

Students at Work

The article delves into the concept of "students at work," emphasizing the importance of student agency and active participation in arts education. It discusses various strategies for fostering student engagement and ownership of learning experiences within the arts.

Introduction to Students-at-Work

Students-at-work is one of the Four Studio Structures described in *Studio Thinking: The Real Benefits of Visual Arts Education*. The Four Studio Structures are what researchers observed in visual arts classrooms when they sought to better understand what happens in a studio classroom. Researchers observed and recorded how time is spent in the studio and grouped the activities into the four categories. The structures are influenced by how teachers organize their studio space, time, and interactions in the classroom (p. 4). They also identified eight habits of mind that are evident in effective visual art classrooms. (See previous chapter "[The Studio Structures and Habits of Mind](#).")

As Hetland and her colleagues conducted observational research in 38 visual arts sessions, they found time allocated for students to work creating art averaged 70% of class time (p.25). When students were at work, often everyone received a common project or problem, but each crafted their art individually according to their diverse attributes and strengths. In addition to individual creation, some work was executed in small groups or in the class working as a whole.

The teacher's role while students were at work was to spend time attending to the individual learning needs of students. Teachers side coached with questions to inspire their students' creative choices rather than directing their work.

In *Studio Thinking 2: The Real Benefits of Visual Arts Education*, the authors use the following bullet points to describe the studio structure of students-at-work:

- Students make artworks based on teachers' assignments
- Assignments specify materials, tools, and/or challenges
- Teachers observe and consult with individuals or small groups
- Teachers sometimes talk briefly to the whole class

Structuring an environment for students to create their own work requires explicit planning. Although such a classroom often looks messy and unstructured, a carefully crafted invisible foundation is supporting the freedom students experience during this time in the creative process. The students-at-work structure involves an intentional mix of rituals, rules, policies, procedures, and directions. It requires careful management of space, materials, tools, and time as well as sensitive attention to transitions within the session and at the beginnings and endings of sessions. At its highest implementation levels, responsibilities for conception and execution of these elements are shared with students.

Below is a description and elucidation of what students-at-work may look like in the dance studio, theatre, or music rehearsal hall, visual arts studio, and general classroom setting.

Students-at-Work in the Dance Studio

In the dance studio, students-at-work may be working on technique, performance, improvisation, or composition skills, each requiring lots of studio time and practice to master. Students-at-work might take the form of teacher/mentor providing side-coached directions to students who are working as a whole group on different movement problems that guide them to explore the [elements of dance](#): body, movement, space, time, and energy.

More experienced students could be given a rubric to use in creating a dance (e.g., start in an initiating group shape; choose a movement tempo and pattern that incorporates a shape for each level; determine how long your group will sustain work at each level; decide how patterns, tempos, and body centers will appear in various sections of the dance; use music or percussive sounds; and end in a silent sculptural freeze, etc.). Group performances could be the culminating event of either a side-coached or an original dance.

Students are physically working on their art and craft for the majority of the time in dance class. Students may be working on their learning goals as a whole class, in small groups, or individually. Because of the nature of dance arts, it is standard practice to see a dance class weave between students-at-work, critique, and demonstration-lecture several times in a matter of minutes.

Students-at-Work in Theatre Performance and Process Drama

Students working in a playmaking context could:

- rehearse a scene in small groups, paying close attention to character (i.e., voice, movement, dialog, intention, stage pictures that group actors into playing areas and use their positions to draw audience focus to the desired action, etc.),
- design aspects of the production (i.e., costumes, set pieces, props, lighting, sound, etc.),
- research different aspects of the play/playwright/period, genre, etc., or
- work with any of the production support elements (marketing and communications, performance space design, playwriting, directing, etc.).

Often, teachers working on playmaking structures assume responsibility for key directorial decisions. But, this doesn't have to be the case. Particularly when working on ensemble pieces, play development can be expedited by assigning students into small groups with the charge to create a discrete scene (e.g., the creation myth according to religions, science, cultural stories, etc.).

In process drama work, the development tends to be guided by the teacher/mentor for the whole class. Using the *Where the Wild Things Are* example from the chapter on Demonstration-Lecture, all students work simultaneously to put on their wolf suits, make mischief, etc. When characters need to be assigned (e.g., one Max, multiple mothers), this is done to facilitate the arc of the piece (e.g., a Max is chosen to journey across an ocean evoked by the rest of the class, tame the rest of the class who are in role as Wild Things, create the coronation tableau, etc.)

Students-at-Work in Film & Media Arts

Students pursuing projects in film and media often work individually to refine skills, and subsequently, are assigned to small groups to finish sections of the film. Ultimately, production elements become the focus of small groups that work in teams to shoot, edit, and master the rough cut. As in dance, rubrics as guideposts to help students shape their project are regular features of how problems are worked on and solved in film.

Teaching Youth About Media Arts

See the section of our website focused on teaching youth about media arts. There are practical activities for students to work on in photography, graphic design, and filmmaking.

<https://advancingartsleadership.com/node/57#teachingyouthmediaarts>

Students-at-Work During Music Experiences

In music, students often work in whole class structures. However, exploring small group and individual problems and/or projects could provide a rich opportunity to vary the routine of whole-class music sessions. The problem could be creating a soundscape to complement a picture book, researching and mastering discrete folk songs in small groups, recording the songs, creating original songs, developing the libretto for an original opera, developing arias and chorus pieces for the opera, etc.



Students-at-Work in the Visual Arts Studio

Imagining and structuring small group and whole class projects adds a rich complement to the individual work often associated with visual arts (e.g., graphic novels, murals, large installations that feature compilations of individual student work, sculpture gardens, "documenting" a school gallery stroll, etc.).

Teaching for Artistic Behavior (TAB)

"The practice of teaching for artistic behavior, now known as TAB, dates back to the 1970s, when Massachusetts elementary art teachers Katherine Douglas and John Crowe searched for alternatives to traditional teacher-directed instruction. They collaborated and developed a learner-directed concept within their own classrooms and called this choice-based art education."

Within this framework the classroom is viewed as the child's studio.

"TAB classrooms are highly-structured studio environments with clearly delineated expectations for self-directed learning in choices of varied work spaces. Available tools and art materials are introduced to students who can then access and arrange these materials independently to initiate and explore their artwork."

Learn more about Teaching for Artistic Behavior and how it might inform the students at work time in your classroom!

<https://teachingforartisticbehavior.org/>

Side Coaching Students-at-Work

Side coaching is when you give students simple prompts as they work on their art. It can occur when students work through a creative, rehearsal, or other artistic process. The prompts should be simple suggestions that will improve, challenge, or clarify students' choices as they create and produce their creative work.

Side coaching includes questions and statements that inspire student's creativity. Positive and specific feedback is always relevant and highlights what you want to see or hear in a student's work. Open-ended questions inspire student's creative exploration.

The blog linked below provides examples of phrases you might hear a studio teacher say while coaching student artists in the creative process. Phrases are provided to coach students in dance, drama, music, media, literary, and visual arts.

Click here to read "[Coaching Students in the Creative Process.](#)"

How to Coach Student Artists in 6 Art Forms



DANCE

"How many ways can you show me that action on a low level?"
"Can you add a twist: a high twist, or a low twist?"
"Face another direction."
"Is there a moment you really love that would be worth repeating?"
"What does that movement mean? How could it be more clear?"

DRAMA

"How can you express this differently with your voice/body? And another way? And another? Which do you like best? Why?"
"How can you use the space to show what you mean? Can you make all your meaning show in a single gesture?"
"What is the focus of the scene? What does the character want?"



MUSIC

"Listen carefully. Does your voice match what you are hearing?"
"Can you follow exactly what my voice is doing?"
"If we were to change the order of the sections, what would you do?"
"This is what I saw/heard. Does that convey what you are trying to express?"

MEDIA ARTS

"Would you like to walk me through your storyboards?"
"These films are similar in topic to yours; they might inspire you."
"It looks like a short tutorial on green screen effects in iMovie might be helpful to you. Here is a link to one of my favorites."



VISUAL ARTS

"I see you chose to use color/shape/texture, tell me about it."
"I see you are frustrated. How can I help?"
"How do you envision the final piece looking?"
"How do you plan to address that empty area?"
"Let's print some pictures you selected to help you design your art."

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Read about the other three Studio Structures for Learning:

- [Demonstration-Lecture](#)
- [Critique and Reflect](#)
- [Performance and Exhibition](#)



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