

Encouraging students

Encouraging Art Students

Teaching kids to keep trying is more beneficial to them than easy praise. Encouragement is the key to promoting a sense of self-esteem and a strong sense of self.

(Dr Michael Grose, *Praise less. Encourage more*, Sunday Herald Sun, April 11, 2010).

The idea outlined above is no better demonstrated than in the art class. Some of the ideas outlined by Grose have been adapted and extended here to suit the needs of Art Education. Some additional ideas have also been included.

Successful experience in all aspects of creative activity and expression depends enormously on confidence, a strong sense of self and hard work. To take on a range of demanding artistic challenges, students need to be supported and encouraged in everything they undertake. All students require self-confidence to be willing to continually expose themselves to different art experiences and to openly express their ideas in their artworks.

While the development of self-confidence in students can come through a number of sources, no one has a better opportunity than the art teacher. When opening student Art Exhibitions I often talk about the enormous courage that students show by sharing their artworks with an

audience. When else do they get opportunities to put their ideas publicly on display for everyone to see and judge? There's no hiding what they feel or think. It's up there for everyone to see – their opinions about life, their experiences, their interests, their personal beliefs, their values, their tastes and their artistic preferences. Taking such personal risks requires great support and encouragement.

'Encouragement' is quite different to 'praise'. While both are related, praise is more like 'junk food' – satisfying for a short while but without much nourishment. Encouragement can be likened more to a healthy diet – it keeps us going and provides a basis for further, on-going development and nourishment. I suggest Art teachers need to focus more on encouragement and less on praise. Encouragement is more 'process-oriented.' Praise is more 'product-oriented.' Encouragement is about the journey while praise is about the end of it. And, education, though concerned with both, is primarily about the journey over time... a long time. While both are important at some stage for the art student the role of the art teacher should be focused more on developing the processes and practices that lead to on-going learning and involvement. And, on-going learning and involvement is underpinned by the confidence and ability to determine self-direction and personal expression.

There is a well-known saying that sums much of this up. *"Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and he can feed himself for a lifetime."*

Ideas to encourage students

It's often difficult to know exactly what to tell students when they do something really good – or when they underachieve.

Some things you might tell them include –

“You do a good job of ...”

Students need to know what they do well and what they can improve on. By focusing on specific things rather than simply telling them they're great you provide them with encouragement to keep doing what they're good at and to be aware of the things they need to work on. Both of these are positive in that they encourage students to 'keep going'. Even comments about something small and insignificant can make students feel good about themselves. Sometimes, they don't realize you've noticed the things they're good at, and sometimes they don't even know themselves they're good at some things.

“You've improved at ...”

Students are usually encouraged when they know they're improving at something that they've taken an interest in or something they've taken on. For many students, improvement itself is a wonderful motivation. Once again, it's far better to isolate what it is that you're happy with rather than provide a general 'pat on the back'. A pat on the back might be misconstrued and really gives no indication of specific things that are being we-handled. Sometimes students just don't know they're getting better and they need someone to tell them – you.

“I like you but I don't like your behaviour...”

When dealing with students it's important to separate the wrong act from the perpetrator. There's a saying *“Love the sinner, hate the sin.”* We can't afford to turn off everyone who does something wrong. What we must do is encourage them as valuable individuals but get them to behave differently. This is particularly important in terms of behaviour in the Art room. Let a student feel you really don't like them and you'll never get them back. And, if they get banned or

suspended from classes, especially your class, you can't do anything with them or for them, can you? I always fight strongly for students banned from classes to at least be allowed to come to my class.

So you made a mistake? What did you learn from it ...?"

Some of the most important learning in Art comes from making mistakes. But you need to encourage your students by telling them that. Do you share with them some of your own artistic experiences where making a mistake was important to your ultimate success? Making a mistake only removes one option available to students and sets them on the path to trying 'other options.' A mistake can, therefore, be a positive rather than a negative. But it's only a positive if you help students to understand that. And, surely any positive deserves recognition even if it's a mistake. A student can learn more by making mistakes than someone who appears to never make one. And, positive recognition of a mistake is a form of encouragement if it leads to further action. As playwright, poet, author and novelist Samuel Beckett once said – *Ever tried? Ever failed? No matter. Try again. Fail again. But fail better.*

"I like your idea. Have you thought about ...?"

Any idea can be interpreted in many different ways. It is possible the student hasn't considered some of these. Yet one of the things you'd want in your classes is students who are creative, imaginative and individual and they can't be any of those things if you constantly put down their ideas. So, it's a critical decision how much you try to influence a student's ideas. Surely one important role of the art teacher is to open up possibilities that might not have been considered. To say to a student "have you thought about" doesn't devalue their own idea but simply gives them options that they can accept, ignore or adapt. There is a danger in being 'over the top' in terms of praising students by always letting them think every idea they have and everything they do is 'great'. In a

way, though, it's more encouraging to try to get students to get more from their original idea than to reject it fully.

“Yes, it might seem finished but there are still some things you can do to make it even better”

Deciding when artworks are 'finished' is not just a classroom challenge. Artists have always grappled with this question. Turner, for example, sometimes returned to his paintings to make adjustments when it was already hung for an exhibition but only minutes before the official opening! Analysing a classroom artwork with the student can help. Even asking them to just tell you what things they like about their artwork encourages them to spend more time looking at the various qualities already evident in it. Students will often 'find things' they feel still need to be improved just by spending some 'critical' time with it. Getting them to focus on its 'strengths' is the secret because it encourages them by reinforcing that the work does already have some really good points. And, by looking closely at a work for its 'good qualities' makes the 'not so good qualities' stand out. It might also be a good strategy to get the student to compare their artwork to the criteria you are going to use for judging it when you allocate marks during assessment. The 1st Point in this list might be a good one to refer back to at this point *“You've done a really good job of ...”*

“You'd like me to think you can't do it, but I know you can...”

Sometimes it can be difficult to know just how hard or how far to push a student. If in doubt, always err on the side of further encouraging or challenging students to try things they might not believe they can do. Many of the students we find are problems in class suffer from a lack of challenge. They're bored. If they are not interested in anything you do in class, give them something interesting to do! It is an art room after all! Students will most times surprise themselves

with just how much they can achieve when they take on difficult tasks. But they need your encouragement and support. They might even surprise you.

“I’m sure you can do it. Don’t give up...”

Nothing provides greater opportunities for teachers to encourage students than when they feel they are getting nowhere and want to ‘give up’ on what they’re doing. Sometimes all it takes is a little more effort and the link between success and effort needs to be reinforced. And, sometimes, success requires on-going effort and might not be achieved straight away. The attitude needs to be developed that when things get ‘tough’ students need to ‘keep going’. Persistence is a great lesson for all of us to learn. Students and teachers.

Your attitude and approach to encouraging students will take on board many of these approaches addressed above. My great art teacher at Northcote High School many years ago, Arthur Markham, is to be credited with ‘encouraging’ me enormously. He certainly had little opportunity to praise me! He didn’t have that much to work with! But, he persisted, seeing something in me even I’d missed. While I didn’t get much praise from him I’m thankful for his patient encouragement.

I’m sure successful teachers already use many of these strategies, and more. If you have some other strategies you use successfully you might like to share and have them included on my website – www.artseducationguru.com.

Dr. Max Darby

Arts Education Consultant; Artist in Residence; Workshop Leader; Senior Art Teacher at St. Leonard’s College, Brighton.

