


2015

Developing Visual Language - Teaching Art

Maria Richa

Follow this and additional works at: <http://educate.bankstreet.edu/progressive>

 Part of the [Art Education Commons](#), [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), and the [Educational Methods Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Richa, M. (2015). Developing Visual Language - Teaching Art. Bank Street College of Education. Retrieved from <http://educate.bankstreet.edu/progressive/20>

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Centennial Collection at Educate. It has been accepted for inclusion in Progressive Education in Context by an authorized administrator of Educate. For more information, please contact kfreda@bankstreet.edu.

Developing Visual Language – Teaching Art

By **Maria Richa**, *Art Teacher*

Parents and guests often notice how personal the works of art are in our school. Along with these observations, I hear a string of comments such as, “You can tell the children really enjoyed this,” or, “They are all so different from one another.” These comments validate a core value of a child-centered education: that the work is about joy and self-discovery. The art on the walls are celebrations of the process of making art and not a teacher’s planned product. At Bank Street, we value children’s natural artistic development, their interests, and the process of making art.

As an art teacher of a wide range of ages in the School for Children, I am highly interested in providing children with the time and space to develop concepts through the process of making art. I enjoy and value the everyday experiences that children have as I carefully observe them at work. Through my observation, I gain more appreciation and respect for the children’s learning processes. When they are making art, children are not only making connections to the tactile qualities of materials, but on an emotional level, they are also delving into and discovering who they are and what interests them.

Our art curriculum has been created over decades of invested observations from past art teachers Edith Gwathmey, Ann Marie Mott, and Lois Lord, who carefully studied and became experts in the field of art education. Learning about children’s artistic development along with anecdotes and the observation of children’s processes were and continue to be important in shaping our curriculum. What we learn helps us guide our curriculum toward finding ways to navigate through the children’s interests and curiosity.

I was recently painting with a class of four-year-olds when a child began to paint his water cup instead of the paper next to him. Soon, other children at the table also became interested in this process. I saw how excited they all became with this discovery and naturally the following day their classroom teacher brought boxes for them to paint. One idea led to the next; it is with flexible thinking and careful observations of a teacher that curriculum is shaped. The child’s interest develops apace with his needs.

The art department believes that it is through the repetition of experiences with the same materials—collage, woodworking, painting, and clay—that children gain deeper understanding. This growing knowledge provides them with the building blocks of a visual language. Beginning with the 3/4s, children investigate and explore the sensual nature of these materials. Soon, they learn to control their explorations and make distinct shapes, and patches of colors and lines. Subsequently, children are

able to integrate these elements into a whole design: an expressive arrangement of visual-graphic elements. In 5/6s and 6/7s, children discover that this artistic vocabulary can be used to create designs, and later, representational symbols of importance to them, such as themselves, people, animals, houses, vehicles, and plants. Planned and repeated experiences provided in the art room enable children to gain skills in the control of the material and in the use of tools. I often tell parents on Curriculum Night that it is not the materials that change, it is the child using the materials.



Maria Richa conducts one of her art classes

As we move into the Middle and Upper School floors, you can see in the exhibits how children use these materials to communicate in a visual language. Often, their work reveals feelings and ideas about what they know and see in the world. Much of their artwork communicates their joys and dreams, their passions and concerns. While they are making art, older children make connections to what they like and the lives they live. Experiences from school or outside of school with their families and friends are important to them in their art-making. They are not only exploring a visual language, but are also developing a means of conveying feelings and thoughts. The children's interpretations of the world around them can often be seen in exhibitions of the higher grades' work at Bank Street. Their narratives are about experiences and feelings they have and about topics typical of their ages, such as justice or injustices in our world.

In a practice that is similar to how most subjects are taught at Bank Street, the art and shop classes start with a group discussion, or “motivation.” These motivations help children connect in an intimate way to the subject presented. Often in these meetings, children are encouraged to share their personal experiences, associations, and ideas. In this process, we build a respectful, democratic community; a language to describe personal experiences or related experiences; and in turn, we make meaningful connections to the world at large.

You can walk into an 11/12’s art motivation and hear the art teacher ask students “Where have you seen a path?” Children share experiences, reflecting and revisiting those places. Through discussion, the definition of *path* expands in the minds of the children and traditional barriers might be challenged. “What do you see near or far on your path?” These questions guide children to deepen their visualizations of their ideas and re-experience or perhaps create, for the first time, a place. Subsequent questions might help tap into their moods such as, “Where are you in the path?” and “What time of the year might you choose for your path?” Whenever possible, we draw on children’s knowledge, or perhaps the use of tools and materials, to demonstrate ways to convey an idea, so in the same lesson, a teacher might invite students to show him or her how to draw a path. In this process, children become the teachers and also support one another.

When responding to children while working, or once they complete it, we use descriptive language carefully. The art department believes it is best to make concrete observations and use descriptive language without judging or assuming what the children have done or intended in their work. When responding to a child, we often hold up the work and comment on elements of line, shape, color, and arrangement.

“I see you used bold and bright colors in your painting.

“What colors did you use to make this green?”

“Look at all the ways you used your brush!”

“I see you dabbed your brush here, creating a rough surface.”

Interestingly, children begin to use this language to describe their own work and each other’s work. Through careful observation, the adult can make comments that not only value a child’s growth and process, but that will also bring awareness to a child of his/her process. As children grow, they develop a language for discussing their own work and the work of their peers. In the older grades, the art and shop teachers often encourage students to respond to each other in similar ways.

The exhibits on each floor build within the children a sense of respect for their own individual discoveries and ideas. At Bank Street, we exhibit all the work of an entire class for the purpose of celebrating and sharing these achievements with the larger community. There is a clear recognition of the individual artist in these exhibits. Children look back at their work and that of their friends. They reflect on their own learning and become excited and proud of their work. As children grow older, they will also look closely at their friends' discoveries and be inspired to explore new concepts that they might not have thought about before, an important development in their social learning.