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December 13, 2010

Art and Anxiety

Fostering Student Motivation in the Creative Process

“Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once we grow up.”

This quote by Pablo Picasso reflects a fundamental dilemma confronting secondary school art teachers. By the time students reach a high school art classroom, many have already reached the conclusion that they do not have the inherent talent necessary to produce successful artwork. Low self-efficacy and fear of failure can significantly hinder students’ motivation to put forth genuine effort in art class. In this paper, I examine the causes of low-self efficacy in art and discuss specific strategies teachers can use to help students overcome their fears and experience greater motivation in art.

When observing young children, it is easy to see the natural capacity of all humans to enjoy the creative process. Preschool age children do not worry about whether their artwork looks like real life. It does not matter if the sky is orange or a dog is pink; the joy of making art is about the creative freedom of smearing paint on paper. But before long the pressure to create lifelike depictions of reality takes its toll. According to Bayles and Orland, “The desire to make art begins early. Amongst the very young this is encouraged...but the push toward a ‘serious’ education soon exacts a heavy toll on dreams and fantasies” (12). This pressure is the result of adults constantly asking children to explain what their drawings are about, and rewarding

perceived attempts at symbolic representations of reality (a green circle near a brown line becomes a “tree” and is praised, even if the child was simply trying to paint a green circle and a brown line). When children begin school, they receive more messages about the importance of creating realistic art. According to Rosemary Richards, “Children show a decline in spontaneous art at the age of about seven” (2003). The fact that this decline in motivation usually takes place around the end of kindergarten is not a coincidence, but the result of pressure from classmates, parents and teachers to create realistic drawings.

While elementary students receive significant pressure to create realistic art, they receive very little instruction in how to do so. This causes students to develop low self-efficacy in art, since “Making art provides uncomfortably accurate feedback about the gap that inevitably exists between what you intended to do, and what you did” (Bayles & Orland, 5). By the time most students reach high school, this gap is usually quite large, leaving students feeling frustrated with their lack of ability to create the quality of work they wish they were capable of producing.

Most people believe that success in art “rests fundamentally upon talent, and that talent is a gift randomly built into some people and not into others” (Bayles & Orland, 2). This perception of artistic talent is “inherently fatalistic”, and leaves teachers feeling hopeless about teaching art skills, and students feeling hopeless about their ability to learn them (Bayles & Orland, 2). It is therefore necessary to discard the assumption that skill is based on inherent talent and instead adopt the mindset that in fact, “Talent is rarely distinguishable, over the long run, from perseverance and lots of hard work” (Bayles & Orland, 3). Although we do not all have the inherent talent of Beethoven, most people would agree that, with adequate instruction

and practice, anyone is capable of learning to play the piano. Likewise, while we may not all be Picassos, anyone is capable of learning to draw. The problem lies in the fact that students do not receive the early instruction and practice they need to develop art skills, and therefore blame their failures on a lack of talent or creativity.

Many teachers share the belief that success in art is based on inherent talent, so they do not see their instruction as crucial to students' artistic development. Because many elementary school teachers are not confident in their own art-making ability, they have low self-efficacy in their ability to teach art skills. "Teacher efficacy is important because it influences student self-efficacy and can affect student achievement" (Bohlin, Durwin & Reese-Weber, 183). Teachers who are confident in their ability to teach art skills, or at least to enjoy the process of art-making, pass this confidence along to their students. Unfortunately, many teachers speak openly to their classes about their own lack of artistic talent. These statements leave students with little hope that they will somehow learn art skills even the teacher cannot master.

Low teacher self-efficacy in art also leads to the failure of many teachers to provide specific feedback and encouragement during the art-making process. Many teachers do not know (or believe they do not know) enough about drawing skills to give advice, or fear that any advice they give will crush their students' creativity and confidence. Instead, most teachers give general praise to any and all attempts at art. This kind of indiscriminate praise is not helpful, since "Teacher praise must be credible in order for students to believe that their performance is praiseworthy" (Bohlin, Durwin & Reese-Weber, 272).

Students are smart enough to realize when their drawings are not successful. According to one study,

Although teachers did not judge the children's drawings the children developed their own critical voice and developed sets of criteria. There were comments that focused on the size of drawings, the content, staying within the lines, coloring-in properly, use of space, drawing appropriate topics, drawing things the *proper* way, and making *mistakes* (Richards, 2003).

When students are praised for unsuccessful drawings, they can tell the praise is not genuine. The same study found that "Some children with low self-efficacy suggested that teachers needed to be especially nice about their drawings, even if they didn't like the drawing" (Richards, 2003). This shows how praise that is not genuine can actually lower students' self-confidence in their artistic talent.

As is true in other academic subjects, praise in art must be specific. According to Bohlin, Durwin & Reese-Weber, "Specific praise is more credible and is informational, providing feedback about students' performance" (272). The authors go on to argue that teachers should be careful not to praise students for being smart, since this can lower students' motivation by implying that learning is about "looking smart and not making mistakes" (Bohlin, Durwin & Reese-Weber, 283). Just as teachers should not praise students for being "smart," they should avoid praising students for being "good at art." This reinforces the assumption that students' artistic ability is out of their control, and discourages students from attempting challenging

projects. Instead, teachers should praise students for mastery of specific skills and perseverance in tackling difficult assignments, since “Training students to attribute failure to lack of effort rather than to low ability leads to increased persistence and improved performance” (Bohlin, Durwin & Reese-Weber, 288). This praise for effort encourages *all* students to believe in their artistic potential, rather than singling out a few students with “natural” talent as the only ones capable of success.

High self-efficacy is particularly important in art, since “Students with high self-efficacy will increase their effort and persistence for success even when they are struggling” (Bohlin, Durwin & Reese-Weber, 181). The creative process involves experimenting and making mistakes, and often feels like a struggle, even for experienced artists. If students do not have high self-efficacy, they are inclined to give up when they begin to experience anxiety. Bayles & Orland describe how this anxiety leads to decreased motivation in art-making:

The pattern is predictable: you see error in what you have done, you steer your work toward what you imagine you can do perfectly. You cling ever more tightly to what you already know you can do - away from risk and exploration, and possibly further from the true work of your heart. You find reasons to procrastinate, since to *not* work is to not make mistakes. Believing that artwork should be perfect, you gradually become convinced that you cannot make such work...sooner or later, since you cannot do what you are trying to do, you quit (30).

Some students’ self-efficacy in art is so low that it inhibits them from even getting started. This aversion to art-making for fear of failure is an example of a mastery-avoidance

goal. “Rather than showing motivation to approach achievement situations...students with mastery avoidance goals and performance avoidance goals want to avoid situations in which they might fail to achieve mastery or might look incompetent” (Bohlin, Durwin & Reese-Weber, 280). This fear of failure becomes especially prevalent in secondary school, when students become preoccupied with the approval of their peers. However, many teachers do not realize that fears of art-making and mastery-avoidance goals are behind the lack of the motivation they see in their students. “[Fears disguise themselves] variously as laziness, resistance to deadlines, irritation with materials and surroundings, distraction over the achievements of others - indeed as anything that keeps you from giving your work your best shot” (Bayles & Orland, 14). Teachers must learn to recognize these fears in order help students overcome them and gain motivation in art class.

Teachers can help students overcome their mastery-avoidance mindsets and develop high self-efficacy through strategies such as verbal persuasion, since “Individuals who are told that they can be successful are more likely to believe in their own success and to develop high self-efficacy” (Bohlin, Durwin & Reese-Weber, 180). In order for this persuasion to be believable, teachers must be genuinely confident that *all* students are capable of learning to create good art. Teachers must explain to students *why* they may have developed the false belief that they have no potential in art, pointing to common past experiences in school as examples. They must openly challenge the notion that skill in art is based in artistic talent, and must encourage students to take risks and make mistakes.

Teachers can also use modeling to increase students’ self-efficacy in art. “When

individuals see others similar to themselves experience success, they are likely to have high self-efficacy and believe that they too can be successful” (Bohlin, Durwin & Reese-Weber, 180). Showing past student work is one way of modeling, but it is important to show examples of student works from early in the year that reflects lack of experience in addition to later, more advanced work by the same students. This dispels the myth of inherent talent and demonstrates that growth in art is possible.

Teachers must also consider how the issue of race influences art self-efficacy. “Art education can be very culturally isolating and misrepresentative” since minority students receive few models of successful artists from different racial and ethnic backgrounds (Jenkins, 2009). Furthermore, teachers must remember that “With minority populations, many traditional teaching methods lose their effectiveness. Assigning relevant, culture-oriented art projects can create the necessary motivation for students to overcome their fears about putting genuine effort into art, since “Creating cultural connections to subject matter in the arts can broaden students’ ideas of what art is and how it can have meaning in their lives” (Jenkins, 2009). For example, students can analyze the themes of gender, race, and culture in works by artists like Frida Kahlo and Judy Chicago, and create their own self portraits reflecting these themes.

Gifted students also require special consideration in the art classroom. Although these students excel in other subjects, many gifted students struggle in art class, due to perfectionism and fear of failure. They are afraid to challenge themselves and instead take the easy way out in art projects. For example, during right-brain exercises, gifted students often cannot restrain themselves from looking at their papers during blind contour drawings, or from turning their

upside-down drawings right-side-up in order to “get things right.” Taking these short-cuts actually hinders these students from making significant progress in art. Teachers can help gifted students overcome issues of perfectionism by allowing mistakes, encouraging sensible risk-taking, designing creative assignments and assessments, and allowing time to think creatively (Handa, 2008).

Teachers can increase self-efficacy in all students by creating situations that lead to student success (Bohlin, Durwin & Reese-Weber, 180). They can insure success by assigning projects in which it is nearly impossible to fail, provided students follow the correct procedures. For example, teachers can assign projects in which students practice drawing using their right brains. These projects find ways to “trick” the brain out of trying to make realistic drawings, since most students will be tempted to use symbols and over-simplification rather than carefully observing how objects actually appear. These assignments include upside-down drawings, blind contour drawings and negative space drawings, all of which force the brain to observe line and shape removed from the context of identifiable objects. Once students complete these drawings and step back to look at their finished results (for example, by turning an upside-down drawing right-side-up) they are usually surprised with their ability to skillfully depict a now-identifiable, detailed image. These exercises teach students to successfully create realistic drawings, which significantly increases art self-efficacy.

Teachers can help students achieve success by giving them plenty of chances to practice new skills, or what *Teach Like a Champion* author, Doug Lemov, calls “at bats:”

Teach them the basics of how to hit, and then get them as many at bats as you can.

Practice after practice, swing after swing: maximize the number of at bats. Let them do it over and over again until they can swing quick and level in their sleep (104).

This advice is particularly applicable to the practice of learning to draw from observation. Students must practice their observational skills and hand-eye observation over and over again, in order to develop the ability to draw from real life. Art teachers must reassure students that the purpose of practice is not to make every drawing look perfect, but to build up their right brain muscles so that drawing from life eventually becomes easy. Bayles and Orland point out that “The function of the overwhelming majority of your artwork is simply to teach you how to make the small fraction of your artwork that soars” (5). By giving students plenty of at bats and reassuring them that most art-making is about practicing skills, not producing perfect pieces, teachers create a low-stress environment in which students can practice and improve their art skills without fear of failure.

