Introduction

"Follow your bliss and the universe will open doors for you where there were only walls."
Joseph Campbell

Humans have an innate desire to communicate. For many students living with disabilities, communication is often difficult. Observing this difficulty fueled my desire to develop adaptations in my art lessons that would facilitate communication with my students while also engaging them in the visual arts. Trying new methods, materials, and tools has allowed me to remove many of the barriers I observed, enabling my students to express themselves and their ideas through art.

I envisioned *Adaptive Art* as a resource to help art educators adapt lessons and objectives for students with disabilities by working through those students' abilities. I did not intend this book to provide information on specific disabilities or how they manifest in people; a variety of books have been written on that topic, such as *The Complete Learning Disabilities Handbook: Ready-to-Use Strategies & Activities for Teaching Students with Learning Disabilities* by Joan Harwell and Rebecca Williams Jackson.[1] Another great book is *Reaching and Teaching Students with Special Needs through Art* edited by Beverly Levett Gerber and Doris M. Guay.[2] Rather, this book presents strategies and techniques, based on my own research and experience, for teaching the visual arts to students who have been identified as having various categories of challenge, such as behavioral, emotional, vision, or fine motor challenges.

The categories in this book are larger than a single specific disability, and the deficits discussed are common in students with and without disabilities. (For instance, Chapter 7, on fine motor skills, will be helpful for teachers working with young children who are developing hand-eye coordination.) A child need not be

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identified as having a disability to have a deficit in one or more areas. Students may have weak fine motor skills and exhibit signs of emotional or behavioral disorders due to frustration and their inability to perform at the same level as their peers. Today, many researchers, such as Dr. Johann Issartel and David Gaul, believe that students entering primary grades commonly lack fine motor-skill stamina because of exposure to touch screens and reduced physical exercise, part and parcel of the sedentary lifestyle that technology promotes.[3]

Adaptive Art's instructional methods and ideas for teaching and adapting art activities, media, tools, and techniques will enable you to engage your students in meaningful and creative self-expression—in which the process is often more important than the product. All are designed to aid your students in engaging successfully and to assist you in managing the vast array of learning styles and student needs in your classroom. The strategies presented here are the result of watching what my students could and could not do, and then modifying lessons, materials, media, and tools, as well as my own thinking about students' abilities, to allow them to successfully make and engage in art.

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The capacity to think and react quickly is important, since not every adaptation will work for all students all the time. The best method for adapting a tool or technique for painting may be different from one student to the next. Let your students try out a variety of brushes and techniques to see what works best for them. As your students gain more control of the task, you may need to change your approach once again or eliminate the adaptation completely as they develop control and confidence in painting.

It is my hope that the findings and suggestions in *Adaptive Art* will keep students engaged in learning and educators engaged in teaching. I wish you much success as you use these adaptations to capitalize on your students' abilities and foster their artistic self-expression.

Notes

1 Joan Harwell and Rebecca Williams Jackson, *Complete Learning Disabilities Handbook: Ready-to-Use Strategies & Activities for Teaching Students with Learning Disabilities,* 3rd ed. (West Nyack, NY: Center for Applied Research in Education, 2008).

2 Beverly L. Gerber and Doris M. Guay, eds., *Reaching and Teaching Students with Special Needs through Art* (Reston, VA: The National Art Education Association, 2006).

3 David Gaul and Johann Issartel, "Fine Motor Skill Proficiency in Typically Developing Children: On or Off the Maturation Track?" *Human Movement Science*, Vol. 46 (April 2016), 78–85.

Additional Resources

D. J. Vera, M. M. Jozwiak, and M. L. Castilleja, " 'The Computer is Broke!' Could Technology Be Affecting Fine Motor Development in Tech Savvy Pre-School Children or Could It Be Something Else?" 1st ed., Vol. 7, *Schooling*, pp. 1–10, Rep. No. 1 (2016). San Antonio, TX: Texas A&M University–San Antonio. doi:http://www.nationalforum.com/Electronic Journal Volumes/Vera, Debbie J The Computer is Broke Schooling V7 N1 2016.pdf

Chapter 1
Creating a Philosophical Framework

"Those who have no compassion have no wisdom. Knowledge, yes; cleverness, maybe; wisdom, no. A clever mind is not a heart. Knowledge doesn't really care. Wisdom does."
Benjamin Hoff

Foster independence whenever possible; offer the necessary scaffolding to reach that independent state.

From the moment I started teaching, I have been more curious about those for whom learning and doing are difficult than those for whom learning comes easily. The desire to find ways to encourage all learners to create and engage in art has led me to investigate best practices and theories for teaching students identified as having disabilities. This research has shaped and altered my philosophy of education.

Building Your Own Foundation

Part of who you are as a teacher is the result of what you have experienced in your life. Each person develops a unique foundation, on which a philosophical framework is built. Most of us have a philosophy or philosophical framework of education that changes as we grow our knowledge and encounter new theories. Your philosophy of education is constructed from your thoughts and attitudes about pedagogy, gleaned from exposure to various opinions on how to teach, reach, and engage students. Your framework is a structure of diverse ideas, thoughts, and methods, which you form into a system that works for you and your students.

From the scraps of wisdom and insights that you have gathered, you create your own pedagogical patchwork, pieced together from what stood out to you as a teacher. In a sense, you have constructed your own educational theory, shaped by all of your observations and encounters. Your philosophical framework consists of the characteristics, theories, and practices that you value. And you alter that framework as you evolve and develop in your profession. Most likely, you became a teacher out of a desire to pass on your knowledge and love of learning to others.

The degree to which you change your teaching strategies to reach every learner will be based on your personal situation.

Set obtainable goals and give rewards and movement breaks when needed or once the goal is achieved.
Photo credit: Kayla McVey

If you do not have a good support system of caring paraprofessionals, combined with the resources of a supportive special education department, you may feel overwhelmed and uncertain about how to meet the needs of a diverse classroom. Art educators with jam-packed schedules and little planning time may feel they can't adapt every lesson. That is okay. Adapt when you can. Change lessons over time. Adapt tools first. We use those every day in the art room.

Knowing your students, as well as understanding their limitations and abilities, is important when formulating adaptations that will be effective in the visual arts. When you make the decision to adapt, you are removing obstacles, such as frustration and doubt, that keep students from appreciating and creating art. This change in approach leads to an evolving and informed awareness about your students' needs. In "A Disability Aesthetic, Inclusion, and Art Education," Doug Blandy speaks about the silenced insisting on a voice; he calls for a new aesthetic that allows us to look at those who have not had a voice and to see and

Adapt when you can. Change lessons over time. Adapt tools first. We use those every day in the art room.

A student builds cutting skills. Warm up by cutting Play-Doh prior to paper cutting.
Photo credit: Robin Hughes

hear what they have to say.[1] As a teacher, you have the power to help students find their voices, many of which will be heard for the first time.

Using Narrative Accounts

Another vital component of meeting students' needs is knowing how they learn. One way to determine their learning style is through narrative accounts. As Steve Thunder-McGuire explains in his contribution to the anthology *Issues and Approaches to Art for Students with Special Needs*, these exercises allow a child to speak about the processes and learning that take place during artistic expression.[2] By creating narrative accounts of his students' abilities, Thunder-McGuire gained a deeper understanding of each learner, beyond what an individualized education program (IEP) alone could provide. A narrative account can play a dual role, serving as an initial assessment tool and as an ongoing metric of a student's progress throughout the year.

In working with my adaptive art class, I have seen the significance of this method. For instance, I once worked with a student identified as having multiple disabilities who was painting a picture of herself. She completed the self-portrait and then added several small objects, one of which had a brushstroke coming off one end and extending into the air. Sara was very proud of her work and had enjoyed looking in the mirror as she worked to paint herself. We sat and looked at her artwork together. I asked, "Is that you?" Sara eagerly replied, "Yes." She then pointed to an object in her painting. I asked what it was. "Shadow," she stated, then pointed to a circular mark and said "ball." Sara's paraprofessional, who knows Sara and her home life well, explained that Sara had a cat named Shadow. Had I not engaged her in a narrative account of her art-making experience, I would not have learned about Sara's life experience and how important her cat and its toy were in her life. Sara's painting was a meaningful experience.

The narrative provides us with a deeper understanding of the artist and tells a story to the viewer. Paula Eubanks discusses the relationship between visual language and verbal development in her contribution to the anthology *Issues and Approaches to Art*, stating the importance

Offer encouragement if hands fatigue during scissor work, as it builds hand strength.
Photo credit: Kayla McVey

of art when other areas of communication are compromised or impaired.[3]

Conducting an evaluation of your students, as well as of yourself and your teaching methods, is essential to creating a successful learning environment.

Conducting an Initial Assessment

The initial assessment involves some basic materials: paper, a variety of brushes, paint, markers, pencils, scissors, and a stencil. I want to see if the student can hold the pencil or marker correctly or at all. I note what type of grasp he has and whether he needs a pencil grip or adaptation of drawing tools. Can he draw basic shapes and follow one-, two-, or three-step directions? Is coloring in a confined area possible?

Next we try painting. We try a number of brushes to determine which give the student the most control and success in art-making. Can he paint independently, or is a stencil needed to confine the painted area?

Lastly, when assessing cutting skills, I recommend tearing paper first to judge hand strength. I always have the student try the basic class scissors first before offering any adaptive scissors. I have the student cut on a fine pencil line and also a thick marker line to see if there are any visual or eye-hand coordination concerns. Students who cannot use scissors independently or safely will need hand-over-hand assistance from their paraprofessional.[4]

This initial assessment allows me to plan which adaptations I will need to consider as I develop my units and lessons. Your students' needs will change as the academic year progresses, but this initial examination ensures that your first encounter with them will not leave you unprepared.

In the chapters that follow, you will learn specific adaptations for materials and tools, and ideas to choose from when adapting lessons for students with disabilities. These resources will allow you to focus on each student's needs, skills, and interests while creating a learning environment that encourages learning.

Guided independent work builds a child's self-esteem.

Notes

1 Doug Blandy, "A Disability Aesthetic, Inclusion, and Art Education," in *Issues and Approaches to Art for Students with Special Needs*, ed. A. L. Nyman and A. M. Jenkins (Reston, VA: The National Art Education Association, 1999), 34–41.

2 Steve Thunder-McGuire, "Narrative Accounts of Experience, Context, Meaning and Purpose," in Jenkins and Nyman, *Issues and Approaches to Art*, 99–108.

3 Paula Eubanks, "Art as a Visual Language that Supports Verbal Development," in Jenkins and Nyman, *Issues and Approaches to Art*, 109–17.

4 Susan D. Loesl, "Students with Physical Disabilities," in *Reaching and Teaching Students with Special Needs through Art* (Reston, VA: The National Art Education Association, 2006).