

## viewpoint

# Being Both: An Integrated Model of Art Therapy and Alternative Art Education

Rachel Albert, Alexandria, VA

### Abstract

*This viewpoint proposes a model of art therapy integrated into an alternative art education program. Because of the pressure to meet educational standards, school systems may be less likely to support clinical programs that take students out of their classes. A blended model of art therapy and art education that utilizes effective strategies from both disciplines and provides students with a therapeutic process can support instruction, empower students, and produce art products the students can be proud to have created.*

I am a registered art therapist. I am also a licensed art teacher in the state of Virginia. I am both. As Wadeson (1987) wrote, “being eclectic does not mean slipping into a ready-made garment and going to work . . . [but] requires far more creativity” (p. 300). This adaptation applies not only to a personal treatment style, but also to blending models to reach troubled clients in any setting. Students in need are everywhere, particularly in special education settings where they are identified with individualized goals and diagnoses. However, in the high school where I work students without diagnosed special needs also struggle with stressors: Many are dealing with teen pregnancy and parenting, sexual abuse, separation from families due to war and refugee status, illiteracy in new and native languages, criminal records, gang involvement, homelessness, and substance abuse. High rates of truancy and a mix of Spanish, Urdu, Farsi, and other languages among the students make group cohesion difficult to attain. All of these students deserve a treatment-oriented approach, but that is not practical.

Yet in a studio classroom, teaching strategies work. Pedagogical models for unit development that acknowledge these students’ varied developmental and educational backgrounds can be utilized as a therapeutic process that leads to increased self-esteem and personal expression.

**Editor’s note:** Rachel Albert (formerly Rachel Kreiger), MA, ATR, earned her master’s degree in art therapy from George Washington University and has been working in the schools for 11 years with a Virginia state teaching license. Correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to the author at [rachel.albert@fcps.edu](mailto:rachel.albert@fcps.edu)

According to McNiff (1997), when partnering with other disciplines the integrity of art therapy can be maintained by following four key principles: (a) avoiding identification with a single model, (b) keeping all options open for creative partnerships, (c) retaining art and depth psychology as the base, and (d) staying closely attuned to the images that are created. When art therapists become certified art teachers, study good pedagogy, and adhere to these principles, legitimate classroom-based art therapy can take place.

As in all professional settings, schools hire teachers who are qualified for the job. Many art therapists have the studio skills necessary to teach art but lack the credentialing and coursework that would increase their marketability and effectiveness in a school setting. Conversely, art teachers are not necessarily qualified to handle the clinical concerns that accompany many students in alternative and special education settings. Bush (1997) wrote that art therapy and school partnerships can be beneficial to students’ emotional growth. Referring to the Miami-Dade County model, Bush proposed that art therapy take place outside the classroom setting because “assigning art therapists sole responsibility for class activity leaves little time for the important services that are an integral part of art therapy and that are best accomplished through small group or individual treatment-oriented sessions” (p. 13). Nonetheless, I believe that if art therapists are educated in curriculum and unit development that follow district and state requirements while meeting the diverse needs of the students, then the art therapists’ planning work becomes integral to the process. The structure provided can foster self-guidance for individual students’ personal growth.

In my first years as a teacher, I struggled with meeting classroom and curriculum requirements while also implementing studio-based interventions and other therapeutic strategies from my art therapy training. Although I was comfortable teaching and supporting students spontaneously as they asked for assistance, I had to plan and document these interventions in a portfolio that showed the students’ progress as required by the school district. The reality of being evaluated as a teacher meant that I quickly realized the need to write lesson plans in advance, not only to assist the

students but also to advocate for myself as a professional. I had to show that I could meet the state educational standards, integrate technology into my work, and assess my students' understanding of the material presented.

The most widely used theoretical approach in art education is Discipline Based Art Education (DBAE), developed in the 1980s by the Getty Center for Education in the Arts (Dobbs, 1992). DBAE is not a curriculum; it is a means for implementing instruction through "a comprehensive approach that develops students' skills, understanding, and appreciation of visual art forms" (Dobbs, 1992, p. 13). DBAE is based on four distinct disciplines: art production, art criticism, art history, and aesthetics. Although DBAE components may seem too rigid for art therapists, Dobbs (1992) suggested that these components could be reframed as "creative expression," "cultural heritage," "perception and response," and "talking about art" (p. 22), thus aligning them more directly with the field of art therapy. The flexibility of the art therapist is what determines the success of a therapeutic application of art education strategies for students with special needs. DBAE can be creatively expanded with themes or *big ideas*—a concept defined by Walker (2001) as "broad, important human issues" (p. xiii). Within the context of DBAE, the use of big ideas helps to ensure students' own personal connections to their work.

## An Integrated Program for Art Therapy in Art Education

Struggling students who would most benefit from a therapeutic intervention during the school day often are behind their classmates academically, making it difficult to pull them out of class for art therapy. Students and their teachers are overwhelmed by the pressures of testing demanded by the U.S. federal mandate known as No Child Left Behind. I believe that the best way to serve these students who cannot leave the classroom for art therapy is to make their art class an engaging space for personal growth and discovery. Because some of the conceptual requirements of art education may be difficult for students with special needs, I use teaching strategies to relay both therapeutic and educational information, making accommodations when necessary. I view my challenge as teaching students about art and about themselves. By using big ideas such as memories, dreams, family, heroes, and journeys, and by teaching various media and techniques, students are pushed to reach their own potential.

In this eclectic practice of art therapy I constantly strive to meet the standards of an educational setting. The result is an integrated model that blends therapy and education. Integrated teaching is distinct from interdisciplinary teaching. Ballengee-Morris, Carpenter, Sessions, and Taylor (2006) explained that in an integrated curriculum, the "overarching themes, concepts, issues, or problems are planned for and taught, however the subjects or disciplines are no longer separate. Instead, the subjects or disciplines are woven together to make a more gestalt whole" (p. 20). Despite variation among individual student needs, I have

found that my overarching therapeutic goals for them are often quite similar: increasing self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-advocacy; developing frustration tolerance, creative thinking, and healthy risk taking; communicating personal stories; reconnecting to cultural heritage; and validating important life experiences. I believe that a truly integrated art therapy–art education model exists when one cannot tell where one subject ends and the next begins. That is the goal of my art program: to blend art teaching with art therapy seamlessly, meeting the goals of both.

To some, the product-oriented approach of my studio may resemble that of a traditional art class. The end goal is to create an art product; however, the overall focus of the program is on the process of creation. Within the evolving theories of art education the process is the true product of inquiry-based instruction (Stewart & Walker, 2005). Traditional DBAE art classes may instruct students to look at a product and critique its formal art elements (line, shape, unity, balance, etc.) or the historical and political context in which the artwork was created. In contrast, when my students use DBAE principles to reflect on their work they are integrating their own ideas with the process of learning how to express themselves, while also reconciling self-doubt with a product that shows their achievement. Often, they verbalize a sense of relief in being able to express something they were not able to say with words.

According to Moriya (2006), one of the ethical issues in school art therapy is whether students understand that they are in therapy. There is no such confusion in the model outlined here; I emphasize that this is art class. When students or parents ask about my background, I tell them quite accurately that I am an art teacher and that my training is in art therapy. As students realize that the structure and effectiveness of the class is dependent on their willingness to use their own life experiences as inspiration for their work, they become more active participants in the process and they express themselves to the depth at which they are comfortable. When clinical issues arise that cannot be dealt with in the confines of the studio, I refer students to a school counselor or social worker for further attention. My role is not to manage any "cases"; rather, I use my clinical judgment from my training as an art therapist to know when to refer a student to the school's support services.

## Designing and Modifying Curriculum for Use in a Therapeutic Art Studio

School art therapists must understand and adapt to the language of education. Just as we shift to meet the needs of unpredictable clients in clinical settings, so must we modify educational approaches to meet the needs of special student populations. The teaching techniques described below draw from discipline-based nomenclature (Dobbs, 1992), reading strategies to help address students' different developmental needs (Fitzgerald & Graves, 2005), and McNiff's (1997) four principles to maintain the integrity of art therapy within art classroom instruction. The successful blend of teaching and providing therapy for

personal expression is a result of planning for both components and integrating all appropriate theories.

### Backward Design

In this school setting, the goal is twofold: (a) personal expression and (b) standards-based learning that is tied to the state's requirements. The standards can be addressed with a unit development model called "backward design" (McTighe & Wiggins, 1998). The first step is to identify the desired result(s), which for my purposes is the curriculum requirement that students will work with a variety of media. For each unit of instruction, I design a project that assists students with their personal expression based on a big idea (as discussed above). These unit plans carry my interventions for student group learning. Essential questions one should ask in this stage of planning are: "What [techniques] will students know?" "What is worthy of understanding?" and "What enduring understandings are desired?" (McTighe & Wiggins, 1998, p. 9). When I can answer these questions with some or any of the therapeutic goals stated earlier, I am confident that my planning will end in a product that is the result of an integrated art education and art therapy program.

After establishing the desired product, the second step is to determine acceptable evidence of achievement in the artwork created. I identify the desired art product based on the curriculum requirements and the needs of the group, and the application of a therapeutic process that incorporates all of the educational goals, resulting in a product of which students can be proud. Students' "best achievement bears therapeutic fruit, not obtainable from a lesser effort" (Arnheim, 1980, p. 249).

The third and final step in backward design is to plan learning experiences and instruction. The focus of the planning method returns to the art process and to outlining how students will be supported emotionally and educationally on their personal journey of expression. McTighe and Wiggins (1998) provided many examples from core academic subjects to illustrate six facets of understanding that also can directly support therapeutic goals: A student who truly understands can explain, interpret, apply, gain perspective, empathize, and, finally, obtain self-knowledge. Using these six criteria for planning helps to ensure a thorough technical education with the art materials while also focusing on the students and their view of themselves and their work.

### Reading Strategies

Fitzgerald and Graves (2005) proposed reading strategies that are easily applicable to a therapeutic model of art education. To adapt to their unfamiliar educational terminology of "read, pre-reading, and scaffolding reading experience [SRE]," I suggest substituting the words "art project, idea development, and guided brainstorming." For example, Fitzgerald and Graves described designing SREs for English language learners so as to "facilitate reading development as well as their learning through reading. . . .

When planning an SRE, teachers start by considering their specific students, the reading selection, and the reading purpose; they create activities that are modulated as needed" (p. 69). Translated into language that addresses the goals of my visual arts planning approach, this description would read:

*Guided brainstorming is designed for English language learners to facilitate project development as well as their personal expression. When planning for brainstorming, art therapists start by considering their specific students, the materials or subject at hand, and the purpose of the project and product; they create guided planning activities that are modulated as needed for the English language learners.*

This modification changes the focus of the educational strategy from reading to art while maintaining the integrity of the strategy.

### Background Knowledge

Background knowledge, as defined by Marzano (2004), is what students already know before they begin school. Such background knowledge as vocabulary, travel experiences, reading ability or interest, and exposure to nature and culture is directly linked to student achievement (Marzano, 2004). Students who lack background knowledge will feel insecure academically and may appear more timid, exhibit closed body language, and wait to see what others do before they act in order to ensure some level of acceptance in the class. An assessment of student background knowledge allows a teacher to understand the student in the same way that an intake interview alerts the therapist to a client's past experiences and coping strategies. For example, if a teacher assumes that all students in an art class know what the word "landscape" means, those who do not know the meaning or have never heard the word, looked at an art book, or traveled beyond their neighborhoods will feel insecure no matter what other norms for safety may be in place.

### Frontloading

Frontloading means teaching background knowledge and pertinent vocabulary before beginning a unit of instruction so that students are brought to the same level prior to their participation. Just as art therapists may use warm-up activities to prepare clients for a session, frontloading introduces ideas to facilitate specific understanding before expressive art making, and thus parallels the academic strategy of pre-reading. I may introduce students to images that help define key terms, such as *emotional landscape* or *expressive portraiture*. Frontloading can be accomplished with a hands-on activity that quickly brings all students to the same level of understanding of a technique, such as spending 30 minutes creating pinch pots to introduce clay or providing a guided activity to demonstrate how to use watercolors. A series of worksheets can guide students through a process of thumbnail sketches and brainstorming to make the expected art product more accessible. Such pre-project idea development plants the seeds for student engagement in the beginning stages of a project.





Figure 1 Frontloading Worksheet for Emotional Life Project

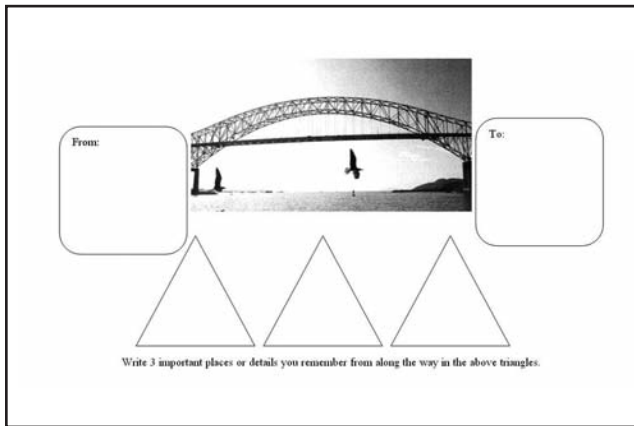


Figure 3 Graphic Organizer Worksheet for Narrative Art Project

As an example, Figure 1 shows part of a worksheet that preceded a long-term project addressing the theme of one's emotional life. Images of people in expressive poses are placed next to an image of a small, blank canvas. I asked students to fill in the canvas with lines, shapes, and colors to express what they thought the person in the picture was feeling based on body language. Some students can do this easily and have the necessary background knowledge. Other students, such as those with little or no experience with artistic personal expression, find the activity to be more difficult. Because of the diversity of student experience, frontloading also works as a concept formative assessment tool (Beattie, 1997). Seeing their work in thumbnail sketches allows me to assess whether students understand what I am asking, even with language barriers. Subsequent steps in the emotional life project were to sketch a self-representational figure that showed expressive body language, form the figure with clay, and finally to create a painting on 3-inch square canvas (Figure 2).

### Scaffolding

Just as a builder uses scaffolding in construction to form a structure of support, students learn to use graphic organizers (worksheets that visually organize an individual's thoughts and ideas into clear sections to support learning, planning, and decision making), thumbnail sketches, and



Figure 2 Emotional Life Project Example



Figure 4 Narrative Art Project Example

written planning as a comprehensive support system on which to build a complex art project. A unit on narrative art that focuses on the big idea of a personal journey illustrates how scaffolding can help to ensure student success. I show poster-sized images of well-known art works and ask the students to "read" them: What stories are being told? Are they positive memories from someone's life, or images that show struggle? What details give this information? Next, students are prompted to complete a graphic organizer worksheet (Figure 3). Students identify their own personal journey in the form of a written narrative. The large spaces on either side of the bridge design are labeled *from* and *to*. Triangles provide a space below to identify three details from the narrative (*Write 3 suggested places or details you remember from along the way in the above triangles*). This scaffolding exercise is a blueprint for thumbnail sketches that function like a comic strip to help structure the students' stories. The small images form the basis of a larger watercolor painting project.

Figure 4 shows a culminating work for the unit painted by Alfonso (pseudonym), a Spanish-speaking immigrant from El Salvador. He was able to communicate through his painting the fear he experienced in the Mexican desert on his journey to the United States. He worked hard to mix just the right color to represent the sand and the hot sun, expressing a journey that was too big



Figure 5 Visual Task Analysis

for words. As Arnheim (1980) wrote, “good works of art tell the truth” (p. 249). From an art therapy standpoint, graphic organizers not only create building blocks for art projects but allow students to peel away layers of their defenses at their own pace to reveal their own truth while addressing all components of DBAE instruction.

### Task Analyses

Utilizing task analyses is another way to eliminate confusion and misunderstanding that may be the result of taking background knowledge for granted. Figure 5 shows a task analysis that I use in the studio on a regular basis. I create laminated “placemats” for each art table that show a photograph of the materials needed for the project along with the appropriate vocabulary words. Easily created using Photoshop and overlaying text, the mats assist communication through the use of imagery, build content specific vocabulary, and support the students’ efforts to work independently.

### An Example of Unit Planning

Drawing from American history, I organized a unit on face vessels, which were pottery found along the Underground Railroad that were thought to express the resilience of the slave artist living in harsh conditions (Smithsonian Institution, 2000). Using backward design planning, I determined that my students would make functional ceramic vessels that incorporated hand-built sculptures to tell a story from their lives. Having established an idea for the project that met curriculum criteria for working with clay and creating a functional clay piece, I continued to design the optimal process by which the students would learn technique and achieve self-expression. I decided that making coil pots would be easier than using a wheel, as the face vessels were historically created. Finally, I designed worksheets and a PowerPoint presentation to introduce the unit. This frontloading of information relayed conceptual material to the students by providing historical context and showed the standard expected



Figure 6 Face Vessel Example

for their work. Done correctly, such frontloading actually helps to avoid copying because students are exposed to many ways of meeting the same standard. The face vessel project addressed the educational standard for functional ceramics, hand building technique, and visual communication. More importantly to me as a teacher and as an art therapist, each student created a meaningful artwork that gave voice to a personal story that would otherwise have gone untold.

Raul (pseudonym) was 21 years old when he created his face vessel (Figure 6). He enrolled in high school with no English language knowledge, having recently arrived from El Salvador. It was only through body language and demonstrations that he had any understanding of my instruction. He also was very creative, as evident from his progress in completing each worksheet; he succeeded with all steps of the process and demonstrated understanding throughout the planning phases. Raul was not comfortable explaining his vessel to me as he worked on it, but when it was completed, his story (told through a translator) was remarkable: “This represents the people that helped me cross the [Rio Grande] river and get to the United States. The duck face [seen protruding from the right side of the vessel] shows the beady eyes that were all watching in the river as I swam across.”

A component of thorough unit planning is the inclusion of a fair and accurate assessment of student understanding. As a teacher I know that grades are necessary; as a therapist, I try to evaluate students on their efforts in participating and creating meaningful work. My grading system is based on the completion of each step as it leads toward a personal product. Because each unit of instruction is divided into clear tasks, grading rubrics clarify for students how their grade is calculated (Figure 7). I also empower the students to assess themselves on their own work so that they

Face Vessels and Story Pots Evaluation					
	View the PowerPoint presentation about Face Vessels and answer the questions on the worksheet.	Complete the planning sheet with well-thought out ideas in both writing and sketches.	Use the coil method to create a pot.	Create 4 sculptures, including at least 1 face that tell the viewer a story from your experiences.	
	15 pts	15 pts	35 pts	35 pts	Total
Student					
Teacher					

Figure 7 Grading Rubric Example

understand how the focus of their learning is on the process rather than on the aesthetic quality of the final piece. Students who complete the rubric earn extra credit, which further reinforces the importance of reflection.

## Conclusion

Integrating good pedagogy into planning for a therapeutic process does not minimize the power of art therapy; instead, it makes art therapy acceptable in the school system and thus accessible to more students in need. Established reading strategies used with English language learners are easily adaptable to art therapists in teaching roles in order to create meaningful art programs as part of the school day. In addition, instruction that is documented through the use of clear steps is acceptable for teacher accountability and provides a structure for personal and meaningful art to be made by the students.

The need for teachers who are willing to work with diverse populations of students and make accommodations to meet them at their academic and emotional level of functioning reinforces the need for art therapy programs to partner with art education. This partnership would assist graduates in finding meaningful work as art therapists in nontraditional school settings, as well as give art therapists in traditional clinical roles an additional skill set in pedagogy that could be called upon when necessary. Wadeson (1987) wrote that the elements unique to art therapy are “expression in images, [work] with art materials, the client-therapist relationship around art making, [and] the place of creativity in art therapy” (p. 312). These are the ideals to remember when working as an art therapist in the role of an art teacher and in whatever setting art therapy takes place.

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