The Decline of Art Means the Decline of Future Innovators

As we rise to meet President Obama’s call to educate a nation of innovators, we must consider the role of art in learning. Children are our future architects, fashion designers, industrial designers, and visionaries. As such, today’s art classroom is positioned to inspire leaders in a visual world by encouraging participation in programs that incite the imagination and promote originality.

While traditional learning strategies that increase knowledge and awareness remain important, fresh ideas that guide fields of art, technology, and science require inventive thinking. Successful art curricula balance admiration and respect for old knowledge and old masters with finding value in contemporary contexts and shaping the new. Through design, students can chart new worlds, tell new stories, and develop fresh ways of doing things. Art instruction anticipates a need in the professional world to consider individual terms of contribution and creative terms of fulfillment. Successful student artists make for successful professionals because they’ve embraced a confidence in their ability to change and transform.

Intuitive Designers and Innovators
Art classes can educate students to be leaders in a visual world by encouraging hands-on experimentation and evoking the wealth of possibilities alive in everyday, common objects. And playhouses, for example, children graduate as interior designers. Free-block players learn the principles of gravity and innovate with forms in space as architects and city planners. While dressing forms and play figures, students gain access to the fashion runway and roll out red-carpet innovations on their stuffed animals. Young Steven Spielbergs assemble casts and chart actions, directing legions of play figures in unique, staged settings. As birthdays come and go, the simple joys of preparing presents inspires wrapping artists and packaging designers.

Design explorations in the art classroom provide our media-saturated students with opportunities to explore through creative actions and hands-on discovery. For student designers, every object has value and importance, even those items disregarded and discarded by everyday users. Art class innovators experience the transformational qualities of art, designing the complex out of the simple, the giant out of the small, and the extraordinary out of the ordinary. When students are trusted to design the new, they become idea people with amazing innovative contributions.

Fostering Centers of Innovation
The complete transformation of an art classroom into a center for innovation requires more than a banner above the door. School principals must support art teacher’s initiatives to make the class a unique place, particularly in the elementary school. In fact, it takes a whole school to nourish creative appetites. The cafeteria staff, custodians, and librarians, along with the administration, can contribute by helping to stock the art classroom with unlikely treasures. These people can learn to set aside as “innovation donations” what they would otherwise discard.

Also, school supervisors should be open to modified classrooms. Rooms where students work on the floor and build under the table, for example, should not be compared with other classrooms. Changes in the room-scape are the norm, and these changes work to meet the needs of different plans and blueprints. On a daily basis, innovation may require that tables be reconfigured or set aside to allow large canvases to stretch across the room. Movement and dialogue facilitate innovation. And in studio labs, students acting as individual artists or as members of design teams will be out of seats, lively, and active. Educators should respect these signs of artists at work and should have tolerance for disorder.

Art teachers should lead by example by supporting with open minds the activities that go on within student art labs. Not all efforts are synchronized, and what appears chaotic could be, in fact, the signs of productive individual research.
These flexible efforts do not discount the value of formal teaching observations. Still, art teachers should find it instructive to act as visitors and be refreshed by artists in the room. The principal must also show support by visiting on the floor with inventors and witnessing the students’ vast powers of innovation. Adult audiences should not always expect finished designs, but seek to understand young creative visions by asking questions and listening to extraordinary stories. For the principal, the art classroom can become a model for ideas that pollinate other parts of the school.

Challenge for the Future
To teach art is to prepare students to explore the world, to collect and gather objects and ideas, and to come to class with creative concerns to express and work out. A good teacher will also stress the positive value of skepticism that prompts students to ask “Why?” and “How else?” As independence is a quality invaluable to a successful artist, it remains something to foster early, during the elementary school years. When innovative students in art classrooms learn to think for themselves, they become their own art teachers, constantly growing in their crafts.

While we, as a nation, are tempted to look beyond ourselves for cheap manufacturing solutions, we need to turn inward to encourage and appreciate our innovative thinkers. The art classroom represents a powerful force that helps to move science, technology, and creativity forward. In centers for innovation, young artists and designers quickly learn that art is not a dead artifact to preserve in museums, but something to constantly manipulate and re-imagine. Put to work, these student artists manipulate and re-imagine our tomorrow.

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