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Diversity and Engagement in Supplemental Elementary Art Education

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Abstract

In this project, I identified two main issues in standard elementary level art education through consultation with a teacher (second grade, public school), and research. These issues are the apparent lack of diversity in the selection of artists that are included in lessons, as well as a tendency for children's art activities to be oversimplified or limited in regard to their potential for creative expression and overall engagement. In an effort to address these two issues, I designed and assembled an educational resource (digital lesson/activity book) that would include a diverse range of artists for students to learn about as well as activities constructed for creative freedom, personal expression, and thoughtful execution. A trial of this resource's content was executed in a second-grade classroom, including a lesson and an activity. Feedback from both the students and the teacher were overall very positive.

Keywords: education, art, diversity

Introduction

I chose the topic of elementary art education and the method of creating a supplementary resource mostly in consideration of the skills and experience that I already had. Because I have professional experience in teaching children's art lessons, as well as more general experience in an elementary school setting, I felt that I had a fairly well-developed understanding of the nuances of this particular niche in education. I also had my own experience as an artist and an art student which informed my perspective on potential issues within the field. Lastly, some of my more honed skills include illustration and design, so I felt it fitting that I put them to use in making an end product of high quality.

The issues which I identified also helped to inform my approach to the project. Through a combination of research, reflection on my own experiences, and consultation with a professional in the field, I identified two main recurring issues in elementary level art education. These issues were: a lack of diversity in featured artists, and minimal opportunity for creative self-expression and artistic exploration in children's art activities. The former was in alignment with my own experiences in art education, as well as specifically brought to my attention by the teacher I consulted. This lack of diversity is very apparent throughout western art narratives and causes a very limited perspective on who can be an artist for our society as a whole. In one study, it was found that out of all artists featured in major U.S. art museums, 87% were male and 85% were white (Topaz et al., 2019). This is indicative of a trend which provides more visibility to a limited demographic of artists and their work. The second issue, which is related to student engagement and limited growth in the subject of art education, was also present throughout my own professional experiences, as well as that of the teacher I consulted. One survey found that two thirds of public-school teachers feel that art is being crowded out of the school day with so

much emphasis being placed on language and STEM subjects (Americans for the Arts, 2012). With so little resources being put towards comprehensive art curricula, activities are often chosen or designed for ease of implementation. However, these activities tend to be too simplified or focused on step-by-step recreation of a specific model, which is limiting to creativity and fails to provide the opportunity for artistic growth and expression. Therefore, the need for a resource which provides challenging, engaging, and open-ended activities while maintaining ease of implementation is clear.

With those things in consideration, the method I chose for this project was to create an easy-to-use book which could act as a guide for a significant portion of a classroom's art curriculum. The process began with the careful curation of a diverse list of artists to feature, as well as researching and writing short biographies for them. Then, I designed the activities and wrote their instructions, which were related to the lessons on featured artists. Lastly, I made illustrations for the artists and activity steps, and compiled all of the different parts into a cohesively designed eBook. It should be noted that I originally intended to have the book printed, but after consulting again with the teacher who had agreed to test the content, it seemed that a digital format would be ideal. This allowed for easier presentation of the material, and for it to be more easily shared or modified.

Elements Coming Together

Innovative Approach

The innovation in this project lies in the careful development of a truly comprehensive curriculum that is delivered in one resource. In my experience, and in the experience of those I have consulted with, art education for the elementary level tends to be dismissed as more of a leisure activity for children rather than a proper discipline. While I do believe that art education should be fun and without stress, I also believe that children should be given the opportunity from a young age to explore their own creativity and engage with art as a meaningful subject. This approach of making a thorough and expansive guide for elementary art education provides a unique learning experience while, at the same time, easing the burden on teachers to find and plan good classroom art activities. This approach is only possible through the culmination of a variety of unique perspectives. This includes a professional working in the field currently (a second-grade public school teacher), as well as my own perspective derived from teaching children's art lessons both in and out of classroom environments and studying art through the collegiate level. Additionally, it has been important to understand the resources that are already available, and the overarching attitudes and trends across children's art education, which has been possible through broad research of the topic. Only then was it possible to identify what the exact needs are for the stakeholders and how I might create something within that niche. By integrating these perspectives, I was able to articulate what works best for the specified environment, what is needed from the teachers and students, what is missing from the resources available, and what new and creative solutions might be developed in response to these. In doing so, I was able to design an end product that I believe is truly innovative, as it fulfills the need for well-structured elementary level art education in a way that is easy to use and accessible.

Emotional Intelligence

For my project, it was very important that I remained aware of the specific needs of the

primary stakeholders (the students and the teacher), so that I can create a tool that supports their classroom processes effectively. My project indicates this awareness by providing the educational material in a way that is both easy to teach and easy to understand. I use step by step instructions with pictures and define words that may be new to the audience. It also indicates awareness of self because I have used my own knowledge, training, and experience to help inform the book but tried to stay very aware of the biases of my own perspective. For instance, just because I have known what something is or how to do something for a long time, it does not mean anyone else has that same knowledge. It is critical that I continually check in with the educational objectivity of the material and use research to inform my development of elementary-age levels of difficulty and complexity.

I do believe that my methods are also considerate of the emotional intelligence of the audience. Because my subject is art education, it explores topics like self-expression, creativity, and connecting with others. It is important to understand that these can be fairly new and challenging topics for young children, and that they will manifest in ways that are much different than the art and artistic communities I am used to engaging with. However, it is my observation, as well as that of the teacher I consulted with, that often adults and educators do not recognize how capable and individualistic young children really are. Subsequently, my activities and lessons are designed in a way that encourages children to think more critically about what they want to express and how they can engage with art. Yet, because I recognize that children are less experienced and, in general, less emotionally mature than adults, it is also necessary for me to design activities that are not centered on achieving one ideal result (e.g. drawing a picture step by step to look identical to the model) as this can lead to frustration and observable regression in self-confidence if they are unable to achieve what they believe is the 'right' end result. Instead,

by recognizing the creative potential and individualism of children, mindful art activities can help them grow self-esteem and discover new ideas. In terms of emotional intelligence, the benefits of this type of learning and experimentation are numerous. In addition to building confidence and developing a unique style of artistic expression, the opportunity to explore open-ended art practices can help build critical thinking skills and help students to approach tasks more thoughtfully.

Creative Thinking

For this project, I've maintained a creative approach that reflects my own unique design and aesthetic perspective. Because I have a strong background in visual art, that is the medium that makes the most sense for me when it comes to cohesively expressing my ideas. Therefore, in recognition of my strengths in design over other formats (presentations, videos, etc.), I decided to approach this project through the creative lens of visual design. This allowed me to work through the information and reform it in a way that is efficient and easy to understand. By combining the research and activities with my own style of illustration, I can better manipulate it to be cohesive and appealing, especially for a younger audience. Because my creative framework is based on solving the problem through the formation of something new and visually inspiring, I have taken careful measures to design the product with thoughtfulness and cohesion throughout.

I would consider this to be a very unique approach compared to other available resources for elementary-level art education. While the information on artists, vocabulary, and techniques may be available online, it would normally be the responsibility of teachers or other guardians/educators to compile that information for a lesson, let alone multiple lessons. Furthermore, the addition of thoughtfully designed activities and the visually appealing and easy-to-use format of the book make it unlike other resources, especially those which are easily

accessed.

Innovative Solution

This solution is innovative because it addresses issues within a specific niche of elementary education that are usually not attended to. These issues include the lack of presenting diverse groups of artistic role models for children of all backgrounds, and the oversimplification or limited personal creativity of children's art projects. The material I have designed addresses these issues in a way which I have not found among other available elementary level art resources. By presenting a diverse range of artists and providing engaging activities in one resource, both of the identified issues are addressed in one effective method. Furthermore, I believe there is a lot of potential for innovative use of this resource, which can be realized through the different methods used by teachers to deliver the material or by the creative exploration of students.

Existing elementary level art resources tend to be either exceedingly simple and focused on one specific outcome for each activity, or they are comprehensive but more suited for one-on-one or small group environments (usually these are more targeted toward parents with their own children, or specifically within an art class that has access to more materials and can provide more focused attention). My solution is designed for classroom use and considers factors such as limited materials (or limited budget for materials) and the need for an activity that does not require too much individual guidance.

Results

My project has provided several benefits to the key stakeholders, which are the students and their teacher. Firstly, my project has provided a very simple resource for the teacher to use. It has greatly reduced the amount of time needed to plan and research art lessons for the classroom.

It has also benefited the participating teacher by providing activities that are well-suited for the age and ability of the students, therefore allowing for a smoother and more enjoyable classroom experience. For the students, my project has provided the extensive benefits of a more diverse education of artists. This means that the children are able to learn about artists that they can relate to, which makes art more accessible and engaging for a wider audience. This project has also provided them with fun and explorative art experiences that help to grow their skills and understanding of creativity and artistic expression. By engaging in these activities, which are designed to foster personal creativity, they can avoid the frustration and limitations of arts and crafts activities that value uniformity over individual expression. Regarding myself as a stakeholder, I have benefitted from developing a new set of skills and producing compelling portfolio pieces. These skills include things like writing for a younger audience, educational illustration, formatting, researching, and collaborating with an expert in the field for designing a curriculum.

The material was tested in a second-grade classroom, during which the teacher presented a lesson on a featured artist and then led students through the related activity. It is difficult to approximate the overall impacts of this project based off of the short-term trial, as it is designed for long-term impacts. Because impact is considered the ‘net good’ that is achieved, I expect that it would develop more fully through continued utilization of the project. Here are a few of the key points I received in my feedback: the participating teacher, Mrs. Lamers, indicated that the children were “much more excited to do a project like this instead of a directed draw” (the project in reference was the Alma Woodsey Thomas activity included in the material, and “directed draw” refers to the common practice of leading students in a step-by-step drawing of a specific picture). She also indicated that the material was easy to deliver and that the students

enjoyed choosing and designing their own subjects and wrote the following: “I liked the historical context. I also appreciate that it featured a POC artist. I really liked that this project allows students to apply a concept in their own way.” Additionally, she noted that many students demonstrated very unique approaches to the activity and came across ideas of their own to add to or modify their projects, which were encouraged. I believe the feedback I’ve received is indicative of the following impacts, which have the potential to contribute to more long-term impacts down the road: a higher level of student engagement and interest in art, higher teacher satisfaction with art lessons and plans, and easier identification of role models and relatable figures in art professions. These impacts, as informed by my research, have the potential to make further positive impacts for the stakeholders. For instance, higher engagement in the arts has been tied to higher academic performance (Americans for the Arts, 2012), and repeated exposure to positive representations of diversity has been linked to the negation of implicit biases (Gonzalez, 2017). For these reasons, I believe that while positive short-term impacts have been noted, the overall measure of impacts from this project are of a more long-term nature.

Conclusion

Overall, I would consider the project’s results to be positive. While I felt decently confident that the material was well-suited for classroom use, the students’ reception to the material was the most variable factor. In my experience while working with young children, the environment can be unpredictable, and plans aren’t always executed as expected. However, I was extremely pleased with the results and the accompanying feedback. It is clear that the participating teacher was appreciative of the different aspects of problem solving that went into this design. She was able to teach the lesson and guide the activity as expected, and the students demonstrated high levels of engagement and satisfaction with the activity.

While I would consider the development of this resource a success, I believe there is a lot that could be expanded upon. The material includes eight artists, eight activities, as well as some accompanying information and vocabulary words. There is certainly potential for more artists to be added, as well as more activities and lessons on other art topics. While I have included artists of different genders, ages, races, ethnicities, and nationalities, I believe that presenting more artists could only help to strengthen the diversity in representation. For instance, I would have liked to include more artists with disabilities or nonconforming gender identities, because I believe the more inclusive the lessons are, the more likely it is that every student will find an art professional they can identify with. Additionally, I believe the material could be expanded upon in other ways. It could be worthwhile to add different digital elements, like links to demonstrational videos, or other methods of delivery.

However, in consideration of the time and financial constraints that were present for the duration of this project, I would consider the end result to be a success. I am pleased to know that the teacher who I have been working with is eager to continue to use the material, and I was thrilled to see the results of the children's creativity. It is my hope that this material will continue to be useful and that it will someday be only one of many reformative resources to make children's art education more inclusive, engaging, and rewarding.

Section 5: Appendix

Project: [Final Capstone Project.pdf](#)

Pictures of Student's Art: [StudentArt.pdf](#)

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