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Re-Imagineering an Elementary Art Experience

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Abstract

Stories and immersive experiences create higher engagement and deeper understanding of concepts for students. My research goals are to identify non-traditional teaching methods that encourage a student's creative experience in the elementary art room. In my multi-unit curriculum, I reference visitor experience design sources. My goal is to translate this into an art room where students visit weekly. One source for big ideas is Walt Disney, the amusement park innovator. Author Shauna Pollock also uses life lessons of Walt Disney to inspire her own experimental prototype classroom of tomorrow. The Bob Rogers Company is another originator of visitor experience design that tells stories to engage their audience. My capstone paper describes how an elementary art teacher can cultivate an environment where stories are abundant and shared experiences drive student learning. First I discuss the importance of making connections to students' personal experiences. Then I consider how stories create emotional bonds to learning concepts. Finally, I share how to build an environment that supports student creativity. By building relationships with students and purposefully setting the tone, an elementary art room can be a safe place for all students to express their creative dreams.

Introduction

I waited in line to board the Magical Express back to the airport and reflected on my past week at Walt Disney World. This was my fifth trip in the last decade and each time something new waits for me to discover. I then begin planning the next trip. “When will we go, what will be new, at which resort will we stay?” were all questions to be explored. The reason the Disney experience is so memorable and immersive is the attention to theming that goes above and beyond. Exploring an alternate world where familiar icons surround every angle creates a feeling of comfort. At the entryway of any park, music entices you in, smells accompany the visual stimuli, and memories begin form. How does this relate to the elementary art room? Both places have the potential to spark one’s imagination through the use of planned spaces, music, visual interest, and experiment-focused learning opportunities.

This study will outline how an effectively designed room and atmosphere can influence the culture of an elementary art class with a curriculum that focuses on incorporating the *Disney magic* into daily lessons. This includes the physical space and also a positive, encouraging atmosphere that is created by the students and teacher. Inspiration to create this environment will be drawn from Walt Disney theme parks and other well forward-thinking educator professionals. Creating an environment where students can work individually or collaboratively takes purposeful planning. By *setting the stage* with music, lighting, prompts, and the necessary props to create art, one can foster an environment where creativity is flowing and students are engaged in meaningful art making. Insights will be shared about how the culture of one’s classroom can generate students who become teachers and Imagineers (Pollock, 2015) of the arts.

The curriculum created will focus on student and teacher experimentation, creating a classroom community that is positive, supportive, and innovative, and reflection among students

and teacher to improve tomorrow by recalling our past (Pollock, 2015). This curriculum unit will translate ways the elementary art teacher can create an experimental environment by using Shauna Pollock's book *Creating Classroom Magic* as a guide. This book sets a foundation for creating an "experimental prototype classroom of tomorrow" (Pollock, 2015, p. xvi) that celebrates students who imagine, dream, innovate, and create. By examining the core values Walt Disney created, an art classroom can be an even happier place than it already is.

As I dream about how my own art space at school can be better, I remind myself that it truly is about the journey. Educators will forever be students in our rapidly changing world. Our goal is to foster happy, productive citizens but sometimes teachers and students get bogged down with formalities. Each week I have the power to create fifty minutes of magic for my students in a space where they are encouraged to play, practice, fail, share discoveries, and create their dreams. Alfie Kohn reminds us in *The Schools Our Children Deserve: Moving Beyond Traditional Classrooms and "Tougher Standards"* that "the features of our children's classroom that we find the most reassuring- largely because we recognize them from our own days in school- typically turn out to those least likely to help students become effective and enthusiastic learners" (Kohn, 2000, p. 35). By acknowledging that changes can be made, though small and slowly, we can shift the classroom culture for our students. I hope this study encourages you to punch up your plans with pixie dust and create magic with your students in your own art space.

Rationale

The inspiration and techniques I currently use in lesson plans are not holding my upper elementary students' attention. Their lack of focus can be a physical and verbal disruption that prevents other students from engaging with new information. From my experience working in two Title I elementary schools, I have observed that many students' families struggle to provide

emotional and educational support. In order to create a class where students are eager to arrive and create, I must establish an environment that is emotionally nurturing. My current practice lacks a cohesive curriculum that puts students' interests first. Teaching process-focused lessons I *think* they will enjoy limits students' emotional connection to a project. While choices are given throughout my lessons, my students are disengaged as they recognize the impersonal approach to their individual experience creating art.

I think about how I might approach this problem. I look to well-designed public spaces and dream about how I can create my educational space that fosters self-disciplined and engaged students. Walt Disney World comes to mind, a place where I have shared many memorable moments. Bob Rogers, a retired Disney Imagineer, describes the destination saying, "this is where showmanship meets scholarship," (Abraham, 2015). Personally, when I go there I tend to wander and wonder, unable to discern if the experience is educational or entertaining. According to outspoken educators like Shauna Pollock, this environment can and should be replicated in the classroom. Moreover, students in an immersive setting think in a bigger picture mindset (Pollock, 2015). Moving forward, they may self-teach or gain personal interest in techniques and mediums because they connect the *how* with *what* they want to create. Storytelling and customer service are Disney hallmarks that I want to adapt into student exploration in my art room. These forward-thinking methods, researched and implemented by educators like Dave Burgess (2012) and Shauna Pollock (2015), offer insight into this educational environment. "Slow down," encourages Pollock, author of *Creating Classroom Magic*, "Give your students time to think and to imagine and to dream. Find out what they are thinking about and help them set goals based on their dreams" (2015, p. 8). For example, I might begin class with five minutes of meditation to help students transition into the creative space.

My research is important for myself and my students who deserve a safe place to express themselves through the visual arts. Before ideas can be made into tangible masterpieces, the culture of students supporting each other, knowing failures do not exist, and accepting experimental actions must be established. This will be encouraged and facilitated by myself as the lead educator motivating students to support one another's ideas.

This non-traditional teaching method of putting experiences before lesson plans, has given educators in a traditional classroom the support they need to create an immersive and student-centered culture. Now I would like to implement these ideas into the art classroom and inspire other art educators. A few key components of this curriculum include storytelling, themed music, flexible seating, and big idea thinking to drive units. Students cannot create or produce meaningful work when other students are a distraction through their actions or lack of focus. These barriers can be prevented or transformed into positive behaviors that invigorate the creativity of peers through an immersive setting.

Background

“Creating Classroom Magic: Using Lessons from the Life of Walt Disney to Create an Experimental Prototype Classroom of Tomorrow” written by Shauna Pollock (2015), provides educators with the means to implement an immersive, non-traditional learning theory into the classroom. Pollock introduces the importance of setting a tone in the learning atmosphere. One case in point is risk taking. “Regretting a failure is as unproductive as worrying about possible negative outcomes” (Pollock, 2015, p. 46). She furthers this message by quoting educational and visitor experience design professionals who put this into practice in their workplace. From her introduction, readers are exposed to her ideal classroom practices and encouraged to reflect on their own. Adopting her method requires an educator to do more. “Magic happens in a classroom

when the stress and challenges fade away and the teacher and students can focus on the good stuff” (Pollock, 2015, p. xxii).

Pollock shares the benefits of meeting students where they are by encouraging them to take risks and opening their senses to untold stories (Pollock, 2015). Her ideas are supported by industry professionals in visitor experience design, like the staff of the Bob Rogers Company (BRC) Imagination Arts (Abraham, 2015). While this company’s end product sells to a for-profit consumer base, it is not in contrast to Pollock’s mission statement. BRC Imagination Arts proclaims their designs are where showmanship meets scholarship. Founder Bob Rogers reflected after a decade upon completion of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum. “We designed first with the heart and emotions of the visitor. We told them one story, not multiple. We created an experience they could share with other guests. The use of technology and interior design did not limit the capability of the learning experience” (Abraham, 2015). Educators can use these ideas to help students create a personal and shared experience in the art room.

Aim for the Heart: Connecting with Students’ Emotions to Encourage Artmaking

“In a planning meeting for the Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow in Walt Disney World, Walt described his vision for the city simply: ‘People will be king.’” (Pollock, 2015, p. xvi). The needs of students must be put first. Students are more invested in their learning when a connection is made to their personal experiences. Pollock created her experimental prototype *classroom* of tomorrow and showed that teachers can build the curriculum and environment for their students. She counters with the question: Why not create it *with* them? Sharing the process of how to reach a common goal or state standard lets students become accountable for their learning. Walt Disney did this by directly observing guests and saw how they interacted with an object as simple as a garbage can. He watched as candy wrappers

were dropped repeatedly in the same place, twenty-seven feet from where the guest received the candy. He determined that was where the cans needed to be placed (Pollock, 2015). By observing and interacting with students, teachers, too, can better prepare to create shared goals.

This is further encouraged by the Understanding by Design model where the outcome is clearly defined and the paths to success are varied. “An effective curriculum is planned backward from long-term, desired results through a three-stage design process: desired results, evidence, and learning plan” (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, p. 17). A common goal will be the focus and students will collaboratively or individually explore. In the art room, the common goal is to create inquisitive students who are eager and curious to discover. “Successful people are those who have learned how to learn...and depend on themselves, not others, for their own knowledge, skills, and wisdom” (Williams & Denny, 2004, p. 94). Students can set personal goals to explore subject matter, practice a range of art media, navigate technology, and create art for the process or product. State standards can help guide common goals in tandem with student interest to support authentic art making. Pollock shares more of Walt Disney’s insight: “You can dream, create, design, and build the most wonderful place in the world. But it requires people to make it a reality” (2015, p. 123). Educators can demonstrate how to use tools and guide students to discover information to make more meaningful connections.

Storytelling to Engage Students

A story can captivate the attention of students and without the connecting piece to *why* they are creating, their learning opportunity is minimized. The story can come from the educator or the student. “The magic is in the story,” tells Bob Rogers, “what we do at BRC is tell great stories with imagination and style” (Abraham, 2015). Stories provide deeper understanding, are memorable, repeatable, and highlight a truth or lesson (Pollock, 2015). What sets Walt Disney

World apart from other amusement parks is its ability to implement themes and stories. Guests are immersed in a familiar setting where characters are in place. Attractions have backgrounds to inform and entertain guests waiting in line. The takeaway is the story's ability to maintain the guests' attention.

Tapping into students' emotions will keep them listening — funny, sad, or angry. Stories are internalized when characters go through a series of events as it relates to the lives of the students (Pollock, 2015). Rhyme, repetition, and visual imagery all assist in the learning process. For students, storytelling informs them of why they are creating the work. Storytelling is not always an easy task. Pollock suggests to “try [sixty] second stories... have a student fill that time, no more, no less, with an improvised story. Reflect on your life experiences and let them inspire you. Help your students do the same” (2015, p. 118). An educator can learn more about a students' process and rationale by listening than by simply observing the art.

An Immersive Experience: Creating the Environment and Class Culture

An immersive experience requires the use of all senses. Pollock (2015) suggests to “learn from Disney and engage the senses, pay attention to detail, allow for role playing, and make it participatory for your guests” (p. 124). When one enters Magic Kingdom in Walt Disney World, the senses are heightened. Guests enter a Broadway-like production with the smell of popcorn, a visually stunning red carpet, posters to excite for what's to come, and music that takes guests back to the early twentieth century. Instead of an educator filling the room with decor, one can purposefully leave space for student work and it will evolve into a shared space.

In addition, one must put away the traditional rows of desks and replace with communal tables, comfortable cushions, plush rugs, and standing options. “There is no reason that every artist must be performing at the same place and at the same time,” urges Katherine Douglas and

Diane Jaquith (2009, p. 13). Unlike an orchestra or marching band, artists mostly have an individual voice that can and should be expressed on the artist's schedule. Letting students choose where they begin their adventure for fifty minutes is a choice that immediately sets a positive tone.

This also establishes a culture of trust between teacher and students. Pollock (2015) gives the following insight:

Culture is often indefinable by the people who are a part of it, but as the teacher, you have to set your intentions and create the culture that you know your students need. A creative classroom culture needs to be deliberately developed because if you don't make a plan, a culture will emerge anyway and you may not like it. (p. 85)

Creating a culture where students feel safe to make mistakes and grow, takes consistency and practice by both students and teacher.

Application

Shauna Pollock's book inspired me with tangible options of how to create an elementary art curriculum that truly focuses on a student-centered experience. Building the classroom and lesson ideas with students are important first steps that Pollock makes very clear. Creating a culture where a growth mindset is present and every action is exploratory assists in forming strong relationships. Though she is a general classroom teacher, I knew I could take parts and apply them to an art room where I interact with students weekly.

Storytelling is also a significant part of any Disney experience and I have been further encouraged to incorporate this action more. Students relate to videos, songs, books, and their imagination that can provide stories. A strategy I already use successfully is call and response. Short phrases delivered with dramatic volume changes engage students and increase the

likelihood of retaining information. Pollock urges that student involvement and role-playing is key to the success of student learning (2015).

Due to the large volume of students I interact with and each class coming with pre-established classroom cultures, I wonder if any of these strategies will stick. Is it possible to form a new culture when students enter my room? The art room is a place for adventure and holds an infinite amount of possibilities. The freedom for children to express those should be worth the try. I will strive to create a curriculum unit that focuses on big ideas, stories, music, and student input that will surely provide the magic each child deserves.

Creating Immersive Experiences

This section will discuss an outline for a unit that provides students opportunities to build memories. The goal of my unit is to create immersive experiences where students can apply all of their senses. Examples include learning through play, collaborative explorations, videos, music, and connect problem-solving skills to their creations. The unit will also demand attention to the space and layout of a classroom. As I have previously mentioned, flexible seating options are a high priority that gives students autonomy over the way they learn and create. The actual content of a unit can vary, and these ingredients can transfer from lesson to lesson, grade to grade, but the goal remains the same; to create exceptional experiences in the art room. As I believe Walt Disney World is the ultimate example of showcasing immersive environments through storytelling,

Careers in our Culture and Community

I created this unit for third-grade students as they are in a transitional period from using techniques and skills in various media to creating meaningful art with personal ideas. Careers in our community and current culture are changing and evolving every day.

Careers in our culture and community will provide students with a basic introduction to how people use art in their workplace and how it supports our community. Students will learn how art impacts those roles and how we can contribute to the art culture through various career choices. Through role-playing, digital exploration, and hands-on lessons, students will explore career options that use the foundations of art. Architects, illustrators, fashion, graphic, and interior designers are just a few.

Presenting a Product

Using the big idea of culture and community and focusing on the exploration of various careers, students will “apply knowledge of available resources, tools, and technologies to investigate personal ideas through the art-making process” (National Visual Arts Standards, 2014). This standard encourages students to research what interests them individually, but as projects evolve, students can engage with their peers to learn about each other's findings.

Presenting student work will be a highlight of this unit as it teaches students how professionals must think about the format their work is displayed. Students will “investigate and discuss possibilities and limitations of spaces, including electronic, for exhibiting artwork” (National Visual Arts Standards, 2014). Students will collaborate and share inspiration throughout each lesson to build a positive culture in the art room and create more in-depth learning moments that will carry over into other subject areas in their general classroom.

Architecture

The first lesson will introduce architecture and famous architects of our past and present. From the grand cathedrals of Europe to ergonomically conscious modern designs,

students will draw inspiration from around the world to create their blueprints and models. The short clip from *The List Show TV* titled *Disney Architecture Inspired by Real-life* provides inspiration from around the world (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dCw7VEgLHHI>). After students view this video, they have a choice from two-dimensional, three-dimensional, and technology-based assignments to showcase their knowledge about architecture. The two-dimensional option allows students to use previously learned math skills like finding area and perimeter to create blueprints of a building or single room of their choice. Examples will be provided to jumpstart their ideas via the overhead projector. The three-dimensional option lets students use paper straws, cardboard, tag board, tape, and other found materials to create a sculpture. The technology option uses PBS' architecture building website and allows students to discover relevant vocabulary and build their digital models. By using these three options in a lesson, students can choose the best way to represent their knowledge and also view the progress of their peers as they continue to problem solve.

Illustrations in Indiana

The next lesson introduces students to the world of illustration. From pictures that accompany children's stories to the beginnings of animated films, illustrations are the basic building blocks to many other forms of art and a final product on their own. This lesson will support students' language arts curriculum by learning parts of a story and how art can inform readers in a different way other than written words. The two-dimensional option prompts students to use their drawing skills and tell a story through graphic images. Students may use pencil, graphite, colored and watercolor pencils, and their favorite storybooks as inspiration. The three-dimensional option showcases an Indiana native, Jim

Davis, through the creation of the comic *Garfield*. Students may create their comic book by folding a twelve by eighteen-inch paper into a real storybook. Students will use elements reminiscent of traditional comics including text, speech bubbles, onomatopoeias, sectioned grids, plot, and characters. The technology option for students requires the use of their Chromebook and accessing www.storybird.com which allows students to create a digital book using templates provided. Students choose from a bank of images and can insert their own text. The book can then be published to the site or even purchased from parents as a hard copy. A minimum number of eight pages will be required to accomplish the goal of this assignment. Students continue to choose where they sit in the classroom at the beginning of class and determine the best place to work for their selected project.

Interior Design

The third lesson introduces students to interior design. The instructor will begin by using the video clip from the Creative Cricket YouTube channel titled, "How to Design the Perfect Room" (www.youtube.com/watch?v=2IzbSUNwZjs). This video shows students step-by-step how to create a single room layout. The two-dimensional option prompts students design a drawing of a room using a birds-eye point of view. Students may include items from a realistic place or their imagination. The three-dimensional option creates a pop-up element on a folded piece of paper. Students then have a wall and floor to fill with the decor and functional pieces of furniture. Appendix A shows an example. The technology option encourages students to use the website www.kidsthinkdesign.org where they can learn more about interior design and other design career choices. This site also supports the previous two lessons with further information that students can explore.

Storytelling and Artmaking is a Journey

The goal of my research was to find ways to create an immersive, memorable experience in an elementary art room. Allowing students to take ownership of where and how they learn is the first step of implementation. Next, we will focus on student collaboration and storytelling to discover new content. By providing multiple options to showcase their understanding of a lesson, students can use their personal experiences and apply them to new concepts. Walt Disney World was the primary source of inspiration and provides the ultimate landscape of storytelling experiences. Shauna Pollock created a book that informed readers how she took those same concepts and applied them to her classroom (Pollock, 2015). She describes how to build a class culture of trust where students collaborate through an experiment and reflect when something didn't go as planned. Storytelling was a way to teach new concepts and connect previously learned ideas. I took Pollock's research and applied it to an elementary art room. I recommend fellow art educators to ponder the ideas presented and determine if any can be used in their classroom today. It may be a simple change in how a student works; sitting on a stool, standing, laying on the floor, or rocking on a stability ball. Stories are another simple step to create lasting knowledge whether it's a verbal tale, video, book, or song. Finally, an art teacher must share their personal enthusiasm regarding content and materials to encourage student excitement about the arts. Students should have a safe place to explore their artistic dreams and be able to experiment, fail, and reflect using personal interests as subject matter. Though programs may dwindle, and supplies must become more inventive, Walt Disney reminds us, "It's kind of fun to do the impossible," (Pollock, 2015, p. 143).

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