

IN THEIR OWN WORDS:

What Student Art Teachers Say They Learn and Need

Photos by Nora B. May

The student teaching experience is often considered to be the final phase of art teachers' preservice preparation. For most, the internship is a time of relating theory to reality, of putting learning into practice. At its best, student teaching helps make prior training relevant and establishes a positive professional outlook in beginning teachers (Kowalchuk, 1999). The practicum can also be a period of great challenge as novices try to balance unfamiliar demands with their own views of what it takes to be a successful teacher. While some interns seem to easily step into being an art teacher, many struggle with this role throughout their placements. What specific challenges do art interns typically face? What do student teachers think they learn and need to learn? How can those who serve as cooperating teachers and supervisors help them become skilled art educators? These issues were the focus of a recent project that examined the reflective writing of art interns over the length of their field placements.

Thirty-seven student teachers enrolled in a large art education program at a northeastern college were involved in the project. Their training prior to student teaching was similar to the majority of art teacher education programs in the United States (Galbraith, 1997; Sevigny, 1987; Willis-Fisher, 1993), with most of their preparation being in the studio areas and including several art and general education courses. In this case, art education courses were taught from a discipline-based perspective. Like many student art teaching experiences, interns were evenly assigned to elementary and secondary schools (two 8-week placements) so that roughly an equal number of individuals were teaching at the same level throughout the term. As part of the student teaching practicum, interns participated in a bi-weekly seminar providing time for collegial interaction and guest presentations on topics of interest. During each of seven seminar meetings held during the semester, student teachers also wrote guided reflective statements about their experiences by responding to open-ended questions about the

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challenges they faced, the successes they experienced, what they learned, and what they thought they needed to know to be a better art educator. Their reflections reveal the thoughts and struggles of novice art teachers as they begin their careers.

The Challenges and Successes of Student Teaching

Overall, four broad topics accounted for most of the subject matter in student teachers' reflective writing. Pupil learning and characteristics, classroom management, instructional strategies, and art content were discussed most often when combining all writing tasks and sessions. It is not surprising that student teachers were concerned about these facets of instruction because interns are often evaluated on their instructional strategies and management efforts during the short, intense internship. Since typical assessment check-lists focus on these topics, student teachers also tend to be preoccupied with them as well. Nevertheless, examining variations and patterns in what interns think about their own teaching and learning can be informative for cooperating teachers and supervisors who work with beginning teachers.

You can't fake it...

What They Say They Learn and Need to Know

When student teachers discussed what they had learned and needed to learn in order to be better art teachers, several themes were evident. Being organized and flexible and providing meaningful learning experiences were discussed frequently when interns wrote about instructional approaches and student characteristics. Having the ability to recognize when a situation is likely to become problematic was a key feature of what preservice teachers said they needed to improve about their classroom management skills. With instructional experience, many student teachers also reported a desire to improve and increase the depth of their art knowledge. Furthermore, continuing to learn about art and teaching was seen as an important aspect of educators' professional growth. Together, these responses are eloquent assessments of the teaching and learning process from the perspective of beginning teachers.

Preparing for Instruction

At the beginning of the semester, one intern wrote, "Organization is everything." This sentiment was recorded frequently throughout the project with varying degrees of

detail and passion. Student teachers' comments about organization included materials and distribution of supplies as well as planning and thinking out all components of instruction. In a sense, being organized and prepared helps novice teachers feel a sense of control at a time when unexpected events seem to happen. These two interns discussed the advantages of being ready to teach and the consequences of being unprepared:

You can't fake it and get away with it. The students know when you aren't prepared or aren't sure what you're saying (not that that has happened to me).

What a positive experience you can have if you're prepared, well rested, and excited. What a horrible nightmare you can live if you are not.

Some student teachers also recognized that planning extends beyond the lesson presentation to include evaluation of instruction. For instance, this intern explained:

It takes a lot of planning and more planning and assessing and reassessing. Not that I've just learned this but I'm definitely convinced.

Experienced educators know that thorough planning and organizing of ideas, activities, and materials is essential. Beginning teachers benefit when they understand the importance of preparation and the time it takes to refine plans. Furthermore, adequate preparation helps novice art teachers impose order on a process that seems to be filled with the unanticipated. Consequently, feeling confident about their level of readiness may enable interns to think and behave more flexibly.

Varying Approaches to Teaching

Some student teachers in this project also recognized the value of flexibility and variation in presenting lessons and dealing with the unexpected. For instance, several interns realized the advantage of having more than one explanation for the same activity or idea:

I learned how difficult and frustrating it can be when students are confused and don't understand. It's a good idea to have different approaches to explain the same idea.

I have only a half dozen ways to say things I may say ten times a class.

In addition, these preservice educators wrote that having differing ways of teaching the same subject matter was important:

Teaching art takes more thought, planning, and creative

It takes a lot of planning and more planning...

input than probably any other subject I can think of. The concepts to be taught can be taught in so many different ways that it is going to take a lot of time teaching to learn the best ways to teach them.

[I need to know] how to most easily make the transference of ideas happen for students. Showing them sample solutions is one [idea]. Knowing more avenues is key to good teaching.

Some interns also reported that they needed to be versatile in modifying what they knew about art for students. This awareness of translating knowledge to specific teaching situations and levels marks a change in beginning teachers' understanding of what it takes to promote learning. These ideas were expressed by the following interns:

I need to work more on taking all of my art knowledge and adapting so that my young students can better understand it.

I learned it's very difficult to teach what you know.... We as teachers, make assumptions about what we know and what students know. Much more is involved to make connections.

Teachers must regularly consider factors such as art content, students' prior knowledge and characteristics, district guidelines, school learning goals, available resources, and effective pedagogical strategies when planning

and teaching. Flexibility is a key aspect of this process. Because the unexpected often occurs, an essential component of good teaching is the ability to think in a versatile way about the content of instruction. Having several explanations and methods of presenting the same art idea is essential, but teachers must also work to adapt what

Knowing more avenues is key...

they know for different student levels.

Flexibility is important when presenting lessons as well. Often, students contribute unanticipated, yet insightful, ideas, questions, or comments during a lesson. Teachers with limited pedagogical experience may fail to recognize potentially useful ideas or circumstances if they deviate from what is expected. Novice art educators must recognize when something has the potential to deepen student learning and have the confidence to incorporate it in teaching. Through discussions, problem solving sessions, and modeling, supervisors can encourage novice flexibility in two areas: developing and implementing lessons and responding to learners. Student teachers need to devise alternative approaches to the same art content and be adaptable when working with pupils who may have surprisingly sophisticated ideas about art.

Making Learning Relevant

Interns seemed to focus on pupil characteristics and learning more regularly in the first third of their field practicum. Making the purpose of lesson content clear and relevant was a theme in student teachers' writing that connected pupils to instructional strategies. Although this is a key feature of

effective teaching, novices often have difficulty including it in their lessons. However, some interns in this project understood the relationship between making lesson content relevant and the degree of student learning. For instance, these student teachers expressed the need for instructional strategies that connect to students' interests and lives outside of the art classroom:

I've learned that no matter how "hard" or difficult something may seem for a specific age level, it may not be so. The way it is explained and demonstrated to students helps a great deal. What also helps is to tell them why they are doing the project and what you want them to learn from it.

Students are willing and eager to learn about any aspect of art as long as they know why they are doing it.

Teachers must regularly consider factors such as art content, students' prior knowledge and characteristics, district guidelines, school learning goals, available resources, and effective pedagogical strategies when planning and teaching. Flexibility is a key aspect of this process. Because the unexpected often occurs, an essential component of good teaching is the ability to think in a versatile way about the content of instruction.

I need to know different motivational strategies (how to get students who don't even want to be in the art room interested in the lessons). I need to come up with ways to relate the content to the students' lives.

I've learned that whatever you are teaching, you have to make it important to your students and you must believe that what you're doing is important.

Successful interns made learning more pertinent for students by focusing on how particular lessons related to their lives and the larger world.

Supervisors can help interns be more effective teachers by emphasizing the importance of examining and discussing the relevance of specific art ideas and skills in every lesson and unit.

Managing Students and Recognizing Problem Situations

The beginning teachers in this project were frequently preoccupied by classroom management and reported disproportionately few successes handling inappropriate student behavior. While persistently challenged by classroom management during their time in the schools, student teachers were particularly concerned about this topic at the end of the semester. This seemed to be true whether or not interns actually had problems managing student behavior.

Recognizing when particular student behaviors or situations are likely to escalate into problems was one skill interns reported they needed in order to be a better teacher. These student teachers reflected on this issue in the following way:

[I need to know] how to have eyes in the back of your head. One of my major problems is begin able to see everything that is going on in the class (sometimes seeing the problem even before it occurs).

It's very difficult to teach what you know...

I need to know students and their mannerisms better. I am not always "one step" ahead of them, knowing what they'll do next. My cooperating teacher can "see" an argument before it happens.

I need to develop the sense to recognize when a situation can be left alone and when it needs to be stopped. For example, when two students are talking it may lead to the class becoming out of control, or it may lead to nothing. I have found myself ignoring situations that should have been stopped and vice versa.

Beginning art teachers can have difficulty determining when intervention is needed in a particular situation. Because they may be unfamiliar with typical student behaviors and interactions, interns may hesitate to get involved, assume that some conduct is acceptable, or wait for their cooperating teacher to intervene. Supervisors and cooperating teachers should actively discuss challenging or problematic pupil behaviors and directly review management strategies with student teachers.

Classroom management needs to be approached by supervisors and interns in another way as well. Because novices typically compartmentalize their knowledge, they may fail to relate *what* they teach to *how* pupils respond. In other words, they may assume that behavior

is unrelated to the content and structure of art instruction and view classroom management as a tool to control student behavior for its own sake. However, managing behavior should be considered part of a comprehensive approach to teaching and learning that includes art content and successful pedagogical strategies. Poorly thought-out lesson presentations and superficial art content contribute to teachers' behavior challenges. Consistent, firm, and positive approaches to management work together with a substantive approach to art teaching. Thus, supervisors should not only directly address management issues, but also help interns to see relationships between art content and pedagogical strategies while maintaining high expectations for what students can learn about art.

Expanding and Using Art Knowledge

Art content references and considerations were consistent throughout student teachers' reflective statements, but the strongest connections between instructional strategies and art content occurred from the middle to approximately the 12th week of the semester. Although interns seemed to have confidence in what they knew about art, they also reported a desire to add to their knowledge in this area. Student teachers seemed satisfied about their studio background and skills, but they frequently wrote about adding to their understanding of artists and art history. One preservice teacher explained, "As much as I fought it in the past, I need to know more about art history. Now, I have a great interest in it because I can see how I can use it."

Many student teachers were challenged by this topic in early stages of lesson development. These interns

You have to make it important...

indicated they had difficulty developing their initial lesson idea and connecting it to appropriate exemplars:

I seem to have great "embryo" ideas, but sometimes I have difficulty pushing ideas further.

I know this may seem like a stupid question, but what is the most efficient way to proceed from idea to research? How can I make my research more efficient? Sometimes, I am caught in a circle where my research takes me off the path. Is there a trick or is it simple perseverance?

I need to know the different resources for finding exemplars. What artist would be good to use for certain lessons, etc. I don't even know where to begin to look for information on artists (other than the masters) and what their concerns were.

Although some student teachers realized the need for additional reading, research, and thought about art and artists, others seemed to have more than realistic expectations about their art knowledge. For instance, this intern wrote:

I need to have a faster recall of artists. Background, styles, and reasons for works (underlying meanings). I don't feel I can retrieve

information that I have learned, readily. For example, if a student asks a question, I can't answer right away. I say, I'll have to get back to him/her, or look it up together, or provide information about where the student can seek information.

Sometimes I am caught in a circle...

It is commonly accepted that prior knowledge is a primary factor in what individuals learn. Unfortunately, the unfamiliar challenges and circumstances of teaching promote the perception in beginning teachers that they know little about art and pedagogy. While novices must certainly deepen and supplement what they know, they must also be encouraged to recall what they understand about art and teaching. In most cases, student teachers also need assistance interpreting, adapting, and translating what they have learned about art in university courses for use in the K-12 classroom.

Thus, supervisors should help interns reflect on what they already know, recognize areas needing additional thought and investigation, and develop realistic expectations about presenting information and responding to student questions about art.

Building Expertise by Staying Current

One way to assist beginning teachers in refining their thinking about art and teaching is to promote a professionally responsible attitude toward art education. In particular, supervisors can encourage novices to deepen their knowledge over time while becoming active and informed about contemporary trends in the field. These two interns made this relationship clear in their statements about what they need to learn:

To be a better teacher is a constant learning experience. You must stay current, collect visuals whenever possible and never, never lose the desire to be the best for yourself as well as for your students!

I think the learning process goes on forever for the teacher. It is my job to stay current! If I do so each day, I will be a better teacher.

To facilitate this perspective, supervisors can help beginning teachers view their field experiences not as the end of their teacher preparation but as the beginning of their career in art education. Furthermore, one of the first steps in building a professional outlook is to join and participate in state and national arts and educational associations. Art teachers can also make an

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It is my job to stay current!

important impact on the local arts community by becoming involved with city and county arts organizations, centers, and museums. In turn, this involvement strengthens the art program and teaches students that enjoying and learning about art is a rewarding, life-long process.

Final Recommendation

Clear patterns were evident in what interns in this project said they learned and needed to learn about the practice of art education. Sometimes challenging to identify in observations, these patterns constitute, to some degree, the beliefs student teachers hold about what it takes to be a good art teacher. By keeping these reflections and

recommendations in mind, supervisors may help beginning teachers make the transition between preservice training and successful practice more effectively. And, beginning art teachers can recognize common features of their own teaching and learning experiences.

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