



## Alexandra Johnson celebrates success in her Visual Arts classrooms and you can too...

Remember your first year of teaching? I do.

For me, Visual Arts has always been about more than the HSC. It is the subject where students can communicate without words, and where their background can have less influence on their creative success or failure.

Like many, my first year as a Visual Arts teacher was filled with high expectations, nervous energy and a determination which allowed me to believe I could almost will my class towards HSC success. Naively, I expected 'Band 6's' were being given out as freely as Oprah gives away free cars.

However, when it came to that first HSC class, sadly, hopes for great results were frustrated by outcomes which were so close, yet so far away, from what I was sure was possible for my students.

### What to do?

How could I change my pedagogy to ensure the success of those students whose education I had been entrusted with? And how could I make sure my students held onto their love of art in the process?

I engaged in numerous professional development opportunities, chatted with colleagues and reflected on my practice. I know it is what all good teachers are supposed to do, but for me, the key was to actually make improvement a priority.

Eventually, it hit me. The syllabus, our central text, and The Conceptual Framework had the answers.

Artist, Artwork, Audience and World are the necessary teaching components of our syllabus, and along with mentoring resilience, knowing our students, building rapport and maintaining high expectations, momentum began to build.

### Artist, Artwork, Audience and World

#### *Artist - us, the teachers*

We are the masters of our Visual Arts classroom. How we continually develop our own practice defines the way we enhance the learning experiences of our students. My most important resources have been



my colleagues, in particular one amazing and inspiring teacher who took me under her wing when I was new. Bouncing my ideas off her and building my own resilience enabled me to recognise that some of my initial and seemingly crazy ideas for building student engagement and rapport through programming could actually be possible.

I also met with colleagues from other schools, as well as in different subject areas. The advice I gained here around time-keeping and making students constantly accountable by upholding promises to contact parents became invaluable.

I engaged in professional development opportunities through [ArtExpress](#) teacher-directed courses, made contact with colleagues at local schools to peer mark senior student work and constantly referred back to the syllabus, asking: What skills do I want my students to be able to achieve?

Throughout, focus was on lessons with explicit learning objectives linked to teaching students to construct focused responses and engage in higher-order critiquing of artworks and critical thinking. I came to fully realise that young student artists need to be taught to write and critique artworks in a sophisticated way; that nourishing both their creativity and literacy is necessary for success.

I also learnt that, sometimes, our skill is to embrace our students' outstanding ability to procrastinate, and to develop a way to cut through the waffle and make more meaningful responses.

### *Artwork - our students*

Where major projects are involved, maintaining a firm and fair approach has helped to get my students over the line. There is a fine line between developing rapport and letting students get away with things that are only going to lead to disappointment in the future. Parent contact and fortnightly progress meetings with students have proved to be beneficial when it comes to producing a successful Body of Work.

Time management and routine is crucial and developing a fortnightly progress interview which can be formal or informal discussions during class time has proven to be successful for students who often leave things to the last minute.

The ability to think creatively and in a different way is an asset in our subject. This can be nurtured by encouraging students to challenge themselves and their teacher. Often we are 'blown away' by how



crazily smart our kids actually are – as artists, they can be more willing to take calculated risks than we are and it can be our role to mentor this ability.

Some questions to encourage creativity include:

- What artists have you considered as inspiration for this piece?
- How have you analysed your own practice?
- Does your medium and concept match? Is there a better way to display your concept?

The idea of such questioning is to generate ideas, prepare for action and encourage students to predict and understand potential challenges.

Honesty and mentoring resilience can also be the most important traits to develop in Visual Arts students, beginning in the junior years in preparation for senior study. In reality, Visual Arts is not the stereotypical ‘fluffy and lovey’ discussions some assume. Whilst the fear of hurting the feelings of sensitive, creative students is high and, at times, real, some approaches to offering encouraging and constructive feedback include asking “Do you want me to be nice, or honest?” I know this sounds harsh initially, but students know honesty is what is going to help them. It is about how you structure this conversation and prepare your feedback to include and offer other options that is essential.

Showing rather than telling is also a helpful approach. Try preparing some examples, finding similar images on Pinterest, art gallery websites, in journals or in art magazines. If all else fails, share some of your work or experimentation if you have some. Students love hearing that you are a practising artist yourself.

I also utilise other members of staff and their experience to support my conversations. More often than not you have mentioned the same thing to your student several times but until they hear it from someone else they also respect it may not stick.

### ***Audience - the examiners and the examination***

The importance of developing the writing skills of Visual Arts students cannot be overstated. Writing about art needs to be analytical, concise and sophisticated. Whilst writing scaffolds (such as ALARM and PEEL) are popular and often useful for coaxing students to move to analysis, interpretation and appreciation, it is essential for such scaffolds to be adapted to your students’ needs, and to understand that this is just a starting point.



Using the language and structures of effective writing in junior years and continuing to utilise this in some form through to senior years can have positive results. At the same time, students add their own 'flavour' to their writing, and students who are already talented writers may find such uniform structures restrictive. In my experience, working to know and enhance students' existing abilities is the best way forward.

The official [NESA site](#) has a useful selection of past papers. However, as images are often subject to copyright, I take the questions from the pages and add my own images to analyse. A fun activity to do closer to examinations is to take photographs of the student's own art and choose short answer questions from HSC papers for students to analyse their own practice against. Not only do they understand artist's practice better but they understand how to answer the question based on their own knowledge of their practice.

### ***World - art is so much more than the HSC***

Students who choose Visual Arts often come to the subject thinking it is relaxed and a bit of a 'bludge'. You can teach them right from the get-go that this subject will make them think critically, challenge them to question everyday assumptions and most importantly, and inspire them.

Visual Arts inspires students to be lifelong learners, to engage in a world beyond their front doorstep and to find a passion to adore a subject that says: "It is okay to think differently, to not always agree and to take calculated risks". I adore the possibilities of this subject and how it allows me to connect with students; I appreciate the opportunities it provides to inspire and make change and how it challenges me. And isn't that what we are all here for anyway?

***Alexandra Johnson currently teaches Visual Arts and English at Castle Hill High School and completed a Masters of Teaching in 2011. Alexandra has been a Year Advisor at Castle Hill High School, and this has driven her passion for student welfare and building rapport with students to manage behaviour and well-being matters. Her focus on improving achievement in Visual Arts has resulted in students regularly being admitted to ARTEXPRESS, recognition for excellent results in the HSC for Visual Arts and student artwork being purchased by the Wilkins collection and exhibited in the Department of Education building.***