

Discipline-Based Art Education:

A Fresh Approach to

TEACHING

Art

As an academy art teacher, you are likely to find that most of your beginning students have had little or no exposure to art instruction. They tend to judge a piece of art subjectively: If it is pretty, looks like a photograph, or appeals to their emotions, they think it is good art. And yet the goal is to train them to both create good works of art and be able to independently evaluate paintings, sculptures, and other types of artwork.

The task need not be overwhelming. Discipline-Based Art Education (DBAE) offers helpful tools to achieve your goals.

What is Discipline-Based Art Education? It is an approach to teaching art that uses four different disciplines: production, criticism, art history, and aesthetics. It starts with questions, using the formal structure of art to analyze an idea, to apply the idea by exploring techniques and media, and to make judgments informed by close observation without personal bias. It enables students to interpret a variety of views, cultures, and genres based on the formal properties of art rather than personal opinion. DBAE is also practical, as it can be applied to an Introduction to Art course as easily as to a pottery class or to a drawing or a design class. DBAE offers direction and produces measurable results.

But most important for schools that offer no formal art instruction, DBAE can be applied to art activities accompanying any discipline. It is flexible, tailored to each individual teacher, comprehensive, and adaptable to all grade levels.

Steven Mark Dobbs, one of the major proponents of DBAE, has written a book explaining its use. It is a guide not only for art teachers, but also for administrators, supervisors, museum educators, and community art programs. Dobbs describes the four parts of DBAE:

1. Art production—Students learn skills and techniques in order to produce original artwork.

2. Art criticism—Students describe, interpret, evaluate, theorize, and judge the properties and qualities of the vi-

sual form, in order to understand and appreciate works of art and to appreciate the roles of art in society.

3. Art history—Students study the artistic accomplishments of the past and present, as well as examples of style or technique as they relate to cultural, political, social, religious, and economic movements.

4. Aesthetics—Students consider the nature, meaning, impact, and value of art, and are encouraged to formulate reflective, educated opinions and judgments about specific works of art. They also examine various criteria for evaluating works of art.¹

Understanding Composition and Production

The majority of students in studio art classes prefer to spend their time producing art rather than studying technique and design, but they also exhibit frustration when they are dissatisfied with the product. They do not always understand the importance of paying attention to composition. Often, they cannot figure out how to put ideas together.

Studio art should be more than undirected self-expression. Without guidance, students are either relegated to copying other artists' methods of assembling an artwork, or getting lost in a maze of questions. Before they begin to paint or draw, they must master the techniques and materials that allow them to create and express. They will learn very little from being turned loose with a box of paints and a piece of paper and told to paint whatever comes to mind. To be effective, art instruction must include guidelines for using media, techniques for creating a variety of different visual effects, and demonstrations on how to effectively apply the discipline of design. Note Charles Fowler's two important statements on this subject: "Every human being should not only be aware of, but also learn to apply and to vener-

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BY MARQUITA FOWLER HALSTEAD

ate, his or her inventive possibilities. The quality of imagination is a treasure that each of us should savor and respect.”²² “Joyous as it may be, the act of creation demands enormous self-discipline and teaches students to learn how to handle frustration and failure in pursuit of their idea. It requires setting goals, determining a technique, figuring out how to apply it, and continually making evaluations and revisions, in other words, thinking and solving problems.”²³

Art Criticism

Art criticism is a four-part process: description, analysis, evaluation, and interpretation. When they act as art critics, students use art vocabulary, which expands their written and oral skills. They develop observation skills—learning to look without prejudice and to make unbiased judgments.

To implement this section of DBAE, it is necessary to teach the rules (formal properties) of art. As students view fine art, they see how artists use formal properties. They read professional critiques and become familiar with the vocabulary of art criticism.

By working through all the elements of design and connecting them to the principles they have learned, students become skillful in expressing their own opinions about the use of color, line, shape, etc. They acquire the necessary vocabulary and learn how to ask questions and formulate possible answers about the artists’ intentions. As they learn that there are no answers to some questions, they gain practice in working with abstract ideas. They synthesize what they have learned through production and study of art history. They begin to develop their own philosophy about art.

In this area of art criticism, DBAE differs from traditional art instruction. It teaches critical thinking along with self-expression. DBAE requires students to apply the formal properties of design when creating art as well as the process of critical analysis used when looking at art. To teach DBAE, the teacher must have a good understanding of the formal properties of his or her subject.

Art History

Through instruction based on DBAE, the student develops an appreciation of the historical factors that influence an artist’s work. In the unit of instruction that began with viewing the reproduction of David Hockney’s *Nichols Canyon* (see case study), the students not only described and analyzed the painting, but also researched the artist. They found out about his photo-collages, his British working-class background, his supportive parents, and where he went to school. They began to appreciate how an artist’s early beginnings might inform his later work. They learned how to place the artist within the historical context of his training, found out what artists he might have studied with, and examined art that would have been familiar to him. They learned what was happening in the world during his formative years. This enabled them to relate Hockney’s art to social, religious, political, and historical events during his life and to discuss how that might have informed his artistic vision.

Aesthetics

Aesthetics is the most problematic of the disciplines taught in

DBAE, since it is both a process and a philosophy. As a process, it is described as follows: “Aesthetic inquiry occurs when we examine the statements and judgments we make about imagery to determine what conception of beauty or other value systems they represent, and how these may be justified.”²⁴

As a branch of philosophy, aesthetics deals with general questions about art, beauty, and creativity. It is a way of dealing with ideas about beauty, such as what moves each person to a higher spiritual level, and what makes a person stop, look, and wonder. Aesthetic scanning is a method of art criticism, of responding to a specific work or body of work. Historically, aesthetics is a branch of philosophy with its own substantive content, which deals with general questions, such as “What is art?” “What’s the difference between a work of art and a copy?” “Are there criteria that can be used in evaluating all works of art?” and “Is the concept of originality in art a meaningful one?”²⁵

The study of aesthetics is important to Christian education. Fowler states it succinctly: “Studying the arts furnishes students with a crucial aesthetic metaphor of what life at its best might be. . . . Through the study of an art, students learn to strive for perfection, to self-correct, and to create a satisfactory solution to the challenges at hand.”²⁶

Why Art? Why DBAE?

For schools in the Seventh-day Adventist educational system that are expected to provide a structured college preparatory program, Discipline-Based Art Education meets a specific need. DBAE provides a strategy that will work within the existing Adventist curriculum, and that will also encourage greater openness to art education. The strategy is found in the five commonalities for all DBAE curricula, as outlined by Dobbs:

1. **A long-range plan and written lessons** ensure that curricular activities are specific, well understood, and coordinated with other grades.
2. **Sequential organization** ensures that skills and concepts build on one another through regular, systematic, ongoing instruction.
3. **Engagement with works of art by mature artists from many cultures** is central to the organization of curricula.
4. **Content is balanced among the four art disciplines** (production, history, criticism, and aesthetics) to promote engagement from multiple perspectives.
5. **It uses developmentally suitable and age-appropriate activities.**²⁷

Adventist education needs more than a single vision of art education. Imagine randomly tossing out a thousand flower seeds in the hope that a garden will emerge. Planting a lot of seeds may be a beginning, but it’s not a sustainable strategy for garden design. DBAE is the landscape architect’s plan for incorporating the thousand flowers into a comprehensive and coherent plan for a garden. Like a garden plan that can be modified to suit a variety of climates, soils, and latitudes, DBAE is flexible and adaptable, while incorporating an overall plan. It rejects the whatever-happens-happens outcome in favor of a strategy with defined goals and achievable results. Our educational system would benefit from putting such a system into place. ☞

Case Study

Twenty-four students enrolled in my academy art class. Only two had had any previous exposure to art appreciation and production. All of them viewed art subjectively, based on the following criteria: Is it pretty? Does it resemble a photograph? Does it affect me emotionally? With this group, I decided to apply Discipline-Based Art Education (DBAE).

Before the students began **art production**, the first step of DBAE, I showed them David Hockney's painting *Nichols Canyon*, and solicited their reactions. Most reacted negatively. They did not regard the painting as very good or interesting. So I dropped the subject, deciding to come back to it later.

Now it was time to get the class involved in art production. During the first few weeks, we discussed various genres of art, elements and principles of design, and the fact that each piece of art has a specific genre (i.e., landscape) and medium (i.e., tempera) and addresses a "big idea." As they created and discussed their artwork, the students began to see how the principles and elements of design play a role in art production.

The assignments both helped them to create good compositions and required them to consider the "big idea" that they were trying to communicate. They examined many fine art reproductions, and studied examples of good student art shown in their textbook. Yet the beginning students continued to incorporate common symbolism (hearts for love, happy faces for joy, a sun in the corner for a bright day) in spite of my ban on such usage.

When the students turned in their first assignments, only two of the landscapes could be regarded as even average; most were of minimal quality. But the students who put the greatest effort and thought into planning their painting felt the most satisfied with their work. I did not get discouraged because quiz results showed that the students were beginning to understand the principles of good **art production**.

To complete their assignments, the students had to learn new processes and methods of expression such as how to create a work of art based on formal properties. They also learned about preparing an idea—by planning and experimenting, rather than relying on "inspiration." They learned to put aside their prejudices, personal preferences, and preconceived ideas when evaluating artwork. Gradually, they became more proficient in self-expression and gained confidence in using new subject matter. Meanwhile, their knowledge of different types of media expanded.

The class was now ready for the second step in DBAE: **art criticism**. We went back to *Nichols Canyon*. First, I asked them to write a description of the painting. They were to describe what they saw, using only factual statements, without any interpretation or personal opinions (such as "I think," "a pretty flower..." or "an ugly dog. . ."). Sorting fact from opinion was hard for some students, but with practice, they were able to avoid interpretation.

Second, I gave each student a handout showing the structure and movement of *Nichols Canyon*, and explained the process of



***Nichols Canyon* by David Hockney**

analyzing a painting. We discussed Hockney's use of the principles of design, the elements he emphasized, and other elements and principles that could be identified in the painting. The students each received a form with questions to guide them in analyzing the painting. Because this analytical process was preceded not only by the art production session, but also viewing of videos on art elements, composition, and vocabulary review, the students could apply what they had learned to the process of analyzing artwork.

Each student was assigned a research project. They found information about David Hockney, and became familiar with the place, medium, genre, political and social atmosphere of the time when *Nichols Canyon* was painted. This was the third phase in DBAE: **art history**.

After the students became familiar with Hockney's early life and work, they were asked to write an evaluation that included these facts. Again, they were to insert no personal opinions, and all judgments had to be supported by facts. They were to seek to understand what the artist was trying to say about the specific place shown, and to judge the effect of the colors and the nature of his composition. Was Hockney's use of unconventional color influenced by the effect of the bright southern California light or the diverse culture in the Los Angeles area? The students were to base their opinions on what they had learned about the history and structure of visual arts, the artist's life, his intentions and place in history, and his relationship to and possible influence on the contemporary art world. Now they had reached the fourth step in DBAE: *aesthetics*.

The class' final art production assignment was to paint a landscape using tempera. They could use family snapshots as a resource but could not copy them. Part of the assignment was to explain their composition, which meant they had to think through what they were trying to say about the place or landscapes in general. Their "big idea" might be to use the landscape to explore a variety of media, or to emphasize one particular element. They were told that their work would be critiqued by classmates.

In critiquing each others' work, the students were directed to apply what they had learned about critical analysis and aesthetics. When a class discussion centered on why Jenny might have put a yellow sun in the corner of her painting, the students began to create a philosophy of aesthetic standards. They discussed the following questions: Is it ever possible to see a sun in the corner of the sky at three o'clock in the afternoon? Is it always childish to put a sun in the corner of the painting? Why doesn't the teacher let us use suns in the corner, or smiley faces, hearts, and stars in our paintings? What genres of art make use of symbols? If Jenny used tempera to make a copy of Hockney's painting, would that be intellectual theft? Do other cultures use symbols in their art? When is it OK to include commonly used sym-

bols in artwork?

Discussing questions such as these helped the students make aesthetic judgments and form aesthetic standards. The questions became more involved as the students' knowledge grew.

At the end of this unit of study, my students had changed their attitude toward the Hockney painting, as is evident from a sample of their comments:

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 ?? Kid's art
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Focus issues on: Prayer, Relationships & more...

Visi nary
 Visi nary
 Visi nary

“Where can I get a poster like that one? I want it on my wall to look at every day. I think the artist was painting a scene in Mexico or El Salvador. Look at the colors he used. They look like the colors you see in Mexican or Hispanic art. He seems to have deliberately made the painting look sort of primitive.”

“At the bottom is a big blue area or shadow. It gives a cool and calm feeling to the painting which has mostly bright, hot colors. It provides contrast. It is complementary to the bright orange in the upper left. The two small white rectangular buildings are emphasized by their placement just off center. Contrast is seen in the values shown—white houses, black road. The black road has a light, bright yellow stripe. There are contrasts in shapes, too. The houses are geometric; there is a rectangular area at the bottom of the painting that contrasts with the organic shapes seen in other places in the painting. There are warm and cool contrasts in the colors. . . .”

Remember, at the beginning of the semester, the students were unanimous in thinking *Nichols Canyon* was bad art, unrealistic, and unfinished. They thought it used strange colors, and questioned “why trees were growing out of the big blue splotch of water in the lower right corner.”

Note the positive impact of a DBAE-based approach in the four areas of art education: production, criticism, history, and aesthetics. The most obvious evidence of aesthetic growth and understanding was the students’ appreciation of a formerly disdained artwork.

Thus, DBAE not only helps beginning art students to develop a more focused way

of art production, but also enables them to appreciate art criticism, history, and aesthetics. Carefully employed, DBAE can address the needs of students with many different learning styles—good students, unmotivated students, those with a lifetime of exposure to the best in art, and those with no exposure to fine art. In my class, DBAE provided a successful strategy for teaching a very diverse group of students. ☞



Marquita Fowler Halstead has taught art at Takoma Academy in Takoma Park, Maryland, for more than 20 years. A working painter and potter who regularly sells work in galleries and privately, Mrs. Halstead co-wrote the visual arts curriculum for the North American Division. She holds a Master of Fine Arts in painting from The George Washington University and has worked as an art instructor at Columbia Union College and John Nevins Andrews Elementary School, both in Takoma Park, Maryland.

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5. Sally Hagman, “Aesthetics in Art Education: A Look Toward Implementation,” p. 3. ERIC Identifier ED329491, 1990-12-00. <http://www.ericdigests.org/pre-9219/art.htm>.
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Guest Editorial

Continued from page 3

it, and the society that produces it.”³
—Thambi Thomas.

Thambi Thomas is currently an Associate Director of Education at the Pacific Union Conference in Westlake Village, California. His elementary through college-level education was in India, and he earned an Ed.D. from Loma Linda University—Riverside Campus. Dr. Thomas has taught and served as a principal at both the elementary and secondary levels. His artistic interests range from trumpet playing to painting. He says that “coordinating this issue of *THE JOURNAL OF ADVENTIST EDUCATION* to focus on the arts was an opportunity I could not pass up because of the abundance of new research focusing on the importance of the arts and because of the opportunity to influence educational leaders at every level to see the importance and value of arts education for every student.” The editorial staff is grateful for Dr. Thomas’ enthusiasm, commitment, and wide-ranging assistance in the planning and production of this issue.

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