

**Material as Means for Differentiated Learning in the Art Classroom**

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Differentiated learning has been well-established as a component of curriculum design for meeting learners' individual needs. The practice is widely used in schools to accommodate students with disabilities, differing levels of knowledge and skill, and unique learning needs. In the book, *Differentiated Instruction in Art*, Heather Fountain writes, "By giving teachers tools to purposefully refine the structure of lessons that reveal to students the varied means to access knowledge in and through art, Differentiated Instruction can transform a classroom into a community of active, engaged learners" (Fountain, 2014, p. 27). In the art classroom, differentiated learning can be seen in several forms; material options to accommodate for sensory needs, choice-based thematic inquiry to promote individual expression, flexible assessment analyzing individuals' learning goals, and many responsive choices in the classroom day-to-day. Well designed art-making experiences based around material experimentation and play incorporate differentiated instruction strategies which engage students in individualized modes of creative thinking. In the following case study, I will analyze a student's experience in which they explored materials as a generative aspect of art-making and engaged with problem-solving and creative thinking.



The Contemporary Art Studio is a weekly after-school program held at the Athenaeum for middle school students in the surrounding Clarke Central School District. The program focuses on studio activities and art-making related to the work on display in the gallery space. The program invited guest artists and lecturers to discuss their art, meaning-making, and professional practice with the students. In this session, vanessa german visited and gave a lecture on the purpose and power of art-making as service to others in the form of her power figure sculptures. The teachers designing the lesson used these sculptures as the basis for framing a project about found object sculptures and material as a conduit for meaning-making. The students were provided several tables of found objects and recycled materials from plastic bottles to toy parts to fabric scraps and beyond. The students were given brief instruction on key points to keep their figures structurally sound, with a challenge to explore the use of material and “deconstruct” existing objects.



Isaac is a 6th grade student from a public middle school in the Athens Clarke County School District. He is an eager participant in most art-making activities, but distractible during certain instruction and demonstrations. He is outgoing and often collaborates with his peers. Isaac was incredibly engaged in vanessa german’s lecture. He was responsive in discussion and seemed to admire german’s work and presentation style. At one point between the artist lecture

and teacher instruction, an instructor mentioned the term “deconstruct” as an alternative to ‘break’ or ‘destroy’. Isaac took this term to heart and interpreted it as permission to explore the materials in front of him as he carefully chose his art-making tools. He returned to his table with an ensemble of recycled materials with a particular interest in a can as the basis for his structure. This permission to deconstruct was a spark and beginning of a generative inquiry for Isaac. The creative modes of thinking he employed related to engineering, architecture, and science, all related to problem-solving for his personal vision of his sculpture. From an outside perspective, this was the most powerful art-making experience for Isaac and at the end of the program he won the Michelangelo Award for his innovative work and excitement with his sculpture.



This case study exemplifies analytical discussions of material in art-making and scaffolding opportunities to explore various materials can diversify assignments to promote and accommodate different ways of thinking. A large contributor to the interaction between material exploration and engagement is the act of “play” in art-making through experimentation. In *Artmaking, Play, and Meaning Making*, Sydney Walker writes, “Risk-taking, improvisation, and forsaking familiar procedures, all attributes of paideia play, readily abet experimentation... Importantly, play can accomplish an encounter with the unfamiliar in a

nonthreatening manner” (Walker, 2021, p. 81). In the CAS lesson, students were encountering new problems with the materials that they had not faced in a typical classroom setting. One student wanted to construct a functioning car by deconstructing and reassembling toy parts. Through trial and error this student discovered the process necessary to disassemble the materials, attach, and organize in aesthetically and functionally successful ways. By creating environments that promote experimentation with material, students become increasingly comfortable with the uncomfortable. When encountering issues or setbacks with their sculptures, students develop problem solving skills that are applicable beyond the classroom as a key component of artistic thinking.

Exploring materials and their function in art-making is a large element of choice-based strategies aligned with Teaching for Artistic Behavior (TAB). Choice-based learning promotes a sense of independence and ownership of student artistic development and learning through a flexible curriculum. In *Engaging Learners Through Artmaking: Choice-Based Art Education in the Classroom (TAB)* (2018), Katherine M. Douglas and Diane B. Jaquith write,

TAB art teachers regard students as artists, giving them full ownership of their artwork. If we wish for students to do the work of artists, we must offer them the opportunity to behave as artists, think as artists, and perform as artists. (p. 8)

One strategy for promoting student independence and ownership of the full creative process is through choices structured in their environment. The classroom itself is often considered the third teacher, an idea coined in Reggio Emilia philosophy (Biermeier, 2015). A well designed classroom can be a catalyst for curiosity and engagement for young artists. Stations or centers with different materials available makes projects both more accessible and instigate curiosity in process. Students can encounter multiple mediums across two-dimensional and

three-dimensional fields and answer the same questions or problems posed by a project. In the case study for example, Isaac was quick to generate ideas as he continued working with found materials. As multiple materials interacted with one another, he encountered problems, discovered interests, and created meaning through imaginative play. A learning space designed to provide a wealth of material possibilities excited and engaged this student in a more meaningful and impactful way through choice-based design.

Materials are a critical consideration when designing curriculum, instruction, and learning environments to best engage all students. Material and medium exploration open the doors for generative inquiry and curiosity, consideration and analysis of art outside of the classroom, and accessibility for every unique artistic mind. Differentiated instruction in the art classroom cannot be separated from deep consideration of material as part of the learning process and opens doors for all students to thrive as young artists.

### References

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