



Teaching and Learning in Art Education 2nd Ed

Cultivating Students' Potential from Pre-K through High School

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Teaching Students with Visual Impairments: Snapshots and Advice from My Career

by Monica Leister

My career as a teacher did not start with Art Education, I began teaching in a state school for the blind back in 1998. It enrolls students who are blind and visually impaired in preschool through 12th grade. I had just become certified as a teacher of the visually impaired. Before that time, I was working in a public school system and was an early intervention instructor to families with children who were born with a hearing or vision impairment. When working at the public state special school, I was first teaching students academics and expanded core curriculum which included job skills, braille, and orientation and mobility.

In my early years there, the art program was practically non-existent. It wasn't until around 2009 that my principal at the time approached me and asked if I would like to go back to school to get an endorsement in art education. She knew that I loved crafts and all things art and felt that we needed an art program at our school.

While all areas of instruction can have its challenges with our population, I have to say that teaching art education to students with visual impairments has been the most challenging yet the most rewarding. I knew going into it that I would be navigating mostly uncharted waters with little help from the outside world on how to provide modifications and accommodations to students so that they too can love and enjoy art as I do. While a lot of what I have learned is self-taught, I have also had great resources from others in my teacher of the visually impaired (TVI) field who have had some experience, as well as organizations such as the American Printing House for the Blind, Borderless Arts (formally VSA), Art Beyond Sight, and a few others. I often found myself advocating for my students in the community and in the art world. Advocating turned into educating the public on the abilities and creative talents of my students.

My Student Population

Students who attend my school are legally blind with different eye conditions ranging from no light perception (totally blind) to high functioning vision loss. Most of the students' eye conditions originate from premature births, disease, various syndromes and birth defects, or trauma, such as car accidents or domestic violence. Along with vision loss, some students have other disabilities which can make learning even more challenging. Some of the most common eye conditions are retinopathy of prematurity, congenital cataracts, glaucoma, albinism, and cortical visual impairment (CVI). Like I said previously, some of our population is diagnosed with just a visual impairment, however, we have a larger population that have multiple disabilities. All students at our school have an IEP (Individualized Education Program). Making accommodations are

an essential part of the planning, teaching, learning, and evaluation process, not only in core subjects but also in art education.

Making Accommodations and Modifications

Class sizes are small and can range from 4- 10+ students. I follow a basic scope and sequence to support state and national standards but know that not all areas of art instruction are going to be appropriate for all students. For example, teaching all aspects of drawing basics and adding value may work with someone who has a visual acuity 20/120 but not for someone who only has only light perception. In one typical class, I might have at least 2-3 with little to no light perception and the remainder having varying degrees of vision loss. In that same class, I have some students who can work independently and some who need a lot of assistance. I must focus on making lessons that have a more multi-sensory approach.

For example, I may feature an artist such as Georgia O'Keeffe. Sample artwork will be provided on a large smart board or on paper using a video magnifier or an IPAD to magnify the image, and a raised line sample of that image for those with little to no vision. I go into a detailed description of the artwork sample of the flower. I might even have a sample of the flower whether it is real or artificial. For the activity, I may have students create a flower bowl out of clay or paint on canvas using glue and tissue paper to make a magnified view of a portion of a flower. The tissue paper is easy to apply and can add interesting texture and vibrant colors. Students with little to no vision can be partnered with someone who has vision to assist with selecting colors and retrieving materials. Also, colors can be labeled in braille if needed. The amount of assistance given to each student will depend on that student's ability and level of independence.

IEP accommodations such as extended time, frequent breaks, enlarged materials, braille or large print are a basic part of many of the students' classes, however, I provide classroom accommodations and modifications to meet the individual needs of each student to help them be successful artists. This might look like modifying instruction and the project for the student so that they are graded fairly on performing at the best of their ability. You really need to get to know your students. Expectations are always high but fair for each student. It might be more appropriate for some students to create a collage than a drawing. Some students who are not able to draw out ideas, may be able to be provide materials to make a raised line drawing. Materials I use for student raised line drawings are wax coated string which they can press on to paper or cardboard to create an outline. Also, students can use "Doodle Boards" from American Printing House for the Blind, which is a drawing board with a rubber surface. A thin sheet of plastic is put on top of the rubber surface and clipped on. Students use a stylus (plastic pencil) to press and draw lines and images which will rise up on the plastic. The students can take their finger and feel what they have drawn. The majority of my students love painting. It is easier for some because they are more visual learners. For

those who are not able to receive visual feedback on what they are painting, I can have those students create texture using paste on canvas and then painting over it or we can provide guided paint zones produced with raised lines in specific areas they need to paint. Hot glue is a highly used item in my room to make raised lines in drawings because it is quick and gets the job done. Some projects are naturally more conducive to my visually impaired artists such as working with clay to make pottery and sculptures. No matter what the medium is, accommodation and modification is a vital part.

Best Practices for Participating in Community Exhibitions

Before we attended any community museum exhibitions, I would speak with docents at art museums. I took steps to make sure that my students were provided with a more detailed description of the art on exhibit and received multi-sensory approaches to learning so they could fully experience their museum visits. I wanted the experiences to be both enjoyable and educational. I am blessed as an educator to teach in such a city that has wonderful resources and an art community that goes over and beyond to meet the needs of my students. I have also exhibited my students' artwork in various places around the city, state, country, and now internationally. Throughout the years, I have received a lot of positive feedback from the community, most of which was how amazed they were to see how talented and creative students and artists with visual impairments are. Many people outside of my school think that when someone is blind, they live in a world of complete darkness, unable to see or even enjoy art, much less...create art. I felt that my student art exhibits were more than just simply showcasing their work but making the community aware that students who are blind and visually impaired can be talented passionate artists.

Building Relationships

Another vital part of having a successful art classroom is continuing to learn and grow as a teacher of the visually impaired and as an art educator. It is also pertinent to build relationships with others in the same field and collaborate if opportunity allows. Thanks to Dr. Sickler-Voigt's encouragement and support, I have attended and co-presented with her over the years at many National Art Education Association (NAEA) and International Society of Education through Art (INSEA) conventions around the country and even in Canada and the Czech Republic. These connections with her and others in the field have been priceless. I have been able to use so much of what I have learned from them in my classroom. Of all the things Dr. Sickler-Voigt and I have partnered together in art education, the collaborations between my school and her art education preservice teachers have been the most valuable. We have been collaborating yearly on a joint project for at least 13 years. Both our collaborations and projects have evolved over the years into something that are both beneficial to students and student teachers as well as getting our work and name out to the world. Her students get the opportunity to come to my school and work in small groups with students who are

visually impaired. This is such a valuable and unique opportunity that many student teachers in other colleges never receive. With our guidance, preservice teachers learn the basics on how to make accommodations in the classroom for this population of students. They take this knowledge with them out into the world. Also, my high school students get the chance to visit MTSU and attend a college art education classroom where they are able to work one-on-one with a student teacher to create the project. Over the years, we have turned our focus and projects to "Stop Motion Animation". Students and student teachers worked in groups to create story boards, characters, backdrops, voice and sound effects, and finally editing. Many of these projects can be viewed on YouTube. From our early projects of "Be Good Beach" and "Arctic Blues" to recently where we became truly involved in a STEAM blueprint helping students learn how to code and operate robots to use in a space game that was ultimately turned into a stop motion project. It has definitely shown our growth. This growth is not just in the projects and our knowledge but also in bringing more people to our team...involving them in the project. These new team members are our music teacher (Georgette Seay) who works with her students to develop music and sound effects for our films, our technology teacher (Joshua Harper) who helps with all things technology including making coding more user friendly for our students, to finally, one of our science teachers (Lisa Salvato), who has helped us with space details with our newest project and also with developing our game board and cards related to space. It does take a village to lay the groundwork and help students create a beautiful and meaningful project that they can be proud of. Ultimately, our collaborative experiences have demonstrated the transformative powers of visual and media arts education in uniting students and teachers with diverse talents. They have nurtured our creativity and resulted in an inclusive community of lifelong learners.