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Arts Educator. World Changer.

Experience In and Out of the classroom
Afterschool Programs, Summer Camps
Work with foster and incarcerated Youth
All Grades K-12

Philosophy of Education

Teaching Philosophy: Learn to love & Love to learn

“Don’t teach students how to build ships. Teach them to yearn for the ocean.”

My mission in the world is to help people discover, develop and realize their full potential. This ought to be the aim of all good education. People who know their own strengths, weaknesses, and passions, go out and contribute to the continuous improvement of the world. Art is the best way I know to have students discover these tenets of themselves and others.

Art is the vehicle I employ to help students explore themselves and unearth their own passions. When they have passion, yearning, desire for something they will be motivated to develop the skills necessary to attain those discovered goals. When they yearn for the ocean, the building of the ships comes easily and eagerly. Art is the tool by which I help students come alive. Students who become alive strive, grow and learn in every area of their lives. Here I share experiences I have had in the classroom and how those different encounters shape my teaching philosophy that art education in my classroom means that students engage in Identity Expression, Exploration & Development. This exploration equips my students to be dynamic contributors to their communities beyond my classroom.

Art as Identity Expression, Exploration & Development

Art is a process of self actualization and the expression of the many different selves we all have. Art represents the artist but is also external to them thus taking on a power all its own. I use art as the tool of expression of all these complicated truths & wanderings. My classroom is the site where my artists can wrestle with different identities while sharing a part of themselves with others.

For example, in my “Sacred Migrations” art project, I had students interview a parent or loved one who had immigrated to the United States. They asked many different questions trying to elicit stories and conversation versus just short answers. Then students had to create a “visual journal”, a collage, representing visually the various experiences they were told about.

One student had a beautiful experience with his mother. He had been procrastinating for a long time on the project, complaining to me that it was weird and he didn't really talk to his mom like that and he didn't really want to because he was uncomfortable. But one night he finally asked his mom the questions. She shooed everyone out of the room and sat down with her son and answered the questions. She was delighted with the project and even helped give my student ideas of what he could draw to represent her (and his) experience and culture. His project was very meaningful. He shared with me how much he appreciated those moments with his mom and learning about his own past. This project was relevant to the students' lived experiences. The population I was working with are of Latin descent and all had parents, grandparents or had themselves immigrated to the US. This project allowed them to discover something about themselves, their family and then share out their experiences visually with their peers. Thus art becomes the means by which students can explore their past & present in order to understand enough about themselves and others to start building their future. Though I did that project with high school students, I have done similar art projects with students as young as second & third grade. Exploring your own identity can never be done too early!

Failing Forward

Another way the art room helps students flourish is by teaching them to fail forward. One of the most unrealistic & ineffective beliefs we often teach our students is that failure is inherently bad. Most students come in with no level of skill in their art. Almost every student I've had says at one point, “My art sucks!” They are frustrated; ready to quit. That kind of language of defeat leaves no room for growth. If the art sucks as declared, there is nothing to be done. Those statements are final and hopeless.

Instead, I teach them to identify what they feel is ‘wrong’ with their art. I make students state specifically what they do not like about their art before they are allowed to throw it away or, as they so often want to do, start over. By helping them identify the parts of their piece that need improvement and why they need improvement, I set my kids up to identify their own needs of growth. This ability to identify needs allows them to build resilience. They do not have to be discouraged when they ‘fail.’ They can look at their failure and figure out where to go from there. I always make them look at their art and give me a strength and improvement. This practice

breeds confidence. By being specific in my praise and specific in my critique, I model a growth mindset that extends to all areas. Students are able to look and see the good in things they have done and make a plan for advancing even further.

Perseverance

In this way, art also teaches perseverance. Skill in art takes a while to build and to be proud of. In my art classroom, students build confidence in themselves as they see tangible proof of their own improvement. For instance, at the beginning of the year on the first day or so I have students draw a self portrait. I give them mirrors or have them take a photo and they have to draw themselves. Mind you, I have not yet given the students any such lessons to be able to complete this task. The sheer panic in their eyes is palpable. The first year I did this in my high school art class, I had no evidence that this would work. With winsome words, I persuaded the students to trust me, do their best and I guaranteed them they would improve. Later in the year, I taught the students how to draw faces. I broke the process down into very simple steps. We spend extensive time learning to draw eyes, then nose, mouth, etc. I gave them all the tools & practice necessary for their drawings to come out realistic. And they did (and still do!) By the time we get to their portraits, all levels of drawing look phenomenal! I then pull out the portraits they did day one. The students cannot believe the difference and growth they have achieved. The second year I did this project, I had more buy in on day one of the self portrait because I was able to show students the work from the previous year. I told them the art was from the same student in the same year of my class! The students were incredulous. I shared that I could summon the student who did the work to testify but there was no need. The students were excited at the prospect of potential and the promise I gave them that it was possible.

This periodic reminder of where students started and how far they've come is foundational in my teaching praxis. When students walk out of my classroom, they walk out better artists. Moreover they walk out with a sense of accomplishment and an embodied understanding of what perseverance produces in them if they are willing to put in the effort, time and give themselves grace as they grow. The majority of my students will not be artists in their career. However, whatever their pursuits in life, they will need confidence, perseverance and a healthy knowledge of themselves and others. In teaching them those skills in the art room, they strengthen those muscles for other areas of their life that will lead to success for themselves and in service to others.