

ART EDUCATION

Section 3: What Excellent Visual Arts Teaching Looks Like

What Excellent Visual Arts Teaching Looks Like: Balanced, Interdisciplinary, and Meaningful

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Interweavings: What Excellent Visual Arts Teaching Looks Like

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Visible Threads: Excellence in the Higher Education Classroom

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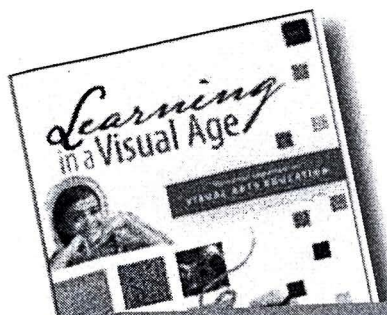
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What Excellent Visual Arts Teaching Looks Like: Balanced, Interdisciplinary, and Meaningful

Renee Sandell

“As a qualitative language, art explores how, in contrast to what is, by enabling people to meaningfully create and respond to images.”

Excellent visual arts teaching for 21st-century learners increasingly combines technology with artistic knowledge and skills—a combination that has already transformed the nature as well as nurture of contemporary visual arts education in and out of the public schools (NAEA, 2009). In today’s participatory culture, the preoccupation with acts of transformation (e.g., “makeovers” of bodies, fashion, and spaces), fascination with talent (e.g., in music, dance, and cooking), incessant demand for innovation, and habitual self-revelation through blogging and social networking combine to compel the need for greater clarity and access to creative expression and critical response. These often are expressed through divergent and convergent thinking abilities—interactive visual thinking skills that shape meanings in school and society. Today’s “screenagers,” who are rapidly becoming tomorrow’s citizens, progressively require capabilities to encode and decode meaning in response to society’s plethora of images, ideas, and media of the past, as well as contemporary elements of our increasingly complex visual world. This section explores how balanced, interdisciplinary, and meaningful pedagogical approaches contribute to excellent visual arts teaching that fosters development of visual literacy needed by all learners from “cradle to grave.”



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Examine evidence for the capacities that art education develops in students and what it can prepare them to do in *Learning in a Visual Age*.

In developing visually literate citizens with visual arts knowledge, skills, and habits of mind, excellent visual arts teaching must engage all learners with art in a myriad of forms, ideas, and purposes. As a qualitative language, art explores *how*, in contrast to *what is*, by enabling people to meaningfully create and respond to images.

Excellent visual arts teaching helps learners navigate through our visual world using two qualitative and interlinked experiential processes: creative expression and critical response. Through the *transformative* process of **creative expression**, visual learners generate artistic ideas that can be elaborated, refined, and finally shaped into meaningful visual images and structures. Through the *informative* process of **critical response**, visual learners perceive, interpret, and finally judge ideas connected to visual imagery and structures both past and present. Fully engaging students with these processes occurs through three interactive “studio thinking” structures: demonstration-lecture, students-at-work, and critique (Hetland, Winner, Veenema, & Sheridan, 2007). Informed by research, excellent visual arts teaching cultivates eight studio habits of mind that help individuals learn: develop craft, engage and persist, envision, express, observe, reflect, stretch and explore, and understand the art world. These habits of mind develop essential 21st-century literacy and life skills in all students.

Excellent Visual Arts Teaching is Balanced

In contrast to stereotypical “make and take” school art projects, art is a vital and core subject that should be seen as balanced, interdisciplinary, and grounded in meaning and inspiration. Furthermore, traditional overemphasis on formal qualities (in terms of studio materials, as well as art elements or design principles) is insufficient in a digital global world where social and other forms of communicative media are prevalent in daily life.

By using a balanced approach to studying form, theme, and context of an artwork, learners can create as well as discern layers of meaning in visual language, as revealed in the following equation: Form+Theme+Context (FTC) = Art (Sandell, 2006, 2009). In exploring **form**, or *how the work “is,”* learners differentiate an artist’s many structural decisions, embedded in the creative process, that lead to a final product. By examining **theme**, or *what the work is about*, learners explore what the artist expresses through a selected

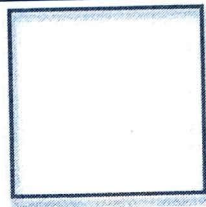
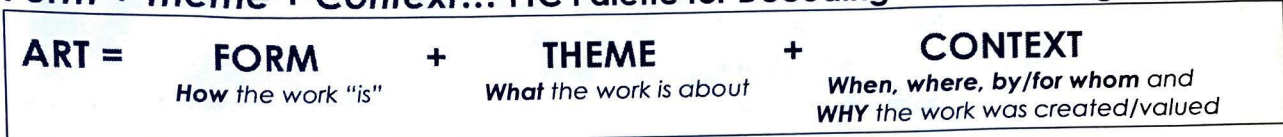
overarching concept or “Big Idea” (Walker, 2001) that reveals the artist’s expressive viewpoint relating art to life as well as other disciplines. In investigating **context(s)**, or *when, where, by/for whom, and why the art was created (and valued)*, learners comprehend the authentic nature of artwork by probing the conditions for and under which the art was created from our contemporary perspective, as well as those of foreign and previous cultures.

“Teachers and others can use FTC palettes to encode and decode a variety of phenomena...”

With contextual information, learners can perceive the intention and purpose of the artwork. Their abilities to explore, interpret, and evaluate art is enhanced by identifying the personal, social, cultural, historical, artistic, educational, political, spiritual, and other contexts that influence creation and understanding of an artwork. As learners distinguish how the form and theme work together within specific contexts, they see how a balance of qualities shapes layers of meaning, revealing the artwork’s nature as well as its significance and relevance. Learners’ insights, assessments, and questions resulting from balanced FTC exploration can lead to deeper engagement, understanding, and appreciation of art and its relationship to other areas of study—and life itself.

Balanced FTC methodology may be made visually accessible through the FTC palette, a graphic organizer that contains both discipline-specific and interdisciplinary criteria to deepen learner engagement and connections (see figure 1). Learners can use this tool with any work of art, such as a painting, to uncover visual evidence through observed formal qualities (e.g., line, color, composition, scale, style), explore relationships embedded in thematic qualities (e.g., big ideas represented and connected to other artworks, art forms, and subject areas), and discern various types of significance and relevance rooted in contextual qualities (e.g., historical period, circumstances, force, and value). Designed to activate divergent and convergent thinking by generating and “mixing” information, the FTC palette helps learners make interdisciplinary connections while inspiring open-ended and deeper inquiry. Teachers and others can use FTC palettes to encode and decode a variety of phenomena, including literature and music along with art lessons, museums, and

Form + Theme + Context... FTC Palette for Decoding and Encoding Visual Art



Title: _____

How does a balance of formal, thematic, and contextual qualities **SHAPE** layers of meaning?

FORMAL

+

THEMATIC

+

CONTEXTUAL

Actual Composition:

Art Elements (line, shape, color, texture, value, space);

Design Principles (emphasis, balance, harmony, variety, movement, rhythm, proportion, unity):

2D&3D Qualities:

Size/Scale:

Media/ Materials:

Processes/Methods:

Skills:

Style:

Other:

Broad Subject/**BIG IDEA**:

Subject Matter:

Point of View:

Visual Sources:

Art Historical References:

Literary Sources:

Other Arts Connections:

- Music
- Theater
- Dance
- Film & New Media

Other Subject Areas:

- ⇒ Math
- ⇒ Language Arts
- ⇒ Science
- ⇒ Social Studies
- ⇒ Physical Education
- ⇒ Vocational Education

WHEN:

WHERE:

BY/FOR WHOM:

WHY:

Intention/Purpose(s):

Significance/Relevance:

- ◆ Personal
- ◆ Social
- ◆ Cultural
- ◆ Historical
- ◆ Artistic
- ◆ Educational
- ◆ Political
- ◆ Spiritual
- ◆ Other

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<http://naea.digication.com/FTC/Home/>

FTC Insights, Assessments and Questions:

Figure 1: Form+Theme+Context: FTC Palette for Encoding and Decoding Visual Art. ©2012 Renee Sandell.

other matter to discern meaning by equally rebalancing formal structures with thematic relationships and significant/relevant contexts.

Excellent Visual Arts Teaching is Interdisciplinary

A balanced approach to FTC reveals art's interdisciplinary nature that correlates with the sciences and humanities, among other disciplines, connecting to life past and present. While the teaching of art in the schools traditionally has been limited in terms of instructional time and curricular emphasis, this qualitative language has natural and vital linkages with all school disciplines. According to John Goldonowicz (1985):

Like French or Spanish, art is a language that can be learned and understood.

It is a form of communication that one can learn to read and speak through study and practice. Reading art means understanding a visual statement.

Speaking art means creating a visual statement. When art seems strange or meaningless, it is only that this language is yet to be understood. (p. 17)

Drawing multiple connections between art and other subjects to include English, science, mathematics, physical education, social studies, music, and religion, Goldonowicz concludes that "art can communicate that which is universal and that for which there are no words" (p. 17).

When "read" in terms of multiple connections between their forms, themes, and contexts, artworks easily relate to other disciplines of study such as history, science, and language arts. For example, the *Bayeux Tapestry* is a visual historical document; its narrative of the Battle of Hastings in 1066 depicts the events leading up to the Norman conquest of England, as well as the events of the invasion itself. The *Bayeux Tapestry* is an embroidered cloth—not an actual tapestry woven on a vertical loom—measuring 1.6 feet by 224.3 feet. Annotated in Latin, the needlework narrative also has recorded scientific significance: It includes a representation of Halley's Comet, which is seen from Earth at 75-year intervals, as a strange star at which the people gaze in fear. Similar artworks can enlarge learners' exploration of fiber artworks from diverse historical periods and cultures. Examples include Hmong story cloths; Huicholl yarn paintings; Mola appliqués; Asante Adrinka cloth; Amish quilts; Miriam Schapiro's *femme* paintings;

Christo and Jeanne-Claude's *The Gates Project* in New York City's Central Park; the *NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt*, the largest ongoing community arts project in the world; and designed fashion creations on *Project Runway* and other television programs.

In *Curriculum 21: Essential Education for a Changing World*, Heidi Hayes Jacobs (2010) observes of the arts: "central to becoming an educated person is the cultivation of an aesthetic sensibility and the capacity to give form to ideas and emotions" (p. 55). This observation points to the need to reexamine the arts and its relationship to traditional school disciplines. Excellent visual arts teaching helps learners make interdisciplinary connections between art and life, while developing visual-communication skills leading to authenticity and multiple forms of literacy that will facilitate community interaction and global understanding.

Excellent Visual Arts Teaching is Meaningful

Focusing on the exploration of art's meaning as derived from a balanced and interdisciplinary FTC approach, excellent visual arts teaching draws on art's sensory nature to inspire individual enlightenment while building community. Nurturing Daniel Pink's (2005) six new senses of *design, story, symphony, empathy, play, and meaning* for a 21st-century "whole new mind," excellent art teaching helps learners develop visual literacy, defined as "the ability to interpret, use, appreciate, and create images and video using both conventional and 21st-century media in ways that advance thinking, decision making, communication, and learning" (Visual Literacy, 2005). Delving deeper into the nature and pedagogical benefits of these six senses, a learner who demonstrates a cultivated sense of...

Design... can create and appreciate human-made objects that go beyond function and may be perceived as beautiful, whimsical, extraordinary, unique, and/or emotionally engaging;

Excellent visual arts teaching helps learners to work with a range of materials, decipher orientation and place in the world, make visual choices ranging from tattoo images and their body placement to the selection and organization of spaces, objects, and materials.

Story... communicates effectively with others by creating as well as appreciating a compelling narrative;

Excellent visual arts teaching helps a learners develop an awareness of history and culture, understand text and subtext in the news and media, gain insight into plot and subplot as well as conflict and resolution, exchange ideas with enhanced interaction and transparency for clearer connection.

Symphony... synthesizes ideas, sees the big picture, crosses boundaries, and combines disparate pieces into a meaningful whole;

Excellent visual arts teaching helps learners build deeper understandings and relate learning in and out of school, perceive one's self as an evolving life learner, able to discern the meaning of "friendship" from social media, and grasp relationships among conflicting ideologies.

Empathy... understands another's point of view, is able to forge relationships and feels compassion for others;

Excellent visual arts teaching helps build tolerance and foster kindness, consideration, and caring while reversing cyber- and other forms of bullying, gossip and antipathy.

Play... creatively engages in problem-solving, benefits personally and socially from flexibility, humor, risk-taking, curiosity, inventive thinking, and games;

Excellent visual arts teaching helps make learning fun, collaborative, experimental, and assists learners in taking risks, lightening up from self-criticism, and taking oneself too seriously.

Meaning... pursues more significant endeavors, desires, and enduring ideas, has a sense of purpose, inspiration, fulfillment, and responsibility in making informed choices toward higher-order thinking skills and transformation;

Excellent visual arts teaching underscores the value of learning experiences, builds pride in contributions given and received, fosters responsibility (vs. cheating) and respect for teachers and parents invested in the development of every student, developing into an accountable citizen of the world. (NAEA, n. d., p. 2)

Excellent visual arts teaching is balanced, interdisciplinary, and meaningful; as a result, every art lesson can be viewed as a work of art on its own. Through art lessons that are designed to help learners fully visualize—creatively express and critically respond—at each developmental level, excellent art teaching can readily enhance all six senses in a single lesson. This results not only in the creation of hundreds of uniquely expressive artworks, but also the ability to make informed judgments leading to sensitivity, understanding, and appreciation by future citizens in our visual age.

Mindful of technology's prevailing role, constant evolution, and worldwide impact, art education's 21st-century emphasis on visual thinking for literacy looks remarkably different from its 20th-century focus on art products and their display. Excellent visual arts teaching holds a crucial and central place in the curriculum in cultivating human potential both today and tomorrow: It directly engages all learners in perceiving our increasingly visual world to discover "*so much MORE than what you see...*" (www.arteducators.org/advocacy). The nature of that discovery transfers readily to other school subjects and qualitative life experience locally and around the globe.

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