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Jillian Hogan, Diane Jaquith & Lauren Gould

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Shifting Perceptions of Quality in Art Education

Jillian Hogan, Diane Jaquith, and Lauren Gould

AS WE CONSIDER ART EDUCATION FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS, we envision a change in focus from the *product*, or artwork, to the artistic *process*—the thinking behind the artwork. How can we be so sure this shift of priorities is afoot? Indicators in general education point to thinking dispositions as the goal of learning (Costa & Kallick, 2013; Ritchhart, Church, & Morrison, 2011; Robinson & Aronica, 2016). In fact, in the next round of the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), the international test that shows the educational progress of the world's nations, an entire section will be dedicated not to content knowledge, but to an evaluation of creative thinking (Gewertz, 2018). While we certainly do not expect content knowledge and technical skills to become obsolete, the capacity to independently behave as an artist, using critical and creative thinking, could matter far more.

Thinking-centered approaches are already expanding students' cognition in some art programs by giving them full ownership of their work through choice-based pedagogy (Douglas & Jaquith, 2018; Jaquith & Hathaway, 2012; Sands & Purtee, 2018). In 2017, the National Art Education Association recognized choice-based educators as a special-interest group, providing a forum for teachers to explore the merits of choice in art classes. Teaching for Artistic Behavior (TAB), a highly visible, learner-directed approach, has grown exponentially through grassroots avenues like social media and teacher-organized professional development. As these approaches continue to spread, a new question has emerged in art teacher circles: *But what about quality?*

For centuries, critics have relied on craft (or skill) as a primary indicator of quality, and our experiences observing in classrooms, offering professional development for teachers, and examining posts on social media platforms indicate that this perspective is still prevalent today. Artwork that emerges from choice-based classrooms—featuring "kid culture" and child aesthetics—requires one to recognize the ideas behind messy and quirky child art. Appreciation for this type of work can be difficult for colleagues, administrators, and parents who are accustomed to whole-class projects, where children follow the teacher's idea step-by-step. Those dubious of choice-based approaches may see these child-developed artworks and assume their teachers have abandoned a commitment to artistic quality. But rather than focus solely on technique, TAB teachers place additional value on *quality artistic thinking*—envisioning ideas, troubleshooting problems, collaborating with peers, and reflecting throughout the process.

The issue of quality in art education is highly related to the area of assessment. What teachers choose to assess, both formatively and summatively, indicates their values for learning (Hogan, Hetland, Jaquith, & Winner, 2018). We see an inherent relationship between assessment and the nature of what we value or what we articulate as having "quality." We see the notion of quality as a way of expanding the conversation beyond assessment—often a dreaded and confusing word for teachers—into what we are valuing and why. It is important for teachers to recognize that by what they choose to document—either polished products or the thinking conveyed through observations, reflections, and

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What makes a quality art student?

conversations—they are making declarations about what they value and what they think matters in art education. We suggest that questions about quality are still in their infancy in our field, and these issues require us to reexamine our beliefs. In what follows, we invite art educators to examine their conceptions of quality in their classrooms. *What is quality? How do we know?*

Quality Art Students

What makes a quality art student? We will look at two ways of answering that question. First, one might argue that a quality art student is one who creates quality artwork. The work of this student shows technical skill and is ready to win a contest or to be shown in the display case at the school's entrance. In this conception of quality, student work is primarily judged by the technical proficiency with which the artwork was made.

We argue that art products are just one of many pieces of evidence in identifying the quality work of our students. Looking at a finished artwork gives us very little of the rich information that can be collected by watching and talking with students at work. Viewing a finished painting does not tell us how closely a student observed and tested colors from a photograph she took. Examining a completed sculpture does not tell the story of the many options a student tried to get it to stand upright. When we listen to a student evaluating their work, we can appreciate the level that an artwork has reached and also how far the student has come to reach that point. Children offer us more than a single data point, and artmaking is a complicated process. The complexities of both children and artmaking require us to expand how we consider quality so we can value the many kinds of thinking and doing that go into being a student artist.

Frameworks for Quality Thinking

Highlighting quality thinking in art class aligns with the core values of many schools. Schools are becoming increasingly focused on metacognition (Perry, Lundie, & Golder, 2019). How many of us have been required to read about and apply Carol Dweck's (2008) growth mindset theory to our assessment practices? In the absence of clear evidence of a student's thinking process, doing so becomes a difficult task. Fortunately, frameworks already exist for examining the quality of students' thinking. Below, we describe three popular lenses with evidence from artworks described in the following pages.

21st Century Skills: The "4 Cs"

The framework for 21st-century skills was developed by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills to prepare learners for the current workforce (National Education Association, n.d.). The mindsets emphasized in this framework update the model on which our schools were initially created when they were intended to prepare children for future factory work (Gray, 2013). The "4 Cs" were created as an easy way to remember those dispositions deemed most important: critical thinking, creativity and innovation, collaboration, and communication. These are listed in Table 1.

National Core Arts Standards

In 2014, the National Core Arts Standards (NCAS) were released to bridge the arts with 21st-century skills. The NCAS

Table 1. Ryan and Jack's Airplane

21st-Century Skill	Evidence and Commentary
Critical Thinking	"Our main idea for it was basically to get it to fly. We actually threw our first prototype away and then started over." Ryan and Jack have created impressive sculptures over the past 2 years, accumulating skills through troubleshooting and experimentation.
Creativity and Innovation	The students went beyond a typical paper plane to create an individualized design through brainstorming and trial and error.
Collaboration	Both students worked together to decide what was next, often delegating each other to different tasks to continue working toward their common goal. At times, they also enlisted additional classmates to help. They understood that one of the duo might occasionally need a break from this project, and that was accepted. Either they both worked on alternate pieces, or they would agree on a task the other could work on while they were away from the structure. After the art show, they decided that Jack could take the big plane home and, in the remaining art classes, they created another airplane hangar so Ryan could take one home too.
Communication	Both boys consulted with each other to determine each day's task or goal. They often planned while on their way into the studio. After each flying test, they sought each other out to explain what they found. Their classmates offered opinions and occasional help. The boys had to figure out how to navigate their advice and the help of others to determine the best course of action.

were developed with the "4 Cs" (and other frameworks, standards, and research reports) in mind (National Coalition for Core Arts Standards, n.d.). In the first column of Table 2, we focus on the anchor standards, indicators of artistic literacy, as a lens for examining student thinking.

Table 2. Chloe and Laila's *Underwater Scene*

NCAS Anchor Standards	Evidence and Commentary
1. Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work	"We felt like doing a narwhal, because we were inspired from the book from March Book Madness." [*Not Quite Narwhal* by Jessie Sima (2017)] Chloe and Laila collaboratively envisioned the underwater scene, inspired by a book.
2. Organize and develop artistic ideas and work	The girls selected to paint from a variety of media options. They considered how each material helped show their idea and experimented with different shades of blue for the narwhal and background.
3. Refine and complete artistic work	The girls routinely reflected on their process with classmates and their teacher.
4. Select, analyze, and interpret artistic work for presentation	"We realized that we've been working so hard on shading the ocean and making waves, and making some pop-up details that we decided to put it in the art show." This work was chosen for display because it was personally meaningful.
5. Develop and refine artistic techniques and work for presentation	"We decided to paint Styrofoam yellow and pink to make some sand and shells. We tried to make it textured, like the ocean floor. We also did coral out of pastels, and then painted over so it would have a nice pop-up color." They found packing peanuts and painted them to show details in the sand and coral in their underwater scene.
6. Convey meaning through the presentation of artistic work	"Then we thought of putting a maze of fish around it. One fish is like its friend, and the other fish is really amazed." The girls strove to communicate meaning with the expressions of two additional fish and their placement around the narwhal. (One fish has its mouth open in excitement and another is in the shape of an "O.")
7. Perceive and analyze artistic work	"We also thought that the narwhal could be magical." Their love of the narwhal from the book led them to honor it through their artwork. This collaboration caused the students to analyze and observe the ocean in new ways.
8. Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work	The artist statement allowed them to reflect on their process and intent; this helped their teacher interpret more of their decisions.
9. Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work	"We realized that we've been working so hard on shading the ocean and making waves, and making some pop-up details that we decided to put it in the art show." "We also did coral out of pastels, and then painted over so it would have a nice pop-up color."
10. Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art	They applied their knowledge of ocean life to incorporate details.
11. Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding	The girls were inspired by literature.

Studio Thinking

Studio Thinking (Hetland, Winner, Veenema, & Sheridan, 2013) is a research-based framework that outlines the Studio Habits of Mind (SHoM) that are taught in visual arts classrooms. Teachers have used the language of SHoM to help themselves and students of all ages recognize and improve those cognitive processes that

Table 3. Ryder's Pinch Pot

Studio Habit of Mind	Evidence and Commentary
Develop Craft: Technique *Learning to use tools, materials, and artistic conventions*	Ryder developed skills to make a pinch pot with clay.
Engage and Persist *Finding personally meaningful projects and sticking to them*	It was initially difficult for Ryder to make his artwork fully like SpongeBob's house. He persisted with the addition of a paper walkway.
Envision *Imagining what cannot be seen and a plan to create artwork of these imagined ideas*	Ryder realized the similarities between his work and his vision of SpongeBob, imagined that the pinch pot was SpongeBob's house, and planned appropriate colors and details.
Express *Making works that convey personal meaning*	Ryder wanted to represent SpongeBob's house, which must be important to him.
Observe *Looking closely and noticing what might not ordinarily be seen*	Depicting SpongeBob's house required prior observation, and Ryder was able to recall the details to create his work.
Reflect: Question and Explain *Talking about work and working processes*	Ryder was able to explain his process and why he made the decisions that he did.
Stretch and Explore *Trying new things, making mistakes, and learning from them*	No one else in class tried to make their pinch pot resemble something from memory. Ryder had to consider materials and form to transform his pot, and he was confident in his direction.
Understand Art Worlds: Community *Learning to collaborate and understanding that artists often work in teams*	As Ryder created this, he shared his ideas with his friends, fully engaging in the artist studio community. He is also connected to the practice of "fan art," which is part of pop culture at large.

are a part of artmaking (Hogan et al., 2018). Definitions of SHoM are located in the first column of Table 3.

Some art education approaches prioritize artistic thinking in their curricula, using structures that help teachers recognize the indicators of quality thinking depicted above. In the section that follows, we discuss one such approach.

TAB as a Thinking-Centered Approach

In learner-directed classrooms, where children design their own work, students demonstrate what they know and can do independently. Student thinking is more readily observable in such classrooms than in environments in which students comply to follow their teacher's directives. When students have agency, as they do in TAB classes, each artistic process is demonstrably unique.

TAB has emerged over several decades, founded on the premise that art education should look to the practices of adult artists in developing and implementing curriculum for studio classes. The child—not the teacher—is the creator, with full access to materials and resources of their choosing. When students are trusted to behave like artists, teachers have the opportunity to observe the quality with which students think as artists because they have made the majority of decisions about the work (Douglas & Jaquith, 2018).

Instruction in TAB classes focuses on introductions to media, techniques, and artists with the gradual release of additional resources to expand media offerings that students may access independently. As the year progresses, teachers model artistic thinking habits, including goal setting, as students assume increased agency. This shift in control places students in charge of their work. When students make the major decisions about their work, their understandings become transparent to the teacher—they either can or cannot perform a task on their own. Of course, teachers provide scaffolding as needed, with the intent for students to become independent over time. In student–teacher conversations, the teacher can connect the thinking of a student with specific qualities—envisioning, observing, or reflecting—and trace these back to the SHoM, the "4 Cs," and National Core Arts Standards.

Teachers who encourage student agency and provide independent access to studio materials and resources will recognize quality in the thinking and decision making of student artists, and not just in their finished products.

Figure 1. Ryan and Jack, Grade 4, work process of *Air Force None*, 2018–2019. Found materials.

A misconception about TAB is that it includes no instruction in traditional techniques. It can be mischaracterized as a laissez-faire approach without structure. But a TAB philosophy does value the development of technique (or craft) because it is a part of developing as an artist. Just like in traditional classrooms, teachers who use a TAB approach directly plan for and teach technical skills, creating a comprehensive curriculum in which students are given exposure to techniques in various media. The difference here is that students may choose to use or not use that technique in their individualized work process. TAB teachers consider technique as one part of an artist's tool kit, not as the sole or primary instrument of thinking or behaving like an artist. Technique is one of many useful capabilities artists use as they work. Essential skills are often taught through short, whole-class skill-building activities, which take minimal time away from student's individualized work process (as depicted in the vignette about Ryder later in this article). During studio time, additional one-on-one or small-group skill demonstrations and critical reflection questions motivate students to strengthen their individualized technique as they work to convey their ideas better.

A related critical claim about TAB is that the quality of the artwork is inferior to that of students who learn in a teacher-directed environment. Student-directed artwork indeed looks different than many class sets emerging from teacher-directed lessons. Artworks that are generated entirely by students look like they were made by children, showcasing their interests, perspectives, and developmental capacities. As adults in the school community become familiar with the work that emerges from TAB classrooms, they come to value the child's aesthetic, and with that, the choices made by the artist.

Looking for the Thinking in the Art Classroom

We now look inside one of our classrooms to see how thinking can be observed within an elementary art class. Coauthor Lauren Gould is a TAB teacher in a Boston suburb. In what follows, we share her classroom observations accompanied by analyses of student thinking through one of the thinking frameworks.[1]

21st-Century Skills: Ryan and Jack[2]

*Fourth graders Ryan and Jack show confidence in envisioning and executing their ideas. They came into the studio in September, excited to get to work. They began creating a large paper plane using 18- × 24-inch paper and craft sticks. They continued until April, when they added a large base, gave the structure a name (*Air Force None*), and flanked their large plane with small planes and a control center.*

Table 1 depicts an analysis of Ryan and Jack's work process through the lens of the "4 Cs." Quotes are included from the students' written artist statement. Their work process is shown in Figure 1.

NCAS: Chloe and Laila

Second graders Chloe and Laila worked collaboratively on an underwater painting about a narwhal. They began by drawing it, and they slowly gained inspiration from materials in the room to add to their piece. They continued to reflect and refine together for over three classes, unafraid to take risks, try new techniques, or request feedback. At the end of each class, they invited me to take a look at their progress, excited to explain what they had accomplished that day.

Table 2 depicts an analysis of Chloe and Laila's process through the lens of the NCAS. Quotes are included from the students' written artist statement. Their artwork is shown in Figure 2.

SHoM: Ryder

Kindergarten students all created pinch pots to practice clay skills. Students were given watercolors and Mod Podge to complete their pieces. Ryder had the idea to turn his pot into SpongeBob's house

Figure 2. Chloe and Laila, Grade 2, *Underwater Scene*, 2019. Paint and paper.

Figure 3. Ryder, kindergarten, pinch pot of *SpongeBob's Pineapple Under the Sea*, 2019. Clay, paint, and paper.

as he began painting it. He had started with orange for the main background color and added a black zig-zag pattern around the circumference. Ryder then realized it looked like a pineapple, telling his friends that it could be cartoon character SpongeBob's house. (SpongeBob lives in a pineapple under the sea!) He added the leafy green color to the top of his pot and a small black-and-green circle to designate the door. When he realized he needed a walkway, Ryder painted it in black on paper and placed his pineapple house pinch pot on top. This completed the scene for him.

Lauren's lesson demonstrates a short, whole-class skill-building activity within a TAB setting. Table 3 depicts an analysis of Ryder's work process through the lens of SHoM. His artwork is shown in Figure 3.

Conclusion

No matter what our field's future holds, we are confident that children will continue to be intrinsically motivated by their curiosity, interests, and beliefs to express themselves (Bandura, 1982; Dewey, 1938). Teachers who encourage student agency and provide independent access to studio materials and resources will recognize quality in the thinking and decision making of student artists, and not just in their finished products. This goal was apparent to Viktor Lowenfeld, who noted that the purpose of art education was "not the art itself, or the aesthetic experience, but rather the child who grows up more creatively and sensitively and applies his [sic] experience in the arts to whatever life situations may be applicable" (as cited in Efland, 1990, p. 235). Sixty years later, teachers continue to champion Lowenfeld's vision because its efficacy endures (Burton, 2009; Eisner, 2009; Gude, 2009). As teachers use the lenses provided by frameworks like the "4 Cs," SHoM, and the NCAS, they gain language to describe quality throughout the artistic process, focusing on how their students think artistically. These are the qualities future art teachers will need to nurture, in keeping with an ever-changing world. ■

ORCID
Jillian Hogan
http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4323-6614
Lauren Gould
http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7723-1438

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Jillian Hogan, Visiting Assistant Professor, School of Music, University of Wisconsin–Madison in Madison, and Ph.D. Student, Department of Psychology, Boston College in Boston, Massachusetts. Email: jillian.a.hogan@gmail.com

Diane Jaquith, art teacher, retired, Newton Public Schools, Massachusetts, and Board Member of Teaching for Artistic Behavior, Inc.

Lauren Gould, art teacher, C.T. Douglas Elementary School in Acton-Boxborough, Massachusetts.

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Endnotes

[1] Lauren's examples are from her time teaching in the public school district of Franklin, Massachusetts.

[2] Some student names are pseudonyms.