

Art and Ideas: Reaching Nontraditional Art Students

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Source: *Art Education*, Vol. 54, No. 5, What's A Teacher to Do? (Sep., 2001), pp. 33-36

Published by: National Art Education Association

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3193933>

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# Art and Ideas: Reaching

“I don’t like art.”

# Nontraditional

# Art Students

“I just don’t want to take art anymore.”

“I don’t take art classes because I might get a ‘B,’ and that would ruin my G.P.A.”

**A**s a high school art teacher, I heard comments like these too often. They led me to develop a different type of art class, Art and Ideas. The new class features a student-driven curriculum that attracts both art and nontraditional students. Now the responses heard are:

- “I adore Art and Ideas because you can be original and really express yourself.”
- “I love this class, it lets an artist free-lance and play the field, so to speak. It gives the unorthodox artist a chance to do his magic. In regular art classes you get stuck in a rut where the teacher does all the thinking for you.”

Before the introduction of the new class, Art and Ideas, our school offered the standard studio courses: Introduction to Two- and Three-Dimensional Art, and the advanced classes of Painting, Drawing, Graphic Design, and Three-Dimensional Art.

However, most of our student population limited its art experience to one class, Introduction to Two- and Three-Dimensional Art. This introductory course, which is a prerequisite for additional classes, fulfills state

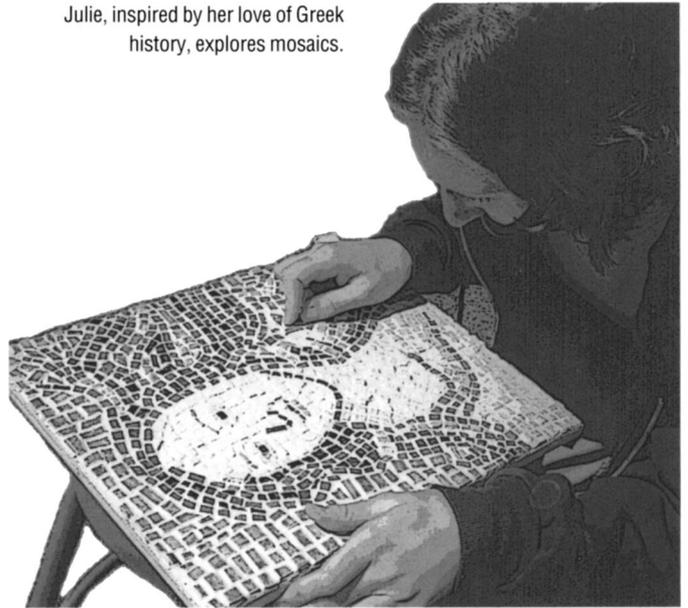
proficiency standards and the Academic Honors Diploma requirements. Typically, the students that I wanted to reach would not sign up for traditional drawing or painting classes because they did not consider themselves particularly good at art. As educators, if we believe that all students benefit from art, then our art classes must address the needs of all students, not primarily those of the artistically gifted. With this thought in mind, I developed a class that would include the nontraditional art student. In order to accomplish this goal, I researched the National and State Proficiency Standards and studied publications from the Getty Center for Education in the Arts, the Smithsonian, the National Art Education Association, and others. I also attended several conferences on alternative assessments.

After developing the course concept, I presented the format and syllabus to our administration and curriculum board for approval. I wanted this class to address five objective:

1. The class would study the arts of other cultures and time periods in greater depth, thereby increasing the students’ global awareness;

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Julie, inspired by her love of Greek history, explores mosaics.



2. The class would connect art to other curricular areas (as art to math, art to history, and art to literature), which promotes interdisciplinary learning;
3. The class would attract the nontraditional art student (one who may never sign up for a conventional art class, but who wants to expand his or her artistic horizons);
4. The class would promote a student-driven curriculum (the student and teacher together determine the course of study). Some students may elect ceramics; others printmaking, drawing, and so forth. This would encourage greater ownership of the learning and promote more holistic and higher order thinking); and
5. The class would use multiple assessment methods.

### The Class

Every few weeks, I introduce a new culture or historical period. This unit of study is the anchor to the curriculum. I begin with a discussion of the area's history, geographical traits, religion, and other cultural facts. We read poetry, some excerpts from literature, and whenever possible, listen to the music. I also showcase 20th-century and current artists from the geographical area. As I do this, students see the impact that life's forces have on the arts and that art is a reflection of the culture.

However, this is primarily a studio class that emphasizes a student-driven curriculum. For each unit, I provide several related art projects that introduce the

students to new techniques and artistic philosophies. Students may choose one of these projects or use the projects as a springboard for their individual art production.

From day one, students must record their goals, thoughts, and reflections. Students don't just sit in class waiting for me to tell them what to do. They must take the initiative to choose a project or direction of work and write down how they will accomplish that. When they do this, they become active learners. I provide an ample amount of information (historical, cultural, artistic), lots of art materials, and the expertise and guidance to help students get "there." However, the student determines where "there" is. Then, as the student and I share ideas, we plot out an art plan. Thus, students are working at their own pace and interest level, determining the direction of their work. One student wrote, "We got to pick our own projects and set our own goals and objectives. We were in control of what we wanted to get from this class. It was a totally new idea from what any other classes in high school are like." Another summed up his experience this way:

Ever since I was a little kid I have enjoyed art. But when I was little I was always able to do the types of art that I enjoyed doing. So when I got to school and had to follow a set curriculum I began to lose some of my flare and interest in art. Especially when the project that I was supposed to do was something that I particularly did not enjoy doing. That is why I enjoy the new Art and Ideas class. Because I get to choose the projects I want to do. And when I do something that I enjoy, I put more into it and I appreciate it more when I get done.



Student on the wheel.

To ensure a harmonious classroom atmosphere, I function as an orchestra conductor. I see that everything runs smoothly and that each student is on task. I appoint a knowledgeable student to be "first chair." I have a first-chair printmaker, first-chair ceramist, first-chair watercolorist, and so forth. Thus, our classroom ceramics expert helps a novice on the wheel. Both students, the novice and the expert, seem to thrive with this set-up. As one first-chair student wrote, "The thing I liked best about Architectural Origami was that I was the best at it. I felt like a famous artist when people would come back and ask me for help. What made me feel even more important was that I was like a teacher."

Again, because this is a student-driven curriculum, each student decides which activities work best for him/her. This classroom set-up is ideal for students completing portfolios for college or art scholarships; therefore the class attracts the top art students in the high school. Artistically gifted students tend to perfect their techniques of drawing and painting.

Nontraditional students may prefer to link art to a favorite subject; I encourage them to discuss art projects with other teachers. Most teachers have enrichment activities from conferences and professional magazines that relate to art. These teachers are delighted to share this information and to see their subject areas represented through art. As a result of this type of dialogue, the math hallway was filled with math-inspired art created by Art and Idea students. This display was initiated by math teachers and students (not the art department).

To other students, however, art is a personal experience, a vehicle for self-reflection. After our study of Mexican art, Ian, who had never taken a painting course,

became intrigued with Mexican artists. He researched the work of Orozco, Siqueiros, and Rivera and began recreating and reinterpreting their work. In doing this, he discovered his talent for painting and developed a greater appreciation of his Mexican heritage. As a result of this experience, Ian changed his major in college from business to art.

### Assessment and Outcomes

If learning is to be multi-faceted and to integrate curricular areas (and not be just an isolated subject in an isolated classroom), then our assessments also need to be more than just one isolated grade. In Art and Ideas I use eight evaluation methods:

- Portfolios
- Reports/Research
- Anecdotal Records (sketchbooks and journals)
- Presentations
- Art Projects
- Student Self-Evaluations
- Final Projects
- Assessment of time on task in art class.

When teachers grade more than just the final product, the student is now open to more experimenting and taking risks. Also, as the student develops a portfolio and uses it as a tool for goal setting, he or she has more ownership of the curriculum. This helps set in motion the goal setting that is needed to be a lifelong learner, an ultimate goal of education.

The growth and popularity of the art program at New Palestine High School is evident in several areas.

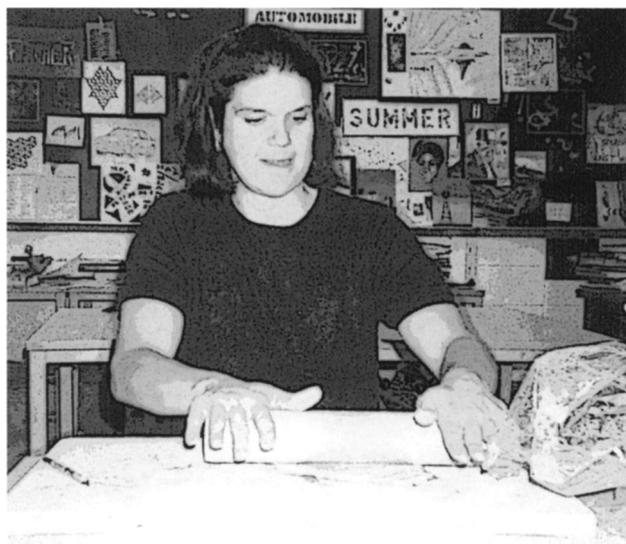
1. We have experienced growth as a department:

1997-98, Art and Ideas is first offered. 80 students enroll, therefore three classes of Art and Ideas are added to the curriculum. Additional staff is hired to accommodate this increase.

1998-99, 100 students enroll in Art and Ideas, making four classes.

1999-2000, 125 students enroll in Art and Ideas, making five classes.

2. We have offered students the opportunity for breadth and depth of projects: We now are able to offer more media to students as well as enabling them to work in depth in a specific area. Thus, one student may work with batik for an entire semester, while another chooses pastel or collage.



Math teacher in art room. Other teachers now visit the art room and "try their hand" at art. Their students have talked about art, and now they visit to see for themselves.

3. This class becomes a springboard to other existing classes: Many students have discovered a talent or affinity for painting, ceramics, graphic design, or other areas, and have elected these classes as a result of taking Art and Ideas. For example, enrollment in our Graphic Design class has doubled in the past 2 years.
4. Students become more responsible for their learning. 96% to 97% respond well to this class structure (a higher success rate than in our school's traditional classes). However, the same 3 to 4 out of every 100 remain unmotivated.

I believe this increase is due to several factors. Students with limited artistic experience or confidence now have an art class in which they are not compared to the artistically gifted students. Our student population (about 840) limits the variety of art classes we can offer. In Art and Ideas, a few students may explore printmaking, while others opt for watercolor, fabric art, collage, and so forth. We could never offer this many class selections in a traditional setting. Also, students are free to work on any area of need in this class. Students can easily fit Art and Ideas into their schedules, as it is offered several times a day (unlike a traditional studio class, which may be offered only once).

However, the final observations need to be made by the students. At the high school level, they are the best judges of how a class has impacted them. Here are a few more excerpts from their self-assessments:

- "I never used to think of myself as an artistic person, but I now realize that we all have something artistic and creative inside of us, but it is up to us to discover what it is."
- "I believe my paintings and drawings express a lot about the person that I am and the person that I one day hope to be. Many people can tell a lot about a person in their poems and writings in literature. I guess people can tell a lot about me through my art."
- "If more young people can be reached through this class, then we will all have a better appreciation for the arts. Art is not just a class you take in school, it is a part of your everyday life."
- "I've grown to love art more and more. It gives me a chance to share my thoughts and feelings with those around me. Now, art will always be a part of my life."

Students who did not consider themselves "good at art" wrote most of the assessments included here. After taking Art and Ideas, however, they developed a greater appreciation of the arts. If we want to promote this appreciation and enhance creative problem solving in the classroom, then we must create an environment for that to take place. Art and Ideas has become that environment for our school.

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"I love this class..."