Taste, Aesthetics, and Student Designers

by Kelly McConnell

There are a few main ideas in this short essay. The first is that teaching art and design is more than teaching about media, art history, and art-making skills. The special quality of teaching art and design is this: most of the jobs our students will have haven't been invented yet, so we need to teach for possibilities. The second is that design marries form and function, so the development of craft and a personal set of aesthetics needs to be present in all art classrooms starting at early childhood and throughout higher education. The third is, prepare to be surprised by your students. They know what they need, they live in this world, and our job is to co-create, and to pull from their own inherent, contemporary art ideas to inspire.

In the fall of 2000 I went back to school to earn my teaching license and was in the market to buy my first home computer. After careful investigation, I came up with the two choices shown below.

I'm an artist. Which one do you think I picked and why?

The future of technology took an ironic direction. When I set up my first email account, I chose sophie97@mac.com, figuring that once school was finished, I'd pass the address to my then three-year-old daughter. I figured I'd never use this annoying means of communication again after I was done with my classes. See? We don't know what the future holds for our students.

No matter the job of the future for our students, we know they will most likely be consumers. The need to pick out and purchase what to wear, drive, where to live, and how to decorate one's living space will surely persist. This is where a set of personal aesthetics comes into play.

Awesome Minimalist Dining Room Design:
Awesome Minimalist Dining Room Design With Marvelous Awesome Dining Rooms From Hulsta On Dining Room With Tameta

In which dining room would you rather eat?

My Maximalist Dining Room Design:
Wicked Awesome Art, Family Collections, With Under Table Chewing Studio by Moxie

There is no right or wrong answer to selecting personal style. It is a matter of taste. To make a choice based on aesthetics is to be able to describe what you like and why. For example, I love brussel sprouts and don't like to eat cauliflower. Why? Steamed cauliflower squeaks on my teeth when I bite it, giving me a weird sensation. I like my vegetables to crunch. My husband, Matt, is a brilliant household cook. He's gotten around my matters of personal taste and aesthetics with information. When the squeaky cauliflower's texture is changed through braising, I like to eat it.

I bring my family into this because design is personal and contextualized. In design thinking, what we need or want as consumers is also linked to context and information, personality and taste.

To discuss this taste in a classroom setting, and instead have a dialog regarding aesthetics, the "likes" and "dislikes" need to be removed. Building a vocabulary for discussion is essential. A good way to start is to build prompts for students using the elements and principles of design. Another simple way to set the tone for design thinking is to have students come up with a real-world problem they want to solve. This type of teaching and learning is also associated with "authentic, project-based learning."

An example from my own teaching includes the story of the school buses. I was teaching at a school that used an expeditionary framework for middle school students. To me, this is a perfect, developmentally appropriate framework to use because middle school students want to be a part of their community. It suits their need to think in concrete, social ways. Learning in the community essentially pushes the students to compare their interests with the work of the community. They ask questions of themselves such as, "Can I see myself as a part of this culture? How will I work with the people around me? What skills do I need to do meaningful work in this community?" When the cognitive, social, abstract, and concrete come together in learning, students start to take increasing responsibility for dealing with their own strengths and challenges. This also lends itself to working collaboratively in groups of people with complementary skill sets, aligning individual pieces to create a common project.

The real-life problem was this: the kids didn't want to ride the school buses. If they did, they ducked down under the window level, causing a safety hazard because the driver couldn't see the passengers. The buses had been purchased used from a defunct day care center and embellished with the words "Lollipop Lane" in black on their stark white sides. The kids were understandably embarrassed.

We are all teachers, so we know "stuff" comes out in art class. It didn't take long for me to figure out the kids had two ugly buses and they wanted to change that. To do so, they participated in a community of practice. The students started by designing the exterior of the buses. After preliminary planning, they decided that their theme should reflect the school's culminating expeditionary adventure -- a week long trip to visit sustainable agriculture sites and homes in Costa Rica. Next, they decided that they needed a certain style to represent their set of aesthetics as a group: graffiti.

As they worked together and discussed their work, the group of middle schoolers in grades five through eight began to grasp the subtle, interpersonal, written and unwritten knowledge of their American culture. They interpreted their needs, with the help of adults who were co-designers, apprentices and mentors. They raised money through Kickstarter and other donations to hire Tim Clorius, a local aerosol artist. Tim shared his expertise with the medium and gave a lecture on Graffiti Art, winning the approval of parents and school administrators for the project. The local art store and Montana Paints also donated materials in return for their logos being on the back of the buses. We dealt with health concerns. We spent days taping and masking and had to do it again after the buses were rained on. We talked to local sign painters and professionals to made sure the paintings on the buses were crafted in a way that would last. The buses were so cool the kids couldn't wait to show them off. The project snowballed into the community-at-large, and they created a whole Street Art Happening for our city's First Friday Art Walk. Quite the opposite of hiding below the window level of the bus!

There is a tremendous difference between learning about art and design and being an artist and designer. The students who came up with and implemented the bus project are artists. A design approach to teaching and learning allows students to be inclusive, to suspend judgement, and be open to past, present, and future art styles, developments, and innovations. Many educators talk about "21st Century Skills," "Authentic Learning," and "Design Thinking. " The bus project is a concrete example of a project that emerges from these philosophies.

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