

TEACHING: A NOBLE PROFESSION EXCELLENCE IN TEACHING ART

Michael Day
Brigham Young University

Abstract

Most art teachers enter the profession with exemplary motives: to change lives, serve others, and make a positive contribution. But, what preparation is needed for success? The author takes the position that rigorous preparation is required for success and excellence in art teaching. The necessary preparation includes knowledge of subject content, understanding of the range of learners, and abilities in the areas of curriculum development, instruction, and assessment of student progress. The discussion concludes with the assertion that art teaching is a noble, and very rewarding profession.

Keywords

Art teacher preparation, Teaching skill, Professional standards,
Noble profession

Those who choose to be teachers have chosen a high calling with opportunity to do much good in the world. Teaching is a noble and a good profession. For many, teaching is much more than just a job, a way to earn a paycheck. Being a teacher has long been viewed as a calling, something that one is destined to do as a means of life fulfillment. Kozol (1995) explained:

I became a teacher because children make me happy. They fill me with a sense of mystery about the goodness of existence, a feeling of magic, a feeling of amazement at the beauty of humanity . . . (ix).

Making a living is important, but for many teaching art is also a way to make a difference, to make a positive contribution to society. It is an opportunity to change the lives of individual students, to help make their lives better. For many in the art education profession, teaching is a means to share their passion for art and to bring that passion into the classroom with the students. Eisner (1998) wrote:

The arts taught me that form, craft, and imagination mattered; and that surprise could be a friend, not an inconvenient intruder. Art . . . helped shape my attitude toward the life of the mind and made possible the satisfactions I receive from well-crafted form (4).

Richard Harsh, a high school ceramics teacher, teaches in a challenging school in a tough neighborhood of South Central Los Angeles. Mr. Harsh is one of ten teachers featured in a series of videos created for the Getty Center for Education in the Arts (1995). The video camera captures Harsh in his ceramics classroom, crowded with students busily working on their ceramics projects. Clay, glazes, clay tools, and brushes are laid out on the tables. Mr. Harsh teaches primarily in English with occasional explanations in the Spanish language for the many Spanish-speaking students in the class. A veteran of more than 20 years as an art teacher, Richard Harsh has maintained his enthusiasm for teaching and his passion for art:

If it wasn't for my wife I would never leave this room. I would sleep on these tables and bath in that sink. And the reason is: I don't love this place, I adore this place. Other teachers say, "Oh, thank God it's Friday," and I go "No, thank God it's Monday" so I can come back with these kids.

A lot of kids will walk out that door in June, and they'll look at me and say, "You know, Harsh (pauses with emotion), thank you for the art history, thank you for the production, thank you for the projects, but the thing you taught me most of all was how to love myself. You

taught me to finally learn that I am a person that's worthwhile and I can do anything in this world if I want to."

And that's what the gift of art is: To open your eyes, not only to the world, but also to your own potential, which is just infinite. (Day1995a).

Many art teachers like Richard Harsh view their teaching position as a means to serve others, to help children and young people learn and grow.

Sandy Walker-Craig, another teacher whose work is captured on video, is an elementary classroom teacher in California. The camera captures her teaching a lesson on Vincent Van Gogh to her first grade class. She takes her small students outside to look at the color of the sky in the morning. Back in the classroom she sits in a chair and shows color reproductions of Van Gogh landscapes to the children, who are sitting on the carpeted floor. The classroom is visually exciting with examples of the students' work and many, many color prints of paintings by Van Gogh. The children are wide-eyed and attentive as they discuss the paintings and answer questions about the color of a Van Gogh sky compared to the blue sky they observed earlier.

Ms. Walker-Craig is calm and confident. She speaks to the children in a soft voice. Next, she demonstrates by making a painting of a sky using tempera paints. Soon the children are putting on adult-sized shirts that serve as painting smocks and are actively involved in their own paintings of skies—and anything else they choose to depict. Sandy Walker-Craig discusses her commitment to teaching:

First graders are like sponges. They're just ready to learn anything and everything. Sometimes I get the feeling that I need to teach them everything because this is the time they're ready to learn it (Day 1995b).

It is, perhaps, a paradox that accomplished teachers like Harsh and Walker-Craig make teaching look easy! This is true with many pursuits that require performance: The easy grace of a ballet dancer; the cyclist who moves swiftly up the mountain road, leaving others behind; the actor who expresses deep emotion that moves an audience. The best performers cre-

ate their magic effortlessly, or so it appears. What is not seen is the rigorous preparation, the years of experience, and the honing of innate abilities.

TEACHING: A
NOBLE
PROFESSION
EXCELLENCE IN
TEACHING ART

A Person off the Street

Some people believe that anyone can teach. They believe that simply because a person has spent years in the classroom as a student, that they know how to teach. They believe that virtually any person off the street might be able to enter the school classroom and perform well as a teacher. This perspective is known as the “smart person myth,” and it has influenced some school districts in the United States as well as education programs in other countries. This myth holds that teacher preparation programs are unnecessary; that if a person has knowledge of a subject such as mathematics or art, that person can enter a school classroom as a teacher. They only need to know more than the students they are supposed to teach.

What a Teacher Needs to Know

However, both research and theory disprove this myth. “Just being a caring person does not mean one is a good teacher” (National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future 1996, p. 6). Good intentions are important but are not sufficient. Successful teaching requires much more than knowledge of subject matter. When teacher preparation and teaching practice are viewed simplistically, lay individuals are encouraged to enter teaching with little regard for the rigors of substantive preparation. John Goodlad (1994) decried the low regard for teacher preparation by persons such as:

. . . the physics professor’s wife who graduated cum laude in English before raising a family and now wants to teach; the legislator’s niece who does not want to take “those silly education courses”; the retired colonel who taught military logistics in the Marines and now wants to ease the shortage of mathematics teachers (159).

Contrary to the “smart person myth,” teaching is a very complex and demanding profession. It requires rigorous preparation and careful clinical supervision. William Ayers (1995) wrote:

Teaching is difficult, demanding, draining work. . . . To teach takes commitment, strength, struggle, a willingness to grow and develop. It is certainly not for the faint of heart. Becoming a teacher is hard work (2-3).

For persons with a motivation to teach and a desire to serve others, the rewards of teaching are worth the rigors of preparation.

Professional Standards

As with any profession, such as medicine or law, educators have developed professional standards intended to raise the level of practice and to recognize qualified practitioners. One level of standards is that required for certification to teach which, in the U.S., is controlled by the respective boards of education in the 50 states (DiBlasio 1997). Although each state controls its own certification, most accept the credentials of teachers moving from other states. Recently, the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) developed standards for preparation of classroom teachers and art specialists (INTASC 2003).

A major event in general education that also affected art education occurred with the passage by the U.S. Congress of the *Goals 2000: Educate America Act*. Immediately following adoption of this landmark legislation, the Consortium of National Arts Education Associations, received federal and private funding for the purpose of developing voluntary national standards for music, theater, dance and art education. As a member of the consortium, the National Art Education Association (NAEA) wrote and published the *National Standards for the Visual Arts* (1994), which outlined in broad terms "What Every Young American Should Know and Be Able to Do in the Visual Arts." Most of the 50 states and numerous school districts subsequently endorsed or adopted the National Standards. Wide acceptance of the standards conveyed a message to art teachers that they would be expected to teach the content promised in the standards.

Students cannot be expected to learn what their teachers do not know. The substance and rigor expected of students of the arts must therefore be preceded and paralleled by a commensurate

focus on substance and rigor in regard to the act of teaching (NAEA 1996, p. 4).

TEACHING: A
NOBLE
PROFESSION
EXCELLENCE IN
TEACHING ART

Wide acceptance of the *National Standards* also placed an expectation for reform in art teacher preparation programs in colleges and universities. As the professional leader in art education, the NAEA updated their decades old standards and published *Standards for Art Teacher Preparation* (Henry 1999).

Because the standards for art teacher preparation are comprehensive and rigorous, the ordinary person off the street, the smart but untrained person stands little chance of meeting them. For success and excellence in teaching, a person needs to be professionally prepared. The NAEA *Standards for Art Teacher Preparation* outline qualifications for prospective art teachers in the following areas:

- Content of Art
- Knowledge of Students
- Curriculum Development
- Instruction
- Assessment in Art Education
- Professional Responsibility

Art Content

A comprehensive content-centered approach to art education is the most prominent approach in the U.S. It is embodied in the national standards for student learning and in the art curriculum guides for most of the 50 states. According to the comprehensive approach, art teachers must be knowledgeable not only in methods for *making art*, but also in the areas of *art history and culture*, *art criticism*, and *aesthetics*. Art teachers need to be familiar with the prominent roles the visual arts play within society and culture, historically and in contemporary life. These are demanding requirements for prospective teachers, who are required to broaden their study of the visual arts beyond studio competency. Adherence to this approach over the past decade has revealed that many teachers have special interests in one or more of the art disciplines and that, as a result, the instruction art teachers are able to provide for their students can be rich and exciting. A recent national study of high school art teachers indicated that 96% continue to create their own art,

95% visit art galleries and museums, and 69% continue to study, critique, and write about art. More than half engage in advanced study in aesthetics and art criticism, and nearly 60% continue to study art history (Day 2001, p. 15). It appears that the art teachers of this era are well matched to the comprehensive approach to teaching art exemplified in the *National Standards* for student learning.

Knowledge of Learners

Schools in the United States educate a wide diversity of students, who represent every racial, ethnic, cultural, and religious group in the world. Many speak languages other than English when they arrive in school. All students are promised an equal education, regardless of their language background, intelligence, disability, or other variable in their life. Art teachers almost always teach a diverse student population. Accomplished teachers quickly gain awareness of the range of learners in their classrooms. Teachers without this knowledge are at a disadvantage, particularly as they encounter students who require special attention. Balaban explained:

Understanding children is every teacher's challenge. The elements that foster this knowledge include self-awareness, recognition of how children grow and learn, familiarity with educational theories, time for reflection, and comprehension of how and what to observe and record (49)

Prospective teachers can learn by reading about various ages and categories of learners and through classroom observations of teachers and students in typical situations. They can observe the actions of experienced teachers in response to the diverse needs of individual learners. These experiences prepare prospective art teachers for their own supervised practice teaching assignment, which provides them with the necessary experience to become certified and to seek a teaching position of their own.

Gardner's 8 Intelligences

The theoretical understandings teachers gain from study and observation interact with the practical experiences they have with their own students. An example of role theory plays in this interaction can be found with the work of

psychologist Howard Gardner, who has informed educators regarding the breadth and depth of human intelligence. There are many types of intelligence, not only the type most readily measured by standardized pencil and paper tests. Art teachers have observed students who excel in art but struggle in other classes. Music teachers, physical education teachers, and others have noted similar patterns of accomplishment by students in their classes. Gardner has provided a helpful explanation that is generally accepted by the education establishment. He has identified, described, and provided exemplars for 8 types of intelligence: Linguistic intelligence; logical-mathematical intelligence; spatial intelligence; bodily kinesthetic intelligence; musical intelligence; interpersonal intelligence; intrapersonal intelligence; and naturalist intelligence (Hurwitz & Day 2001, p. 11).

Gardner does not claim that these 8 abilities or intelligences circumscribe all of human intelligence. They are prominent examples and can be verified in the lives of persons who have excelled in one or more. It is important for all educators to realize that every learner has a unique profile of abilities. Schools should attend to all areas within which students need to learn and achieve. The focus of education should be broader rather than narrower and should include significant learning in the arts.

Learners with Disabilities

Art teachers often have students with disabilities in their classes and they need to be able to recognize the range of disabilities and accommodate the needs of disabled learners. Following are several terms from the official list of disabilities provided by the federal government in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 1997):

Autism means a developmental disability significantly affecting verbal and nonverbal communication and social interaction, generally evident before age 3.

Deafness means a hearing impairment that is so severe that the child is impaired in processing linguistic information through hearing, with or without amplification.

Mental retardation means significantly subaverage general intellec-

tual functioning, existing concurrently with deficits in adaptive behavior and manifested during the developmental period.

Orthopedic impairment means a severe orthopedic impairment, including impairments caused by congenital anomaly, impairments caused by disease, and impairments from other causes.

Specific learning disability means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations (Hurwitz & Day 72).

These few terms from the IDEA list provide a glimpse of the challenges that face all teachers as they work with the full range of learners. Educators need to recognize disabilities and communicate appropriately with and about the diverse student population. Teachers are not expected to be therapists for students' disabilities, but are expected to adapt the learning program to meet the needs of individual learners.

Gifted & Talented

Students identified as gifted and talented also need special attention from the teacher. Numerous misconceptions surround the concepts of "talent" and "giftedness" (Clark & Zimmerman 2004). Research has revealed that very bright or intellectually gifted students tend to have problems in school if the pace is too slow and the curriculum is too easy for their abilities. Unless they are appropriately challenged, bright students can become bored, distracted, exhibit behavior problems, and in some cases drop out of school. Accomplished teachers are aware of methods for identifying gifted students and have experience in meeting their unique needs. They recognize the wide variations of learning styles and abilities among their students and accommodate these differences in their classrooms. Accomplished art teachers develop a repertoire of teaching methods and strategies that allow them to teach art effectively to all the children.

Teaching Skills

In order to teach a comprehensive art curriculum as outlined in the *National Standards for the Visual Arts*, teachers must employ a range of teaching methods such as: slide and lecture, demonstration of art techniques, discussions, group study, supervision, interviews, and others. Accomplished teachers use these methods fluently, responding to the interests of students within the unpredictable and unique environment of the art classroom. One important responsibility of an art teacher is to create and maintain a positive learning environment. Good art teachers encourage visual learning. The art classroom is a place where students can learn many things visually at their own pace, just by being in the room.

Another teacher in the Getty video series, Evelyn Pender, teaches art to elementary students in the state of Florida. She recognized that her 4th grade students needed to learn more about other cultures, and she noted that they knew very few women artists. She developed a curriculum unit that focuses on Japanese printmakers and the American artist, Mary Cassatt, whose work was influenced by the Japanese. Ms. Pender is accomplished in many aspects of art teaching. One segment of the video demonstrates the fluidity of her teaching, her ability to move from one teaching method to another in response to her students (Day 1995c).

As she leads a discussion with the students prior to demonstrating printmaking techniques, the teacher stands before an array of art prints organized according to the theme of the lesson. The two parallel rows of prints are especially provocative for making comparisons. A visitor to the art classroom is able to visually observe the essential theme of the lesson, compare works of Japanese printmakers with similar works by Mary Cassatt, note the criteria and skills that students will attempt to apply, view the tools and materials they will use to create their own prints, and see examples of work created by students.

As she leads a review and class discussion, Ms. Pender: a) asks questions that require only simple correct answers such as "genre"; b) asks questions that require more thought and more elaborate responses; c) adds new information about the topics; d) reinforces and supports students who volunteer responses; and e) asks students to point to specific works in support of their comments.

Ms. Pender has completed the discussion of the prints, reviewed criteria for the students' prints, and now she is ready to demonstrate how they will design and cut their blocks for printing. But wait! A student raises his hand and asks a question.

What will she do? Will she:

- Ask the student to put his hand down and go ahead with the demonstration?
- Tell the student to talk to her later?
- Give him a quick answer and go ahead with the demonstration?
- Show the student real respect and respond to his question?

As viewers of the video observe, Evelyn Pender not only responds to the student, but she is so flexible and confident in her teaching that she continues the discussion and engages several other students. This teacher respects her students and they obviously return that respect in their attitude towards her.

Curriculum and Assessment

Art teachers often create curriculum units especially for their own school setting, facilities, and student population. They write lessons with essential components such as objectives, learning activities, and assessment of student progress. They write units of instruction with scope, sequence, valid content, and appropriate methods of inquiry. These units of instruction are organized around works of fine and applied art from a range of the world's eras and cultures. Good art teachers are prepared to relate, integrate, cooperate, and collaborate with other teachers to further their school's mission.

Like their colleagues across the curriculum, art teachers are asked to take full responsibility for evaluation and assessment. Teachers are expected to develop expertise in assessment as part of their professional preparation. Their understanding of assessment in art education should be commensurate with their competencies in curriculum and instruction. These three areas of teaching expertise are fully integrated in the best art classrooms. As often as possible, assessments of student progress in art include actual artworks, essays and critical responses, interpretations and evaluation of works of art, and other authentic tasks.

In her printmaking unit, Evelyn Pender derived criteria for the students' own printmaking from the works of adult artists. She helped students to understand the concept of "genre" as scenes from everyday life. The artists' use of pattern, point of view, and other visual aspects became criteria for the students' work. Pender explains the evaluation process:

Is this lesson easy to evaluate? Very, because the children do the evaluation. They are given criteria. They can see if they added enough ink, if they moved it when they pulled the print. They can experiment! I require them to do at least 5 prints. From those 5 prints they will pull one and will mount it themselves, write about it. They do the evaluation on that one.

Perhaps one of the highest levels of teaching accomplishment is to provide vivid, lasting memories of the learning experience. All teachers have the opportunity to do this, but perhaps art teachers have a special advantage. A fascinating example is the culminating activity for Sharon Seim's 7th grade class in a Nebraska middle school. Students have spent several weeks with Sharon's curriculum unit on contemporary art and the idea of making a social or political statement with art. Students have worked in groups to create floating islands that express ideas about the contemporary environment. Ms. Seim has asked students to donate personal objects to their "commentary island" scenes and to write a statement about the social issue upon which they based their work. The video shows the students launching their floating islands (with a fish-line attached so the islands can be retrieved) on a pond near the school. On this sunny day the students read their statements:

Student: Our island represents the destruction of the fragile rain forest bio. The wall represents the pushing out of civilization. The damaged trees show the effect of pollution on our forests. As you see, less than half of the rain forest is still green and standing. Our team members brought the following personal symbols to our island. Lindsay contributed the animals from her collection. They symbolize all the animals endangered by disappearance of the rain forest. Ashley contributed a rubber stamp as a symbol of the systematic way our wild places are being stamped out.

Student: It is our American dream that our generation might live to see a world that is clean and filled with peace.

When these students have their 10-year class reunion, which classes will they remember? Which learning experiences will they recall? I think these students will not only remember this experience in art class, but they will remember the concept they were learning at the time. Their lives were changed for the better as a result of this teacher's efforts. Sharon Seim made a contribution to the world through her students.

Summary and Conclusion

This discussion has touched briefly on some of the professional requirements for good teaching supported by examples of teaching practice by accomplished teachers. It has asserted that rigorous preparation is necessary for development of a strong corps of professional teachers, particularly teachers of art. We recognize that teaching can be "a joyful way to spend one's life. . . because when we feel satisfaction or exhilaration, we will often see it also in our children's eyes" (Kozol 1995, x).

Now let us speculate for a moment with numbers. If teachers such as Richard Harsh or Sharon Seim teach 5 periods a day and each class has 25 students, then they influence 125 students each semester, or about 250 each year. After 20 years of teaching, each will have changed the lives of about 5,000 students. Art teachers in elementary and middle schools often teach many more students. For a professor involved with preparing teachers, suppose he or she works with 20 prospective art teachers each year and continues for 20 years. The professor has influenced 400 art teachers and each art teacher will influence 5,000 students on the average. The influence of the professor over 20 years has the potential to reach 2,000,000 people.

These numbers are interesting, but they are not what motivates teachers on a daily basis. What motivates good teachers is their contributions to the students. When your students walk out of your classroom at the end of the term, when you know you have done your best to give them something of value, when you have shared your passion with them, and when you have seen them respond and grow, you understand the basic assertion of this article: Teaching is a noble profession.

References

- Ayers, W. (1995). *To become a teacher: Making a difference in children's lives*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Balaban, N. (1995). Seeing the child, knowing the person. In Ayers, W. (Ed.). *To become a teacher: Making a difference in children's lives*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Clark, G. & Zimmerman, E. (2004). *Teaching talented art students*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Consortium of National Arts Education Associations. (1996). *Teacher education for the arts disciplines: Issues raised by the National Standards for Arts Education*. Reston VA: Music Educators National Conference.
- Day, M. (1995a) *Viewers guide. Art education in action #1: The Aesthetic experience*. Video of Richard Harsh. Santa Monica, CA: Getty Center for Education in the Arts.
- Day, M. (1995b) *Viewers guide. Art education in action #3: Integrating the art disciplines*. Video of Sandy Walker-Craig. Santa Monica, CA: Getty Center for Education in the Arts.
- Day, M. (1995c) *Viewers guide. Art education in action #3: Integrating art history and art criticism*. Video of Evelyn Pender. Santa Monica, CA: Getty Center for Education in the Arts.
- Day, M. (1995d) *Viewers guide. Art education in action #2: Highlighting studio production and student social commentary*. Video of Sharon Seim. Santa Monica CA: Getty Center for Education in the Arts.
- Day, M. (Ed.). (1997). *Preparing Teachers of Art*. Reston, VA: National Art Education Association.
- Day, M. (2001). Forward. In National Art Education Association. *Art Teachers in Secondary Schools: A National Survey*. Reston, VA: NAEA.
- DiBlasio, M. K. (1997). Certification and licensure requirements for art education: Comparison of state system systems. In Day, M. (Ed.). *Preparing Teachers of Art*. Reston, VA: National Art Education Association.
- Eisner, E.W. (1998). *The kind of schools we need: Personal essays*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Getty Center for Education in the Arts. (1995). *Art education in action*. Santa

- Monica, CA: Getty Center for Education in the Arts. A set of 5 videotapes featuring ten art teachers in their own classrooms or in a museum setting.
- Goodlad, J. (1994). *Educational renewal: Better teachers, better schools*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Henry, C. (1999). *Standards for art teacher preparation*. Reston, VA: NAEA.
- Hurwitz, A. & Day, M. (2001). *Children and their art*. 7th edition. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- INTASC. (2003). *Model standards for licensing classroom teachers and specialists in the arts*. Washington D.C.: Council of Chief State School Officers.
- Kozol, J. (1995). Foreword. In Ayers, W. (Ed.). *To become a teacher: Making a difference in children's lives*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- National Art Education Association. (1994). *National Standards for the Visual Arts*. Reston, VA: NAEA.
- National Commission on Teaching and America's Future. (1996). *What matters most: Teaching for America's future*. New York: National Commission on Teaching and America's Future.

Correspondence concerning this article may be sent to the author at daybyday1313@comcast.net