

The ABC's of Art Program Advocacy & Survival

Part I: A to L

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When I began writing this *Advisory* on advocacy and survival, I pondered possible formats, content and my general working knowledge of the subject. Ultimately, I concluded that my task was to share what I have come to learn as "The ABC's of Art Program Advocacy and Survival". Here is my version of the ABC's.

Assessment of students: Students, fellow teachers, administrators and — of course — parents need to know that what goes on in the art classroom has value which someone other than the art teacher can recognize. One vehicle which will help others to perceive 'value' is student assessment. We need to assess our students' activity in the art class — be it in terms of effort or production or portfolio completion or some other criteria. It is not enough to say that a student does what is expected or to take refuge in the old misnomer — "You just can't evaluate students in art class." Assess your students! Say that what goes on in the art class does make a difference.

Bring resources into the art room—people, things, places: All too often, we hold ourselves up as the embodiment of art. We forget to tell students about everyone, everything and everywhere else that is art. Open the door and let the rest of the art world into your room. In particular, if you are excited about someone you meet, something you saw or some place you have been or dream of going, let your students know. Art is all around us (as we frequently profess) and we need to communicate this to our students.

Curriculum development is important and necessary: In these days of educational reform and everyone getting in the 'act' of defining education, it is important for art educators to take the reins in directing the efforts to describe the 'curriculum' of art education. This may be as grand as the current efforts in the areas of a national and state curriculum guidelines or as simple and direct as an individual teacher writing down a one page summary of what is the curriculum plan for a single class in a school. My point is that, at all levels, art educators must take responsibility for letting others know through the written word what the planned art learning is about and how it will happen.

Display and exhibition: "Art" is generally not produced to be hidden away. Historically, it has had either decorative or functional use. Student art is no different. It should be displayed, exhibited or otherwise shared with others. And, please forgive me — we, as art educators, need to make decisions about which student art has particular worth and deserves some special recognition in the public eye. Don't be conflicted about selecting for display student art work which you feel demonstrates the vitality of your art program. Indeed, you should search out examples and tout them all. Students, parents, your fellow educators, and community members need to know what you value as a result of your teaching and the students' learning. In addition, you will find that your students appreciate the recognition of their own and their peers efforts. Art is meant to be shared and through sharing finds an audience.

Evaluation of the program: It is all well and good to say that my program works because: (1) I am happy; (2) the students seem to be learning; and (3) the administration has suggested that it likes my program ... But it is another thing to 'know' that your program is working because you have some data which tells you something about your program. Don't be afraid to develop or identify some evaluation tool which will give you some data about your program's success. Again, complexity is not necessarily the key to this activity. Program evaluation can be as simple as an informal student survey or as complex as statistical manipulations. The important thing is to do 'something' in the way of critically examining your art program.

Fight: Don't let others tell you what is wrong (or right) with your program and what is going to happen to it. Art educators should not take the stance, or lack of a stance, that others

know best and there is nothing I can do. It is more than past the time that this sort of behavior could be considered acceptable or understandable. We need to 'fight' with those who would suggest that they know more about our program than we do. We cannot accept platitudes about our worth and the regrettable situations which dictate our program curtailment or elimination. We need to stand tall and defend our art programs. Don't just wait to be defensive — be offensive (in the politic sense of the word).

Get involved in professional activities: As I look at the membership fluctuations and renewals in our own association (NAEA), I am appalled at the lack of 'professionalism' exhibited. If we are indeed a profession then 'all' art educators should belong to their respective professional art education organizations. If your doctors didn't belong to and participate in the activities of appropriate professional medical associations, you would undoubtedly have some concerns about their abilities and professional commitment. Likewise, our students and parents should have the comfort of knowing that we are 'professionals' who support and participate in activities which promote and guarantee the professionalism of our vocation.

Host the art class: Make sure that everyone — including students — feel that they are welcome and your special 'guests' in your art teaching space. Your instructional environment (hopefully a designated art room) should be a wonderful mecca for all who enter. Welcome each visitor — again including students — with open arms and gracious behavior. If your guests feel that you don't care whether they came or not, they get a message which you don't want to be sending. Let everyone entering your instructional space know that they are a welcome addition and that they have a potential role in that which is or is about to be going on in the room.

Involvement in school activities: How often have I heard art teachers say, "I wish I had more time in my school so that I could become more involved in school activities outside of my program." I have talked to many art teachers who feel they are looked upon by their fellow teachers as the one who doesn't follow the same rules as they do and who doesn't participate in any school activities. Don't let others give you this label. Become a part of your school(s) by participating in school activities outside of your classroom. Join the faculty chorus. Be on the school council. Volunteer at a PTA function. Make sure you attend staff breakfasts, luncheons, or other social activities. Wear a school shirt! No matter how

limited your teaching time might be in a given school, be a part of the school.

Justify and explain your program: The word 'justify' may seem defensive but I use it with no malice or indignity. Rather, I am suggesting that we all too frequently assume everyone knows what we are doing and knows why we are doing it. This is, by my experience, frequently not the case. When teachers come to your room to pick up classes, you should take a few minutes to tell them what the students do in your classes and why. When sitting around the teachers' room at lunch time, you might engage a fellow teacher in a conversation about what your students did during the morning and why. On parent's night, you should have displays of students work with explanations of various projects and be prepared to talk about how and why you chose certain activities. Don't assume. Make your own case for the art program.

Keep up-to-date: When I finished my undergraduate work, I knew everything I needed to know in order to teach art for the rest of my career. After I attended a staff development activity a few years into my career (a national NAEA convention), I knew then that I knew everything I needed to know to finish my years in art teaching. Then some "fool" invented the computer and art software. My point is that we as individuals and as a profession will never know enough to stop learning. We cannot take comfort in the notion that art has been and will always be made in the same way. It just is not true! Likewise, we cannot realistically suggest that we know all there is to know about how students learn and diverse teaching strategies. We need to keep learning and sharing our knowledge with students and colleagues.

Love art and show it: I always hear art teachers talk with passion about the importance of art in their lives. Yet I rarely hear teachers talk to students or non-art devotees about their passion for art. It is time that we stopped being embarrassed about our passion. I know of few (sensible) individuals who entered art education with the goal of financial independence. Most entered because of their love for art and their sincere wish to share that love with students. How often have you been excited when a student has understood your excitement about a work of art? We need to let others know about such revelations. Our students need to know!

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Part II: M to Z

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Motivate students: We all know about the teaching methodologies which are based on the necessity of motivating students — yet many of us do not spend time thinking about ways to 'truly' motivate students. We have tried and true tricks for introducing lessons which we name 'motivations'. We all give lip service to the ideals of inspiring students to success and greatness. But how many of us really think about how to 'motivate' our students. It is not enough to just show a few examples and describe the steps of an art learning process. We need to be concerned about motivating our students to the point that they can hardly wait to get started in our planned art learning experiences.

New and different: I was bewildered and left speechless recently when talking to a parent in my community. She was discussing her fourth grade student's experiences in art class from her vantage point. She said, "I can't wait until next year when Sally will get to do linoleum prints of animals, clay bells and watercolor fish. She has been so bored this year with cardboard weaving and tissue paper collage. Just like her five brothers and sisters were ...". It is natural and easy to re-use lessons that have had success in the past, but, as you can see by this example it is also dangerous. Try to be somewhat unpredictable — new and different. At the very least, try variations, e.g., prints of flowers, clay chimes, and watercolor birds.

Occupy your in-school time: They are many who will criticize me for this one but it needs to be said. Nothing irritates classroom teachers and other staff members more than the 'perception' that art teachers have a lot of extra time to do nothing but relax. We argue that we need extra time between classes for setup and cleanup. We defend our few extra minutes of time at the beginning and end of the day as time needed to order, arrange and sort supplies. We need the stolen minutes of time without the students to mount exhibits. These are all words we have said before. The crux of the matter is who's listening. If others see us sitting around and

aimlessly wandering the halls, we are leaving ourselves open for criticism and envy. Be sure that you effectively utilize your in-school time and be 'definitely' sure that others know how you spend your day. "I" know you all work hard but make sure others do, so there is never a perception that you somehow have it easier than others.

Parent involvement: In our haste to keep things on track and avoid confusion, particularly if we are in more than one school, we frequently overlook one of our greatest resources — parents (and even grandparents, siblings, and other relatives or friends). Listen to your students and find out about what art talents or interests their family members might be able to share as resources to your program. Invite them in to demonstrate or talk about their particular interests. Encourage the students to bring in examples of art created by their relatives or friends. Use parents as volunteers — particularly when they have an interest or skill in the medium or technique which you are teaching. Use parent volunteers to help hang or mount exhibits. Give your students the benefit of extended exposure to others. Ensure the vitality of your program by giving others some ownership in the program.

Question: I am not advocating civil disobedience but simply urging art teachers to take a pro-active stance in their schools. If you get a notice that you don't understand, ask someone what it means. If you have a student that seems to have problems or distractions that are interfering with learning, you need to ask someone about the student and get information which will aid in your teaching. In fact, the whole point of this section is to encourage art teachers to get the information you need to be successful. Don't wait for someone to give you the information you need. Go out and ask questions!

Relate to other subject areas: Student learning does not happen in a vacuum, you should not be planning your program in a vacuum. Talk to other teachers. Find out what subject matter they are focusing on and create art learning

opportunities that will enhance and validate not only your teaching, but that of your peers. Recently, I visited a school where the art teacher had decided to really focus on relating her art teaching to the science teaching going on in the school. Fifth graders who were studying owls in science were excited about creating cray-pas/tempera resist art works of owls. Fourth graders who were studying butterflies in science were enthralled with permanent marker/watercolor art works of butterfly wings. And on it went. You can still teach the elements and principles of art, as well as a good bit of medium and technique, while integrating art with other subject areas.

Sequential art program: Have you ever seen the students look blank after your wonderful introduction to a new project? Are they wondering why are we going to do this now? Don't let that happen even once. Students (and everyone else) need to somehow know that what they are doing next has some relationship to something they did before. This is not to suggest that every lesson logically follows the one before. But it is important to present each lesson within the logic of something that has gone before it. You might even be so obvious as to say something like, "Remember when we did the flowers with bright colors and dark lines. Today we are going to begin an activity which will use some of the skills we practiced in that activity." A lot of "cute" projects could add up to nothing. Try to make sure that you are going somewhere and others can make sense of your direction.

Take a few minutes to reflect on the world: Here's 'your' chance to "rest" in my list of do's and don't's. Every once in a while (on a regular basis) give yourself permission to just sit back and think. Just ponder for a minute: what have I done right; what might have been improved; what will I do differently the next time; what could I do next week to help the students or myself. This is your time. You don't have to tell anybody about your thoughts or conclusions!

Understand what is going on around you: It has not been unusual for me to hear art teachers say, "I just don't understand why that happened?" Find out why! As a professional, you need to understand: the workings of your school, the needs of individual students, the reasons why a group missed their art class this week, the principal's reason for re-scheduling all your classes. You should not just dismiss events and things around you as not understandable or controllable. You need to work at your understanding of events and things and then accept them or propose change!

Vicarious thrills: Here is another one for you! Don't be ashamed to take vicarious thrills in the successes of your students. After all, they wouldn't have reached their successes without your successful teaching. If you look at a student's work and see wonderful things, tell the student and the rest of the world. Take that work and march right to the principal's office — stop off at the Teacher's Room. It's OK to feel good about yourself and your students.

Win community support: Community support for your program is not necessarily something that will come naturally. You need to work at it. You need to "win" it. Take advantage of every opportunity to put your art program in the community eye. Have exhibits at the local library. Put student works in public buildings, office buildings — anywhere they will let you. Try to get local newspapers to print examples of student art work. Have punch and cookie receptions during exhibits of student art works. Get the word out!

X marks the spot: Make sure that everyone knows where the art room is in the school and where exhibits of work can be seen. Put up signs in the halls. Put a big sign on the door. Make sure you are in the building on Open House nights (you might sit there alone for a while, but parents will find you eventually). Make sure the principal visits your room on a regular basis. Invite school administrators or school committee members to come to your room to view particular lessons or projects. As I suggested before, you need to open the door and get others into your art room.

You: You are the foundation of your program. You are the future of your program. You must take responsibility for your program. Don't forget how important "you" are to the success (and/or failure) of your program.

Zealous behavior: The final note is simple. Feel good about what you do and let people know. Celebrate art and invite others to celebrate with you!

I hope these thoughts are useful to you. Although perhaps overly simplistic, I believe we need to continually think about the simple ABC's of our art programs. What are your ABC's?