

Dear Art Teacher,

People ask me about my experience over the past months working with art teachers in DoDEA. While I can say "extraordinary" or "great," it is really hard to put into a few words. Roy Hall in Japan suggested I keep a journal during this time and that is what I have done.

It takes many words to get a sense of what this has been about. I wish I could come to your classrooms and see how you are making the critique protocol your own.

In this holiday season I would like to acknowledge each of you for the creativity and constancy you provide as a teacher of art in a child's life. It is an honor and a pleasure to work with you.

Thank you to the teachers who wrote to me for this first e-letter. My responses follow.

Teaspoonfuls: Starting Small

1. The Los Angeles artist John Baldessari told this story with photographs and text: once he was driving along when he noticed that there was a yellow #2 pencil on his dashboard. Even though it really bugged him that the pencil lay there and rolled up and back with each movement of the car he couldn't bring himself to reach across, pick up the pencil and put it away somewhere.

Such a small easy step yet no action.

2. This past week I was thinking about writing this response while tying a bright red ribbon on a holiday gift. Although alone in my kitchen I found myself suddenly engaged in critiquing my gift wrapping. I didn't have to labor over my assessment: the truth was plain as day. While I love gift giving I am not the greatest gift wrapper. The ribbon could have been more expertly tied: made tighter, more symmetrical. It was imperfect.

I thought about the expression we hear so often during the holidays about the "spirit of the season." I realized that often that is what makes the difference - the spirit we bring to the actions we take.

Somewhere during this holiday season I hope you are cutting yourself some slack. Letting some things be imperfectly done.

3. An art teacher wrote:

"Each of us, as art teachers, has our own separate set of knowledge, skills, and dispositions about the ways to use critique in the classroom. Since each of our facilities is unique, it would be insightful to share how we physically set up our rooms for critique".

A great suggestion: I thought of the work we did in Protocol #1 in which the whole group spent time setting up the artwork. This teacher would like to hear from others so do respond to his request for our next e-mail letter in January.

Describe how you have arranged the physical set-up of your room to view student artwork and to talk together about it. A brief description - a few sentences is fine.

Share what the critique space in your classroom looks like. Where does it happen? It would be great to hear across grade levels about this.

4. An art teacher wrote:

"I haven't much to say, except that I am excited by your ideas. I want to take at least 30 minutes to think about how I am going to begin including your assessment structure in my lessons."

I appreciate this teacher's directness in her opening! And admire her wise plan to set aside the time to deliberate about how she would like to proceed. That is the tried and true method for planning a lesson. It's exciting that she is plans on incorporating critique.

But in light of the theme mentioned at the start of this e-letter about *being imperfect* sometimes we do not have the luxury of time. In that case my refrain would be to just dive in and begin.

A good place to start is by carving out 5 or 10 or 15 minutes of class time to simply set up the artwork with students. Or if you have done that take the same amount of time and make up the ground rules with them. Or if you have done that spend quiet time just looking or writing about the artwork. You get the idea.

Then reflect afterwards about what you would like to change or refine.

3. Which brings me to the topic of critique and assessment. While I know we have in our

community teachers who are experienced and skilled at art critique for those of you who are beginners, or rusty or just haven't found the time - in light of *celebrating imperfection* I want to extend an invitation for you to begin with small wonderfully imperfect steps. Years ago I was talking with a fellow artist, Maria, who used the expression "teaspoonfuls" to suggest the liberation that comes with starting a new project with small steps.

We often place pressure on ourselves to get everything in place all at once perfectly. Paradoxically this can prevent us from beginning.

Take a step in the arena of critique and art assessment. Start anywhere. Start small.

4. Regarding Critique and Assessment in your classroom:

1. Start small.
2. Anywhere is a good place to start.
3. Pull out the sheet in the module you received at workshop that has the protocol with bullet points on it. Choose one that grabs your attention and go for it. Try interpreting that point in your classes for one week. *And don't try and be perfect!*
4. Don't even think about doing the all the steps of the protocol. Incorporate just one of the protocols into an art lesson.
5. Share an idea, problem related to assessment. Talk even briefly with a colleague - over lunch, in the hallway, or e-mail.

If you recall The Positive Negative Art Project I brought with me and that we based our Master Lesson on - that lesson grew out of a single conversation I had with a fellow teacher at lunch one day when I asked how she was addressing composition in her class. Hearing my colleague Julia speak then about her approach sparked my own lesson design.

5. An art teacher wrote:

Just wanted you to know I've been working on critiques with my students and am pleased with the results. They automatically put their work up now when they finish an assignment so that we can take a look. I was happy to see a group of four 5th graders independently discussing the work of one student the other day - soon they won't need me at all!

I'm still having trouble getting them to verbalize their thoughts and with clarity of their statements. I'm trying to work on art vocabulary, which is helping, but it seems to be more than that. Any suggestions?

I agree with you: it is more. I like the nature of your question: it's big! What would it

mean to break "verbalizing thoughts" down into teaspoonfuls? First, cut yourself slack: for a student to verbalize thoughts there usually needs to be systemic requests for this from many teachers.

When we say a student embodies *creative thinking* we are pointing to something more than just incorporating art vocabulary, great and necessary as that is.

A conceptual way of putting it is getting students to *become observers of the observers that they are*. By this I mean having them learn how to step back and outside of their (art and learning) process mid-stream so they can better see what they are up to, what choices they are making, what they need to rework or applaud. My students tease me because when I tell them this I wave my hand above my head. "Go meta!" I say.

We cannot confuse the action of creating with the action of observing our process of creating. They are two different processes and we need to grant our students room for both. Too often though we emphasize the former at the expense of the latter: we make art and leave out the component of reflection and self/group assessment. That is where The Yaven Protocol comes in.

I always like to turn the question back on myself as art teacher. A bunch of questions and comments come to mind:

- a. Where am I introducing "stopping points" for reflection within the art lesson so that students have an opportunity to begin to observe themselves *in the process*? This means breaking the lesson down into smaller components with pauses along the way.
- b. What would I need to design as part of my lesson to get at this? You could design specific moments beforehand where you knew you would want them to stop mid-stream and reflect/observe/talk about their process.
- c. Or as the class is working just notice moments when it feels right to spontaneously ask them to stop and reflect about what they are up to. Design several questions beforehand to ask that they might pair share about. Have them do a gallery walk and then speak or write about what they observe.
- d. Get in the habit of asking students unanswerable questions. For example the first day of class we go around the room and I ask students a series of questions including "what do you know?" Answers range from "I know how to make an omelette to "I know that life is good".

6. There was a moment at the close of our 2 day sessions when we were each asked to speak about a highlight of the workshop. Again and again art teachers spoke about what it meant just to be in conversation with other art teachers. As art teachers we are nothing if not resourceful This e-mail forum which is occurring for **only 2 more sessions** is a great way to talk with colleagues. Take advantage of this opportunity which has a small window of time. Don't let 2 more years go by without connecting to fellow art teachers. Jot down your thoughts and e-mail them. We love to hear from you.

So the invitation stands: write a sentence or two on some small way you are implementing this work in your classroom.

7. In closing would love to hear how the posters are working in your classrooms. Any comments from your students?

My Sabbatical semester is over. Classes start up again for me in January too.
Happy 2004! '

Regards,
Linda