

A LOOK AT LOIS HETLAND'S EIGHT STUDIO HABITS

A Presentation Transcribed

The real product of art education is not the works of art, but the child. We have to keep that firmly in mind—though it goes against several grains. If you are an artist and you want to make good art, I urge you to go into your studio and make good art. What you need to do as a teacher of art is create kids who make good art, create kids who think well as artists, who have an artistic mind.

As artists, kids have to learn to chase the quality of their work. Artists must make the best art that they can make, but that's not your job. Your job is to get your students to chase the quality of their own work and make the best work they can make. So it can be confusing. I think we get really trapped and stuck in thinking that it's our job to make really high-quality work, so that we can put it out in the hall and everybody will say that we have a good art program. I think we have to be careful of that trap because you can turn your class into a production factory and then your kids don't develop artistic minds, even though they may be making beautiful work that is hanging in the hall. What I'm really urging here is more autonomy on the part of the student artist—they need to be making the decisions if they're going to make a better mind.

Developing Craft:

Technique: learning to use tools (e.g., viewfinders, brushes), materials (e.g., charcoal, paint); learning artistic conventions (e.g., perspective, color mixing). Studio practice: learning to care for tools, materials, and space.

Most often, the default belief seems to be that all we need to teach is craft, as if craft is what art is. One of the reasons this studio habit is useful is because it helps teachers see that craft is important; it's one of the eight studio habits, but it's not all that's important. It's not the most important. There are seven more habits in addition to craft. So if all you are doing is teaching technique, craft, the principles and elements of design, you are missing a lot of what is important about developing an artistic mind. And just as craft requires skill, learning to use that pencil, or getting that structure to stand up, there's also the inclination to use craft. I want the kids to be driven, to need to pursue good craft, inclined to do another draft. Why? Because inadequate craft diminishes the artwork, the craft needs to read as intended. The work needs to speak, and craft is how we make materials speak.

A lot of times, not always, but a lot, artists work with developing craft in relation to the studio habit "Express." You go back and forth, developing craft to express, trying to express with your craft. They kind of tug on each other, and then both dispositions grow.

Engage and Persist:

Learning to embrace problems of relevance within the art world and/or of personal importance, to develop focus and other mental states conducive to working at and preserving art tasks.

It is important to understand that people engage differently. A project that is low stakes, temporary, and has no right answer may help someone with low confidence or who's confused to begin to engage. Engaging is what it takes to learn strategies to persist. Much of what develops this habit are the qualities of the assignments we design. When we look at students' work and

working, we'll see evidence about what learners are demonstrating in regard to their skills and attitudes at engaging and persisting. What is their disposition to engage and persist at this particular point in time? If a problem is too unambiguous, if it's too explicit, then it doesn't call for the kind of engagement and persistence that students need to develop. If everything is too simple, with too few choices and decisions, or with all those made by the teacher, then the assignment is too structured to leave room for the student to find his or her own way, to find what is interesting and compelling. So you have to find what David Perkins calls the "optimal ambiguity" in your assignments. They have to be structured enough to guide, and open enough to discover our unique paths.

Envision:

Learning to picture mentally what cannot be directly observed and imagine possible next steps in making a piece.

If you look at the work of Understanding by Design by McTighe and Wiggins, they talk about planning backwards, that is, you envision an end product and then you think, what do I need to do to get there? That's one really great way to envision. It's not the only way, though. Some people plan first, sketching and keeping artists' sketchbooks, drawing thumbnails, diagramming, writing, talking with peers or mentors, looking at works by others. Some people begin to build right away, making a move with the materials and then responding to what they did—sort of improvisational envisioning. There are many ways that artists envision. They envision with storyboards, with conceptual drawing, with throwing stuff together and then taking it apart and then throwing it back together again. They envision by imposing ideas on what they see, like seeing the landscape as shapes viewed through a viewfinder. They envision by playing, by stretching and exploring. And artists need to develop a repertoire to pull from in different circumstances; a repertoire that works for them.

Express:

Learning to create works that convey an idea, a feeling, or a personal meaning.

Expressing is not just emoting all over the page. I think a lot of times people limit the arts by saying “the arts are about feelings.” Yes, arts are about feelings. Arts pull from some deep down places that often do not have words. It’s a knowing that hasn’t figured out how to put itself into words or maybe can’t be put into words. Isadora Duncan said, “If I could say it, I wouldn’t have to dance it.” So expressing in the arts is saying that we want to figure out a way to convey meaning in the symbol system of the particular art form in which we’re working. So, in dance it is in gesture and movement and force and time. In music it is in tone and melody and timbre and pause and silence and harmonies. In visual arts it is line and form and color and texture and all those elements and principles. So those techniques are how artists express. That’s why “Express” pulls on craft, because learning about the lines that different tools make in different contexts is a craft, but you use those lines to say different things. And that’s a beautiful creative tension. If you are looking for a simple way to create a lesson that has a creative tension, pull it from “Develop Craft” and “Express.” Have kids go back and forth with what they are trying to say and how they are trying to say it with materials.

Observe:

Learning to attend to visual contexts more closely than ordinary “looking” requires, and thereby to see things that otherwise might not be seen.

The thing about “Observe” is that, again I need to refer to David Perkins, a lot people think, “What’s the big deal, so you look and you see.” But the truth is that as you become more sophisticated in your artistic mind, you develop the skills and attitudes that give looking time, that cause you to take different perspectives, to look for certain variations, to compare and

contrast. There are all sorts of ways in which artists observe and develop their capacity to observe, to see. They play with metaphors. They play with all sorts of interpretations. All those things help them to see. So a lot of times artists go back and forth between “Envision” and “Observe” – it’s another creative tension. Think of “Envision” as the seeing you do in your head and “Observing” as the seeing that you do with your eyes. So, if I am trying to draw a figure as an observational drawing, and my teacher tells me to see the figure as geometry, I’m observing, but I’m also envisioning the figure as something that it’s not. So there’s a lovely tension between “Envision” and “Observe.”

Reflect:

Question and Explain: Learning to think and talk with others about an aspect of one’s work or working process. Evaluate: Learning to judge one’s own work and working process and the work of others in relation to standards of the field.

There are two parts to “Reflect.” One is learning to use words about art. The habit “Express” is about saying the meaning in the symbol systems of the art form, but “Reflect” is trying to talk about art’s meaning in words. Even if it is not quite what Isadora Duncan knows a work says, we still have to talk about it. The thing that is so sad with English language learners is that when they don’t succeed, they get more “kill and drill, drill and kill.” It’s just like, “You aren’t doing this well, so let’s make that all you do.” You know that old adage, “The floggings will continue until morale improves”? But if you get the kids to engage deeply with something and then want to express it, that motivates them to want to talk about it, to want to write about it. And as they are motivated to write and talk, they write and talk more, and when they write and talk more, they are practicing, so they get better. So, the motivation is a very critical piece for kids finding their voice and gaining literacy. And art can help release that motivation. “Reflect: Question and Explain” is about using words in relationship to artwork.

The other part of “Reflect” is evaluate. It’s a lot easier to check off right or wrong on a true and false test than it is to evaluate the quality of art. The rules and criteria by which to judge art follow along after the creation of the thing. Elliot Eisner says, “Artists have to learn to make judgments in the absence of rule.” There are some rules in art, but then the question of whether you are following the rules or breaking the rules is up to the artist and it’s up to the community of viewers. When Marcel Duchamp first submitted a urinal to an art show in New York, it was not shown, even though the show claimed it would show all submitted works. Now it’s an icon—voted by a panel of art historians and artists as the “most influential artwork of the 20th century.” He exhibited the piece in 1917, almost a hundred years ago. Now it’s an icon of post-modern art, of found-object art. So, artists change the standards, and when the standards change you have a pretty hard time knowing how to judge the quality. But judge quality you must. Teaching kids to understand a sophisticated evaluation that considers purpose, intersubjective agreement, relation to history and present, and your own feelings, your own felt response—it’s a very delicate dance and very important.

Studio Habits split the ordinary meaning of “Reflect,” to think deeply or carefully about, between “Envision” and “Reflect.” That’s because you can think deeply and carefully about ideas in images and in words. So when reflection is based in mental images, we call it envisioning. When it’s based in word, spoken or written, it falls under “Reflect: Question and Explain.” When we observed how artist-teachers taught, that’s the way it came out. It’s a fine point: just that “Reflect” as we define it is a technical meaning that only holds some of how we use the word in the everyday. But notice that it could be another of those great tensions to take advantage of in a lesson; building in a sequence of steps that asks kids to reflect in images, then in words, then in images, then in words. That might really push the thinking.

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STUDIO HABITS *continued*

Stretch and Explore:

Learning to reach beyond one's capacities, to explore playfully without a preconceived plan, and to embrace the opportunity to learn from mistakes and accidents.

Artists “Stretch and Explore,” for example, when they have something to say but aren't sure what it is, or when they're using a new material, or when they know they don't yet have the craft to say what they want. They might play around with materials then, to see what happens when they play or try to say something. Of course, that results in what some people would call “mistakes.” Mistakes are an important part of artful thinking. They're not something to be avoided and ashamed of—though that's what a lot of kids end up thinking in school. Artists see error as an opportunity, a pathway to new ideas, or a chance to diagnose what's going on. So “Stretch and Explore” turns the idea of “error” on its head. It ends up being a good thing, a fun, useful thing. That alone would warrant teaching arts in school, by my lights. Kids have to learn how to make and use “mistakes.”

In practice, the Habits stack and cluster. It's important to remember that the Habits don't happen in isolation. Often you will see that the Habits play off each other, working in either collaboration or interaction. And it's the interaction between them that creates really interesting things in your lessons.

For example, “Stretch and Explore” often groups with “Observe,” “Envision,” and “Reflect: Question and Explain,” and that might lead to “Reflect: Evaluate” and “Develop Craft.” It might go like this: you see something (“Observe”) in what came from your play (“Stretch and Explore”), and then you think about it (“Envision,” “Reflect: Question and Explain”) to see how you can say it differently or better (“Reflect: Evaluate,” “Develop Craft”).

Laughing and some playfulness, which are part of “Stretch and Explore,” help you engage. A lot of envisioning comes from stretching and exploring. Art is always pushing at the edge

of what is and what isn't. It's innovative. It's creating new. It's exploring and learning from mistakes.

Understand Art World:

Domain: learning about art history and current practice. Communities: learning to interact as an artist with other artists (i.e., in classrooms, in local organizations, and across the art world) and within the broader society.

“Understand the Art World” has two parts. There is “Domain;” which is the objects and events that other people have made; the stuff art history talks about. But studio artists use it differently than art historians, because they're seeing it as a resource for their making. Studio artists use the objects, information, and productions that other people created very differently than art historians do. Artists use art as ideas. You look at the work that others have made because it's a resource to give you ideas about your own making. My friend and colleague Steve Locke, a painter, says, “All of art history belongs to me.” That's how he feels when he walks into a museum! And that's how we want all our students to feel. An artist responds to the work other people have made, it's another opportunity. That's pretty different from how an art historian deals with it.

The other part of “Understand Art World” talks about communities, about how artists work in communities. There is a value to what everybody brings when we work in an artistic community. The artist stands at the center, autonomously. Sometimes, visual artists work alone, though not always, and that's been true in the past and now. But working alone or in a team, artists work in relationship to others. Those others might be right there now—your peers, friends, family, or teachers; or they might be occasional visitors, like art gallerists, local artists who exhibit, or audiences at your exhibitions; or they may be people you talk to in your mind, like artists you've never met who live in China but whom you relate to through their work, in books, or film/video, or on the web. And they might be alive, but they might be long dead. Artists are in relationship to a

complex network of others who affect their making. That's what “Understand Art World: Communities” is about.

Again, it's important to understand that the Habits don't happen in isolation. Even if you are doing an observational drawing assignment, besides “Observe” the other seven Habits are floating around, sort of like a Jacob's Ladder, the toy where the wooden blocks seem to turn and fall and hit one another. It's not exactly linear, but it is responsive. All the Habits are happening. The question is, “What are you emphasizing that needs to be learned by your students?” You need to think hard about how to emphasize that. If you really want students to learn to observe, then emphasize that, but think about what you are going to cluster with or combine with it so that you can help your students learn to observe. Maybe contrast it with envisioning or reflection. Some generative, mobilizing tension needs to compel them to observe more deeply. Don't try to teach all eight Studio Habits with every project. It's important to make a choice about focus. I have my pre-service teachers go through the Habits and assign the state standards to each one. There is some overlap among them, but when these teachers articulate their goals for the lesson or unit, they can go back and see which standards and Habits that goal emphasizes.

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Lois Hetland

So, in conclusion, here are a few practical tips I've learned about using Studio Habits as a teacher:

You have to give students time to Envision. Many assignments fail because that habit is left out or not emphasized.

You need to think of the expression in your assignments, because ideas push the development of craft. That's *why* we Develop Craft, to say something!

Use the Studio Habits diagnostically to see what isn't working in a unit. Maybe you need more time for Stretching and Exploring. Maybe you need to find better ways to help your students discover what Engages them so they can learn to Persist.

You can also use the Studio Habits to prepare for critique: "Let's practice Observing. Can you describe what you see in Torvah's piece?" or "Let's think of ways Juan could push this piece through play. What might he do to Stretch and Explore?" or "Maia, what habit would you like to talk about in relation to your piece? Which one really jumps out at you from what you've done so far?"

Put the Studio Habits on the wall and teach them. Have the students redefine it in kid language. My friend Todd Elkin does that, and it really hooks his kids. I remember they said Engage and Persist was "work as hard as you can and never stop." I think they may have missed the engage part, but that's useful information for their teacher! You could add it in when they are ready. That's a great way to get the kids involved.

Reflect with particular Habits. Look at the work and the day together and describe which Habit you used today.

I've made a little routine for doing ongoing assessment with the Studio Habits that asks teachers to describe something they see and hear, anything a student has made, done, or said. Then think about that observation in terms of each Habit. What does Develop Craft help you see? What does Engage and Persist help you see? Once you've done that, you can think about what those observations suggest the student does and does not understand, and that helps you make decisions and choices about what to do next with that student. You can also use photographs of kids working or of stages of their work in your assessment.