills they are learning, including communicative expression and personal growth, are vital to students' future successes in the workplace and society (Ohler, 2000). My students should learn those skills today, but if they do not, then they can come back and learn them tomorrow.

Similarly, late work never reduces a student's grade. Nowhere in the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills—Texas' "standards for what students should know and be able to do" (Texas Education Agency, n.d.)—is there a reference to "time management." Class grades should

reflect the students' mastery of the topics covered in class. To give an "A" project a "C" because it was 3 weeks late would falsely assess its quality. This grade would not accurately communicate my students' mastery of the concepts covered in the assignment, but would instead reflect the mastery of juggling all the responsibilities in his or her life. While time management may be an important skill, the report card is asking about my students' mastery of art. The grading period imposes a final deadline due to the nature of the public school system, but any work turned in before the final reporting deadline for a term is accepted for full-credit. It would be irresponsible of me to include in my grade anything other than the student's mastery of art. Also, imagine a student with numerous failing grades in a class. At some point in the term, it becomes mathematically impossible for said student to earn an exemplary or even passing grade if their grades are set in stone. Eventually, the student comes to the conclusion that there is no reason to even try. Mathematically, failure is inevitable. I cannot afford failure in my classroom. My students need to succeed and to be filled with as much knowledge as possible before venturing out into the world.

Facilitating an Environment of Respect

If a student doesn't believe you respect them as a person, they will have difficulty believing that you respect them as an artist. One of the realizations I came to while observing my students was that they are so afraid to be unique. When they first come to me as students, they are afraid to carry their portfolios through the hall out of fear that they will appear different from the general population. Yet, my students are amazing. They create wondrous things. They astutely analyze and critique the world around them. They feel different from their peers, but they have not yet learned to take pride in that. They have opinions and emotions that have value. Standardized education tends to teach students that, to be correct, their answers have to match those of the rest

of the class. Our education system has become obsessed with memorizing facts in a world where those facts matter less and less every day (Richardson, 2012).

This is what our students deserve to have and know: that there is something inside them that—although they feel the need to hide it—is valuable, is meaningful, and should be shared with the world. Their voice is unique, and it matters. One student, Madyson, reflected on her experience as an art student:

> You didn't teach us all the same. You treated us as individuals and focused on what we each needed personally. You got to know each of us and figured out what it was going to take for us to get better.

The sentiment of individual value is profoundly stated in the words of the ever-quoted Walt Whitman, "the powerful play goes on, and you will contribute a verse" (Whitman, 1886, pp. 139-140). My students have voices, powerful voices that need to be shared. Their voices need to craft the culture of the future. That future will belong to those who add new meaning and new knowledge to the world (Pink, 2005). Our students should boldly enter that future with their heads held high.

To do this, students must respect themselves, and we, as educators, must model that respect for them. This means allocating as much weight to the student's voice as to the teacher's when considering the direction an artwork will take. It also means eliminating disrespectful classroom policies, like monitoring when a student goes to the restroom. An adult would not be expected to ask permission before using the restroom; a teenager deserves that same respect. But it also means respecting the student's artistic voice and not trying to minimize it with a highly restrictive curriculum. Instead, the curriculum should encourage the student voice and the life and culture that created that voice. As one student, Landon, noted,

> I personally appreciated being told to make art for OURSELVES. I felt it necessary to have encouragement to do things even if we didn't originally like the idea of them, or we

were just too scared to try. I found I ended up liking those things most. And I appreciate your way of teaching in that all throughout the year, we eventually found ourselves and truly painted what WE were.

Education starts with the experiences of people, and we need to create an environment where we as educators are working closely with students to facilitate their process and engagement (Andrews, 2010). Once a student strongly believes he or she is an artist in pursuit of his or her own artistic voice, they can become a powerful, driving force in their own education.

Conclusion

Our students are entering an unknown future. They may have self-driving cars and robot butlers, and cell phones may be implanted directly into their heads. We do not know what skills will be necessary for this unknown future, but I am confident that the ability to take a problem and create a unique, impactful solution (higher-order thinking) is a skill that will be much more important than the ability to following a rubric (lower-order thinking). This is a universal skill that will not only drive them to be impassioned artists but also better doctors or politicians or carpenters or whatever it is that they go on to become. Art, when taught from a student-centric approach, has the potential to be the most transformative class in preparing students for whatever future they find themselves in (Ohler, 2000).

Designing an art curriculum that empowers students to create authentically requires rethinking the way art educators teach. Students can learn to reflect upon complex topics and synthesize various techniques and media to best suit the purpose of their individual expressions. By using the conceptual tools of inspiring student thought, minimizing the finality of formative and summative grades, and creating an environment of respect, we can empower students' decision-making and strengthen students' voices. By fostering an environment of creative investigation we can make a space for students to have the opportunity to work together and to

accomplish a goal of personal artistic growth. Encouraging artistic authenticity can guide our students through becoming authentic artists.
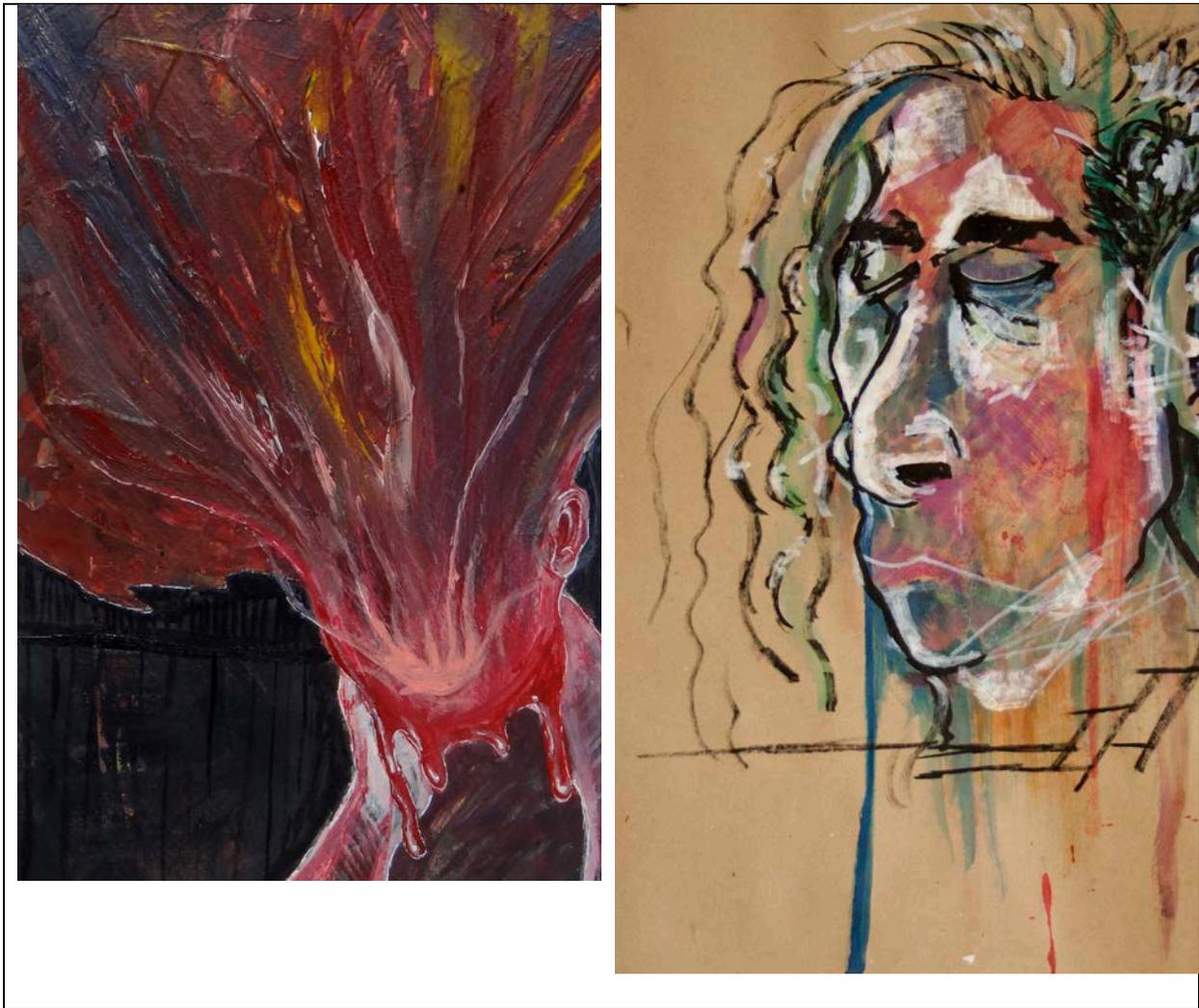
Figure 1. Student artwork based on concepts developed during "winter break" discussions by

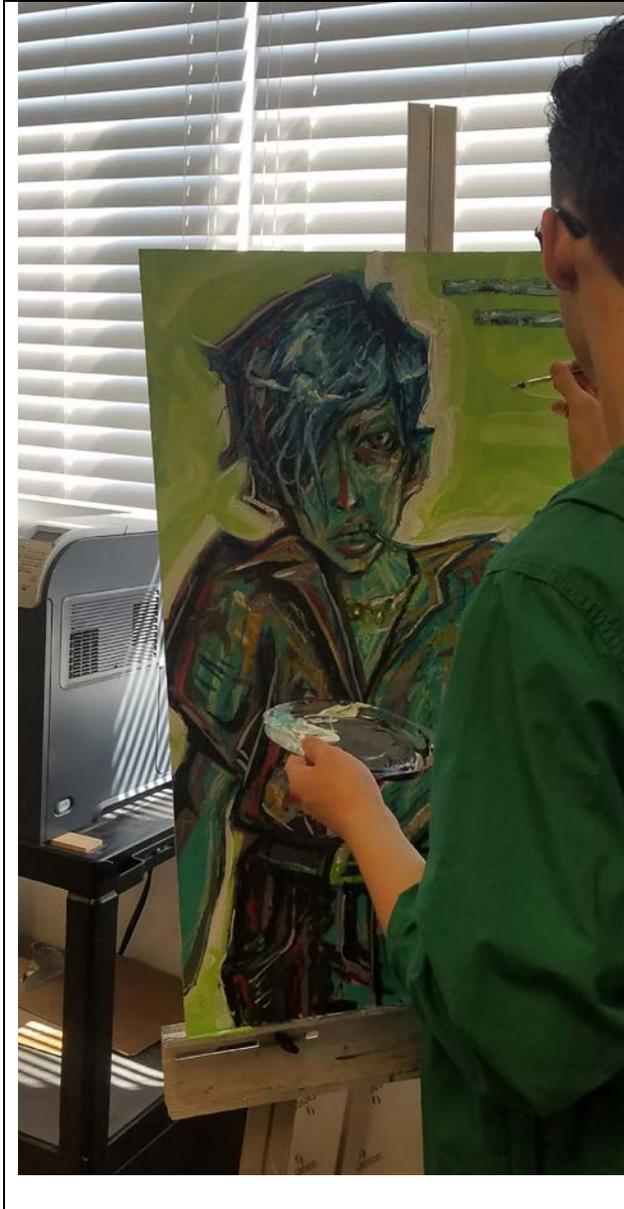Jacie Cook, James Campos, Kelsie Brouillette, and Isabella Gonzalez.

Figure 2. Four examples of student works in progress. Students pictured are Bryce Brewer, Kelsie Brouillette, and Mayra Ayala.

Figure 3. Three examples of student artwork based on concepts developed during "gender"

discussions by Ethan Thomas, Allison Kelly, and Krystal Rodriguez.

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