

Thinking about Art Education? Think again

On the 22nd February 2023 the long awaited [Curriculum Research Review into Art & Design](#) will be published. AccessArt will be at the launch, and we'll be feeding back our views on the report at a later date. But before that day, and we all embark on a discussion about its pedagogical intricacies, I wanted to take the opportunity to do what AccessArt always tries to do, namely to help us "open up and out" our thinking about art education and how we might best enable a rich creative experience for all.



Common snipe, illustration from Bijutsu Sekai (1893-1896) by Watanabe Seitei, a prominent Kacho-ga artist.

Before we get bogged down in what Ofsted thinks and wants, let's give ourselves space to think about art education from a very human perspective, rather than from a directive.

So, I'd like to ask you to:

- Put aside any thoughts about how we should or could teach art
- Put aside any insecurities about how qualified or inexperienced you feel to teach art

- Put aside any thoughts about what Ofsted or SLT wants...

Instead, as one human to another, I'd like to ask you:

- How important do YOU think it is that we make time for making (art, dance, music, film, architecture, design, craft...?)
- If art wasn't on the curriculum, would you still teach it? And if yes, why?
- What would you hope to achieve?

Big questions, and I'm certain your answer depends on your own upbringing and attitude to what creativity means to you, but it's important we really think about this, to get us out of the sticky mess of what we should teach and how and when, and into the much more powerful "WHY?"

Perhaps you landed, in your answers, on the word *creativity*. Sometimes, when we talk about art education, it feels like we have forgotten the purpose of teaching art (or facilitating an exploration of art, which feels much more appropriate) is about enabling individual and collective creativity.

As educators, we carry a caring responsibility. We are responsible not just for teaching future generations, but for nurturing too (remember we

are human beings first and foremost). Let's think about "duty" as a value. What is it our duty, our responsibility, to nurture in pupils? Remember I'm not talking here about what Ofsted wants, but a much deeper and freer question about what it might mean to "be educated" as creative human beings.

In answer to the question "What does creativity mean to you?" Brene Brown answers:

"[Creativity is] the way I share my soul with the world and without it I am not ok, and without having access to everyone else's we are not ok."

"Everyone is creative. There are people who use their creativity and there are people who don't. For the people who really struggle because they don't think of themselves as creative, there is a lot of shame around creativity. They think creativity is self-indulgent, they don't think it is productive enough, they don't understand what it means - it was shut down in them as children."

And then Brene makes the statement: *"Unused creativity is not benign."*

(I'll leave that hanging, except to say switch that word "unused" for "unexplored" and how does that affect your understanding, as a teacher, thinking about our duty to enable every child to explore their creative potential?)

The theme is echoed by many. Sheryl Paul writes

that anxiety often starts with sensitivity, and that sensitivity can be channelled into creativity. (The question again: What happens when access to exploring creativity is removed?)

It isn't rocket science to remember that creativity is vital to all of us, on a personal and societal level. We might not know it yet, or we might know it and be holding our heads in our hands that many seem to have forgotten that simple truth, but we are ALL entitled to explore our creativity.

And if not at school, when? Where and when does creative exploration start? When is it stopped? Damaged? Misjudged? Too closely defined so that it is strangled?

Back to the children and adults you work with. We don't teach creativity as a discrete subject in schools (yet – though one day hopefully) but we do teach art. So the responsibility is on the teachers of art (and dance, drama, music) to embrace the simple fact that when we teach art, we are enabling creative exploration. Nothing more, nothing less.

Why do we need to remember that?

Because creativity sits far beyond an Ofsted specification. It is not tidy, distillable, controllable, definable. It is messy, loud, quiet. It is fragile, brittle and easily destroyed and at the same time incredibly powerful and will sit

latent patiently until we make time and space for it. It is life affirming, and yet destructive. It is a tool for personal processing and yet sharable beyond cultures and language, individual and yet capable of connecting. It cannot be mapped, measured, stacked or contained. I think it's hard for anyone to put that on an excel spreadsheet.

It would be arrogant and mistaken to think that our current approach and attitude to art education in schools, at this precise point and location in the history of time, is the best it can be or the best it has been. Let's remember that the way we do things now, is just that, nothing more. There are lots of other approaches and attitudes to tempt us, and whenever we get bogged down with the minutiae of what we think we should be doing, let's just look up and remember that there are bigger truths floating around and amongst us and there have been for thousands of years: nurturing entitlement to creative exploration.

Paula Briggs, AccessArt

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