Awakening Student Ownership: Transitioning to a Student-Centered Environment

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During my first year as a middle school art teacher, I was handed a list of projects that I was required to teach. Disappointed with my predecessor’s interpretation of the mask unit, I preserved the techniques used but modified the Halloween-inspired results. I thought grounding the unit in a culture would provide meaning and expose my students to others. However, I was wrong in my execution. My naïve perspective caused a shortcoming in my lesson where I failed to provide a deep contextual understanding of the West African culture.

I began my mask-making unit with a short video of the Dogon tribe from Mali known for their ceremonial mask creations. I talked about the history of West African masks: why they were made, what they were made out of, and how they were made. A PowerPoint presentation followed, and I discussed the colors, patterns, and shapes that unified the masks. I then moved to the demonstration table, where I laid out sketch worksheets for brainstorming and planning. Surrounded by students, I sketched one mask design, sharing my thinking behind each step. Once finished, I explained how each feature resembled the characteristics found in a West African mask. After further emphasizing the importance of copying these elements, I dismissed my students to sketch their designs.

Exhaling deeply, I paused to congratulate myself on successfully planning and executing my first 8th-grade lesson. Everything went according to my plan until students began questioning the assignment.

“So, can my eyes be stars?” a student asked.

“No, but I want mine to be different.”

“Was that one of the shapes you saw in the presentation today?”

I responded.

“No, but I want mine to be different.”

“Well, yours can be different, but it has to reflect the characteristics found in a West African mask, and stars weren’t one of them.” (Note: The personal communications in this article were face-to-face interviews with students that took place on November 20, November 21, and December 3 of 2013.)

With confidence in my discipline-based teaching philosophy, I ignored student complaints and continued to encourage my students to make masks that looked exactly like the ones shown in my PowerPoint presentation. I attributed the complaints to me being a new teacher, and figured it would take some time for my students to adjust, but I was wrong. As the unit progressed, my students continually questioned why they could not use what they wanted. I answered with the same response every time: “Your mask can be different. You get to choose the colors, patterns, and shapes you want; they just have to resemble those found in a West African mask.”

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My teaching method was flawed; it was discipline-based and presented through a culturally insensitive lens. According to Douglas and Jaquith (2009), discipline-based art education (DBAE) centers on teacher perfected skills and techniques needed to produce a final product. It is based on goals that disregard students’ daily lives and interests (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005). Instead, students are creating artwork to fulfill the requirements of an assignment made by their teacher (Gnezda, 2009). Here, teachers dispense information and students follow. I not only directed the subject matter, but I told my students what materials to use and how to use them, stripping their potential for student individuality and voice. The result: a classroom of apathetic learners with meaningless projects. According to Hathaway (2013), the teacher is the artist when she plans, organizes, and solves the steps of the creative process beforehand. My students were not the artists; I was. They were unwilling to participate, think creatively, or take ownership of their work since it was already done for them.

Besides monopolizing my students’ artmaking, I was asking them to connect with the cultural values and stories of others without fully understanding the cultural nuances and signifiers of the Dogon tribe. They could only appropriate the appearances of the masks, not their meaning. Prompted by my graduate coursework, I was inspired to question my approach. I wondered what my students’ responses would be to a teaching method that centered on them rather than focusing on another culture taught through a DBAE lens. How would their artmaking differ? This article focuses on the changes I made to shift my classroom from discipline-based and presented through a culturally insensitive lens.

Art is no longer about practicing skills and techniques, but making meaning (Pennisi, 2013). Centering art instruction on big ideas fosters an authentic environment where students are given the opportunity to personally connect with their artwork and the world around them (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005; Gnezda, 2009; Kay, 2013; Walker, 2001). It is here that art becomes more than just a perfectly crafted project and takes on the new role of developing students’ individual voices. To practice this pedagogy, I abandoned my traditional teaching role to become a guide.

Becoming a Guide
Guiding is helping students navigate through the artistic process without telling them what to do or how to do it. Rather than overwhelming them with teacher driven skills and ideas, students are encouraged to become independent learners. Here, teachers pass control to their students and adopt the role of a guide (Douglas & Jaquith, 2009; Gnezda, 2009). As guides, teachers become fellow inquirers as they step aside and let the students direct their own artmaking (Douglas & Jaquith, 2009; Stewart & Walker, 2005). Educational practice commonly refers to this as a transition from “sage on stage” to “guide on the side” (Stewart & Walker, 2005, p. 15). Exchanging these roles shifts the classroom environment from teacher-centered to student-centered. Brown (2008) defines student-centered instruction as a “form of active learning… where the planning, teaching, and assessment revolve around the needs and abilities of the students” (p. 30). Students are placed at the center of their own learning as the teacher provides opportunities for students to “generate their own questions, engage in relevant investigations, and reflect upon their learning progress” (Stewart & Walker, 2005, p. 15). Accepting the role of a guide, I fostered a student-centered environment where I engaged my students in open-ended assignments that offered more choices and encouraged exploration.

Offering More Choices
I began the new unit with a mask prompt that asked students to brainstorm things associated with the word mask. After collaboratively mapping and discussing their answers, I introduced the history of masks through a PowerPoint presentation that briefly highlighted various cultural masks and their purposes. I also showed 3-D sculptures, installations, and masks from the following contemporary artists: Nick Cave, Brian Jungen, Vik Muniz, Robert Bradford, and Willie Cole. I told the students that they would not be reproducing these works but instead creating their own unique mask sculptures that represented their identity. Jaws dropped and eyes blinked. The students were clearly puzzled. One student raised his hand.

“Why can’t I just copy my favorite mask?”

“You can be inspired by it, but you can’t copy it. That mask has already been created. If you copied it, you would be stealing that artist’s idea. Just think about what parts of your identity you want to represent.”

This small conversation turned into a group discussion as students posed ideas and possible solutions to the assignment. We talked about repurposing other artists’ ideas into our own and...
how they could help us work toward something different, even unexpected. I could sense the excitement. Wide grins began to span students’ faces as they became jittery sitting in their stools. Wrapping up our discussion, I reminded them that their goal in this project was to express their own voices. I wanted them to come up with their own ideas and choose their own ways of making their mask sculptures. Allowing students to make their own choices instead of handing them all the information involves the students in their own learning (Andrews, 2010).

The assignment was open ended. Each student received one piece of recycled cardboard, but no mask templates were provided. I initially offered three ways to construct the armature for the mask but welcomed additional ideas. The students could plaster, papier-mâché, or build their armature out of found objects. There were no restrictions on size or shape. The students had free reign to use any material and tool to construct their masks. In addition to the basic artmaking materials, I provided overflowing baskets of found objects, ribbon, fabric, felt, rocks, seashells, patterned paper, pipe cleaners, tissue paper, and colored cellophane, as well as small adornments such as sequins, googly eyes, pom poms, beads, sea glass, buttons, and old discarded jewelry. Offering unlimited access to these materials and an assortment of tools provided endless opportunities for exploration.

Encouraging Exploration

“I would rather see you try something new and mess up than not try at all.” This became my new motto. Since students were accustomed to my teacher-directed approach, they were afraid to take risks and explore. Hetland, Winner, Veenema, and Sheridan (2013) tell us that we need to “urge students to play around, to take risks, to discover what can happen, and to try out alternatives” (p. 97). To encourage exploration, I related the artistic process to an
experiment. I would tell them, “Sometimes you don’t know what you’re doing, so it’s okay to mess up. Experiments fail just like art projects fail. Some of the best artists’ ideas come from accidents. How are we to know it will work if we never try it in the first place?” I wanted them to understand that it was okay to make mistakes, and through these mistakes, they would express their voices. According to Szekely (2011), when students are allowed to explore independently, they see things in new ways and create opportunities for finding their individual voices.

To demonstrate this process, I first showed my students a short video of the artist Nick Cave. Cave creates his three-dimensional sculptures, *Soundsuits*, from everyday household objects. In the video clip, Cave talks about his identity and demonstrates his experimental process of artmaking. Cave tells us, “You can make something out of nothing.” Using Cave’s artmaking process as a segue into exploration, I modeled trial and error. I placed a plethora of found objects onto the demonstration table and then began arranging them on top of a mask armature. I was not creating my piece but playing with the materials. When modeling how to explore, I told the students that they would have to work outside of their comfort zones and try something new.

After introducing, explaining, and demonstrating the identity masks, I was nervous to let the students work independently. Previously they had been constrained, following exact guidelines to complete their teacher-directed assignments. How would they respond to my new student-centered pedagogy?

**Responding to a Student-Centered Environment**

*Meaning-Making*

"Do you think I can splatter paint on my mask?" one student asked.

“As long as you feel that it represents your identity.”

With a huge grin on her face, she nodded. “It shows that I’m not a quiet person. I’m very loud and I normally get people’s attention.”

Excitedly, she poured bright neon acrylic paint, capped the plastic containers, and rushed back to her seat. This was just one example of the excitement that emanated from my art room. Changing my mask-making unit to focus on personal identity finally engaged my students. The students were making meaning by connecting to their lives and sharing their personal experiences through artmaking. For example, near the mouth of her mask, one student attached a clump of white stuffing shaped like a thought bubble, on top of which she glued three passages from

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*Student splatter paints an old pair of ski goggles for her mask sculpture.*

*Student’s mask composed of splatter paint, ski goggles, and passages from John Green’s book.*
communication inviting the viewer to experience the student’s life story. Anderson and Milbrandt (2005) tell us that meaningful art communicates life’s experiences and shares the “stories of individual human beings and the groups we live in” (p. xxiii).

**Autonomy**

Freedom was a new concept for my students. Never before were they allowed to choose their materials. Who would have thought that free reign of materials would produce so much excitement? I brought in my found-object box and placed it on the center table. As soon as I placed the box down, half of the class swarmed over to the table. Eager hands grabbed materials to sort through. Each student wanted to find the perfect object for his or her mask sculpture. Offering my students unlimited materials gave them a voice. They had become the artists. Not only did they choose their ideas, but they selected the materials for creation. Comparing this new teaching style to the old, one student said:

> We never had an art project before that was our identity and something that we could just free fall with. It was always kind of a guideline and saying okay you have to paint this like this, but you get to choose your colors. But you don’t really get to choose your colors because you have to use these certain types of colors.

Inspired by freedom, one student constructed his identity mask from old athletic balls. He cut a soccer ball and basketball into quarters. Gluing one piece of the soccer ball to the basketball, he created the shape for his mask. To create the face, he used parts from a tennis ball, baseball, and football. Another student cut off the leather from her old tap dancing shoes and embedded the heel.

John Green’s book *The Fault in Our Stars*. Each passage related to a different experience in her life. In one passage, she connected to the character’s pain. She told me about her childhood, recalling the struggles she faced when diagnosed with dyslexia in the 3rd grade. She said, “When you’re being told that you’re worthless and stuff, it’s not like you’re not gonna feel bad. You’re going to feel bad, and I feel like everyone has pain in their life no matter what.” Another student used his mask to communicate the struggles he was currently facing in school. Carefully perched on the tip of his mask’s elongated nose was a wooden hummingbird, its wings spread wide open. At first, he explained that he liked nature and helping his mom in her garden shop, but after a short pause, he told me what else the bird symbolized:

> It also shows how I wish I could just try to fly away from all my mistakes because it kind of like embarrasses me in a way. Well like whenever I make a mistake on something people expect me to be perfect on everything.

I quickly realized that my students’ artwork had meaning and substance. They were not carelessly putting objects together just to finish the project, but truly articulating themselves. Their masks shared personal narratives, expressed emotions, and revealed strengths and weaknesses. They became active forms of...
into her mask armature. She glued the leftover leather on top of the mask's surface. By playing with these materials, the students stimulated new ideas. For instance, one student thought at first that he was going to cover his mask with seashells. After rummaging through a box of materials, he came across broken plastic mirrors. Inspired by the reflective quality, he tried them on the surface of his mask. He said that he would have never thought of using the mirrors on his own. When students are encouraged to explore, they dig deeper and find new ways to convey their personal voices. Having choices also provided a sense of comfort and relieved pressure.

If students felt that they were not very good at painting, they picked a different material to convey their information. Because they had choices, they remained engaged in their artmaking. I found this especially important for the students who did not identify themselves as artistic. One of these students said, “If I don’t really have a lot of choices, I just end up doing worse than everyone else.” The students were finally able to feel confident about their artmaking because they were not confined to a specific medium. By stepping aside, I opened the door to possibilities and transitioned ownership to the students. Another student described her newfound independence: “You weren’t told what to do... like it’s nice to be free with the work and not have a whole bunch of guidelines that you have to follow... you can do what you want with it.” Autonomy empowered students to take control and responsibility of their education.

**Confronting the Challenges**

I experienced some barriers as I was making the transition to a student-centered classroom. During the opening days of the identity unit, some students were hesitant to begin the new assignment. This did not surprise me, as I had always handed the knowledge directly to the students. The shift to a student-centered environment allowed me to reverse this role: the students now had to construct their own knowledge as they brainstormed, planned, and created their own mask sculptures. Some students struggled with this transition and treaded cautiously through the assignment. They would constantly ask for my reassurance. “Do you think my armature is the correct size?” “What about these colors? Do you think they go together?” So accustomed to being spoon-fed directions, they were too afraid to rely on themselves. To wean them from teacher dependence, I used peer critiques and “what if” questions.

Peer critiques encouraged student-to-student dialogue rather than teacher-to-student talk. I used this technique when several students were simultaneously struggling with their ideas. They displayed their masks together on one table, and the rest of the class stopped working and gathered around. The unplanned critique began with the voices of the struggling students. After explaining their frustrations, other students offered suggestions and possible solutions. The students walked away with several ideas to fix their problems rather than having the teacher give them an exact solution.

After peer critiques had taken place or when the students were working, I often relied on my “what if” strategy. If a student came to me with a question, I would not provide an answer. Instead, I would ask three to four “what if” questions. For example, one student wanted his mask to resemble the surface of a soccer ball. He asked me what to do, and this was my response:

“What if you painted the pattern?”

“What if you used magazine cutouts to form the hexagons?”

“What if you cut up a real soccer ball?”

By wording my suggestions in the form of questions, I redirected the students’ thinking without imposing a direct solution. With time, they depended less on me and more on themselves.

Time also became a factor. Students required more time in a student-centered environment than in a teacher-directed one. Without the highly structured directions, students needed additional time to think for themselves, discover their own ideas, and explore new possibilities. I found that I needed to designate

**FINAL PROJECTS ARE NOT SIMPLY TEACHER IMITATIONS, BUT REFLECTIONS INTO STUDENTS’ INDIVIDUALIZED WORLDS.**
more time for the early stages of the artmaking process. One student clarified the importance of time:

People need time to experiment and test around their ideas. I think the more time that you have to experiment, the better your artwork will be... if you know what you're going to do right away it's probably not going to be your best work because you have an idea and you can always make improvements to it... so having time to test is important.

In order for students to invest in meaningful artmaking, they needed adequate time to work through the artmaking process. To offer this time, I opened my door outside of class, and students came to work on their masks before school, during lunch, or after school.

Conclusion

“The teacher who is always in control of every aspect of teaching and learning may never see what is truly important in the lives of children” (Douglas & Jaquith, 2009, p. 91). To avoid this position, teachers must relinquish the role of director and accept the role of a guide. When this happens, students are less likely to copy the teacher’s model but create one-of-a-kind originals. These originals, like the identity masks, are true representations of the students. Centering a curriculum on big ideas allowed me to create open-ended art assignments that welcomed unlimited solutions and invited new possibilities. Here, students chose, explored, and experimented with their own materials, tools, and techniques. This freedom unlocked the artist within and gave my students permission to be an authentic artist.

It is important for us to regularly stop and reflect on our own methodologies. Are we teaching for the good of the student, or are we relying on the convenience of predetermined curricular content, predictable outcomes, and teacher-directed practices? Real learning begins with the shift to a student-centered environment. It is here that students become engaged in their artmaking and take ownership of their work. Final projects are not simply teacher imitations, but reflections into students’ individualized worlds.

“Can I melt old crayons to make hair?” a student asked.

“Yes! Have you thought about how you will melt them?” I responded.

“No, but I thought you could help me with that.”

“Why don’t you try running them through a hot glue gun.”

When I stepped aside to become a guide, I cleared space for my students. Not only did they fill it, they made it their own.

Author Note

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Endnote

1 Documenting student dialogue was an integral part of my qualitative research study, as I wanted to know how my students would react to a student-centered environment. Data were collected through surveys, observations, interviews, and student work. I handed out survey questions on the first day of class asking students to rate their experiences of last year’s projects in reference to their personal investment, their freedom of choice, and their exploration of ideas, materials, and techniques. Observations were recorded daily in a journal and included student interactions with their peers, student reactions to lesson presentations and exemplar artists, and student attitudes toward their work. I chose five students of varying abilities to participate in a semi-structured interview where I questioned them about their artmaking process. Last, I collected various samples of student work including brainstorming activators, sketch sheets, written reflections, and completed projects.