

## A CLOSER LOOK:

# Student Engagement in Artmaking

BY REBECCA SOKOL LEVINE

It was a Tuesday morning when I entered the art room storage closet to gather the old hardback books for my students. My eighth-grade students seemed to have a sense of urgency to start their work after I explained that they would design a book cover representing who they were “on the outside.” Several students rushed back with me, trying to get old hardback books from the closet, even though I only asked two students for help. When I looked up from the books, the other students were so excited to choose books that they were all standing inside the closet. I was in the initial stages of a descriptive research study about student engagement in artmaking and that is why I was so tuned into their excitement.

As a middle school art teacher, I build students’ artistic skills through studio lessons that require a great deal of patience and skill. A focus on originality ensures that no two artworks look exactly alike. Frequently, I also ask students to draw from observation to learn how to draw subjects accurately. This approach, combined with the expectations of middle school-aged children about their own artistic skills, sometimes creates frustration because they perceived their own abilities as “limited.” Students tend to want to draw without making mistakes like disproportionate figures and eraser marks left behind after trying to draw a line several times, and may neglect to notice their positive achievements. As a result, I seek to better understand and develop alternate instructional approaches to studio art problems that are more engaging to students. I would like to see students more involved in their artwork and less worried about perfection. This concern for more genuine engagement was the impetus for my study.

The study takes place at a suburban middle school on the East coast. There are about 480 sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade students from different cultural backgrounds who attend this school. Approximately 45% of the student population are African American,

43% Caucasian, 7% Hispanic, and 5% Asian. They come from lower- to middle-class families. The main research question that guides my study is: *How can instructional use of art problems elicit middle school students’ engagement in artmaking?* The following sub-questions focus the study:

- *In what ways does the structure of an art problem affect student engagement in artmaking?*
- *In what ways does the instructional presentation of an art problem affect student engagement in artmaking?*

For the purpose of this study, *art problem* is defined as an open-ended question or statement focused on elements of an artmaking process that challenges students to make choices and generate original ideas to craft a product that has personal meaning (Carroll, 2004; Kay, 1998). *Engagement* is defined as evidence of three characteristics: students’ attraction to their own artwork, persistence in work “despite challenges and obstacles,” and “visible delight in accomplishing” artwork (Schlecty, in Strong, Silver, & Robinson, 1995, para. 4).

I investigated a class of 16 eighth graders, between the ages of 13 and 14. This class met every other day for 9 weeks for 96 minutes. The unit of study occupied 10 class periods. Questionnaires served as my primary source of data. Students responded to a total of four questionnaires—one after each art problem. The final questionnaire, for example, asked students to rank their four artworks in the order in which they found the most interesting and explain why. Three students were selected as participants for interviews in addition to the activities and questionnaires. I conducted two semi-structured interviews (approximately 3 minutes in length), one after the first class and one following the second to last class of the unit with each of the three participants. I observed and listened for student engagement and recorded these actions and comments in my field notes. I selected participants from whom I

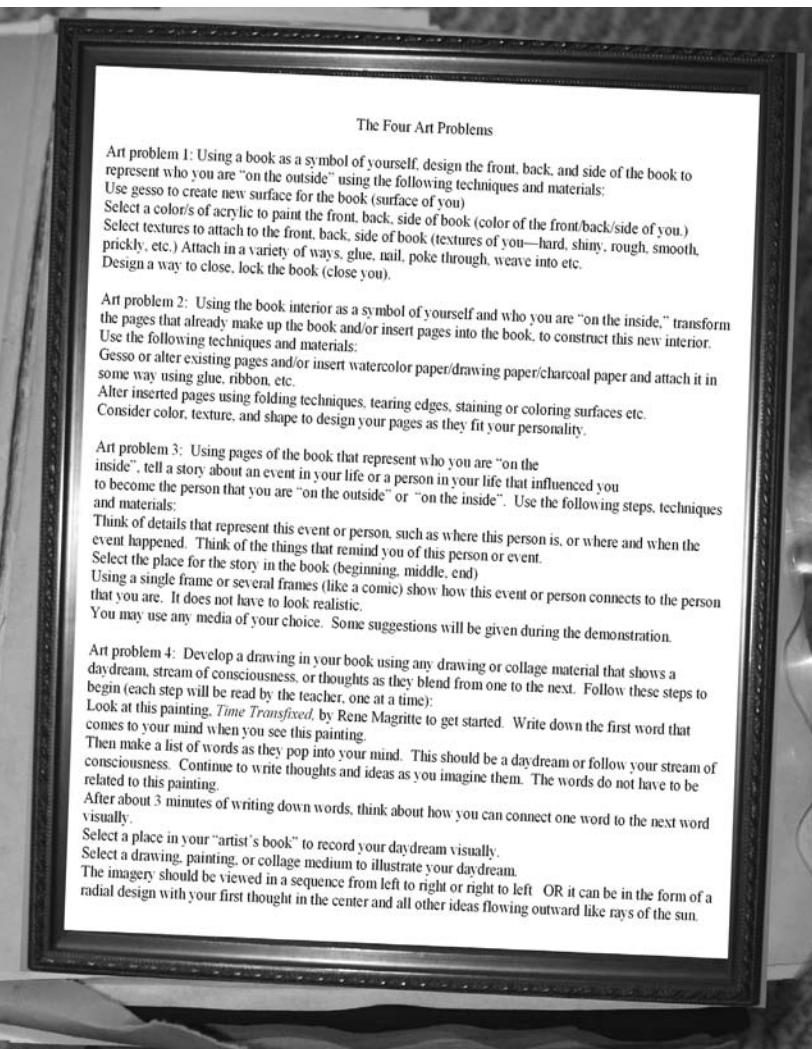


Figure 1. The Four Art Problems.

could learn the most. I chose to interview students with whom I had good rapport and who were articulate and could reflect on the choices they made for their artwork. These students reliably completed the questionnaires, were capable of self-reflection through verbal discussion and written description, were cooperative, and followed directions.

For the purpose of my research, I developed a book-making unit. *The Artist's Book*, comprised four art problems (Figure 1), challenging students to transform an old hardback book into a metaphor of self. Exploring identity, the cover design represented who the students are "on the outside," and the interior pages represented who they are "on the inside." Within the book, students also created a narrative artwork about a person or event that influenced them in some way. The final art problem was a stream-of-consciousness drawing where students illustrated a progression of their thoughts. Amy Ruopp, an art educator in Michigan, shared the idea for the stream of consciousness drawing.

## Art Problems and Student Engagement

My study focused on how to engage students. I consulted literature on student engagement in learning and found an emphasis on posing questions that reached all learners through broad themes. Therefore, *The Artist's Book* lessons presented opportunities for students to make choices as well as provided constraints to guide innovative problem-solving. Recent scholarship in art education (Carroll, 2004; Kay, 1998; Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005) indicates that students are most engaged when art problems invite personal expression, choice of materials, brainstorming, and open-ended solutions.

Within the field of art education, my understanding of artmaking processes of middle school students was informed by scholarship on art and human development. Kerlavage (1998) describes the emotional/moral development and the social development of middle school aged children as trying to "reconcile the differences in their roles as children and their roles as adults" (p. 56). In consideration of the developmental level of middle school students, the work of Kerlavage (1998) and Burton (2000) was helpful in deciding what instructional strategies work well with this age group. For example, a group activity worked well for teaching students how to connect different ideas. Each student had to draw a word picked from a hat, and then pass his or her drawing clockwise until each group member added a drawing of his or her own word to the paper. Students enjoyed talking with their group members as they collectively designed this drawing. This activity was a preparation for a stream-of-consciousness drawing.

Kay (1998) suggests that art problems should be "flexible," "fluent," "elaborate," and "original" (p. 281). James (2000) explains how she redesigned assignments to meet her students' needs for success. In order to improve student engagement with assignments, she used student journal reflections as input for their thoughts during completion of assignments. Andrews (2001), Parker (2005), Sandell (2006), and Walker (2004) also informed this study with their recommendations for structuring the art process considering topics that might intrigue students. Walker (2004) "identified the use of big ideas as a major conceptual factor that shapes the artist's practice" (p. 7). She says that "Big ideas can be characterized by themes, issues, or perhaps questions that captivate the artist for extended time periods, often for years" (Walker, 2004, p. 7). *The Artist's Book* art problems I developed and utilized heavily focused on the question of self-perception and how others perceive and influence us.

## Portraits of Engagement

Each of the three participants selected for interviews had unique approaches to artmaking, and therefore provided different insight to their art processes. Two of these participants are illustrated in greater detail. (Their names are pseudonyms.) Focusing on understanding student engagement, I inquired about students' brainstorming processes, problem-solving approaches, and experiences with art materials. Additionally, I was also interested in their personal feelings toward their work.

**Kristin.** A bubbly and resourceful 13-year-old girl, Kristin is good-natured and works well with others. She takes chances when making art and works outside of her comfort zone. She is also an introspective and independent thinker.

Kristin's book cover was brightly colored, like her outgoing personality. Kristin wrote in a questionnaire in reference to designing her book cover: "I liked expressing who I am through many different colors and media ... **I like that we get to express our true selves through art, and through this process, I've begun to learn more about myself.**" These comments emphasize the importance of creating opportunities for personalization in art activities that can result in greater student engagement. The use of personal themes sustains most students in artmaking (Carroll, 2004; Kay, 1998; Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005).

About her narrative artwork of an influential event or person, Kristin wrote that she "liked looking back at (her) life and reflecting on what has happened." She also explained how the story she selected to make an artwork about had affected her outlook toward other events in her life. The story about the death of her neighbor put her daily challenges into perspective and she remembers that, "nothing is as bad as that day." In a later discussion, Kristin said that, "looking back at old memories" was "really emotional" and she was able to express this "through artwork." Kristin enjoyed the daydream/stream of consciousness drawing because it was "something (she'd) never done before," and she read her words from that activity with excitement, and said she had "fun" linking them together in her drawing. These comments, among others, represent the opinion of Kristin's classmates whose remarks emphasized the need for personal expression.

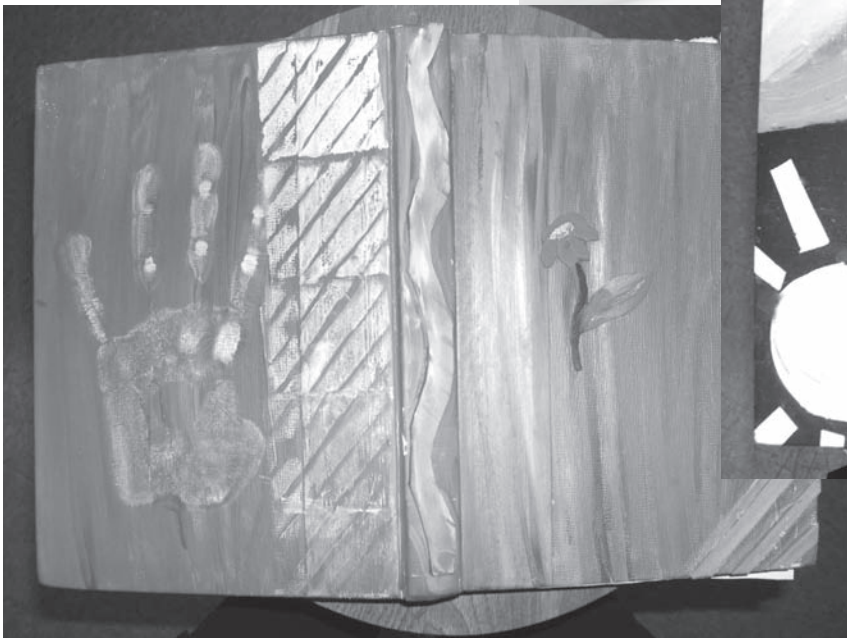


Figure 2. Kristin's Book Cover.

**Geoff.** A very intelligent, independent thinker, Geoff thrives on challenges and works well with others. He has a good sense of humor and is able to take artwork mistakes and turn them into something purposeful. He is inventive and his artwork shows flexibility and originality. Bright-eyed and sharp, Geoff exudes confidence in his mannerisms, but expresses hesitancy and uncertainty in conversations about his artwork.

Geoff wrote that his book cover, "looks kind of depressing, but I can look like that to some people. [However,] it doesn't take long to realize how happy a person I am." I asked Geoff how the book cover reflected his personality on the outside. He replied, "Well, when people see me on the outside, immediately they think that 'Oh he's always wearing this, black hoodie, so he must be this sad, depressed person,' and it doesn't really take long before people realize that, that's not me at all..."

Geoff wrote that he most enjoyed working on the narrative artwork because "it took the most planning." During his work process, he would often describe choices of materials, colors, and techniques to me. Art materials, especially paint, motivated Geoff. He enjoyed the freedom of mark making with paint. Geoff was partly a planner, and partly an improvisational artist. He planned his artworks' concepts before painting and allowed his materials to guide him in illustrating his ideas. Geoff explained his plan for the narrative artwork. "...It's going to be mostly color, and color that shows feeling...[in] the page that represents happiness, the people are gonna be more simple lines and circles with maybe streaks for hair, but it's gonna be pretty abstract." He connected colors and the feelings he wanted to portray to

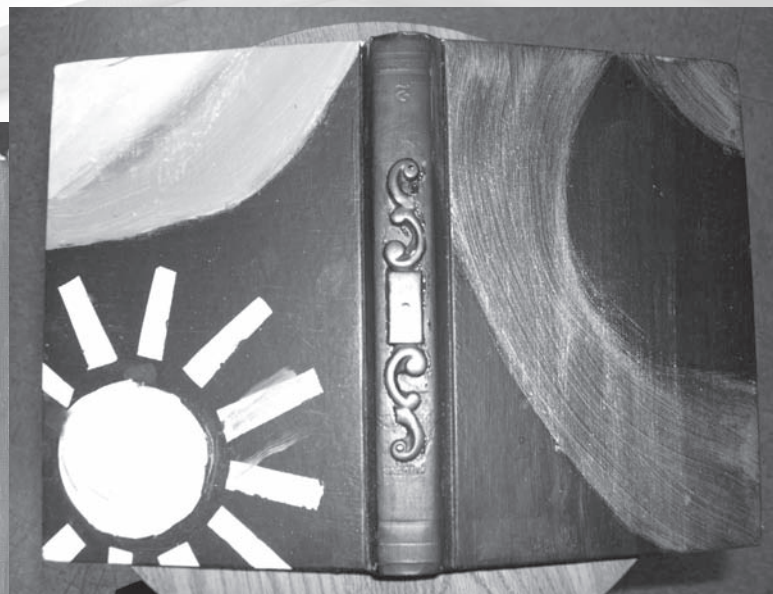


Figure 3. Geoff's Book Cover.

illustrate his story, and at the same time, pay tribute to his favorite comedian, Mitch Hedberg. Part of Geoff's narrative image had a window cutout to reveal a yellow, orange, and red painted page with a silhouetted figure representing the comedian's humor. Geoff explained, "...he inspired me, and he kinda influenced me to be more funny and comic with my attitude...it was nice to be able to honor him."

### **Student Engagement**

A few days after we had invested a few hours of time in our book-making assignment, the evidence of student engagement I was observing pleased me. At each class, students were anxious to get started on their books and some wanted to stay beyond the class period. "I wish this class was longer," I said to my students who were diligently working on their artist's books. "Me too," chimed in a few. "This is the best class!" exclaimed another. It was affirming to hear the enthusiasm in their voices. The class period, already 96 minutes long, was such fleeting, precious time that students resisted cleaning up when the period was over. Rather than students putting materials away before the end of the work period, students requested to stay beyond the class period. Why were students so engaged with this particular assignment? I found that students were truly engaged in their work because it had meaning to them. Anderson (2004) suggests that artmaking strategies should "feed into real life" (p. 35). As an art teacher, it can be a challenge to reach so many different learners with various interests. My goal as an art educator is for all of my students to become engaged in their work. I realized that my students shared an interest in personal expression and selection of materials.

*I could see the art problems I developed stimulated curiosity as my students explored a variety of materials to discover how to relay their own personal message.*

### **The Four Art Problems**

Kristin and Geoff are representative of a larger group of students who expressed similar feelings of enthusiasm regarding their engagement with the activities of the class. Students felt most interested in personally relevant themes. Collectively, important observations emerged from all four art problems.

- Art problems that invite personal experiences and facilitate personal expression engage students.
- Art problems that invite choice of new or unique materials allow students to actively pursue experiences with various media.
- Finally, art problems that allow for both open-ended solutions and aesthetic outcomes engage students in brainstorming original ideas.

Although each of the four art problems was considered "very interesting" by at least one student in the final questionnaire, some art problems were favored over others. In general, students were most interested in creating the book cover. The stream-of-consciousness and the narrative drawings were appealing to most of the students, while they were the least interested in the inside-page alterations because they were unable to derive personal meaning from this problem. Students were most engaged in the cover design and visual narrative because of the personal meaning possibilities of these assignments.

These findings emphasize the importance of personal connection to artmaking. One student asked if she could make a dedication page in her book, thinking about someone special to her. This student also explained the complexity of her book design, "When I was trying to figure a way to close my book, I thought I should tie it in a series of knots, so that way, it could show that I am shy to open to other people..." This comment harks back to Anderson and Milbrandt's (2005) claim that, "making art should begin with and come back to students' own identities and what they do in the world" (p. 144). In Strong, Silver, and Robinson's (1995) research on students' motivation, participants described "engaging work [as] work that stimulated their curiosity, permitted them to express their creativity, and fostered positive relationships with others" (para. 3). I could see the art problems I developed stimulated curiosity as my students explored a variety of materials to discover how to relay their own personal message. In summary, studies show that students are engaged in work that has personal meaning and/or also offer an opportunity for exploration. As inferred from my study's findings, combining both concepts in artmaking can have a strong impact on student engagement.

### **The Instructional Presentation of Art Problems**

I was also interested in understanding how the way in which information is presented can also affect student engagement. Art problems that are presented through teacher demonstrations and verbal explanations engage students in relating the ideas to their own artmaking. When I explained how I would portray my ideas by using materials a certain way, it allowed students to see how to begin that thought process. Students said in a class discussion at the beginning of the unit that engagement involved "paying attention," "starting something immediately," and "doing your work." I received undivided attention during demonstrations of media techniques, and also when I shared my personal experiences with the students in order to explain how I approached the different art problems in my own artist's book. The students stood still and quietly listened to me describe my personal qualities and how I incorporated these in my book design. For example, on my book cover I included stamped patterns representative of my need for organization and mirrored tiles demonstrating my "reflective" personality. After a demonstration of media techniques, Kristin said, "I think they were really helpful...I never knew how you could make stamps like that, and using the tape and stuff, that was really cool." Every student in the class attempted this stamping form of printmaking.

In response to a question following a discussion about making the book, Geoff said, "Well, I was even more excited because it seemed like it was going to be really fun, just to do the different things." About his plans for artmaking he said, "I already have a basic idea of what I want to do, 'cause I was thinking about it as you were giving the demonstration." In the first and second questionnaires, all students found the teacher demonstrations beneficial in making their artwork, and some students gave examples. A student wrote, "Seeing how to tear the edges of the paper to make the cool edge helped." One student observed a printmaking technique I suggested in my demonstration and used it to create a pattern over her entire book cover. Students also discovered their own techniques by experimenting with materials.

To help grasp the concept of connecting unrelated objects together, I presented students with a group activity. Rather than explaining the art problem, we went right into the group activity and then discussed the stream-of-consciousness art problem afterwards. Students said in the beginning of the unit that one definition of engagement is, "to interact with each other," and "talking with group members about the activity" shows engagement. I observed students laughing and discussing their group drawings. I heard a student referring to a group activity drawing, saying, "Oh, that one's awesome!" Students appeared to be engaged because everyone was participating in the activity. In response to this group activity, Geoff said that "It was pretty fun just to improvise, with it, cause a lot of people had some r-e-a-l-l-y different things, like, we had to figure out how to mix a cookie with a dirt bike, which was kinda difficult... You gotta kinda think outside the box to figure out how something could possibly connect." The four group members were laughing as they found ways to connect unrelated words through drawing.

Art problems that present an opportunity for brainstorming can engage students in planning and visualizing ideas for artmaking. In response to a brainstorming worksheet one student said, "It helps me a lot by giving me ideas, and I only can think about things visually, so when I get an idea I can imagine what it will look like." Another student wrote, "It helped me organize my artwork and it helped me plan." Furthermore, another student replied that, "What I wrote made me think about what colors and what kinds of things I would put on the outside and on the inside." The instructional presentation of art problems can facilitate student learning and engagement because students who are visual learners benefit from seeing how to use new art processes and they can begin to brainstorm ways to personalize these ideas into their own work.

## Conclusion

My experience with this study opened my eyes to the possibilities of implementing open-ended art problems. Regardless of student age, personal theme-based art problems are valuable and applicable in classroom instruction. Part of the challenge is integrating skill building into open-ended problems so that students will also improve their technical skills and hand-eye coordination along with expressing personally meaningful work. In order to achieve this goal, it is important to focus on the skills that teachers want students to acquire, without losing sight of students' voices that will motivate them to maintain quality work. In practical terms, think about student interest first and combine it with the skills you are teaching. The key to student engagement is capturing students' attention with something that they want to know.

Rebecca Sokol Levine is an Artist Educator in Elkridge, Maryland.  
E-mail: reccasokol@yahoo.com

## REFERENCES

- Anderson, T. (2004). Why and how we make art, with implications for art education. *Arts Education Policy Review*, 105(5), 31-38.
- Anderson, T., & Milbrandt, M. K. (2005). *Art for life: Authentic instruction in art*. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Andrews, Barbara, H. (2001). Art and ideas: Reaching nontraditional art students. *Art Education*, 54(5), 33-36.
- Burton, J. (2000). The configuration of meaning: Learner-centered art education revisited. *Studies in Art Education*, 41(4), 330-345.
- Carroll, K. (2004). *What is an elegant problem?* Unpublished manuscript, Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore.
- Carroll, K. (2006). Development and learning in art: Moving in the direction of a holistic paradigm for art education. *Visual Arts Research*, 32(1), 16-28.
- James, P. (2000). Working toward meaning: The evolution of an assignment. *Studies in Art Education*, 41(2), 146-163.
- Kay, S. (1998). Shaping elegant problems for visual thinking. In J. Simpson, J. Delaney, K. Carroll, C. Hamilton, S. Kay, M. Kerlavage, & J. Olsen (Eds.), *Creating meaning through art: Teacher as choice maker* (pp. 259-286). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill/Prentice Hall.
- Kerlavage, M. (1998). Understanding the learner. In J. Simpson, J. Delaney, K. Carroll, C. Hamilton, S. Kay, M. Kerlavage, & J. Olsen (Eds.), *Creating meaning through art: Teacher as choicemaker* (pp. 23-72). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill/Prentice Hall.
- Parker, J. (2005). A consideration of the relationship between creativity and approaches to learning in art and design. *International Journal of Art & Design Education*, 24(2).
- Sandell, R. (2006). Form + theme + context: balancing considerations for meaningful art learning. *Art Education*, 59(1), 33-37.
- Strong, R., Silver, H., & Robinson, A. (September 1995). What do students want (and what really motivates them)? *Educational Leadership*. Retrieved February 14, 2007 from the MiddleWeb database.
- Walker, S. (2004). Big ideas: Understanding the artmaking process: Reflective practice. *Art Education*, 57(3), 6-12.