



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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IS IT ART?

Sometime ago, I decided to create an experimental art class after polling some of our advanced art students and giving them an option for a course about learning “to put things together.” The basis of the class (Art General Studio) stemmed from my observation that an entire generation of art students was too tight and conventional in the production of their art. I had noticed that only a few students would push the boundaries of art and that most played it safe and produced more “traditional” work. For a long time, I had felt that many of our students demonstrated weak “general” hand tool (drills, power saws, etc.) skills and that these poorly developed skill sets narrowed the possibilities of exploring other areas of art production.

To my surprise, the class made, and the anticipation began. It is fair to say that no one, including me, knew exactly what the outcome was going to be. After all, the main goals were to play and learn. During the first few weeks, most students were learning to use their small hand power tools, and almost all were learning to let go of their inhibitions. However, most were finding it difficult not to make their work academic—the primary criterion of the course.

As we moved into the fifth week of the semester, I noticed that at least half of the students were still concerned with how their artwork would look, while the others were trying to adhere to the objectives of the course. As I walked around observing their progress, I joked as they made the usual mistakes with first-time learning experiences. However, as time passed, students began to display a pronounced sense of pride as their skills improved.

Good teachers search for new ways to expedite the learning process; they avoid blaming the student or making excuses for poor learning. Rather, they evaluate the value of what is being taught. So, I looked to exploring how an art class like this one, in particular, might serve as an instructional tool for others who decide to think about how their discipline will impact their students’ futures. Some time ago, I heard an education

expert observe that students in some school districts were spending more time coloring than reading and that this activity could well explain why some students do not do well in school. Of course, those of us who teach art well know that coloring (art) has as much value in a public school program as any other academic discipline.

At the six-week mark in the course, the students’ levels of concentration were higher, and their work pace had accelerated. I found myself not in a classroom of young adults, but instead in a nursery full of children deeply lost in creative play. I concluded that the creative process of learning to play, think, take things apart, and then trying to put “stuff” together to make something that looks like it might work is pure learning—similar to what a child does when playing with a new toy. Do you remember that feeling, that time when you were lost and nothing existed except that moment, how that gave you a sense of inspiration, and how you did not want the moment to end?

Finally, the first critique of the semester was to begin, and there was a sense of insecurity in the air. Normally smiling faces were walking around with tight lips. In their classes up to now, these advanced students had displayed control over their work and were able to handle any problems. But this was a quite different class; they were not supposed to be “making art.” Well, the critique went as most do, except when one student was about mid-way through analyzing his own artwork and was asked how he would present this piece in a show, he responded: “I was just putting stuff together. I would not dare exhibit this thing!” What happened? Did the adult in the student speak, and if so why? What happened to the child who created the piece? Why is that child not speaking? These are very important questions. There is a conflict here. Do we explain the value of what we teach to our students? Do we tell them that this is for this and that is for that, or do we just throw information at them and hope that they get it? Where did this sense of insecurity come from and why? They should have learned that the product was not as important as the process, but this particular student did not see it that way—until later!



Too often in a world that demands immediate results, we lose sight of what is important, even in the educational process. Everything I have learned from teaching, I have learned from students. And one lesson I have learned is not to put too much emphasis on the outcome, but instead to work on perfecting the process. As I noticed in this experimental art class, if the process works, the outcome takes care of itself. Of course, not all of the questions about "is it art?" went away, but at least they could be answered with a resounding, "Who cares?"

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HAMMERING HOME THE IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATION

Marketing a college to prospective students once meant talking to high school seniors as they prepared to make their selection among the many institutions of higher education. Now, college and career planning reaches into the middle and elementary schools.

The "If I Had a Hammer" program provides colleges with the opportunity to make a good and lasting impression by bringing fifth-graders on campus, making education fun, and sending them away with a t-shirt.

The Hammer program shows fifth graders that what they are studying in class is applicable to what they do in life. Using a kit, students build an 8' x 11' house with a door, windows, siding, and a front porch. The program couples classroom curriculum with construction—applying math, geometry, science, economics, communications, and other skills during the planning and construction phases of the house.

As the children split into four teams, each assigned a color matching the coded building materials, they are outfitted with hardhats, hammers, and cordless screwdrivers. Over the course of two to three hours, the house comes together, and the students get the message that subjects, such as math, and skills, such as communication, can prepare them for life as a responsible, productive adult. The presentation may be sprinkled with warnings about drugs and other social ills that can wreck the firm foundation they are trying to build for their lives.

The community outreach aspect of the Hammer program also extends to area businesses that are given the opportunity to serve as sponsors. In return for a monetary contribution, employees may act as construction bosses, helping the children build the house; and the company logo is printed on the t-shirts that children may wear for years.

The college pays a \$15,000 annual license fee, designates a specific area for the project, and covers expenses, such as a climate-controlled trailer for housing and transporting the materials, salaries for student workers to disassemble the house after each class session, and a portion of the salaries for faculty and staff to serve as project bosses.

The national Hammer program provides the kit, marketing tools, classroom workbooks, and construction leadership training for college faculty and staff. The program was developed by Perry Wilson, a college dropout, who found he could do complex geometric problems on the job that he had been unable to do in the classroom.

Blinn College, which began offering the Hammer program in 2000, brings more than 2,000 students annually to its campuses. Participation is open to fifth-grade classes at public and private schools in Blinn's 13-county service area in Southeast Texas. The program is so popular that teachers include it in their schedules for each school year.

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