

A Clear Progression of Knowledge and Skills...

[By Paula Briggs](#)

“We need to show clear progression of knowledge and skills... Can anyone help?”

That’s the common cry from many Primary School Subject Leads at the moment. Pressure pushed down from a SLT who want art treated in the same way as all other subjects, who themselves are feeling pressure from an impending Ofsted inspection. “We need to get the paperwork in place”.

But what is the nature of knowledge in art? And can we pin it down into simple, clear progression? Is it constructive to do so?

Before we go any further, I should clarify the role and position of AccessArt. We are a charity, and our sole aim is to:

“Further the advancement of visual arts education”

One of the practical ways we do this is by providing resources and guidance for use in schools, and as part of that we have a responsibility to teachers to help provide you with what we think you need, to help you teach art in the best way you can. We work really hard to try to help make teaching art enjoyable and

effective and we really do want to take pressure off you by creating resources which will work for you, in the now, in your school.

But, if we go back to our sole charitable aim, it wouldn't be right for us to blindly endorse ways of thinking which we felt went against the "advancement of visual art education", and it saddens us that the current focus appears to be on pinning down progression, knowledge and skills to such an extent that we are in danger of losing the richness and diversity of experience that art offers us.

So the aims of this post are three-fold:

1) Encourage us to stop and think (at least for a moment). If you are being asked (or asking) to create a "clear progression of skills and knowledge in art" is it the right thing to do? Is it an appropriate thing to do? Does asking that question "further the advancement of visual arts?" Could mapping in that way actually stifle creativity? Let's stop and think, so that if a change of approach needs to take place, we can work towards it.

2) IF we HAVE to ask "How can I show a clear progression of skills in art" (because we have to deliver in the short term, because of the pressure put on us from x,y and z), then how can we make sure we fully understand what we might mean by knowledge and skills in art, and how can we make

sure the language we use on any progression plan or knowledge organiser we create is truly reflective of what is really happening when we make art.

3) And lastly, the purpose of this post is to invite you to comment. How much do you understand what is being asked of you? Does it feel right in your gut to dissect art in this way? Are the plans your school makes for art helpful, or do you feel they are defensive? Do they detract or enable? Please tell us how you feel, what has worked for you, what isn't working for you, and what you need in order to better understand the issues.

Knowledge and Skills in Art

Let's start with some simple definitions – though even these alone may cause debate (which is good).

We could say, that knowledge is theoretical – the knowing “what”, whereas skills are practical and applied - the knowing “how.” So for some, when SLT asks you to split down knowledge and skills, you might differentiate by those simple criteria.

Except, if we dive further into knowledge, there are many kinds of knowledge and that's especially true for art:

Let's start with "substantive knowledge" (which might also be referred to as propositional, declarative or explicit knowledge), - the knowing “what”. Substantive knowledge is factual, can

usually be sequenced, and because of that relies on prior knowledge (perfect for excel spreadsheets ☐).

It's easy to see the place of this type of knowledge in other subjects which are built using a series of pre-defined building blocks, such as maths. But in art?

Yes, it could be argued (is by many), that we can define these blocks and present them as stepping stones. Here is the paper (fact). Here is a drawing tool called a pencil (fact). The pencil can make all these different kinds of marks (fact). Here is the subject (a factual orange). This is how we draw the line to show the edge of the orange (already getting into non-factual territory). Here is the shadow, both on the paper and on the orange (fact). We're going to use the side of the pencil to replicate that shadow (no longer substantive knowledge, now we are talking about skills or "disciplinary" knowledge – the knowing how). (I start the paragraph "Could be argued" because many art teachers would argue that most sequencing of this type of knowledge ends up being pretty arbitrary once you start to map it).

Ofsted would like us to be able to map knowledge across all years, so that we can all see there is a coherent plan, that learning is built upon, that all teachers are onboard and that thought and care has been given to art education. And vitally, if we map substantive knowledge and skills, we should

be able to check all pupils are achieving. We're onboard with that in theory, sounds good.

Except, Except, Except - there are so many other kinds of knowledge involved in the making and appreciation of art, and most of these are not factual. And that's the most important part of this post, and the reason we feel that knowledge organisers and progression plans are not the best use of teacher time in art.

Let's say that again. Most of the knowledge we gain through art is not factual. By definition, by its nature, most knowledge we gain through art is "experiential". And why is that important?

Because experiential knowledge, knowledge which is not factual, cannot (as much as a tidy mind would like) be segmented and sequenced, and it often does not require prior knowledge (in a set order).

What do we mean by Experiential Knowledge?

In contrast with substantive knowledge, experiential knowledge is implicit (rather than explicit). It includes:

- Knowledge gained through experience.
- Tacit knowledge - knowledge that arrives through personal wisdom, experience, insight, and intuition. The child might "know how" to do something but they can't easily explain the knowledge. (Would you ask artists to explain,

segment and sequence the knowledge that enabled them to make a certain work of art? Would they create art through such sequences?).

- Embodied knowledge – “The body knows” – “I just know how tightly to wind this wire around this wood to hold it in place.” “I just sense how much pressure to apply to get that mark.”

The benefits of this type of knowledge go far beyond the benefits brought about through accumulating factual knowledge. Experiential knowledge in art leads to learning through art, as well as learning about art. And learning through art develops all kinds of traits within us which are desirable (desirable not just for us as individuals, but for society too).

But Ofsted acknowledges that this kind of knowledge is hard to map (they have that right), and therefore we can't check that every child will benefit, therefore it doesn't appear on most knowledge and skills documents, and experiential knowledge rarely appears on any knowledge organiser (because it's a bizarre action to organise that kind of knowledge).

So the big question is:

IF you HAVE to create progression plans and Knowledge Organisers (and on that last point OFSTED neither endorse nor dismiss the use of 'Knowledge Organisers'), what are you going to map on your knowledge

organisers and your progression plan so that they are really representative of a great art education?

To answer that, a few thoughts about the language we use. The language we use every day shapes our lives. It might be the language we use in our heads, our internal dialogue, or the language we use with others or the words we write, whatever it is, the language shapes our world and it changes the way we think.

If we have to produce progression plans and knowledge organisers (and we would still argue to tread very carefully with them in art), and if those documents do not contain any reference to the more experiential, holistic learning which is taking place, then we would worry that those documents would be negatively starting to shape art education in that school. Of course many of these documents are written and then sit in a draw or on a laptop waiting to be whipped out when Ofsted arrives, otherwise ignored, but it would be sad if these dry documents, written without any acknowledgement of other types of experiential knowledge, were then adhered to. The words we use shape our approach (that surely is the whole point of such documents - to make us think about our cohesive approach to art education) and not referencing, in a broad holistic way, what art is really about in the class room, risks us being so preoccupied checking we have met those other

pedantic, more easily mapped factual elements of knowledge, that we lose sight of the real joys and benefits of the subject.

Let's remember that the nature of art, making or consuming, is never fixed or static. By nature, art is about growth and evolution, about unexpected discovery.

A Few Tips:

- IF you have to produce the documents described in this post, then you can at least push back in the language you use in the documents. The cells may be rectangular and boxed in, but your intention and language can deliberately challenge stereo types of similar documents in other subjects. Include more holistic concepts, and use language which celebrates the creative, playful, exploratory, innovative nature of the visual arts. For example, we should make sure that we try to make our end points for each year as holistic as possible. If we have to treat art like other subjects in terms of a gridded document (and we still fight against this) then we can at least make sure that the words in those grid cells are as touchy feely, creative and playful as possible. Let's not be complicit in sucking the subject dry.

- Share this post with SLT and talk to them about ways in which teaching art is unique. Perhaps there are other ways you can map progression which celebrate the particular nature of the subject.

Perhaps you can base your maps (and they don't need to be in a grid) around "Opportunities for Discovery". How does changing the title change (expand) your thinking and approach?

- Take a look at the [supporting documents created for the new AccessArt Primary Art Curriculum](#) to see how we are trying to walk a balance between giving schools what you might need, but using language which is true to our ethos and belief in what really constitutes excellent art education. [You can find our new Progression of Knowledge and Skills Plan, complete with implicit and explicit knowledge here.](#)

- If the message in your school from SLT or Ofsted is that the building blocks or steps need to be in place before the creative magic happens, challenge that preconception. It is not true in art. Just look at the creativity in many EYFS settings.

- Remember if you are finding it hard to produce the documents – don't blame yourself. We have over 30 years experience in the area and we find it hard to pin down concepts. For every concept you include, it feels as if you are leaving out another 5 vital but slippery elements. Perhaps we are all finding it so impossible, or disheartening, because it is an illogical (or overly logical) ask of the arts? Perhaps – to go back to the beginning of this post, we are being asked or asking the wrong question?

To end, a few quotes to reassure you that one day the tide will turn, that perhaps our current system is outdated, or if not to reassure, then to challenge your thinking and give you the opportunity to see what your heart and your gut really thinks about what we are all being asked to do. Does it further the advancement of art education?

"In the last twenty to twenty five years, we've seen the dominance of rational thought. It's dominated a lot of our academic institutions, it's dominated the media, and it's taken away from the capacity to advance the intuitive skills, and I think we are now for the first time that problems are not getting any better, that we need to step back and take a whole new approach. One of the challenges we've got in business, is that by going to this fully rational side, and by focussing everything on the near term measurement and analytical tools, we have ground out or expunged creativity from our companies. You get lost in logic, you don't give yourself a chance to pull back" Bill George, Professor, Harvard Business School

"The World seems like a heap of fragments and it's hard to see how they cohere. And the sort of understanding that used to enable us to see what things means has been lost so that wisdom has been replaced by knowledge and knowledge has been replaced by information, pieces of data, chunks of

*data." Iain McGilchrist, Psychiatrist & Author
Innsaei: The Power of Intuition.*

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