

“I CAN’T DRAW!”

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“I CAN’T DRAW!”: *A discussion of how ideas and assumptions about art and artists can impact middle school students’ feelings of competence and confidence in their art abilities, engagement in the art classroom, enjoyment in art-making, and consequently their involvement in the arts throughout the rest of their lives. This discussion will also consider ways that art teachers can help their students to overcome the obstacles which have the potential to halt the development of their visual arts abilities.*

“I can’t draw”; “I can barely draw a straight line”; “I can’t draw people, unless you count stick figures”; “I’m not an artist”; “I can’t do art” As art educators, artists, and art enthusiasts we hear this all the time. I’ve heard it from many adults. Most recently I have been hearing this sort of talk in my Early Field Experience classroom at Chenery Middle School in Belmont, from students in grades five through eight. Out of all the art activities happening in my EFE classroom, drawing is the activity which seems to cause students the biggest trouble of all. Drawing, fortunately or unfortunately, is the foundation of many of the art projects assigned to these students which means that it is an essential skill to help them feel successful in art class.

Studies have shown that getting students engaged in art making during this developmental period can be very tricky and often a slippery slope. The authors of the textbook *Creating Meaning Through Art* state that, “This stage often marks the end of most student’s involvement in formal art education... many individuals face an artistic crisis at this time involving a lack of self-confidence in their ability to produce work that meets (their own) standards.” (Simpson, 1998)

Middle school students often express feelings of frustration in their art-making, particularly in their abilities to render realistically. The ability to render realistically seems

to be what they measure their abilities by (Simpson, 1998). This is unfortunate because during this developmental period their bodies and minds are going through many changes. Student minds can easily conceive what they want their drawing to look like but when they put their pencil to paper they often have difficulty getting down what is in their mind's eye. This can be very frustrating and, despite having successes with other art forms, this discouragement often results in students putting little effort into developing their art skills from middle school onward. (Simpson, 1998)

I believe that this problem is multi-faceted but may have a lot to do with society's conception of what art is and what an artist is, as well as the way that these kinds of perceptions are often perpetuated in art education. I also believe that the benefits of art-making stretch way beyond being able to successfully render an object, person, or place realistically. In this paper I will discuss the concept of art and the artist, as our society defines them, especially in relation to art education. I was able to survey some of the students I worked with regarding this matter and will discuss some of what I found in my survey. I will also strategize about the ways that we as art educators can help our students to develop their skills so that they feel more competent, and therefore more motivated to create. I am interested in finding ways to encourage students to feel competent in art even if they continue to struggle with drawing.

Why am I interested in this topic? At first I believed it was because I was so frustrated with hearing the phrase "I can't draw" over and over. The reason that it frustrates me so badly is that I know the answer to the dilemma of being "bad" at drawing: practice, practice, practice! It is true that, for a variety of reasons, some

students have stronger drawing abilities than others. For the most part, though, even the students with a great amount of so-called “natural ability” only get better by putting a lot of time and effort into their drawing practices. Rates of improvement vary greatly from student to student but there are certainly strategies utilized in many art classrooms to improve drawing skills. The real problem lies in the factor of motivation, and motivation relates directly to competence (Pavlou, 2006). But if a person feels incompetent at drawing why would they bother wasting their time doing it? Also, if a person is incompetent at drawing then they are not going to be an artist, and what is the point of learning how to draw if you are not going to be an artist? Might there be other reasons to learn how to draw if a person does not intend to be an artist?

I believe there are, as does the famous art educator and author, Betty Edwards. Jean Ellen Jones discusses Edwards’ theories in her article *A Lesson in Teaching Art Self-Confidence from Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*: “She proposed that, if students approach drawing as a personal problem-solving project, they can build both visual thinking skills and problem solving skills that will transfer to many problem solving situations. (Jones, 1997)

I feel especially connected to this topic because I too have experienced problems with motivation. Though I love it, it is sometimes extremely difficult for me to sit down and create. Even after years of excelling in art classes, after receiving praise, after hearing exclamations that I have “natural ability” from teachers and peers, after making art independently on a relatively regular basis; I still feel incompetent at times. I compare my drawings to the drawings of others. I feel jealous of other people’s technical skills. I hear one of my art history professor’s words in my head, “The world is

flooded with crappy art. If you're just going to add to the crap pile, please don't bother!" I still feel uncomfortable identifying as an artist because I do not believe that my skills are up to par with others who are recognized by our society as artists.

The reason for my own feelings of incompetence is that I do not always feel inspired to create. I don't know what to draw, I can't always think of a creative original idea. My conception of being an artist is that it is not only about being able to render and compose well (though that is pressure enough), but it is also about being able to come up with creative, original, interesting ideas. A great artist is supposed to be a creative genius. Knowing this doesn't exactly help to inspire me to rush home and create- what if my ideas aren't good enough or original enough; what if they have already been done and articulated better than I ever could? The fact of the matter is that what I learned in school for art skills are not exactly skills that have pushed me to be creative or original. I can draw a scene with approximately accurate perspective. I can accurately render faces, hair, and figures. I can make a chair look like a chair. I am grateful to have been taught these skills because I know they are important and valuable. But in the world as we know it today, who really cares? What relevance do those skills have in this world? And more importantly, what meaning do those kinds of images have to me or to my potential audience?

In the article, *Young Artists and the Charismatic Myth*, the concept of "artist" is discussed. "Artist" as defined in this article is very familiar to me: a person who is a creative genius, who is elevated by society because of their special artistic talents and abilities. In this article a group of young artists was asked to define what they believed an artist to be. They described artists in ways like: "person of extraordinary talents" and

“a person with the ability to create unique and sublime works of art carried out in a disinterested manner with pure aesthetic vision as their only guiding light”. As defined by this group, artists are people with “inborn talent” and “gift of grace”. Artists were discussed by this group as being socially marginal people who create art for art’s sake, and whose talent could potentially be damaged by standardized learning. The young artists’ descriptions of their own artistic processes stayed in line with their conceptions of artists. They stated that their art making was driven by things such as: “a calling”, “divine inspiration”, “inner voice”, “inner necessity”, “almost physical need to create”, and “fate” (Røyseng, 2007). The concept of artist defined as it is here is, to me, the epitome of what we in Western society think about art and artists. We put art and artists up on a pedestal and we expect them to create something amazing out of nothing. Art as defined this way seems far out of reach for the average kid who takes art in school.

As a part of this exploration I asked my EFE students themselves what they think about art. I put together a survey (attached) which was passed out to several classes over two days at Chenery. The teacher I worked with passed it out on one day to two classes, one of fifth graders and one of eighth graders. On the last day of my EFE, she and I passed out the surveys to a few more classes of fifth and sixth graders. Overall, I received over one hundred responses. Unfortunately, no seventh graders completed the survey, but I decided to work with the responses I got and not worry too deeply about the missing seventh graders.

The surveys were passed out differently, depending on what was happening in each class. A couple of the classes had students who were trying to finish up a

sculpture project they had been working on for a long time, so with them I only passed out the survey to the students who had moved on to the less messy perspective drawing project. In one class we had all of the students complete the survey at the beginning of class before they moved on to their class work. In another class we had them clean up early and complete the survey at the very end of class. I am not certain exactly how these different methods affected the survey responses, but I do think that they did.

One thing that I noticed was that there were a great number of repeated responses in the classes where we had them do the surveys all at the same time, which indicates that the students copied off of each other a lot. Another thing that I noticed happening with the classes where we had them complete the surveys at the same time was that they had a lot of interesting discussions and debates around the topic of art. While I was not very pleased that they were copying each other, I was glad to see that they were contemplating the questions, and considering their classmates opinions as well as their own. In the next portion of this paper I will discuss each question and the types of responses that were given by the students surveyed.

Question One: What do you think makes a drawing “good”? Please list 2 or more qualities.

The responses to this question revealed to me a few very distinct differences between the older students and the younger ones. Some of the key words remained steady throughout each grade such as: creativity, details, precision, effort, and uniqueness/originality. An aspect of drawing which turned out to be of particular

importance to the younger students was color. It was mentioned by a majority of them, while it was only mentioned a few times by the older ones. The younger students were also concerned with neatness, imagination, and conveying of emotions. Some of the eighth grade students expressed increasingly mature concerns such as: theme, realism, and “making people stop and think”.

Question Two: What skills/abilities do you think a “good” artist should possess?

Please list 2 or more.

The responses to this question were relatively similar across the board. Some typical responses were: creativity, drawing, painting, flexibility, confidence, patience, “steady hand”, neatness, enjoyment in art making, imagination, inspiration, belief in oneself, and persistence. I’d say the major difference between the younger students and older students with their responses to this question was in the language used. For instance, the older students used terms such as “hand-eye coordination” rather than neatness, and “persistence” rather than patience or taking ones time. I was a bit surprised in all of the responses that technical skills such as drawing and painting skills were not highlighted as much as creativity, imagination, patience, and hard work.

Question Three: Are there any personal characteristics, qualities, or emotions that you associate with artists? If so, please list them here.

This question caused some confusion, especially with younger students. I had to explain the question to a good number of them. In hindsight, I wish I had worded the question differently, perhaps something like “When you think an artist, what kind of

person do you think of?” and perhaps even had them make a sketch of what their prototypical artist looks like. The responses to this question were various but some of the recurring words were: wacky, creative, crazy, messy, wild, funny, nice, spontaneous, determined, persistent, and driven. There were some rather interesting and amusing answers to this question, especially from eighth graders who were trying to be funny or deep, for example: “Having seen true horror in their past (and/or a Justin Beiber concert)” and “interpretive, seeing ‘below of the veil’ of reality”. Some of the answers such as ‘funny’ and ‘nice’ made me wonder if those students had their art teachers in mind. Another notable response came from a few students who indicated that they did not have a particular response because they believed that anyone can be an artist.

Though I did get a fair amount of the responses that I had expected about artists being wild and wacky, I was a little surprised with such enlightened and democratic philosophies about who can be an artist. Again, I suspect that these students are highly influenced by the attitudes of their art teachers who are extremely encouraging to all of them. I also suspect that some of them must have parents with similar views who encourage their children to be creative and artistic.

Question Four: Do you believe that artists are born or made? Both? Neither?

Please explain why you think so.

A strong majority of the Chenery students surveyed responded that they believed artists are ‘made’ with a great deal of practice and determination. The second most popular response was ‘both’, with many students stating that some people are born with stronger art skills than others, but that anyone can be better with a great deal of hard

work. A smaller group of students indicated that artists were born that way. The reasoning behind these responses was various, with some students stating that artistic ability was a gift. One student reasoned that it was an inborn skill because the student himself was “awful at art”. Again, I was impressed by how open and thoughtful most of these middle schoolers were in their ideas about art. Their responses indicated to me that the majority of them truly believed that they with hard work, being a great artist was a possibility for pretty much anyone.

Question Five: Do you have a favorite artist? If so, who? And what do you like about them?

I threw this question into the mix out of my own curiosity about what artists they knew of. The most common answers to this question were what I call the Big Five: Vincent Van Gogh, Leonardo Da Vinci, Jackson Pollock, Claude Monet and Pablo Picasso. Van Gogh was fascinating to students because of the story about him cutting off his own ear. In one of the classes a student was wearing a t-shirt with stick figure portraits of several famous artists on it. Most of the students at her table and the table around her chose an artist off of the shirt, Picasso being the most popular. Some other choices were artists who I knew they had learned about in class, such as Keith Haring. A few students, particularly in the eighth grade class, named off several rap music artists. A few students named Ms. Ripley, their art teacher. A few of the girls named their best friend or one of their parents. The only females mentioned were familiar ones such as Ms. Ripley or the student’s mom or friend. The responses given to this question revealed to me that, although their previous responses indicated open-minded

conceptions about who artists are, their brain automatically harkened to the usual Western canon of male painters when they were asked to identify particular artists.

Question Six: Do you Consider yourself to be an artist? Why or why not?

A fairly large majority of students (about 65 percent) responded yes to this question, but quite a few also said no. One of the major reasons that students said 'yes' was because they enjoyed making art. Another popular response was that they spent a lot of their free time making art. A couple of students wrote about their aspirations to be artists later in life. Some students said yes, but that they were not very good at it. There was also a handful of students who said yes, but that they considered themselves to be musical artists not visual artists.

Of the students who said no, the majority of them claimed that the reason was that they could not draw or make art. Some said that they did not like art, were not concerned with art, or that they didn't think about it outside of art class. One thing that I noticed among the 'no' group was that there were several students who said no because they identified as athletes, as though being an athlete automatically removed the possibility that a student could also be an artist. This reminded me of the "jock" and "artsy" stereotypes that existed in my own school experiences (and often in popular movies and television shows). These two groups are often considered diametrically opposed because the jocks are usually thought to be the most mainstream and popular, and the art kids are usually considered to be outsiders and weirdos.

My overall conclusions, after having researched middle schoolers' attitudes about art both in educational literature and in the classroom I worked in, are a bit different than I anticipated, but remain somewhat the same. I have begun feeling more hopeful that the different ways we can teach students about art may help them to feel more accepting of and competent in their own artistic capabilities, and therefore more motivated to create art, both inside and outside of the art classroom.

I do believe the assumptions our society holds about art and artists affect kids' feelings of competence. This seemed most apparent to me when I saw the student responses to my survey, especially in their responses regarding who they thought of when they thought of artists, and in their responses regarding whether they considered themselves to be artists. While their attitudes about what made drawings "good" or what skills artists need to be considered "good" seemed to be rather open and non-judgmental, they didn't seem to hold themselves to their own standards. Many of them still seem to hold their own art to the standards set by Western culture. According to Jean Ellen Jones, "Students who adopt a view of intelligence and skill as a fixed entity [an idea which has been reinforced by our culture and educational system] expend their efforts seeking validation of their ability rather than focusing on increasing their competence." (Jones, 1997)

After seeing so many students lacking confidence and motivation to create art, I feel that it is extremely important that art educators find ways to reach the kids who sigh deeply and claim that they can't draw, when the truth is that they can indeed draw, they are often just afraid to try because they are afraid of failure.

It is difficult to engage students in art if they are not interested in what is being taught. This is why it is important to know what methods your students are interested in using and what themes they may be interested in exploring. There is value in being mindful of what kind of art work students tend to make on their own time, because then teachers have an idea of what students are interested in making. (Haanstra, 2010)

Art created in school is often quite different from art made at home. In the article *Self-Initiated Art Work and School Art*, Folkert Haanstra identifies some of the most widely used self-initiated art forms as: applied arts (greeting cards, websites, fashion design, earrings, creation/decoration of functional items, etc), popular culture (comic books, manga, graffiti), personal experience (pets, holidays, emotions, wishes and dreams/“me as a pop star”), and traditional art (landscape, portrait, still life, abstract). Utilizing these forms and/or themes in the classroom, or at least offering them as options, may be useful in engaging students who feel incompetent or disinterested. (Haanstra, 2010)

Teachers should trusting of their students, willing to give them the power of choice in what they want to work on. I believe that empowering students often has the result of helping them to feel more motivated in what they are working on. I believe that teachers should trust that their students are intelligent and capable, and provide them with projects that are challenging and complex. According to Jean Ellen Jones, “The task must be considered to be of at least medium level difficulty. The more difficult it is perceived to be, the more impact it will have on self-confidence when a person is successful.” (Jones, 1997)

Students should be given the chance to work autonomously if they choose to, but there is evidence that students who have lower levels of confidence in their artistic skills often work well collaboratively. Collaboration allows students to work together to find solutions. It is beneficial because it provides them with the opportunity to learn from each other and it helps them to build the extremely important transferable skills of working in groups learn more and to solve problems. (Pavlou, 2006)

In art educators' attempts at creating higher confidence in students, the key is to help students build skills that will help them to endure the often frustrating process of art-making, "teaching them the basic skill of reflecting long enough to define the problem, propose solutions, and evaluate their results" (Jones, 1997). Now perhaps I should follow my own advice and the advice of the art educators I have researched.



(comic by

Kate Leth)

MS. GILCHRIST'S ART QUESTIONNAIRE

Name:

Grade:

1. What do you think makes a drawing "good"? Please list 2 or more qualities.
2. What skills /abilities do you think a "good" artist should possess? Please list 2 or more.
3. Are there any personal characteristics, qualities, or emotions that you associate with artists? If so, please list them here.
4. Do you believe that artists are born or made? Both? Neither? Please explain why you think so.
5. Do you have a favorite artist? If so, who? And what do you like about them?
6. Do you consider yourself to be an artist? Why or why not?

THANK YOU FOR YOUR RESPONSES!

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