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Discipline Based Art Education: One Classroom Approach

Ashley Byrd

In many school districts across the country, the arts are no longer confined to a room in the far wing where students draw, paint, and, if they are lucky, make some pottery or jewelry. Instead, art is front and center in every subject taught in the classroom thanks to the teachings and research of Dwaine W. Greer, director of the Getty Institute for Educators on the Visual Arts. Known as Discipline Based Art Education (DBAE), this concept is being developed and implemented in schools all across the nation. DBAE treats art as an actual subject for study, rather than as a recreational activity.

Visual art, if present at all in the classroom, is usually treated as a time filler or recreational diversion from academic study (Greer & Silverman, 1987). All too often there is little concern for developing a student's understanding of and appreciation for the world of art. These very factors influenced the J. Paul Getty Trust to make the improvement of art education one of its major priorities. Subsequently, the Trust established the Center for Education in the Arts to investigate how to best contribute to improving art instruction. After a yearlong series of interviews with leading art educators, the center decided to support a discipline-based approach to art education. In 1982, the center created the Getty Institute for Educators on the Visual Arts, charging it with developing and testing a model for the

implementation of discipline-based art education.

DBAE is a comprehensive approach to education, attempting to balance and integrate four areas in a sequential program for grades kindergarten through twelfth. Art content is derived from the following disciplines: art history, aesthetics, art criticism, and art production (Mark, 1988).

Art history helps the student understand more about the artist who created a particular work, the functions of the work, the culture in which it was made, and how and why art has changed over time. This gives the student an awareness of how cultures have communicated through art and how the past related to the present.

Aesthetics provides the student with a structure for organizing questions about the nature and quality of art and other objects of beauty. The reasons that aesthetic objects provide certain responses are also considered. The student learns to understand and value art and ask questions such as "Why is this a work of art?"

Art criticism requires the student to observe, describe, analyze, interpret and evaluate art in written or oral form. To do this, it requires the use of acquired knowledge and the ability to make judgments based on objective criteria. Also, the student might wish to compare his or her criticisms to those of established art critics.

Art production, or the creation of art, requires the student to make choices. He or she must choose among materials; visual elements (shapes, colors, lines) that best depict the subject; and visual principles (contrast, composition, balance) that will best communicate the student's thoughts. These choices must be deliberate, based on knowledge and experience.

This approach to education, formulated in the late 1980's, differs significantly from the "creative self-expression" approach that dominated the field during the previous forty years. The content of that earlier approach was exclusively the making of art for self-expression, in a personal exploration of a variety of art materials and methods. DBAE is a more holistic, comprehensive, and multifaceted approach to art education. Not only do teachers incorporate painting, drawings, sculpture, and architecture into their lessons, but they also include fine, applied, craft and folk arts, such as ceramics, weaving and other textile arts, fashion design, and photography (Black, 1996). Students work with and study a variety of visual images and objects that carry unique meaning for human beings from all cultures and times. Although there are DBAE curricula, DBAE itself is an approach to instruction and learning in art and not a specific curriculum; though it should have sequential, cumulative, and articulated implementation (Greer, 1999).

Discipline-based art education exists in many forms to meet the needs of the community in which it is taught. Examples of variation include selecting one or more of the disciplines as a central or core discipline(s) for helping students understand works of art; featuring settings such as art

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museums or community centers and the original artworks they collect or display; integrating the arts with other subject areas; and pursuing newer technologies. What is striking about classrooms that use discipline-based art education is their strong intellectual content. Children in such programs seem willing, even eager, to think critically, make astute judgments and discuss and debate philosophical issues (Brandt, 1987).

DBAE requires content derived from valid information and practices within the professional art world, much as content for the study of mathematics, history and literature is derived from those professional fields. Based on research of many schools across the country, it is concluded that discipline-based arts education is a quiet evolution that is gradually taking hold in schools across the country (Young, 1991). As the school districts across the country implement the discipline-based approach, they will make it possible for every teacher to teach art well, and thus start every child on the road to a lifelong participation in the arts.

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