

Art is a visual language, as important and intrinsic as the words with which we communicate and the numbers with which we calculate. Artist Bill Richards states, "Making art is perhaps as natural as learning to speak – I have never seen a child resist art materials."¹ It is a fundamental means of expression – a birthright rather than a privilege. To that end, the mastery of techniques and media is integral. However, these components are only the grammar of art. They are the *how* – not the *why* – of visual art.

Prominent linguist Stephen Krashen states, "[Language] Acquisition requires meaningful interaction in the target language – natural communication – in which speakers are concerned not with the form of their utterances but with the messages they are conveying and understanding."² The same is true of art. Our students are often foreigners in the art world. So meaning and intent must be the focus over the elements and principles of art and design which provide students with useful tools but not a purpose. What good is an extensive vocabulary without something to say? Like language instruction, art instruction must be relevant, meaningful, and collaborative. As a result, ability will improve naturally through increased participation and engagement. Therefore, quality art instruction should focus on four themes:

Discovery: The art world is a big place. Art instruction must begin with discovery – not just in fine arts, but in visual culture, which constantly bombards us with messages. Therefore, we must learn to identify and *read* cultural texts like art and advertising in order to understand their construction and choose which statements to accept or reject. Awareness of these often invisible visual languages enables improved navigation of our visual world.

Immersion: Students must have time and opportunity to develop and improve their skills through a variety of immersive, often rigorous, artistic practices. Naturally, instruction should be equally varied. Likewise, art instruction must encourage exposure to complicated, even challenging ideas – not only in the art world, but in the broader world as well. Through these explorations, learners are encouraged to participate and create their own messages.

Conversation: Art instruction must be 'multilingual', or composed of many voices. Creating a safe and comfortable environment where sharing and support are the main goals is a necessity. Beyond our own relationships, experiences in art must be interdisciplinary, investigating the relationships between media and ideas. Such connections model the inner-workings of our minds, present realistic experiences for students, and encourage creativity which often stems from such fusions.

Fluency: Art should motivate students to become self-directed and reflective while providing skills necessary to excel in a wide-range of fields. To do so, students need permission to explore their own interests and to make mistakes so that they can develop at their own pace. Simultaneously, students need to stretch their potential in order to meet ambitious expectations, not only of the teacher, but of themselves. In this way, those who do not continue as artists may utilize self-discipline and creativity as tools for enrichment and expression throughout their lives.

In sum, approaching visual art education from the perspective of language acquisition allows me to see art-making as a developmental process where thoughtful

inquiry, playful risk-taking, and problem-solving should be central. Opposing the more authoritarian teacher-centered implication of *grammar*, this student or group-centered model demands active involvement on the part of the learner while offering a greater stake, not only in her/his own mastery, but in the mastery of others as well. In this way, each student may contribute her/his voice and ultimately discover the *how* of visual art as well as the *why*.

¹ Wexler, Alice. "The Art of Necessity: Pictures of Lives Reclaimed from Trauma." *Art Education*, (57) 1, 21 – 24 & 33 – 34.

² Krashen, Stephen D. *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*. Prentice-Hall International, 1987.