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Art is Possible

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Abstract

This article describes how an art educator in a suburban public high school developed a holistic approach. It includes a brief theoretical framework, an overview of the methodology used for constructing holistic art problems, and descriptions of four components characteristic of holistic classrooms. The author shares how holistic practices were implemented over a period of four years, and, through case studies, demonstrates that authentic, well-crafted, meaningful art is possible employing a holistic approach to art education.

Introduction

No artist ever perceived quality without experiencing doubt, but all artists experience unattended, unqualified excitement. This is why and how art endures.

—Frank Stella (1986)

Peter London (1989) describes a state of being similar to that described by Frank Stella:

The experiences of the first person who ever drew recur each time any one of us in our naiveté rubs our hands across the world and leaves our own special mark. We can experience anew the wonder of being the first person who ever drew out of the earth, from nothing, some thing that is somehow alive and real. We can experience again that power, that sense of being deeply connected to and with the world. The ability to fashion a world, even if it be a tiny world, as we see fit, is to partake in the exhilaration of the gods. (p. 43)

This deeply connected, excited, exhilarated state of being is often referred to as a state of wholeness—as it necessitates the whole person: mind, body, and spirit. Many

creators, leaders, and philosophers of various time periods, religions, and cultures have identified characteristics for this peak experience: Effort is light, ideas flow easily and rapidly, images appear entire, senses are more acute, endurance and patience are extended, and everything seems to be a portion of everything else (London, 2004).

The root *holo* is of Greek origin meaning whole or entire, and refers to a universe made up of integrated wholes that cannot be reduced to the sum of its parts (Miller, 1996). Holism, therefore, holds that all things are part of an indivisible unity or whole. An instructor who practices a holistic approach to art education creates a learning environment in which the student's mind, body, and spirit—the whole person—is challenged. If students are challenged in this way they might, in their art-making enterprise, experience that unqualified, unattended excitement that is a result of the holistic experience, of living fully.

Methodology

In order to create a learning environment that is holistic, the teacher must be aware of the student's needs and must strive to create problems that challenge the whole child. I created the chart below, "A holistic approach to teaching art in high school," to illustrate the process of creating art problems based on students' needs.

The first step, as shown at the base of the grid, is to consider the student's mind, body, and spirit, as it is essential for a holistic approach to take into account the whole person. As defined by Peter London, mind encompasses reason, wonder, memory,

awe, intuition, and dreaming; the body includes sensory experience and dexterity, control, endurance, balance, and tone; and the spirit is defined as "any quality we hold to be of ultimate value ... whatever resides enduringly at the core of our belief and value system" (London, 2004, p. 3-4).

The second step is to assess the developmental level of the whole student. I have generalized the developmental characteristics so as to embrace the complex nature of artistic development as it is understood in contemporary theory and practice (Carroll, 2004). The factors affecting the spirit (or core values) vary widely depending on the dominant values of the school, community, and culture in which the students live. Therefore, the teacher must be aware of the prevailing values of the school, community, and culture; the socioeconomic status of the students; and developments in

students' lives. It must be noted, however, that I have found it is unnecessary to know everything about every student's developmental level at the first class meeting. If art problems are posed that have the qualities described in Step 3, then students will reveal where they are developmentally.

After taking into account developmental considerations, the instructor can then craft an art problem that challenges the whole student, Step 3 of the chart. The problem must inspire students to "say something important to someone they deem important, so that the urgency to say that something full and clear, has sufficient force to craft that expression accordingly; full and clear and artistic" (London, 2004, p. 1). For me, that art problem takes the form of a developmentally appropriate elegant problem with an existential question or provocative task. An elegant problem is one that

is flexible enough to provoke students at different developmental levels, that elicits diverse solutions from students, and that allows for individual students to elaborate on and personalize their artistic response (Kay, 1996). An existential question challenges students to consider their own experiences (Castro, 2004); a provocative task is one that becomes intrinsically interesting because it arouses the students' curiosity or fascination (Bain, 2004). The question and the task must have embedded within them the skills, habits, attitudes, and information the students are trying to learn (Bain, 2004). To be holistic, those skills, habits, and attitudes must challenge the mind, body, and spirit. If students think the art problem will help them satisfy a need to know or help solve a problem that they regard as important, intriguing, or beautiful, then the most effective learning will take place (Bain, 2004). It has been my experience that an elegant problem initiated with an existential question or a provocative task—thoughtfully constructed with the particular students' needs in mind—will inspire personal artistic responses from all students.

The topmost block of the chart represents the students' resulting holistic experiences (the crafted expression mentioned earlier), which I labeled the authentic artwork experience. Two dictionary definitions of authentic fit my meaning here: not false or imitation, but rather real and actual, and true to one's own personality, spirit, or character. An authentic artwork or art-making experience is therefore one that is more representative of the young artist who made it, not the teacher who provoked it. I have further chosen to identify the holistic experience as an artwork experience—and not simply an artwork—because at times the art-making process captures the holistic experience even if the artwork itself does not completely do so. In an authentic artwork experience the student harnesses mind, body, and spirit—and experiences something like that unattended, unqualified excitement of which Frank Stella speaks.

Implementing the Components of a Holistic Approach

The Study Group for Holistic Art Education identified a number of habits and conditions that were conducive to teaching and learning art holistically. They include: a safe climate in which each learner is met with genuine regard; a teacher who is knowledgeable of and sensitive to the learners' intellectual, emotional, artistic, and socioeconomic level; opportunities for expression and response designed to engage learners at the deepest possible levels of meaning-making; and a teacher who models peer collaboration, who varies instruction, and who strives to integrate teaching and learning for the benefit of all learners (Carroll, 2004). Since the Study Group's discussions in 2000, I have gradually put into practice each of these habits and conditions, which I have highlighted below in the order in which I implemented them.

Component 1: Creating a Safe Climate

I teach in a four-year public high school in an economically prosperous suburb of Washington, DC. An average of 1,600 students attend each year, all of who are drawn from the surrounding geographical area and therefore represent a cross section of the local demographics. Academic and athletic successes are highly prized by the school and community, and parents work actively to support their children's education. Most graduates go directly to schools of higher education—some to mid-level colleges, a few to the most competitive institutions. Approximately 300 students per year are enrolled in art courses—150 in the Foundation (Art 1) course and the remainder in the upper-level courses, for which Art 1 is a prerequisite.

Students feel physically safe in this school, and their needs for food, clothing, and shelter are almost always met. However, in my first year I noticed that even the brightest, most talented, and financially comfortable teenagers felt uncomfortable much of the time. Because of this, I en-

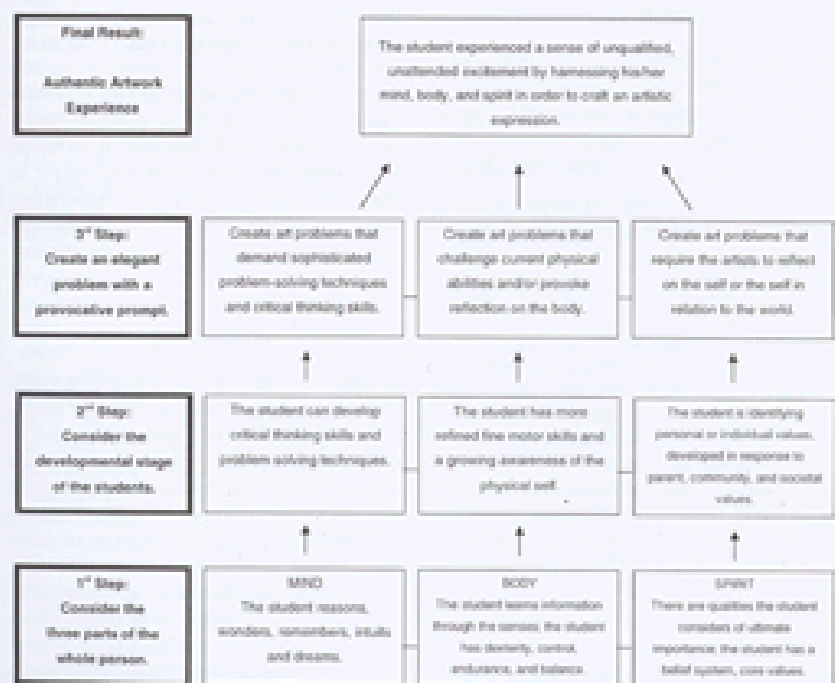


Figure 1. A Holistic Approach to Teaching Art in High School © Stacey McKenna, 2005

deavored to create a relaxed classroom environment where it was acceptable to experiment with many thoughts and opinions. In so doing, I hoped that students might feel more at ease and therefore take more creative risks. To that end, I facilitated frequent group discussions and class critiques, encouraged students to move freely around the studio, spoke informally to students on a daily basis, and sponsored after-school art activities.

In spite of these efforts, it came to my attention that, though respectful of one another and familiar with one another's work, many students in my Portfolio Development class (juniors and seniors who had been in art classes with one another before) did not know all class members by name. Upon closer scrutiny, I noticed that student groups at the four separate worktables rarely interacted with students at other tables. My goal became creating an artistic problem that would alter this studio dynamic.

As the students had just completed an observational self-portrait drawing, I designed a sculpture assignment based on the human head. The students had not yet been challenged to create a three-dimensional translation of a human form, and very few had worked on a large project in clay, wire, or papier mâché. By building a provocative experience into the lesson, I hoped to stimulate some personal reflection on assumptions about others—that is, I hoped to make them reflect on a core value: the value of productive relationships on the quality of life (and art) experiences.

The evolution of this lesson followed the methodology described in the chart above: after assessing the students' needs, I constructed an elegant problem (Make an homage sculptural head using the three-dimensional medium of your choice) with a provocative task (Interview an assigned peer-artist so that the resulting sculptural homage head will express something about them—in addition to what they look like) that required that they know or learn the necessary habits, information, skills, and attitudes to complete the problem. In an

article I wrote about this lesson, I explain how I carefully paired students, initiated and modeled a peer interview process, facilitated the artistic sculptural responses, and recorded student reflections on the experience (McKenna, 2004c).

The finished sculptures demonstrated that the students had a better understanding (the domain of the mind) of the structure of the human head. A significant challenge to the body was evident through their control of media. And, students' values—especially as revealed in reflections completed at the close of the lesson—shifted dramatically. Ninety-five percent of the students said they did not know their assigned artist-partner "at all" before this art problem, and therefore had felt "indifferent" toward them. Sixty-five percent enjoyed being interviewed, one young man adding, "I liked it because I could have a reason to tell [my partner] things that I wouldn't just come out and tell people." Another said, "[The interviewing] was the best part of this assignment because it was a great chance for the students to socialize. ... Everyone talked and smiled much more than usual." After the interviews and the construction of the sculptures, 95% of the students stated that they "liked" their artist-partner. Everyone, without exception, used positive adjectives—such as "friendly," "focused," "lively," "united", and "light-hearted"—to describe the atmosphere of the classroom while the sculptures were in progress. "The atmosphere," said a female student, "was really ... pumped. Everyone was interacting with one another. No one was left out or alone. The room was just vibrating out [sic] of the talking and getting along. It was a great vibe!" Said another, "The atmosphere changed immensely because even the different tables started to talk to each other, which previously had never happened."

This holistic lesson transformed the studio classroom into a place of connectedness and community. Now peer interaction is facilitated at the beginning of every course, so that students build artist-peer relationships early, and feel safe and sup-

ported in taking creative risks throughout the year.

ported in taking creative risks throughout the year.

Component 2: Know the Learner

The second stage was a conscious attempt to know the students. Initially, information about the school and community was gathered, including the school's socioeconomic status, art preparation in middle school, and the value of visual arts to the community. Secondly, to learn about individual students, art problems were created that provoked students to connect their lives with the art-making enterprise. At each lesson's conclusion, students wrote about the metaphors and decisions they made, so that much of who they were and what they valued was revealed.

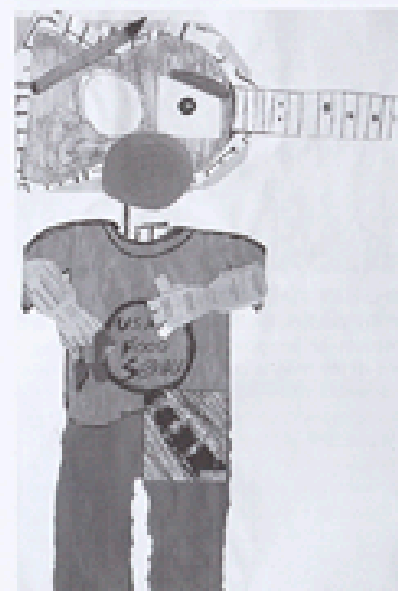


Figure 2. Jacob, age 16. My self-portrait depicts me in a very accurate way. It shows that I am very skinny and wearing my usual attire, jeans and a t-shirt. The chaotic shapes emanating from my head show that I usually have a lot on my mind. The large, bright, bold guitar is dominant because, for me, music dominates my life, and I could hardly go a day without listening to some sort of music.

One such lesson was created for an Art 1 class—typically 34 students with a wide range of ages, interests, and abilities. The students collected detritus from their daily lives and drew rapid visual responses to 12 instructions such as: "In the next 5 minutes, make a drawing from memory of an object you might use when you are 'just hanging out' at home," or, "Using only color, line, and shape—no pictures, symbols, or letters—



Figure 3. Sally, age 15. I really love stars. I have an earring that has stars on it, a shirt and skirt that have stars, and all of my shoes have stars on them. This is why I drew lots of stars in the background. Second, the swirl placed as my skirt represents my confused feelings. I feel so confused and not clear in this country since it has been just 10 months I've been living here. Third, the picture of two girls' backsides sitting on the beach represents my emotional stability and calm happiness. I felt really relaxed when I was in Korea if I was sitting on the beach with my best friend. Even though I cannot go there with my best friend now, thinking of that time makes me little happy and relaxed. My life had lots of changes and lots of events and things made me. My life can be described as a pizza, like my face in the portrait, since a pizza is a product of mixing all kinds of things.

make a drawing that represents the sound of your favorite piece of music." Then, using the accumulated found and constructed material, the students collaged a metaphorical self-portrait. Afterwards, students explained how the composition expressed who they took themselves to be.

In this holistic lesson, students thought about self-portraiture in an unconventional way, used a variety of materials and techniques, thought deeply about—and shared—what makes them who they are. The methodology is the same: first, the learner's intellectual, physical and spiritual needs are identified; to have a broader idea of what can be considered art; to experience many types of drawing media; to experience the importance of connecting life experiences to one's art, to identify who they are, to share who they are with another person. Then an elegant problem with the provocative task is constructed: Using found and hand-made representations of your life, construct a metaphorical self-portrait that feels like you more than it looks like you. The resulting evocative collages and personal statements suggest that the whole person was engaged in the art-making experience.

Component 3: Creating Opportunities for the Deep Levels of Meaning-making

Old lessons may be altered or new ones created to make engaging, more meaningful problems that are holistic—problems that provide opportunities for deep levels of making meaning. In creating multiple opportunities for students to harness mind, body, and spirit, the instructor encourages the students' true selves to emerge.

Beginning art students (Case Study 1). In the first incarnation of an abstract painting lesson, the students used color schemes and shapes to illustrate selected moods (happy, angry, excited) and repeated that design to create a pattern. When reinvented as a holistic lesson, the problem became: Create a painted composition that is a metaphor for your own personality. Select the colors, shapes, and lines that

you believe best represent your personality traits, and organize them in such a way as to represent who (or how) you are.

To assist the students in assigning personal meaning to their own selection of colors, lines, and shapes, a series of provocative experiences and tasks was initiated before they began designing and painting (McKenna, 2004a). A rubric that focused on the technical choices (color mixing, paint application) and questions regarding how the shapes, colors, and lines represented their personalities insured that the paintings could be as-



Figure 4. Jingya, *Flying Dreams*. A major part of my personality is a fanciful dreaming and freedom of imagination. Almost every single one of my lines is curvy and wavy because of the random flow of thought—it also exemplifies an easy-going, mellow mood. Most of my shapes are irregular for unpredictability. The orange and green background represents an excitement in creativity—the colors are bright, suggesting eagerness; the shape is narrow on the bottom left-hand corner and gradually grows wider—the expansion symbolizes opening up and flourishing surprises. There's a purposeful imbalance and lack of exact pattern to represent unconventional surprises. The swirls and squiggly lines add to this craziness and zest; yet, at the same time, there's also a more pervasive "out-of-the-box" sense, as symbolized by the darker shades of red, violet, and green. Overall, there's not really an area of dominance—rather, it allows the eyes to go wild along with the design, and to discover the imaginative freedom of endless possibilities.

sessed, as making choices with meaning was so crucial.

Advanced art students (Case Study 2). The student whose works are shown below was enrolled in the art program during the four years in which the holistic adaptations took place. The advanced students participated in numerous holistic art problems given at all course levels. Due to this preparation, students were able to produce work as Independent Study seniors that was personally meaningful, self-directed, technically proficient,



Figure 5. Joe, Art 3, *Sponge Raincoat* (for my little sister). Sponges, thread, buttons. Girls' size six.



Figure 6. Joe, Art 4, *Toilet Paper Toilet*. 100-rolls of toilet paper and wallpaper paste. Life-sized sculpture installation in school bathroom.

and independent of teacher-generated assignments. Their final reflective statements testify to their awareness of how they have evolved as artists.

After a found-object art-to-wear assignment, for which *Sponge Raincoat* was his solution, Joe discovered a materials-based, problem-solving process felt right for him. Though he had a portfolio full of observational drawings and paintings produced during his junior year, he chose to focus on using nontraditional materials to create sculptures for his Independent Study. In *Toilet Paper Toilet*, Joe "wanted to show the idea of using a disposable material to make a non-disposable object," and in *Student Absence/Presence*, he cast clothing retrieved from a donation bin. Joe's ideas about what constitutes art changed radically since he began Art 1: "Early on in art, I had the idea in my head that 'good' art was what looked real or what someone of importance said was 'good.' Now that doesn't matter so much, it is about saying what I want to say."

In Rachel's works, addressing both visual and metaphorical reflections, dem-



Figure 7. Joe, Art 4, *Student Absence/Presence*. Wax and personal clothing (shirt, pants, sneakers). Life-size sculpture installation in school auditorium foyer.

onstrate how an idea that comes from a student's intellectual, physical, and spiritual curiosity drives the desire to improve artistic skills. At the end of her high school experience, Rachel said, "I think the creative idea is the most important thing to me as an artist. There are many artists, and I think the only way to survive among many artists is creative idea and concept. I think handling material and skills do not matter—just practice a lot, and enjoy art a lot, then the skills will be improved soon."

Component 4: Reflection, Collaboration, and Integration

Due to my own positive experiences with a holistic approach, I became convinced that a department wide holistic approach would benefit all students, so when my current colleagues joined me four years ago, I, as department chairperson, set a precedent of informal lesson sharing and casual dialogue about teaching and learn-

ing. I hoped to create a collaborative dynamic within the department that might encourage my colleagues to adopt holistic methods. Though initially there were challenges, such as finding time to rethink approaches and adapting provocative tasks or existential questions to fit our individual styles, we experienced great satisfaction in our growth as teachers and in our students' successes.

As informal dialogue had become our habit, our second year together we agreed that we would each trade one course, so each of us would have a new course that the other had taught the previous year. In so doing, we found a number of opportunities to plan collaboratively and to create lessons that integrated disciplines (Shauck, 2005). In the years thereafter, the three of us took turns teaching courses, so each instructor would have direct experience with most courses.

By the end of the second year, we found that much of our dialogue revolved around

how we were challenging students at one course level, and how to best prepare students for the next. It followed then that to reduce redundancy and to raise the standards we collaborated on a very open, but also very detailed, vertical plan (an outline of expectations, experiences, and assessments proceeding vertically from the foundation level to the most advanced levels) that allowed us to see how, while maintaining a holistic approach, all students should be progressing as they moved up through the department. Because this document evolved out of our own reflective dialogue, we felt the vertical plan was a significant asset to our planning and teaching.

Interestingly, since we began working in concert, there have been significant changes in our students' behaviors: they are more willing to help one another, they are eager to help us, and they are likely to talk with any (or all) of the three art instructors about their artwork. The high school art studio environment is now a truly support-



Figure 8. Rachel, Photography 1, *Self-Portrait (Three Lenses)*. Oil on paper.

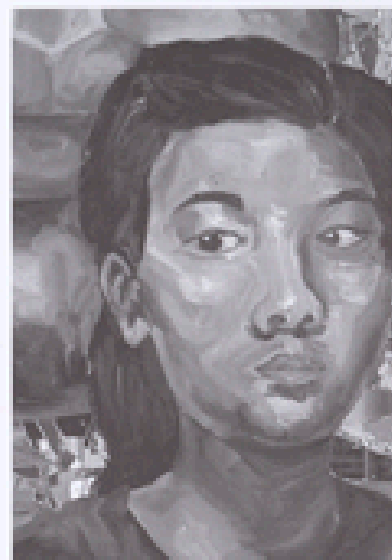


Figure 9. Rachel, Art 4, *Triple Self-Portrait*. Oil on paper with mirror fragments.



Figure 10. Rachel, Art 4, *Secrets*. Pencil on paper.

live community of artists: Students create elegant and personal solutions; students are focused; there is laughter and ease in the studio; and students initiate their own problem solving. These are the same qualities that were identified by the Study Group for a Holistic Approach to Art Education as characteristic of all of our classrooms when a holistic lesson was taking place.

Finally, in addition to the daily benefits identified above, there are external measurements of success as well. Last year, 23 seniors went on to study art at the college level—a number at top-rated art colleges such as Cooper Union, the Maryland Institute College of Art, and the Rhode Island School of Design; 17 out of 19 passed or excelled on the Advanced Placement Studio Art Exam; and, of students applying to art programs, over \$600,000 in merit-based scholarship money was awarded. These numbers are even more meaningful when compared to the seniors who graduated in 2000, two years before the components of a holistic approach began to be implemented: Only two of those students went on to study art at the college level, no students took the Advanced Placement Studio Exam, and no merit-based scholarships were awarded. By consciously considering mind, body, and spirit, and by gradually implementing the holistic practices described in this article, many passionate young artists experienced internal reward and external recognition.

Summary

A holistic approach to teaching art in high school involves first taking into account the whole person. Though the methodology for creating holistic art problems was developed within a specific high school setting, the planning and executing are universal processes that may be adapted to fit a variety of teaching situations. Holistic problems may be constructed to implement components common to holistic classrooms—such as to create a safe climate or to know the learner. As well, problems may be created to lead students to deeper

levels of meaning making by harnessing the mind, body, and spirit. Implemented at all levels of a high school art program, a holistic approach provides students multiple opportunities to create authentic, well-crafted, meaningful work, and, as well, at the upper levels, to create work that is self-directed. Using a holistic approach to art education, art is possible.

About the Author

Stacey McKenna is the Chairperson of the River Hill High School art department. She is a practicing artist as well, and her paintings have recently been included in shows at the MAEA 2004 juried exhibition, the Maryland Institute College of Art Faculty exhibition, Goucher College Rosenberg Gallery, and the Johns Hopkins University Evergreen House. In 2005, two articles by McKenna appeared in *Toward a Holistic Paradigm in Art Education* published by MICA's Center for Art Education. Project PLASE, Inc. (a foundation for the homeless) selected one of McKenna's paintings for permanent display in their corporate headquarters. In addition to teaching at River Hill, McKenna teaches a graduate course, *The College Teaching of Art* at MICA, and every summer teaches undergraduate painting in MICA's Continuing Studies program. McKenna holds a MAT from MICA, an MFA in painting from Towson University, and a BA in Fine Arts and Art History from Randolph-Macon College. She currently lives and paints in Baltimore, Maryland.

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