



# CREATIVITY IN THE CLASSROOM

How can you not be passionate about teaching the visual arts and witness the development of creativity taking place in your learners? Here, **Alex Blaauw-Reenalda** of AISJ Pretoria shares her passion for using the arts to stimulate critical thinking and active learning.

For me, teaching art has only one main aim: to develop my students' ingenuity, imaginative insights, and new ideas. In order to understand how young people think, one of my favorite resources is the brain guru, JoAnne Deak. She is a preventive psychologist who specialized in brain development during the first six years of a child's life. Deak perceives the brain as a fantastic elastic band which needs to be stretched and shaped by learning new things. Learning something new causes the brain to develop more connections among the neurons. These connections help to stretch the brain and make it more elastic, so that it can hold more information and ideas.

The Visual Arts in particular enable me to design and develop assignments with a strong focus on creative thinking and how to identify and solve visual problems. It's an effective tool to introduce and stimulate new ideas and new ways of doing things, and thus stretching the elasticity of the brains. Consequently art should be exciting and thought provoking; it should inspire a natural curiosity to explore new media, new materials and develop new techniques and new skills, while stimulating problem solving and decision-making. This view is echoed by creativity expert Sir Ken Robinson, author of *The Element*, in a conversation with Educational Leadership: *'Not giving all the answers but giving the tools they need to find out what the answers might be or to explore new avenues.'*

Based on the above, it is highly possible that you might reconsider the lay-out of your art room. It is essential to offer your art students an inviting, supportive space of thinking and expression, designed to meet their needs, allowing them all necessary investigation, exploration and production, and providing the opportunity for ownership over their work and the creative process. Ownership refers to the value students derive from being included in the decision-making processes during a lesson. When students feel that their own voice matters, a subtle, yet important shift in perspective and energy occurs: they move from being a passive receiver to an active explorer which is precisely what we want to foster in our students.

Additionally, you may also reconsider your art units by beginning with the question, 'How can this art assignment facilitate 'brain stretching' and enhanced creativity?' To start with, keep in mind that the key for a successful art production depends on your personal commitment as a teacher. To do this, we as teachers must feel challenged to engage and exercise our own thought processes, allowing greater insight, productivity and reflective learning. Elliot Eisner, author of *'Cognition and Curriculum Reconsidered'* calls it 'cognitive flexibility'. Eisner emphasizes that we as artist-teachers need to develop this 'cognitive flexibility' continuously and promote artistic growth not only in our students but in ourselves as well. In developing interesting, stimulating, thought provoking art projects I investigated and explored a large variety of handbooks for primary and secondary art teachers, however one of my most valuable resources became *'Engaging the Adolescent Mind'* as well as *'From Ordinary to Extraordinary'*, both written by Ken Vieth (Montgomery High School in Skillman, New Jersey). Many of my units were inspired and shaped by Vieth's vision on art education and are based on the following criteria:

- The creative idea to be developed must stimulate both student and me
- Clear objectives yet allowing multiple outcomes
- Technical challenge, demanding physical skill and personal expression
- Opportunity for students to reflect/evaluate on what they have learned

Through the years I refined my strategies, with a stronger focus on abstract thinking; teaching skills and techniques in 'layers', including small experimental exercises depending on the needs of my students, approaching steadily a final, holistic end product. Since joining the International Baccalaureate Organization as a Visual Art examiner, I have been introduced to the IB Design cycle and have been developing my units according to the various steps of the design process. Closely related to Vieth's set of criteria, this tool gives students a clearly defined structure and guides them through the process of investigation, design, planning,

creation, and evaluation. Students learn to reflect on different explored resources and their visual potentials related to the theme/topic. They learn how to 'mix' diverse ideas of prominent contemporary artists, and invent ways how to express their personal intentions better: a personal developmental process which will lead them eventually to a different final art product than what they initially had in mind.

**The following are some practical strategies that incorporate some of these ideas:**

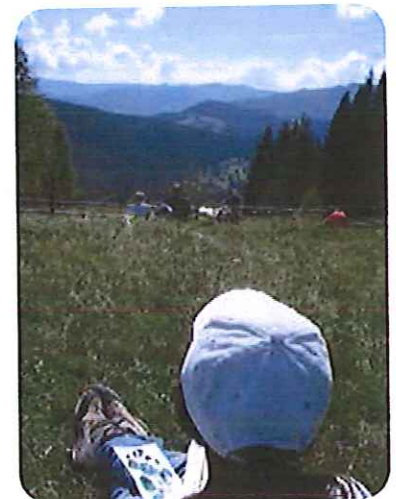
In your art room, do not provide colors other than primary colours and black and white. Be careful with black as the younger students tend to darken their projects very quickly. Students' brains will be stretched by solving their problems; making their own green, orange and purple. You will enjoy when all your students start to compare all these different greens/oranges/purples. As a result all end products will look different thanks to all these personal greens/oranges/purples.

Stimulate abstract thinking, focusing on form and shape outlined by air/forest/mountain/meadow. Students transfer investigated shapes and specific colors to bubble wrap blending colors on the outlines, within the bubbles.

Develop abstract thinking by stimulating 'to think big' and the grid technique, learning to measure, calculate and work with a ruler in order to enlarge self-portraits, after having manipulated original pictures with Photoshop.

Developing the 'eye' by designing masks based on African patterns. Students make masks of recycled material and papier-mâché. Before painting the masks, students explore African patterns and make a prototype-design (photocopy of the unpainted mask) which they use when transferring their design onto the papier-mâché mask. Students' brains will be stretched by carefully copying the design unto their mask.

Be always open-minded as a teacher, looking for new ideas, especially those that will relate and connect with what your students are already interested in. Introduced by my students and fascinated by the popular computer game 'Minecraft' I developed an architectural unit based on the famous Bauhaus' architect Mies van der Rohe and his Barcelona pavilion. In Part 1 students developed the plan and measurements of the pavilion through Minecraft. In Part 2, students applied the Minecraft technology to create three 3D images of their Barcelona pavilion from different perspectives. As a follow-up activity, students made a small model of the Barcelona pavilion to scale. To incorporate personal expression, students will create their own specific pattern (based on Oriental pattern motifs) on one of the main walls of the pavilion.



Building a Visual Arts course that develops creativity and design skills in students is, thus, more like painting from a blank canvas than painting by numbers, more like cooking from available ingredients than following a cookbook recipe. (*Understanding by Design, Professional Development Workbook*, by McTighe/Wiggins, 2004)

I hope the above inspires you as a teacher and a life-long learner. Please don't hesitate to contact me; I would be very pleased to support you in the creative journey to promote and develop artistic growth in your students and yourselves.