

# Inviting Creativity: The Teacher's Role in Art

By Robert Schirrmacher  
Date: April 02, 2006

## Approaches to Teaching Art

### Teacher-directed:

Some art projects are structured and teacher-directed. The teacher has an idea of what to make and how to go about it. Specific directions are given to ensure a recognizable product. Often, there is little input from the children. For example, a teacher distributes a piece of paper with an outline of a tree. The children are instructed to use a dark color, such as black or brown, to color in the trunk and green for the top. They also cut or tear small circles from red construction paper. These are pasted onto the green top. The completed apple trees look nearly identical. Generally, this approach is used when art is approached with the entire group or small groups of children. Most craft projects are teacher-directed. Seefeldt (1995) critiques teacher-directed art. Asking children to complete patterned artwork or to copy adult models of art undermines children's sense of psychological safety and demonstrates disrespect for children including their ideas, abilities, and creativity. Children who are frequently given patterns to cut out or outlines to color in are in fact being told that they, and their art, are inadequate. Seefeldt gives the example of giving children egg cartons to paint and paste eyes to make caterpillars, an activity that she sees as ridiculous when compared to the artwork of children of Reggio.

### Child-centered:

An opposite approach is to be unstructured and completely child-centered. A teacher may distribute pieces of paper and encourage children to make whatever they want or encourage them to visit the easel or art center. In this approach, children have much input and choice. There is very little structure. Some children do very well with this approach. They may have a bank of ideas to represent through art. They may also see endless artistic possibilities at the easel or art center. Many children, however, are uncomfortable with this approach. It may be too loosely structured. Some children quickly tire of inventing their own daily art program. They look to the teacher for some structure, guidance, or possibilities.

According to Wright (2003), unsupported arts learning in the classroom sometimes can lead to a laissez-faire or "anything goes" type of practice. In this non-interventionist approach, the underlying belief is that whatever children do in the arts is valuable. For a teacher to interfere would stifle a child's creativity. This hands-off approach may restrict the teacher's role to one of organizing the environment only and discourages one from suggesting ideas or processes that could mediate and scaffold children's learning. With no input from others, children can sometimes become bored and even frustrated with experiences and may benefit from background ideas and suggestions. Teacher-directed and child-centered approaches are extremes. Teachers can elect for a compromise using support and guidance by adopting the role of facilitator within a guided approach.

### Teacher as Facilitator:

A teacher-guided approach offers the best of the two former approaches: subtle structure with much child direction and input. For example:

- **A teacher supplies the theme.**  
“Children, it’s getting very close to summer. Today, we will make a picture that reminds us of this season.” Although the theme is given, there is no specified product. Children are free to use paint, crayons, markers, or clay to make their own versions of what summer means to them.
- **A teacher introduces new materials at the art center.**  
“Today I put some spools and buttons near the easels and art table. I want you to look at them and think of how they might be used in art. Try out different ways of using them.” Children are free to use them as brushes, make a stamped impression, or paste them to a collage, as long as the rules for the art center are upheld.
- **A teacher extends or builds upon an existing activity or suggests a new technique.**  
“I’ve noticed how much we enjoy easel painting with our long-handled brushes. I found these small tree branches outside and am leaving them at the easels. Let’s see if we could use them to paint with.” Or, “Let me show you another way of doing watercolor by first wetting your paper.” Or, “I see how much you enjoy your paper-bag puppet. If you like, I could show you how to sew one out of cloth.” Or, “Did you enjoy your paper weaving? Would you like to learn how to weave on a loom with yarn?”
- **A teacher poses a problem.**  
“Let’s see how many different shapes we can cut out of paper for pasting.” Or, “How could we use these empty boxes and ribbon?” Or, “What will happen if we try painting on newspaper or the colored pages in this magazine?”
- **A teacher extends art into other curricular areas.**  
“There seems to be a lot of excitement in your picture. Would you like to share it by telling me a story?” Or, “The dog you painted looks so happy, let’s work together and write a poem about it.” Or, “Perhaps you would like to plan a play for your ferocious dinosaur.”

Different approaches may work for certain activities and certain children. Young children will not automatically discover how to use a watercolor set. They will need some direction and instruction in its use and care. They need not, however, be told what to make or what it should look like. For example, Emily is having difficulty deciding what to include in her summer picture. Her teacher senses her frustration and asks her to name things that remind her of summer. Emily answers, “Sun and swimming.” Her teacher further structures the task by asking Emily to choose one. With the teacher’s subtle guidance, Emily chooses the sun and now must decide if she should use paints, watercolor, crayons, markers, or clay to represent it.

### Child-Centered Art or Teacher-Directed Projects?

Arts and crafts are terms that are often viewed as opposite. Hirsch (2004) provides a distinction. The motivation for art comes from within the child. Young children are dealing with autonomy and initiative. They are often not responsive or interested in teacher-directed experiences. When art is forced or extrinsically motivated, it may lack meaning, expressiveness, or detail. The art may reflect external expectations, or the autonomous child may purposefully create anything but what was asked for. The approach is reproductive in that the child merely reproduces the teacher’s product.

By contrast, when the motivation and purpose for art comes from within the child, the artwork reflects personal meaning and purpose. When children have free access to materials in an art center, they have the opportunity to create meaning and purpose. The approach is productive, not reproductive. In terms of approach, art activities are viewed as developmentally appropriate while crafts are often teacher-directed, product-oriented, and lacking artistic merit.

The term **project** is presently used in place of **craft**. Although some would refer to teacher-directed activities as crafts, the terms are not interchangeable. Crafts have artistic merit, and craftspeople work long and hard to produce products, many of which reflect their culture. Crafts may also be functional as with candles, jewelry, clothing, or wind chimes. Therefore, it would not be fair to use crafts in the same sense of teacher-directed art projects. Instead, teacher-directed projects, rather than crafts are the opposite of child-centered art. Substituting teacher projects for art does children a disservice for it robs them of the opportunity to make self-expressive, self-initiated art.

### Child-Centered Art Activities or Teacher-Directed Projects

Art Activities	Teacher-Directed Projects
are creative, unique, original	appear mass-produced and very similar
are open-ended and unstructured	are closed-ended and structured
are child-centered and child-directed	are teacher-centered and teacher-directed
come from within the child	are imposed from without by the teacher
involve self-expression	involve copying and imitating
foster autonomy	foster compliance and following directions
are process-oriented	are product-oriented
finished product may not be recognizable	finished product is recognizable
may not be useful or practical	may be useful and practical
are success-oriented, no fear of failure	may be unsuccessful if the child is unable to approximate the teacher's model or standard
empower children to decide on content	are decided by the teacher and related to holiday, season, theme, unit of study
please the child	please adults
need open blocks of time	may involve time constraints

### Is There a Place for Teacher Projects?

Although teacher projects should not dominate your art program, they do have a place and are to your art program as spices are to cooking. Some people avoid spices while others use them sparingly to enhance but not overpower or dominate the taste of food. When should teacher projects be used? They can be used occasionally

- with older children who have a solid foundation in processing and are interested in learning how to make art products.
- when children tire of visiting the art center and appear to run out of ideas for processing. They appear stuck or out of ideas. It appears the art center is not being used.
- to introduce children to new cultures by directly experiencing representative crafts. The process involved in making crafts must be tailored to meet the developmental needs of your group.
- while allowing for individual expression, as in the choice of color or type of decoration added. For example, children can be taught how to make a piñata without specifying what it should look like when finished.

From *Art and Creative Development for Young Children* 5th edition by Robert Shirmacher. © 2006. Reprinted with permission of Delmar Learning, a division of Thomson Learning.

## Guidelines for Open-ended Art

- Do not alter or 'fix' a child's work
- Provide a wide variety of interesting quality materials and choices
- Add new materials weekly, incorporating your theme if possible
- Never tell a child what to create
- Don't ask "What is it?"; Say "Tell me about it"
- Let children explore materials
- Let children come up with their own ideas and use materials creatively
- Provide materials for 3-D and on-going artwork projects
- Encourage, do not force participation
- Do not do models or samples for the children
- All materials should be at the children's level, and accessible
- Playdough and the art easel should be open much of each day
- Display art in a variety of ways – it should not all 'match'
- Talk about texture, color, smell, shape, etc and *the experience*
- Let the children be as independent as possible, and encourage self-help skills
- Educate parents as to the value and learning in open-ended art
- Teach and model appropriate use and respect of materials and clean up
- Allow ample time for children to create and explore
- Incorporate books on fine art in your classroom
- Children should be doing their own cutting – it's okay if a circle doesn't remotely resemble a circle yet. This is how they develop these fine muscles
- There is no 'right' or 'wrong' way, or end product.

