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## Creating a classroom culture

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Creating A Classroom Culture

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Departmental Honors Thesis  
The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga  
Art Education Department

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## Creating a Classroom Culture

“A classroom community culture is a set of rules and understandings that are specific to the individuals included in the group and reflective of the values and identities of the world these individuals inhabit.”<sup>1</sup> This definition is just one of many of what a classroom culture is from the article “Classroom Community Culture for Learning”. A classroom culture involves an environment that is established in a classroom and is created by the relationships between students and instructor as well as the relationship between peers. The real question is, how can educators establish this environment and utilize its potential to the fullest for students to have meaningful experiences in the classroom. More specifically this thesis will frame and answer the questions: How can an educator integrate their art practice and identity into their classroom? How can an art educator model artist behavior to foster a low-risk environment where experimentation can flourish? What are the benefits of creating a classroom culture and how do certain instructional practices cultivate a culture that fosters an authentic learning environment?

As a pre-service educator myself these questions are important to me on a personal level. It is important to me to have a classroom culture that aligns with my values as a person and an educator. Based on my experiences as a student in many different art classrooms, I understand what it means when there is no culture established in a classroom. But I can also remember what classrooms made me fall in love with art and creating. Because of these experiences, it became important to me to figure out what practices can be used to design an ideal classroom culture that best fosters an authentic connection and experience of learning that creates empowered individuals. That is my most important purpose as an art educator, but I am still trying to answer

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<sup>1</sup>Gallagher, Suzanne, and Greg S. Goodman. “CHAPTER EIGHT: Classroom Community Culture for Learning.” *Counterpoints* 329 (2008): 145–62.

the questions of how this can be done. Throughout this paper, I will walk through a few different ways that a culture can be created and nurtured and what that may look like.

First, I will establish what a classroom culture looks like by sharing the thoughts of various educators in multiple areas of the school system. I reached out to art educators that have taught classes throughout my years of being a student in the public school system. The first teacher that I interviewed was a previous elementary art teacher of mine, Mr. John Bass who has been an elementary school teacher for 22 years. As a student in his class, I remember feeling an overwhelming sense of belonging and experiencing the joy of creating something for the first time. The culture of his classroom, to my memory, embraced every student's flaws and mistakes and used them to create a sense of authenticity that was palatable even at a very young age. The excitement of walking to his classroom once a week or so was undeniable to every student and it is something that I can remember vividly even to this day as a pre-service teacher. Every mistake was encouraged and was fostered into an experience that told me at a young age that it was okay if things did not always go to plan. His classroom culture was extremely influential to the one that I wish to cultivate in my future classroom. The authentic relationships that were formed with art as well as other students inspired a lifetime love of art and learning that saw me through many years.

In high school, I was able to have even more wonderful and enriching experiences with art. Ms. Andrea Howard, my high school art teacher, modeled an exemplary classroom studio space. In her classroom as a student, I remember holding myself to a high standard due to the fact that she told us we were artists. Centering myself as such was an important change of mindset for me as a student. It was empowering to call myself an artist and have my teacher call me one as well. It gave the activities we did meaning, and the art that I created feel valuable. I

remember that strong sense of belonging and of safety. More importantly, I remember how they pushed me to be better - to learn and grow from my mistakes even if it was hard. As a college student pursuing education, I began to look back on my experiences with my teachers and asked myself 'what was it that they did that made me love art and have a desire to teach it?'. I have always had a desire and passion to create and make artwork, but I wanted to know more about what it meant to be an art teacher who instilled that love into others. In order to answer these questions, I reached out to Mr. Bass and Ms. Howard to ask them about how they viewed and set up their classroom culture.

In these interviews I asked questions pertaining to classroom culture and how they managed to cultivate their own culture over their multiple years of teaching. What I found was that many of the same terms were used when they were presenting their own vision of what a classroom culture was. These recurring words involved phrases such as 'a positive or safe environment' or 'a place to be vulnerable, a place to take risks' and most importantly, a good classroom culture made students feel like they belonged. These words and phrases to me are the backbone of this ideal classroom culture that we are going to walk through. Each of these words work together to create a classroom culture that I remember experiencing as a young learner. In a dream scenario, a classroom is a place where you can be vulnerable, make mistakes and feel like you are somewhere where you belong. In the following sections I will introduce and explain how certain instructional activities and classroom management techniques can foster this classroom culture. These include the introduction of choice-based learning to give students empowering opportunities to guide their own learning and take risks through experimentation, restructuring the classroom as a studio space to center the student as an artist alongside the teacher, encouraging peer learning to help students build relationships as well as build collaborative

relationships to build creative confidence, and finally how to plan lessons for this specific classroom culture.

Classroom cultures are crucial to establish as they are the foundations upon which relationships between students and their peers, as well as teachers, are built. When I mention culture, it pertains to an environment that is established by different groups of individuals and changes with the individuals and personalities in the room respectively. Each and every classroom will have a different culture based off of the students that are occupying and interacting with the space and their peers. But this begs the question, how does an educator cultivate a classroom culture, and more specifically, a classroom culture in an art classroom? It is important to note that some students struggle more in an art classroom than other subjects. This is due to the fact that there are a lot of unknowns when it comes to art because there is never really a right or a wrong answer. For some students this is a freeing experience, but for others who are highly motivated by their grades it is a very stressful environment. It is important to have a classroom culture in place that can support the individual needs of each student. The goal of an art classroom culture is to provide students with a low-stakes, stress free environment that encourages students to take risks and experiment and be okay with the idea of the unknown. The goal is for the unknown to become a place of play and exploration for students in order for students to successfully express themselves.

### **Choice-Based Art Education**

One way to help structure experimental behavior for students while building a classroom culture is choice-based learning. Choice-based learning is an instructional strategy used frequently in the art classroom that places students towards the center of their learning. Specifically, “choice-based art education provides for the development of artistic behaviors by

enabling students to discover what it means to be an artist through authentic creation of artwork"<sup>2</sup>. By allowing students to be the conductor of their work is a great start for encouraging students to take part in the creative process. When students choose what they want to make or work on, they will naturally encounter some problems, and when they do it can encourage them to think outside the box or turn their 'mistake' into something positive. In choice-based art education, because the students are the driving force behind their work, the teacher is able to serve as a guide and simply act like another artist in the room. Additionally, the teacher does take on a bit more active role in terms of modeling decisions and processes. In other words, the teacher is instead appointed to "inspire, instruct and support the learning within"<sup>3</sup>. The act of giving up a bit of control to your students promotes the idea of a classroom culture. By allowing students to make their own choices and steer their projects, there is a sense of trust instilled in the students from the teacher.

Choice-based art education also welcomes a state of equitable learning in the art classroom. Because students are self directing a lot of their learning, there is less pressure to do the same things as everyone else. This classroom culture scenario relies on experimental and low-stakes instructional strategies which support learners who struggle with conceptualizing information delivered in oral or text formats such as lectures. This allows students who may struggle with reading or writing to succeed where they may have otherwise struggled to keep pace with their peers. By letting students experience the classroom in a way that is mostly based on their interests, students are more likely to be engaged and learn how to make artistic choices.

Another inherent benefit to choice-based art education is that it encourages and builds up students' independence as well as creative confidence, which in turn helps students to take

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<sup>2</sup>Hathaway, Nan E. 2013. "Smoke and Mirrors: Art Teacher as Magician." *Art Education* 66 (3) (05): 9-15.

<sup>3</sup>Hathaway, Nan E. "Smoke and Mirrors: Art Teacher as Magician."

creative risks. In a classroom that utilizes choice-based learning, students “are expected to come to class prepared with a plan or idea, ready to seek and employ appropriate media or processes to bring that idea to life, or to arrive with the willingness to find inspiration through experimentation, discovery and interaction with materials, methods, and resources in the studio”<sup>4</sup>. By letting students experience the freedom of influencing their own creative practice it allows them to begin to reconstruct their view of the art classroom. By positioning students as artists in a studio space who are building their own art practice, “the teacher is able to target instruction in response to demonstrated student need and interest. Differentiated instruction can be initiated by the learner as well as the teacher, and students frequently take on the role of teacher or mentor when their specialized skills can benefit others in the studio”<sup>5</sup>. This introduces another mode of classroom culture creating which is redefining the classroom as a studio space.

### **The Introduction of the ‘Artist-Teacher’**

The concept of the artist-teacher identity is described as “an approach to art education that celebrates artistic practices and artistic ways of thinking into the classroom. In this manner, "artist-teacher" represents a more inclusive and richer understanding of the multifaceted aspects of teaching art”<sup>6</sup>. The intention of presenting yourself as not only an educator, but a fellow artist as well can influence many aspects of a classroom culture. For example, when a teacher is able to model and create alongside students, students will be able to watch their teacher perhaps make a mistake. Mistakes, such as a spill or a splattering of paint, for some students would mean that they completely give up on a project. However, in art, mistakes always happen and they give educators, and artists, an opportunity to make that splatter of paint into something new. The importance of modeling cannot be expressed enough in an art classroom, and it is so valuable for

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<sup>4</sup>Hathaway, Nan E. "Smoke and Mirrors: Art Teacher as Magician."

<sup>5</sup>Hathaway, Nan E. "Smoke and Mirrors: Art Teacher as Magician."

<sup>6</sup>Daichendt, G. J. 2009. "Redefining the Artist-Teacher." *Art Education* 62 (5) (09): 33-38.



teachers to model artistic behaviors and attitudes when it comes to creating. In this art classroom in an ideal classroom culture, both the students and teacher will take on the role of artist.

Now, what exactly are characteristics and behaviors of an artist? According to “The Role of Art and the Artist” by Edgar H. Schein, there are roughly six notable characteristics and behaviors that artists model. The first characteristic is that artists “expand their perceptual and expressive range”<sup>7</sup>. In simpler terms, the artist helps others see, or perceive more and get in touch with forces that others may not see. In an art classroom, the artist teacher can model this behavior during instruction in the studio classroom. This, for example, could be demonstrating an exercise on interpreting or analyzing art in order to demonstrate how an image can be trying to tell you many different things, you just have to look deeper.

The second characteristic Schein mentions is that art, as well as artists, should “disturb, provoke, shock and inspire”<sup>8</sup>. In a school environment, students are placed in a routine cycle of predictability and repetition. In the art studio classroom, the artist teacher can model this behavior by encouraging experimentation that allows students to provoke, shock and inspire. This can take place by exposing students to many different types of art and artists to first allow them to have the experience of being influenced by another person's art. After recognizing those feelings, the artist teacher should empower their students to make work that can evoke an emotional reaction from a viewer. But students have to start out by being a viewer themselves.

The third characteristic is that the artist “can stimulate us to broaden our skills, our behavioral repertory and our flexibility of response”<sup>9</sup>. In other words, artists are able to recognize that their practice can become stagnant, and they understand the importance of experimentation and risk taking. In my own experience, this is the most important behavior that an artist can have.

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<sup>7</sup>Schein, Edgar H.. “The Role of Art and the Artist” *Organizational Aesthetics*, (2013)

<sup>8</sup>Schein, Edgar H.. “The Role of Art and the Artist”

<sup>9</sup>Schein, Edgar H.. “The Role of Art and the Artist”

When you develop a steady habit and practice, it is easy to remain in the known comfort zone that you have created. However, there are always going to be new things to try and discover that can make your art continue to evolve. For students, especially those who are scared to make mistakes and ‘ruin’ their work, this is the most important step. As an artist teacher in this culture, it is imperative that this behavior is modeled.

The fourth characteristic of the artist is that artists can “stimulate and legitimize [their] own aesthetic sense”<sup>10</sup>. This means that artists are able to curate what beauty means to them essentially. There are many things that are considered to be beautiful but very rarely is there any direct reflection about what makes these things beautiful or meaningful. An artist is able to provide this justification through varied means. This can be modeled in the classroom by the artist teacher through an activity such as an artist statement or even an art analysis. Reflecting upon your work and the work of others is an important skill of an artist and it scaffolds your ability to justify your aesthetic sense. There is no right or wrong answer to what is beautiful or appealing, which is the advantage to the art classroom. But it is important to learn how to talk about your opinions about the world around you and learn to make meaningful comments and connections to work that students are making.

The fifth characteristic of an artist is that they are trained and “are able to produce important insights into what is needed to perform and what it means to lead and manage”<sup>11</sup>. This characteristic refers to the more technical side of having an artist mindset. This characteristic emphasizes the importance of collecting and practicing a variety of skills, mediums and practices to be able to perform as a well rounded artist. In the studio classroom, this is important and can be implemented quite easily. The artist teacher must be sure to plan for a variety of projects that

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<sup>10</sup>Schein, Edgar H.. “The Role of Art and the Artist”

<sup>11</sup>Schein, Edgar H.. “The Role of Art and the Artist”

help students to establish and expand their knowledge of a wide array of materials. An artist needs to be able to use many different materials and understand the technical side of a certain process, such as how to paint and draw. When these skills are understood, improvisation can take place much more seamlessly. In this ideal classroom culture, I hope that students will be comfortable in taking risks and being able to work intuitively with materials they understand will serve as a meaningful foundation for students who may struggle with experimentation.

The sixth and final characteristic of an artist is that they “put us in touch with our creative selves”<sup>12</sup>. All students walk into the art room with different levels of experience and interest with art. But when you begin to ask questions, all students are interested in something that can connect them to creating. Linking creation to student interest is the best way, I have found, to help students connect with their artistic self and begin to think of themselves as artists as well. In the role of the artist-educator, doing things such as simply calling students artists and using vocabulary that is immersive and identifying is a place to start. Being consistent about positioning students as artists is important, especially when students are down on themselves and tell themselves that they cannot make work or that they are bad at everything.

The artist-teacher identity is also a priceless asset when it comes to motivating students who are either unmotivated or disinterested in the project. When art educators design instruction and plan their projects, it is inevitable that their personal interests in art will be present. For example, in my own art practice, I love creating self-portraits so it is almost a given that I would have my students create a self-portrait. Past research has demonstrated that “Teachers who embrace their own artistic aptitudes and value the connections between studio and classroom can create a classroom experience that utilizes individual artmaking interests.”<sup>13</sup> This not only

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<sup>12</sup>Schein, Edgar H.. “The Role of Art and the Artist”

<sup>13</sup>Daichendt, G. J. "Redefining the Artist-Teacher."

connects to redefining the classroom as a studio space, but also to choice-based art education. By expressing personal artistic interests as a teaching artist, students will be able to sense your excitement and interest in certain content and it is “very possible that this personal “excitement” is the spark that creates a fire for the children’s artmaking and learning.<sup>14</sup>” I have personally found that students were much more inclined to listen to me and ask me questions after I made a teacher example. I did the same project that they were doing which allowed them to see that I am first of all capable of doing the project and also, it lets them know that I would not have them do anything that I would not.

While an artist-teacher's personal experience with art is vital to this classroom culture, it is also important to remember certain perspectives. While the students and the teacher are artists, the teacher has more experience and knowledge, and it becomes easy to take this expertise for granted:

“Frequently art teachers, artists, and advanced art students take their personal expertise for granted. We forget what it was like to be a beginner, and we may pursue visual exploration and reach visual success in very automatic or fluid ways, not even having a conscious awareness of the synthetic nature of our process.<sup>15</sup>”

It is easy, especially when there is personal interest involved, to forget that some students have no previous experience or interest with the project at hand. And that is okay. In my experience as a pre-service teacher, I was confronted early on with unmotivated students. Even in this dream-like scenario that I am creating, there will always be students who are not as interested as others. I was excited to be introducing a collage project that would allow students to take full advantage of opportunities for choice and some students performed poorly purely due to little

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<sup>14</sup>Miller, P. (2011). “Lesson plan using artistic ways of thinking.” *Current Issues in Middle Level Education*,

<sup>15</sup>McCollister, Sandra. “Developing Criteria Rubrics in the Art Classroom.” *Art Education* 55, no. 4 (2002)

interest in the project. As a pre-service educator, this was a valuable experience for me to see that even if I had enjoyed the project, it does not mean that it will be a successful learning experience for the students in the studio. The best way that I have found to move on from this, is to again, model artist behaviors and acknowledge that there were things that were unsuccessful and did not work, because after all, the teacher is just another artist in the classroom.

An ideal classroom culture would account for this. In a perfect world, the teacher would be able to meet every student with individual feedback and meet them where they are as far as skill and interest level. Just because this is ideal, unfortunately does not mean that this is practical. Ms. Howard addressed this downfall is mostly due to time constraints. While every teacher ideally would want to have the time to meet with every single student and give them all equal feedback and attention, this just is not possible. What can happen however, is to cultivate an environment where students feel comfortable with expressing their needs or confusion to the teacher or even their peers. Operating within the classroom as a studio space can help with this. When all students are operating as artists, even at different levels, there is space and time for individual experimentation and time for one-on-one assistance to occur.

Another benefit to treating the classroom as a studio space is that the teacher can model artist behaviors such as risk-taking and making mistakes. Art is all about experimentation and making mistakes, but many students feel like, if they are not good at something the first time they try, that they will never be good at it. This not only discourages students from trying new things, it discourages them from trying to do anything that is outside the box which is what creating is all about. The misconception that artists are born with innate talent and skill and not individuals who have honed a craft and skill similar to training for a sport, is mostly to blame. Modeling making mistakes and responding to those mistakes is an opportunity to remedy this

misconception and prepare students for responding to their own future mistakes. For example, if you splash a bit of ink onto your painting, what should you do? Yes, you can start over and try to make your next rendition even better or, you can work with that splattering of ink and try to transform and integrate it into your work of art.

When the classroom is repositioned as a studio space and the teacher is able to model artist behavior as a fellow artist in the room, students have a better chance at accepting their own mistakes. As Ms. Howard explained “I think students especially now have a lot of pressure to succeed and get an A in the class and maybe there is pressure from their parents, so there is always a mindset of ‘I’m so afraid to fail’ and its different in art because in a way you want them to fail because you want to push them past their limit and past their comfort zone.”<sup>16</sup>. In a traditional classroom, the fear of failure and the stress of having the right answer is ever present. This mindset without fail infiltrates the art room and students become fixated on their grade instead of focusing on these artist behaviors such as experimentation and risk-taking. In the classroom culture that we are discussing, a solution to this is to allow students to have completion grades and never penalize a student with a bad grade if they have tried something that did not work smoothly. As a teacher in an art classroom, students will make mistakes and make messes. Instead of creating penalties for experimentation, I will endeavor to encourage mistakes and experimentation. This is where the artist-teacher can make a difference in the classroom. Even after redefining the context of the space, students will still feel pressure to make work that can live up to their personal expectations. In order to quell concerns to encourage risk taking, it is important for the art teacher to present themselves as an artist as well who can take risks and also make mistakes.

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<sup>16</sup> Ms. Howard interview

In this case, risk taking can take on many different forms. Risk taking in an art classroom could mean testing out a new material that you have never used before and perhaps even experimenting with said material on different types of papers. Risk does not have to be an elaborate thing even though it may feel like it. Risk taking can sound daunting, to students and teachers alike. However, it is important to emphasize risk as part of the artistic process. Experimentation is a great way to present and model risk taking. Sometimes something that you plan for as a teacher will not work out exactly the way that you wanted it to and modeling your reaction and solution to that is integral to this classroom culture.

### **The Classroom as an Art Studio**

Redefining the classroom as a studio space is a great way to get students to begin thinking about themselves and the work that they produce differently. Many students do not consider themselves to be artists, but if you as a teacher promptly position a student as an artist with the means to work creatively and freely, students can begin to believe in themselves and work with more confidence in the classroom. This strategy has to been found to be “successful with diverse populations in public and private school settings, with large and small class sizes”<sup>17</sup>. Most students do not enter the art classroom with knowledge of art or even how to use certain materials. Some students may even need to be reminded of the basics of cutting with scissors or how to use glue. Students who need to develop skills in some of these basic tasks are put in vulnerable situations in a classroom setting where everyone is doing the same thing. Self-criticism, comparison, and fears of being embarrassed can surface and block progress. However, a studio environment can mitigate some of these difficult feelings by allowing trial and error and normalizing mistakes. Restructuring the classroom as a studio space instead of a traditional classroom gives students the mobility to be active and pick and choose what they

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<sup>17</sup>Hathaway, Nan E. "Smoke and Mirrors: Art Teacher as Magician."

want to work with. In an actual artist studio, an artist is always moving and adjusting and experimenting which are all things that can and should occur in the art classroom. Giving students the freedom to be mobile and work with a variety of materials also demonstrates mutual respect and allows students to feel like an independent artist in the room.

A studio space benefits the teacher in the sense that it helps the teacher meet each student at their individual skill level. Because a studio structure is interest-driven, students can express what they are interested in, and the instructor can then nurture those interests with the technical skills that they need to complete their task. Even when the class may be working on the same project, students can find places to adjust the project to their skill level and interest to make the students more motivated to learn and more importantly, create. When the classroom becomes a studio space, in addition to the students becoming artists, the instructor also is able to become an artist in the room as well.

Because there are so many students who come into the art classroom feeling like they have no ability to create, it is important for the instructor to show students that they are capable of actually teaching them what they need to know. In my own experience, after I showed an example of work that I made or the example that I made for the project my students are working on, they began to take me more seriously. Students were asking me questions and listening to my feedback. It is important for students to see that their art teacher is an artist.

### **Lesson Planning for the Culture**

When considering this ambitious style of classroom culture, it is important to consider the task of lesson planning and building curriculum to support the artist teacher and the classroom as a studio. According to the article “Lesson Plan Using Artistic Ways of Thinking”, lesson plans and instructional time should include the following three properties:



- “(1) Students and teachers are engaged in active, purposeful learning.
- (2) Curriculum is challenging, exploratory, integrative, and relevant.
- (3) Educators use multiple learning and teaching approaches. Teaching and learning approaches should accommodate the diverse skills, abilities, and prior knowledge of young adolescents, cultivate multiple intelligences, draw upon students' individual learning styles, and utilize digital tools.”<sup>18</sup>

In this proposed classroom culture, respectful and productive interactions should take place between teacher and student but also between two peers. When students are engaging in active learning with each other, they are able to learn and experiment with each other. Designing lesson plans that encourage peer and social learning is very important in building a classroom culture because not only is it important to encourage healthy interactions with the teacher, it is also important that students feel safe and confident interacting and creating with and alongside their peers.

It is also important that the learning environment and activities are intentional but also challenges students to explore and experiment. When asked about how to design instruction Ms. Howard noted that she found success with “Scaffolding the curriculum by creating initial activities where students can find success with doing and when they experience that success they get more confident and then moving on to that next step or next project they have that sense of confidence of ‘oh I can do this’ and then you start to scaffold it into more advanced concepts that they are prepared for”<sup>19</sup>. This could manifest through activities such as initial planning pages in sketchbooks or creating thumbnail sketches or even testing out materials on different pieces of paper to see what works.

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<sup>18</sup>Miller, P. (2011). “Lesson Plan Using Artistic Ways of Thinking”

<sup>19</sup> Ms. Howard Interview

Each step of this process is intentional and builds onto larger and more complex ideas. There are also other methods to consider such as Object Based Learning. This instructional method is described as “an educational method that involves actively using authentic or replica material objects”<sup>20</sup>. Object based learning, or OBL, allows for students to interact with what they are learning in a hands-on and material way, which is very important in an art classroom. Students need to be able to have time for play and exploration with materials to be able to understand how things work together. OBL is a great way to help students to experiment and scaffold their ability to take risks in their practice. In this low-stakes environment where there is an emphasis on learning hands on, students immerse themselves in experiences that are more “memorable and informative in the learning process” rather than a more “passive experience of reading from a book or listening to a lecture”<sup>21</sup>.

This again relates to the idea of centering the classroom as a studio. When working on a new project, even a trained artist will start with the basics, such as sketching or thumbnailing. By creating instruction that mirrors the practice of an artist, students can be encouraged to be more confident in their ability to create. Ms. Howard further states that it is important to set “the classroom up to where mistakes are okay and failing is okay”<sup>22</sup>. Based on my findings, in general, students either do poorly or do nothing at all in the art room because they are afraid of the idea of having the right answer. They are afraid to fail.

This is where it becomes crucial to create diversified instruction for every type of student in the classroom. Differentiated instruction in art is exceptionally important because every student will come into the room with a different skill level and a different level of interest in the

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<sup>20</sup>Jamieson, Andrew. “Object Based Learning: A New Way of Teaching in Arts West” University of Melbourne Collections,

<sup>21</sup>Jamieson, Andrew. “Object Based Learning: A New Way of Teaching in Arts West”

<sup>22</sup> Ms. Howard Interview

content as a whole. When designing curriculum, it is also important to have the lessons be student centered. It is important for the artist-teacher to be able to “rethink their own ideas about their students, and create new assignments that utilize different pedagogical methods and allow students more power with regard to their artmaking choices”<sup>23</sup>. Centering projects and activities around student interest is a great way to get students motivated to engage in learning and creating. Allowing students to experiment with their own ideas and interests also helps to build this proposed classroom culture where students are treated and respected as artists.

### **The Importance of Peer Learning**

It is also worth noting that student to student interactions play a major role in developing an artist mindset and taking risks. While it is important to have the teacher be a driving force for creative activity, it is also important to encourage the practice of peer learning in a studio centered classroom. Peer learning consists of grouping or pairing students together to work side by side or collaboratively. The goal of this grouping is to encourage students to learn from and with one another and perhaps begin to think differently and create more confidently. The idea is that students will observe their peers following procedures of an artistic practice which can inadvertently lead their peers to mimic their actions and behaviors. According to “Peer Teaching and Learning in Art Education”, utilizing “peer teaching in art can both promote learning through peer relationships and challenge the conventions of student social interaction. Reid and Duke (2015) attest that ‘students, by the act of being a student with other students, become part of a complex community where disciplinary know-how and identity entwine’”<sup>24</sup>. Classroom

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<sup>23</sup>Buffington, Melanie L. “Power Play: Rethinking Roles in the Art Classroom.” *Art Education* 67, no. 4 (2014)

<sup>24</sup>Workman, Amy and Frances Vaughan. 2017. “Peer Teaching and Learning in Art Education.” *Art Education* 70

cultures are built and reinforced through these intertwining interactions through people as well as environment and focus.

A case study conducted in the article titled “Social Learning and Drawing” provides accounts of peer-interactions with students that he observed in his classroom while practicing peer learning. He recounted that by introducing peer learning, “Children learn to draw by looking, copying, and creating anew.”<sup>25</sup> Students at all levels of school are curious and social creatures. By embracing their social and curious nature as an asset, students can begin to learn and experience creativity with and through each other. The concept of peer-learning also has the powerful role of being a tool that promotes empowerment and collaboration. As previously stated, every student enters the art room on a different level of experience as well as interest. By introducing peer-learning, students learn to work collaboratively with their peers and learn from each other. This can begin to take some of the stress off of anxious students who feel a lot of pressure to create something on their own. By working collaboratively, students can work together and use each other's strengths and empower students.

Mr. Bass, recounted to me his personal experience with implementing the practice of peer-learning and teaching in his classroom. Most notably, Mr. Bass described a break-through interaction between a group of students where he observed a successful encounter with peer-learning that allowed a student to paint without the fear of failure<sup>26</sup>. This interaction began with two different students, one very nervous and hesitant student who was too scared to make a mistake or a mess and thus would not make any work at all: and the other student, a spontaneous student with high energy who would paint with so much vigor that he would make two or more paintings in the span of a class period. When making a new seating arrangement, Mr. Bass made

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<sup>25</sup>LaRoche, Gaetano A. 2015. "Social Learning and Drawing: What Children Learn by Copying Images of their Peers." *Art Education* 68

<sup>26</sup> Mr. Bass Interview

the choice to seat these two students together and the results were groundbreaking for each student respectively. All of the sudden, each student's work and process underwent meaningful change. The hesitant and fearful student began to actually make work and more specifically, was mimicking the style and technique of this very spontaneous student. This included fast application of paint and color with little planning but instead demonstrated the playful and energetic nature of the student. This student, by watching the high energy student, was able to quell his fears of mess making and not only make one painting, but two or even more. The confidence that this student was able to begin creating with serves as a wonderful example of how successful peer-learning can be. This seating arrangement also affected the work process of the high energy student. While this student was still producing multiple works, Mr. Bass recounted that this student began to slow down a bit and began to think a little bit more about the artistic choices that he was making<sup>27</sup>. While working spontaneously is a great skill to have as a young creator, it was interesting to see how this student began to experience art making when he was confronted with someone who was more critical of their choices and worked with a lot of intentionality.

The direct effect of peer learning is how it can create a low-stakes environment where students can feel less stress and take risks as a result. Based on this account from Mr. Bass, it is clear that some students can benefit greatly from peer influence in order to build their creative confidence. This is a key aspect of the classroom culture that I am endeavoring to cultivate in the future. Ideally, the artist teacher would be able to quell the concerns and fears of a timid student who is afraid of making mistakes, but sometimes that is not the best solution. This is supported by the research conducted in the article “Social Learning and Drawing” with this article stating that “it is essential to the psychological well being of children that they have healthy peer

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<sup>27</sup> Mr. Bass Interview

interactions"<sup>28</sup> which can subsequently allow the artist-teacher to “promote both growth in the discipline and educate the whole person by designing and allowing for communication and interaction between children in the classroom.”<sup>29</sup>

### **Boundaries when Cultivating a Classroom Culture**

As it was previously stated, “A classroom community culture is a set of rules and understandings that are specific to the individuals included in the group and reflective of the values and identities of the world these individuals inhabit”<sup>30</sup>. Because a classroom culture will look different depending on the individual groupings of students that inhabit the space, each grouping will differ in ways from the others. When thinking about a classroom culture, we are thinking about the collective grouping of students and how they create an environment along with the teacher. However, in these groupings it is only natural that there will be outliers: students who are clashing with this culture. Here is one of the first boundaries of a classroom culture. This proposed classroom culture redefines the classroom as a studio space and implementing this requires a certain amount of responsibility that some students are not going to be able to devote to the space and their peers.

Based on this information, even though the studio space is meant to let students have autonomy in their work and actions, it is still vital to have rules and procedures for classroom management. Even in their simplest forms and with the most well behaved students “Rules need to be part of the life of the classroom from the beginning of the year or semester. Establishing them early is time well spent in helping the students get acclimated to the classroom”<sup>31</sup>. The idea

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<sup>28</sup>LaRoche, Gaetano A. 2015. "Social Learning and Drawing: What Children Learn by Copying Images of their Peers."

<sup>29</sup>LaRoche, Gaetano A. 2015. "Social Learning and Drawing: What Children Learn by Copying Images of their Peers."

<sup>30</sup>Gallagher, Suzanne, and Greg S. Goodman. "CHAPTER EIGHT: Classroom Community Culture for Learning."

<sup>31</sup>Gallagher, Suzanne, and Greg S. Goodman. "CHAPTER EIGHT: Classroom Community Culture for Learning."

of establishing rules for the classroom still allows the room to be treated as a studio and centers the students as artists. When working with tools and materials, there are restrictions and procedures that need to be followed, this even applies to the artist teacher. Structure in this sense, will appear differently as students will be treated as independent and capable artists who are able to respect their materials. However, providing structure in this classroom would rely heavily on organization and communication in order to maintain order. This could mean checking out materials on a clipboard or dedicating a period of class time to clean up the space and make sure everything is put away. Allowing students to feel connected to the space would hopefully lead to them feeling a responsibility to maintain the space. I believe that this type of studio space can be maintained through classroom management that focuses on relationship building with the teacher as well as the space.

By setting high expectations of the student's material usage and respect for the room, you are building respectful rapport with students. Research in this area has demonstrated that "In a climate of respect and responsibility, students are much less likely to be motivated to disrupt or misbehave"<sup>32</sup>. Additionally, when a teacher focuses on building mutual respect instead of asserting absolute control, there are opportunities to "promote both growth in the discipline and the person by designing and allowing for communication and interaction between children and teens"<sup>33</sup>. Some more benefits to this approach include, by focusing on mutual respect, "Students are engaged in meaningful, productive activities with others, and they share authority and responsibility with teacher"<sup>34</sup>.

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<sup>32</sup>Gallagher, Suzanne, and Greg S. Goodman. "CHAPTER EIGHT: Classroom Community Culture for Learning."

<sup>33</sup>LaRoche, Gaetano A. 2015. "Social Learning and Drawing: What Children Learn by Copying Images of their Peers."

<sup>34</sup>Gallagher, Suzanne, and Greg S. Goodman. "CHAPTER EIGHT: Classroom Community Culture for Learning."

While this can begin to remedy the boundaries set by students, there are other boundaries to the classroom culture that begin on an institutional level. Boundaries at this level include issues such as large class sizes that do not allow for one-on-one instructional time and pressure that students are dealing with such as grades and testing. In an ideal setting, in a classroom every student would have time and attention devoted to them to help foster an authentic and meaningful relationship with art, but most of the time, that is not possible. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, in the state of Tennessee the average class size for teachers in self-contained classrooms, such as art, is 26.5 students<sup>35</sup>.

I also wanted to speak on my own experience and boundaries that I face in my pre-service teaching experience. All of this paper revolves around an idealistic classroom culture where the students and teachers are operating under ideal conditions. But the reality of a classroom is different, and this philosophy began to feel disconnected in many ways. This thesis experience began as a way for me to think about what I would want my students to feel in my classroom in the future, but I found myself operating under many assumptions. For one, I failed to consider that some students may have nothing to say. I want my classroom to feel warm and inviting and safe so students can use art as a way to express themselves and their interests. While this is still how I feel, I have come to realize that there are students who have no interest in art and have nothing that they want to say. So, no matter how much you encourage these students and how much you try to empower and inspire them, some students just do not want to participate, and this deeply discouraged me. I find myself forgetting that some students just have no interest in art or creating while I have such a deep love and connection to creating and I wanted everyone to feel the same way. This reality struck me and inspired significant reflection.

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<sup>35</sup>“Average class size in public schools, by class type and state: 2017–18.” n.d. National Center for Education Statistics



I felt discouraged and disconnected from my original research questions that I sought to answer. How can I use my identity as an artist and love for art to create an environment where students feel safe to express themselves and take risks?

### **Conclusion**

As a pre-service educator, these are all ideas for a classroom culture that I am dreaming about cultivating and at times, it feels out of my reach. In my student teaching experience, I was placed in a high school and was teaching Art I courses to students in grades 9-12. In this environment there was a great variety of learners, and it was quite challenging for me at first as I had little experience with teaching high school students. I was coming equipped with only my high hopes of the classroom culture described throughout this paper. There were rough moments where I thought that this type of classroom culture was impossible and then I experienced my very own beautiful “oops”. I wore a pair of white shoes to school –shoes that were brand new—that I should have not been wearing, especially since these shoes were new Doc Martens. When we were working with paint, fate would have it that I would drop paint on my pair of new white shoes. I stopped and my students stopped and stared, I could not believe that I had just dribbled black paint on my white boots. Taking a deep breath, I listened to the room around me for a moment. On this particular day, we were wrapping up a project, and I overheard the conversation of two students who were done with their paintings. They were talking to each other loudly and asking my mentor teacher if they could paint something– anything. The walls, the floor, the ceiling tiles, even the tables were within their ideas of perfect places to paint. They were itching to paint anything other than paper, and without giving it much more thought, I offered up my shoes as a canvas.

These students, of course, jumped at this untraditional opportunity to paint on something different. Then, all of a sudden, other students were asking to paint on my shoes, students who usually showed a general disinterest in art and other projects, after seeing the others excitedly discussing their plans and compositions to cover the rest of my shoes. At face value while this was happening, I did not think much of it, but after some reflection, this experience was much more meaningful than I originally thought. Without thinking about it, my students and I were modeling artist behaviors and treating our classroom as a studio space. I had made a mistake, and instead of letting it ruin my day, I let it become a beautiful “oops”. Taking off the shoes and allowing and, more importantly, trusting students to paint spontaneously to cover my shoes were actions of operating as artists in a studio space.

I was also accepting the risk of this activity. Could a student have painted and written profanities and other nonsense, yes. Did they? No.

Instead, I now have in my possession the silliest, yet most endearingly, decorated pair of shoes in the world. I like to consider these boots as an artifact of my classroom culture that I was able to curate. For one, these boots are evidence of the strong relationships that I was able to build with my students. Students who were spontaneous and messy took their time because they did not want to mess up their work, and they wanted me to remember them. Students wrote their names, my name, the year, and sentimental messages to remember our time together. Their love and care for me as their teacher shine through on these shoes and allowed me to look even deeper into what this activity achieved.

Without even realizing it, I was also working spontaneously and initiated a collaborative work. Students were able to demonstrate that they could work around other paintings as well as add onto or around certain work to fill up almost the entire surface area of the shoes. They were

demonstrating their ability to be mindful but also express themselves and have the confidence to claim their own space on the shoes for their small contribution. In addition to these artist behaviors that students modeled, they also opened up about how they felt about me.

Students began to write me messages and painted hearts and their names on my shoes, saying that they wanted me to remember them and that they were my favorite students. When the shoes were complete, I realized how important they actually are and I now view them as an artifact of the beginnings of a classroom culture. The messages and the paintings were wonderful spontaneous examples of artist behavior, but I can also see that they are messages of respect and fondness of our time together. I left school that day with a brand new pair of shoes and an overwhelming sense of warmth and reward.

Teaching, to me, is a very giving profession. You give your time, energy, attention, thoughts, advice and much more to growing minds every day, and it is overwhelming. But when I see students get excited about a project or become proud of work they make and become eager to show it to me and their friends, I cannot help but feel warm and accomplished. It was especially rewarding when disinterested or unmotivated students expressed excitement after completing their work. It was at times a struggle to communicate with these students because of their attitude, however I think after a while my sincerity and confidence in them reached them. I wanted them to reach the realization that they were capable of being an artist and on my last day with them, I was able to witness many students realize their ability. For those times I witness students' joy at their work and what they managed to create, the feeling is almost indescribable. I love watching students create and their confidence build. I love to watch them be silly and make mistakes and start over, because that is what artists do. And I know not every student that leaves my room considers themselves an artist, but when they are in my classroom, they are.

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