

Teaching Painting in the Special Class: Enhancing Self-Concept through Discipline Based Art Education

Children with special needs often do not attain any noticeable progression in painting skills. Too much emphasis on 'self-expression' may leave many pupils with little to express and a lack of confidence to even try. Discipline Based Art Education introduces a skills based approach and provides guidelines for enhancing self-concept through art using a detailed lesson guideline. Pupils with learning difficulties may be successfully taught to paint, to see themselves as painters and to feel confident in their efforts.

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TEACHING ART OR CRAFT ?

In many schools and classrooms (whether special or ordinary), an ever-decreasing pool of ideas and inspiration has led to the displacement of the art lesson by its more practical cousin, craft.

This is not surprising. Craft is straightforward. It involves little in the way of philosophy or psychology. Learning to make sock puppets and helping a class to mass produce them the following day is a straightforward (if somewhat intense) affair. Success involves following a series of steps and instructions in sequence. In craft, the "how do I do it?" is more important than the "why do I do it?" Art however is not so straightforward.

ART: INSPIRATION CAUGHT OR TAUGHT ?

Art involves philosophies, psychologies, sociologies and usually leads to interpretations of one sort or another. There are disagreements in society generally as to what is even meant by "art"; priceless old masters to some, worthless advertising promotions to others. As for artistic talent, is it a spark

from heaven which alights on the chosen few, something which is innate and cannot be taught? Or on the other extreme, could artistic talent evolve from following well-planned instructional objectives where anything can be learned? Somewhere, lost amid the many disagreements and debates is the individual child and in particular the slower learner. Morgan (1988, p.119) was in no doubt however about the central value of art: "Clearly there are different levels of ability (and we all have our own remedial areas) but imagination and worthwhile art experience can be fostered and enabled to develop in all children". How is this to be achieved ?

A STRUCTURED APPROACH TO PROMOTING PAINTING

The philosophy and methods of Discipline Based Art Education opens up opportunities for the teacher to positively affect the self-esteem of the learner. This approach has the potential to inform and enthuse teachers, encourage them to provide structured opportunities for children to paint and to give them a greater understanding of sharing and enjoying children's painting.

Becoming a successful cook involves much more than owning a shelf-full of recipe books. Understanding basic nutrition, the benefits of combining different food groups in a diet and the sequences involved in food preparation can lead one to work with any ingredients. So it is with Discipline Based Art Education. In terms of teaching painting, the proposed approach is introduced through positive and definite guidance and instruction, a background of current theory and a basic structure upon which teachers and art educators may design and build a programme of work suited to the needs of their pupils.

PROGRESSION IN PAINTING SKILLS

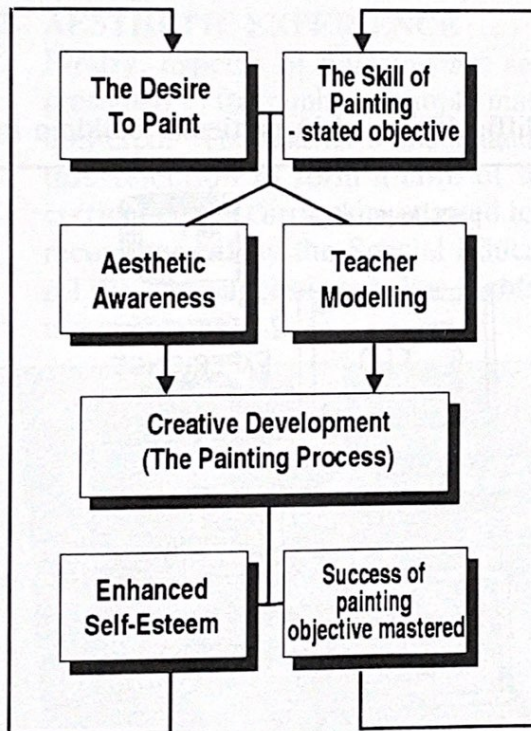
Art educators such as Lowenfeld and Brittain (1975) believed that pupils should develop their artistic abilities free from adult interference. Pupils however are not expected to write creatively or play music without tuition. In reality this meant that teachers were taught to develop creative talents in some subjects through demonstration, modelling and correctly sequenced work, but to merely wait for it to emerge spontaneously in other areas. Language, poetry and storytelling for example, advanced in skill, complexity and excellence from junior to senior schools, whereas painting did not. It is often difficult to see any progression in painting skills in some pupils and many end up not knowing what to paint, or how to paint it anyway. An "excessive pre-occupation with self-expression" (Lindstrom, 1994, p.196) at the expense of skill development may have left many pupils with little to express and a lack of confidence to even try.

DISCIPLINE BASED ART EDUCATION

Discipline Based Art Education (DBAE) emerged in the late 1980s. It was developed as a pilot project by art educators such as Greer, Eisner and Kaagen at the J.P. Getty Centre for Education in the Arts in America. Lindstrom (1994, p.196) indicates that “today DBAE represents the domineering trend in art education and is supported by two thirds of faculty in art education programmes in higher education”. According to Kindler (1992, p.345) some teachers may already be using a form of DBAE while others who entered the profession following a Lowenfeldian legacy may see DBAE as “a revolutionary concept, requiring major adjustments in their practice”.

The following programme presents an over-view of the approach of DBAE in its application to teaching painting to pupils with learning difficulties.

THE APPROACH: A FRAMEWORK FOR SELF ESTEEM



Discipline Based Art Education is a concept of visual arts education. It is subject based in that it relates directly to the materials, the process and the product of each lesson. However it is not prescriptive. It leaves room for teachers to make a personal contribution to lesson planning in accordance with the needs of the pupils. Each lesson is content rich, beginning with the sharing of recognised artworks and thereby providing an opportunity for the development of aesthetic awareness. This is followed by teacher modelling as a means of developing creative potential. The objective for the lesson is stated to the pupils and as artists they undertake to express their ideas through paint with confidence and commitment. In providing an attainable goal in the lesson content and explaining this clearly to the

young artists, the work can be evaluated positively on this recognised criteria. The aim here ultimately is to enhance the self-esteem and positive self-concept of the pupils.

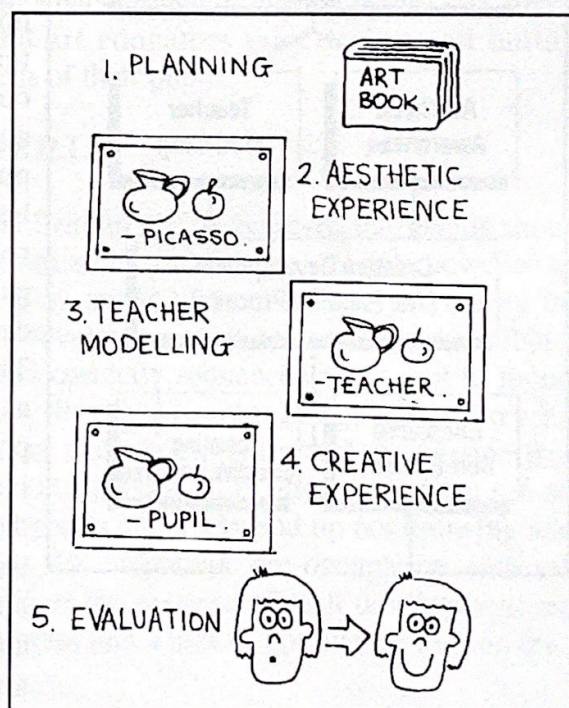
MEANINGFUL GOALS AND PROMOTING SELF CONCEPT

Self-concept is defined by Vander Zanden (1993, p.507) as “the view we have of ourselves through time as ‘the real me’ or ‘I myself as I really am’”. Self-esteem is defined by Allport, (In Allen, 1994, p.465) as “pride in one’s pursuits and accomplishments”. Many pupils, especially those with learning difficulties, may find that they have little to be proud of, especially in relation to artistic expression and creativity. Their experience of poor achievement in comparison to their peers in mainstream education leads to indifference, frustration, demoralisation and failure-orientation. In art education, such a destructive cycle can be stopped by using the highly structured approach of Discipline Based Art Education. The key to this success is spelled out by Cowan and Clover (1991 p.41): “the most effective way for teachers to help students feel self-esteem is to help them set meaningful goals that they can attain”.

THE LESSON PLAN

With regard to children with learning difficulties, and in particular children in special classes in mainstream schools, the work of Cowan and Clover (1991) is adapted in the design of the following lesson plan as a means of teaching painting. It takes account of the needs of pupils with a general learning difficulty whether ‘clinical’ or ‘sociocultural’ as outlined by Edgerton (1979, p.14). It also adheres to independent recommendations by Biehler and Snowman (1990, p.209) regarding the teaching of slower learners.

To hope that children, especially children with learning difficulties, will evolve their own creative



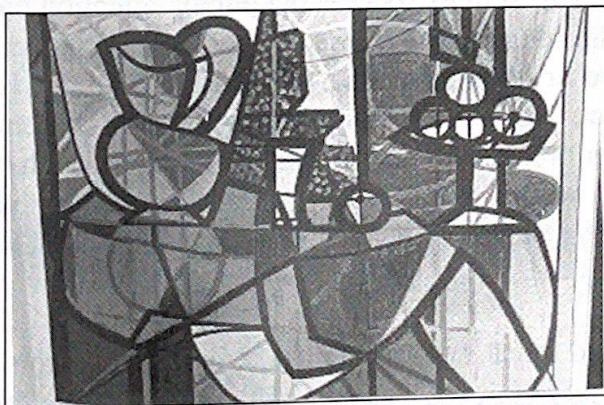
processes spontaneously and with zeal is a nonsense. Fontana (1988, p.115) detailed the four stages of creative growth as preparation, incubation, inspiration and verification. All are included in the above plan. Advance planning on the part of the teacher, presenting the pupils with an established artwork, encouraging discussion on an appropriate level, outlining the lesson aims, modelling the criteria, providing scope for the pupils' own work and evaluating this work strictly in terms of the stated criteria is the overall plan for success.

1. PLANNING

There are undoubtedly many aspects of painting skill of which many would be unaware. However more and more children's art books e.g. *Royal Academy of Art - Painting - A Young Artists Guide* (Waters & Harris, 1993), detail a progression of painting skills accompanied by established art work and ready made samples for teacher modelling. With even a modest collection of such art reference books, lesson guidelines, a professional understanding of pupils' special needs and above all an openness and willingness to adapt, DBAE may be brought successfully into any special education setting.

2. AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

Firstly, aspects of painting are selected in advance by the teacher and presented to the pupils as simple manageable skills which can be learned and mastered. The teacher's understanding of the abilities of the pupils guides this selection to form a core of work which will build into a painting curriculum; "a curriculum adapted to their learning needs and capabilities" as recommended by the Special Education Review Committee Report (1993, p.119). The suggestions below highlight three possible aspects of painting for use in lessons.



"Pitcher and Bowl of Fruit"

(1931) by Pablo Picasso
(Jaffe, 1981, p.124)

Aspect - Painting with unmixed colours.

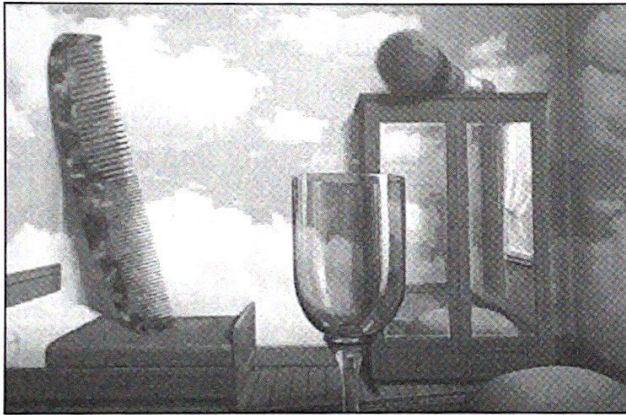
Objective - That the pupil will produce a painting in which the colours remain separate and unmixed on the paper.

“Wheat Fields with Cypresses”

(1889) by Vincent Van Gogh
(Schapiro, 1987 p.111).

Aspect - Suggesting Rhythm and Movement.

Objective - that the pupil will produce a painting in which the use of curved lines suggests rhythm and movement.



“Personal Values”

(1952) by Rene Magritte.
(Calvocoressi, 1984, p.46)

Aspect - Imaginative Composition, Surrealist Art.

Objective: That the pupil will produce a painting combining objects in an imaginative composition.

3. TEACHER MODELLING

The teacher demonstrates the use of the properties previously discussed to compose a picture for the class. This activity focuses the pupils' attention on the practicalities as well as the technicalities of the exercise. Whether the teacher is an accomplished artist or has little experience of paint is unimportant. What is important, especially to pupils with low self-esteem who are reluctant to paint for fear of rejection or criticism, is that they see that a member of the group has been willing to try first. Someone has attempted to be a maker of art and is willing to face evaluation in accordance with the stated objective of the lesson.

This aspect of DBAE has caused much disagreement among art educators. Lowenfeld and Brittain (1975, p.8) believed that the pupil should “develop without any interference from the outside world use his deeply rooted creative impulses without inhibition”. Leonard Lamme and Thompson

(1994, p.47) disagree: “The potential may exist for children to learn a lot about drawing from both adults and peers if they observe how these people draw and then copy their models”. The latter have shown that pupils in fact go beyond copying to add their own dimensions to the work using the model as a stepping stone to reach their own creative goals. Dunnahoo (1993, p.54) supports the DBAE viewpoint and adds that “the primary role of the teacher (is) to provide stimulation, encouragement and an atmosphere conducive to open expression”.

The pictures below demonstrate teacher modelling suited to each of the three selected pieces of artwork above.

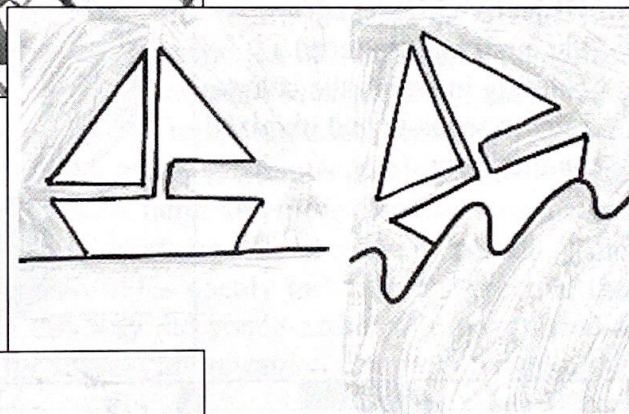


Lesson Criterion:

To produce a still life painting based on object shapes where the colours do not mix on paper.

Lesson Criterion:

To produce a painting showing movement by using wavy lines.



Lesson Criterion:

To produce a painting which combines odd things, or things that are too big or too small.

4. CREATIVE EXPERIENCE

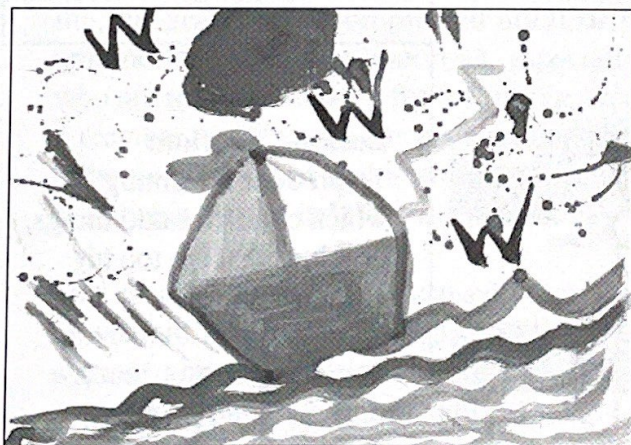
This is the part of the lesson in which the pupils have the opportunity to create a work of their own based upon the lesson criterion. Most of the lesson time is spent at this activity. Painting and drawing as Gentle (1993, pp.56-60) points out, “are holistic and image based forms of communication ... expressive and tactile....to which children readily respond.”. This communication is the key to all work involving self-esteem and an “open-communication” which is essential for fulfilment, should be “spontaneous, empathic (and) equal”; (Humphreys, 1993, p.59).

For this reason the pupils must work independently of teacher instruction, but are free to summon advice or reassurance throughout. The creative element of this exercise is explained simply by Robinson (1992, p.18); “Artists are creative in the obvious sense of making things that did not exist before.... The creative artist is an observer whose brain works in a new way”. The pictures below demonstrate pupils’ work related to the three previous lesson criteria. They were painted by pupils of a senior special class.

“Fruit” by Stephen

Objective Mastered:

the pupil has produced a painting in which the colours remain separate and unmixed on the paper.



“The Stormy Sea” by Tina.

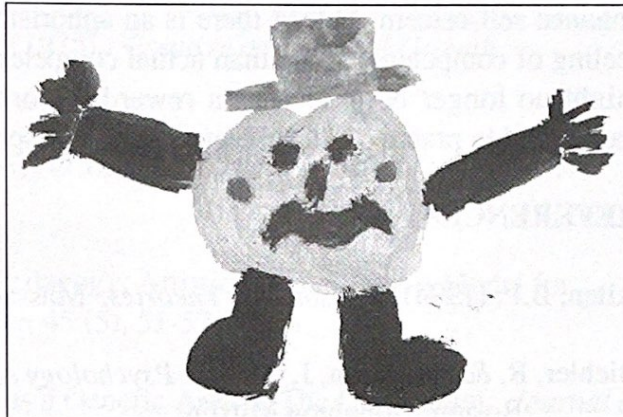
Objective Mastered:

The pupil has produced a painting in which the use of curved lines suggests rhythm and movement.

“The Apple Man” by Paul.

Objective Mastered:

The pupil has produced a painting combining objects in an imaginative composition.



5. EVALUATION

“Experience is the catalyst for the artists’ creation of a work of art”, (Dewey in Parkes, 1992 p.53) and at this stage each artist/pupil has produced a unique work of art from his/her own experience but in accordance with the lesson objective. Each individual work is mounted for display and evaluated positively by the teacher and pupils. The paintings may be labelled or anonymous. The evaluation is not a matter of judging one child’s work against another’s or stating teacher preferences. Both the teacher and the pupils know what has been taught in the lesson and the pupils do not therefore have to contend with the uncertainties of a teacher’s response. Comments by teachers, however well intentioned, such as “that’s very nice”, “I like that bit” or “I think you’re finished now, well done!” may come across as judgements and personal opinions, telling the pupils nothing about art and doing nothing to increase their skill. A fairer and more consistent evaluation in which the properties of the pupils’ work are related to the properties of the original established artwork demonstrates openly just how constructive the learning process has been. In this way the young artists who have faced a new task with a definite plan for success are rewarded strictly in terms of the criterion stated.

CONCLUSION

This lesson outline in DBAE promotes the view that painting involves more than just picture making; by studying the artwork of others and by observing artwork in the making, skills of painting can be isolated and learned. These skills in turn will increase the pupils’ willingness to participate in art and their confidence and ability to produce art. The goal according to Cowan and Clover (1991 p.39) is to produce masses of young people who can contribute to and appreciate the art process with “interest, motivation and command”. The primary purpose of the teacher in DBAE is to achieve pupil success in art and thus

enhance self-esteem. Indeed there is an aphorism that states: “nothing justifies a feeling of competence more than actual competence itself.” In this way, painting might no longer be treated as a reward or form of relaxation but elevated in theory and in practice to a subject of study for special education students.

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