

BY BARBARA HENRIKSEN ANDREWS

# and Creativity in the Classroom

## The Student-Driven Art Course

Seven years ago our high school added a student-driven art course, *Art and Ideas*, to our curriculum. As a high school art teacher, I wanted an art class that would attract all students, not primarily just the artistically gifted. That class assumed five goals:

- To study the arts of other cultures
- To connect art to other curricular areas
- To attract the nontraditional art students
- To promote a student-driven curriculum
- To employ several assessment methods

The structure and functioning mechanics of this course are described in the September 2001 issue of *Art Education* in "Art and Ideas: Reaching Nontraditional Art Students" (Andrews, 2001). When we introduced *Art and Ideas*, our focus was to create a classroom environment that would promote greater student input into learning and the choice of art projects. In this inclusive environment, as students made choices for their art projects, they also became more responsible for their learning as well as more energetic, enthusiastic students. In addition, unanticipated benefits or outgrowths also resulted. Five of these will be discussed. The purpose of this article is to strengthen visual art in the classroom by empowering the student.

Student writing and reflection are a major component of this class; therefore, excerpts from their writings are included throughout this article. All student quotations are from reflective papers written between 2001 and 2004. Due to the very personal information that is often shared, last names of students will not be used.

### Visual Connections to Other Curricular Areas

The first unanticipated outgrowth was students truly seeing the connections between art and other curricular areas. As we studied art history, culture, and the many reasons artists have for creating art, students better grasped the relationship between art and the world around them.



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Eric Jensen, author of the ASCD book *Arts with the Brain in Mind*, argues that the arts should be a major discipline in the schools—“one worth making everybody study and learn.” Not only can the arts be a powerful solution for helping educators reach a wide range of learners, they also “enhance the process of learning” by developing a student’s “integrated sensory, attentional, cognitive, emotional, and motor capacities,” writes Jensen. Such brain systems are the driving forces behind all other learning, he adds. (Allen, 2004, p. 2)

Through the development of classroom discussions, students identified the relationships between art and other curricular areas. Some elected to visually show these connections as their studio art project. After receiving permission from the administration, they began painting reproductions of the masters in the hallways of our high school.

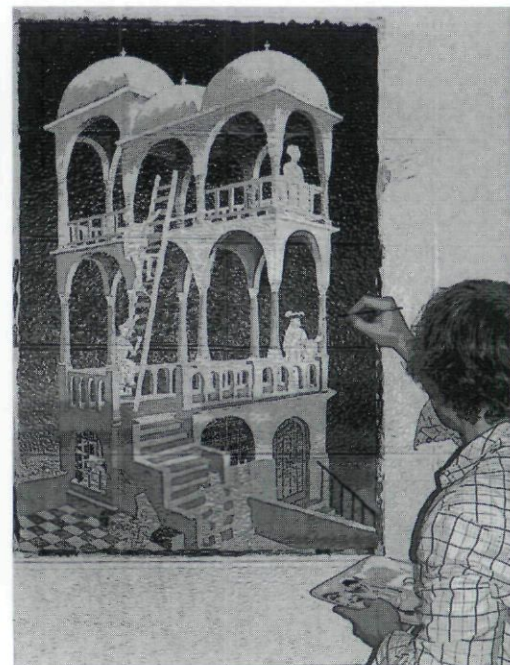
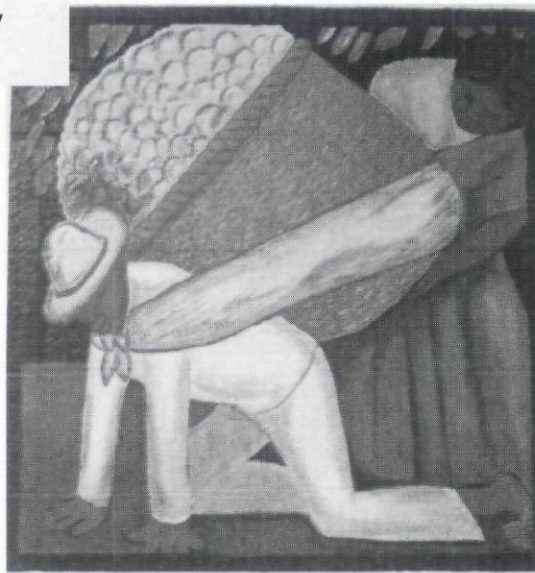
Depicting work by M. C. Escher and Cubist artists in the math wing and paintings by Diego Rivera and Joan Miro in the Spanish wing were obvious choices. Students determined that a reproduction of *The Great Wave of Kanagawa* by Katsushika Hokusai should be placed in the science wing. As students discussed the American Romantic authors being studied in literature, *Moonlit Landscape* by the Romantic painter Washington Alston was a perfect

match for the English area. Likewise, work by Walter Gropius was an excellent example of art completed during the Federal Art Project, and a reproduction was placed in the history hallway. Within 2 years, every curricular area had re-created masterpieces on the walls related to their subject.

Students were eager to share their insights of where to best place a painting, as well as to literally leave their mark on the school. This has resulted in pride on the part of the student artists. As Aileen wrote,

By painting Chagall’s *Paris Through My Window* on the wall, many conversations that typically would never come up were started. We were able to discuss certain aspects of it, share our own opinions, and also listen to other viewpoints. Moving outside our usual classroom presented us with an opportunity to make masterpieces an everyday expression and conversation starter.

Teachers in other curricular areas now approach the art department with ideas and suggestions for additional student work. These paintings also serve as writing prompts. English teachers have taken their students on an “Art Walk,” spending 5 to 10 minutes at selected masterpieces. Upon returning to the classroom, students write a short story inspired by one of the re-created masterpieces.





### Classroom Partnering with the Community

A second, unintended derivative of a student-driven curriculum was the opportunity to partner with the business world. After a few months of painting on our school walls, students wanted to expand their work into the community. Students, not the teacher, locate a business or civic organization to paint, such as credit unions, day care centers, restaurants, and volunteer fire stations. Students must initiate the discussion. After designing an appropriate logo or mural, they present their idea to the business representative. Upon approval, they execute the art project. After completion, the business

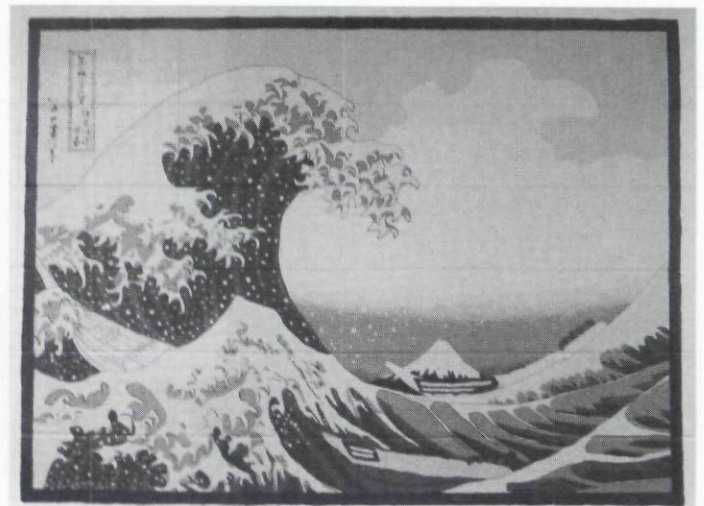
makes a donation to a charity as a thank you for the student work. In addition, our local newspaper publishes an article with photographs of the work and the name of the charity to which the donation has been made.

The students are excited to see their artwork in the "real world." The support, in return, from the community is energizing. Businesses now contact the high school to become involved with the art department. Small businesses that could not afford to hire a design team now partner with our students. This alliance has benefited all. The business owner receives a newly created logo or mural. The students have their graphic design

work displayed in the neighborhood and are able to include the project in their résumés. For example, Kyle's design was selected by the diabetes awareness program at our local hospital and his new logo for the Indiana Central Association of Diabetes Educators is displayed on their shirts and stationery. The school receives positive accolades from the community, and the art department grows as the businesses often thank us with monetary gifts in addition to their charitable donation. Our area hardware and paint stores now donate or sell at greatly reduced price, gallons of "mis-mixed" paint. Thus, our art department is partly funded by the business community. We did not intend to go into business, but business did choose to embrace our art department.

Our students have gained practical, commercial art experience and have been personally energized by the opportunity to visually make a difference. As students Jill and Amanda wrote,

By doing a community works project, we are swerving from the path so often stereotypically given to teenagers. We believe even the smallest artistic addition to an office or building can produce a profound effect on the life and outlook of people in our community. And because of this, we decided to help.





## Meaningful Classroom Opportunities

A third outgrowth was truly meaningful learning experiences for the students. As students take responsibility for their art projects, they become personally vested in their education. "When students have a voice and a degree of choice, and when they are asked to consider how their learning should progress, they are likely to understand the importance of the learning process" (Daniels & Bizar, cited in Milbrandt, Felts, & Richards, 2004, p. 20). Daniels and Bizar (1998) went on to write, "Structuring purpose and meaning should be at the heart of artistic activity" (p. 20).

Each student has a different background and reason for enrolling in a student-driven art class. One young lady wrote,

I had a lot of problems at home and in my head. These problems led me to bulimia and depression. No matter what other people took from me mentally or physically, I always had my art to hold onto. I never trusted people so I needed something; that something was art.

Another student shared his reasons for taking the class,

I'm kind of a goof ball, which I'm sure you know, but I still dream. Without classes like this one, students would not be able to have the chance to dream. This class opens your mind to endless possibilities, and that's what keeps us striving to do our best, dreams.

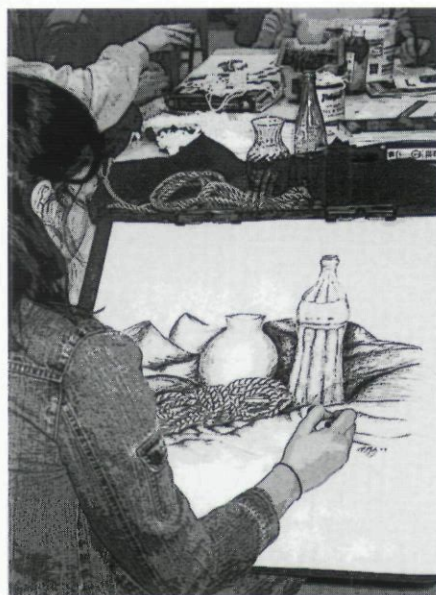
These young people have become passionate art students. Their desire to learn more, read more, and create more is contagious. After a couple of months in the class, another student concluded,

I realized that the projects I made in Art and Ideas were able to be used for things outside class that actually had a purpose. I think that is why this class has become one of the few that actually has a purpose for me being in school.

**Students are engaged in artmaking, art planning, and art reflection. They are the instigators of their art curriculum; not passive bodies waiting for instruction.**



Students working on different projects during same class period.



## Shift in Teacher and Student Roles

A fourth derivative of this class structure was a shift in roles. My role as an art teacher in the classroom has expanded. Previously, I ladled out all the instruction. Now, students share in the teaching of studio techniques and processes. Our expert water colorist shares knowledge with a novice, our expert ceramist assists those new to the wheel, and so forth. I oversee the total learning experience, from students painting in the halls to proper classroom operating procedures. I set the tone and establish expectations, functioning more like an art orchestra conductor.

Students are now often overheard saying, "Wow, I like how you threw that pot. I want to learn how to do that." In addition, students seem to listen attentively to their friends and classmates. As Ryan explained, "I think that learning from our peers is more efficient because we can relate to them better than with teachers." Tyler added, "I learn better from a friend because they're more on my level. I can understand them better—and I'd listen to them more."

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As Katie concluded in her paper, "This class has shown me a different side of things also. Weird things happen in here that baffle my mind. People care about art; they have long conversations about it, and to me, that's different. Just recently I had a conversation with my friends, in art class, about all the meanings behind particular art pieces! Who has those kinds of conversations?"

This arrangement fosters greater interaction among the student artists, brings more ideas into the art room, and creates an atmosphere of enthusiasm and creativity.

## Shift in Emphasis from the Product to the Idea

This class, Art and Ideas, is not offered with the end product in mind. It is not labeled drawing or painting or ceramics. Rather, it is the idea, the thought process, the disciplined creative effort that is the starting point. As Eliza Pitri (2003) writes, "The process of artmaking is more important than the product because it could and should involve thinking and problem solving" (p. 23).

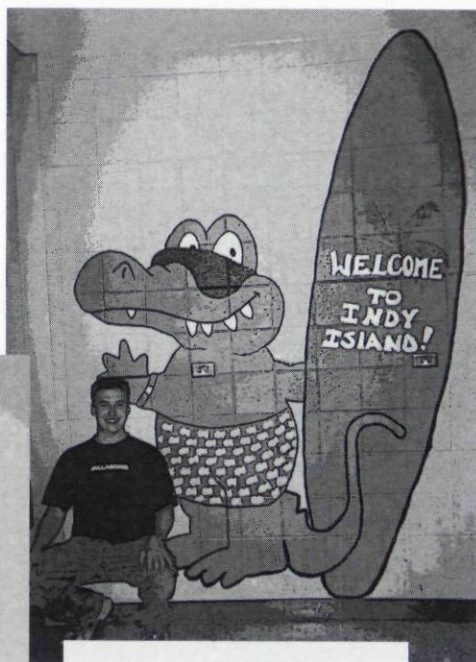
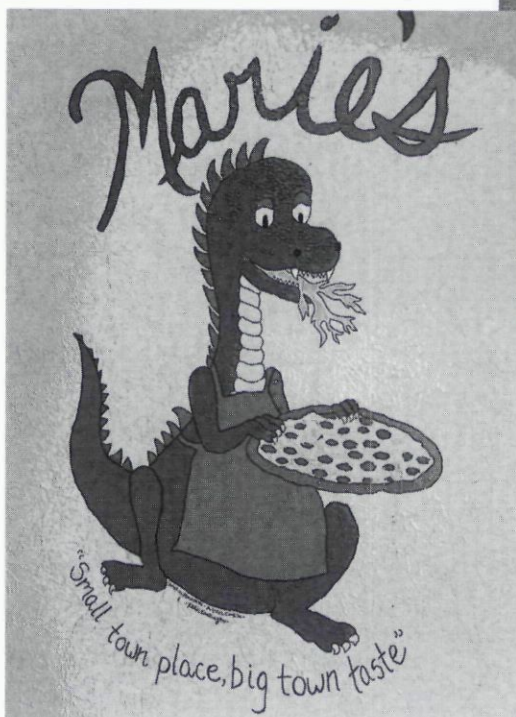
Jessica expressed the difference between a conventional art class and a student-driven art class.

The typical art class in high school was a teacher standing in front of a group of students waiting for directions. Guidelines are always placed on the project and what and how the student can go about creating it. You had to do it the teacher's way.

In a student-driven art room, several ideas are activated simultaneously, as evidenced by the different media that are explored during one class period. This works wonderfully for high school

students, who also want the opportunity to express their individualism. As Josh wrote,

In a regular art room all the kids are working on the same thing. No two people are the same so why would you chain their hands and minds together so that all you are doing is limiting their abilities. This class is like taking a lake that has been dammed up for hundreds of years and letting down the flood gates. One can only sit back and watch the water scrape and become different after so long. See schools teach kids art, but they have to also let kids create art, because art is the handwriting of the soul.



**"This class is like taking a lake that has been dammed up for hundreds of years and letting down the flood gates."**

As students take more responsibility for their art curriculum they become more aware of their learning styles and potential. Ross wrote, "In other art courses you do what they want and what they plan. In this class you have to think." Jason added, "I don't learn from a teacher lecturing. I learn by discovering."

For some students, art is a tool to better understand culture. Upon completing a reproduction of Diego Rivera's *The Flower Carrier* in the Spanish language area of the school, Gilberto concluded,

I can relate to the sombrero hats and the type of clothing used in my painting. Those things are a part of my background, my heritage, and most importantly, me. If I go back in my memory to Honduras I can remember baskets woven as the one which carries the flowers. I can also relate to the darkness of the skin of the people. The elder, short woman supporting the basket reminds me of my grandma. I took this class to broaden my mind and artistic talents. It turns out that in doing so, I touched on things that already pertained to me. I learned new things by involving some old things.

## Conclusion

A student-driven curriculum is more than a choice about art project options; it is a responsibility. Students teach, discuss, seek out job sites, and create their art curriculum; they are active learners, not passive. Their efforts and enthusiasm promote our art program. The teacher is no longer the sole individual championing the arts. Each student actively participates in this opportunity. As we partner with the business community, they support, rather than challenge our art programs. When we nurture students' passion for the visual arts, we promote a future generation of art makers and art supporters.

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## NOTE

Photographs show New Palestine High School students and their work throughout the school and community.

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