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GUIDING PRINCIPLES OF TEACHING THE VISUAL ARTS EDUCATION IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Abstract

The development of students in the visual arts education is successful only if their visual skills are developed on every level – emotional, psychomotoric and cognitive. The teacher needs to organize the class so that students develop deeper understanding of the visual art concepts as a result of the self-based study and their own experience with the objects from the environment and natural phenomena. The students will thus gradually acquire skills to verbalize those concepts and spontaneously produce their own creative pieces of work.. The essence of understanding visual and other concepts and creating visual expressions is presented through the problem-based learning. This is the highest level of learning, characterized by tangible results and a high quality of education. The problem-based learning requires that the teacher verbally presents theoretical concepts of the visual art and that the artistic problems are solved on the basis of students' visual expressions and assessment of their work.

The teacher can elucidate an artistic problem in many ways: by evaluating their work after the students have expressed the artistic problem visually, or before the process of visual expression by stimulating students' creative ability, enabling the students to pick up basic concepts of the visual art. This approach allows the interchange between perception, comprehension and motoric activity.

The organization of the problem-based learning in the visual arts education requires the creativity and an appropriate professional qualification of the teacher. The teacher has to be creative and practical at the same time in order to teach his students to observe and perceive the objects and phenomena from their environment in a certain way, thus stimulating their understanding of the visual art concepts and enhancing the creative visual expression. The concept of the problem-based learning enables the students, depending on which age group they belong to, to learn how to apply the concepts of the visual art to their work (visual expression), thus solving the theoretical artistic problem.

We live in a time of visualisation, the time in which visual information are more common than verbal. In order to understand those information, we have to be familiar with both verbal and visual symbols. Comprehending visual symbols requires more than our inborn abilities; it is necessary that we develop our potentials further. That is the reason why the visual arts education is so uniquely important: it stimulates gradual comprehending, perception and awareness of visual symbols and teaches us how to use those symbols. It is therefore highly important that the students as a part of the learning process of the visual arts education not only develop their manual skills and perceptual tendencies, but also gradually acquire knowledge about various concepts of the visual art and regulations of their use in the visual expression, all of which is necessary if they want to be a part of the contemporary world of visualisation. Those skills need to be developed in a very subtle manner and at an early age, as soon as the pre-school level, whereas the most important role has the later learning process in the visual arts education on elementary and secondary education levels.

The principles of students' complete development in the visual arts are planned by the teacher during the educational process. The old educational truism in the learning process of the visual arts education is focused on developing manual skills, teaching how to use different materials and tools and on experiences resulting from the visualisation of artistic motifs, at the same time neglecting the students' cognitive development. This is the reason why a special attention needs to be payed to the system of the visual arts education in which students can continually and according to their age develop the abilities of visual perception, presentation and expression in the visual arts. There needs to be established a balance between the capability to communicate verbally and through visual symbols.

The process of teaching and learning in the visual arts education has to become a multifaceted activity, synergically activating student's both brain hemispheres and allowing different affective, motoric and cognitive changes.

The most effective methodologic condition for inducing those changes – perceiving and activating emotional, psychomotoric and perceptive functions through the self-based activity in the visual arts – is the problem-based learning, where the teacher designs the problem simulation and presents it by means of specific methods used in the visual arts. Those methods stimulate the students to sharpen their perception, develop the aesthetic sensitivity, and broaden their knowledge of the visual art concepts and their function in the visual expression. The role of the teacher is to organize the learning process, in which the students will learn to develop deeper awareness of natural phenomena and the objects from the environment, to understand the concepts of the visual art, gradually gain skills to

communicate those concepts verbally and to be able to spontaneously express themselves in the visual art. This is an extremely demanding learning process, characterized by a remarkable quality of skills and perceptive ability. Learning how to solve artistic problems is the highest possible level of visual arts education, because this approach triggers the most "recognizable interaction between the subject and the object of recognition, ...the gap between what is given and what is to be accomplished, between the known and the unknown, the implicit and the explicit ..."¹

The problem-based learning in the visual arts education is well-organized if it is based on student's experience, perceptual tendencies, knowledge and ability to integrate information. Students are offered the possibility to reach and develop all sorts of potentials and problem-solving skills. They are encouraged to be independent and creative, to enquire and construct different solutions and ideas. The role of the teacher is only to direct their individual way of thinking, perceiving and communicating.

The teacher has to be fully aware of the final aim of the visual arts education in order that the artistic development of his students is successful and their emotional, psychomotoric and cognitive development in the visual arts is complete. The students in the problem-based learning are therefore not merely taught to different skills of the visual art, but they are also encouraged to assume responsibility and through the self-based study acquire knowledge on the visual art concepts, gain manual skills and develop emotionally and socially.

On all grade levels, the aim of the problem-based learning is not just to encourage the students to express themselves in the visual art, but to teach them to understand the concepts of the visual art, to seek and find them in the environment and in nature. This approach arouses students' interest and motivates them to find a visual solution to an artistic problem through a creative visual expression. The complexity of task increases as the students grow older and pass from the elementary school level to the secondary school level.

The problem connected to a visual art concept is presented verbally. The teacher should use as many didactic means as possible (slides, photographs, videotapes, reproductions of various works of art, originals, the objects taken from the environment and nature). He presents an artistic problem and stimulates the students to think, explore the presented visual concepts and their relations, and express the visual solution to the problem in their artistic creation.

Students' taking part in theoretical research of the visual art concept and visual expression depends on how the teacher designs the artistic problem. Whether the problem will be successfully solved or not very much depends on the teacher's capability to adapt the complexity of the problem that has to be solved either through verbal or visual expression. The younger the students, the more the teacher needs to adjust the difficulty of artistic problems to their age, especially with the youngest students whose capability of making connections between visual concepts is still inadequate. The complexity of the problem thus needs to be adjusted to student's problem-solving skills.

The way in which the artistic problem is presented to the students of the first four grades of elementary schools is extremely important. Younger children seem to show more creativity, understand and relate better to visual concepts that are closely connected to the environment in which they live or a situation that fires imagination and stimulates intuition. Familiar visual concepts are essential for the solution of an artistic problem through visual expression. Besides, in this way a child's self-confidence and independence are developed as well. If the teacher chooses to integrate information from other subjects or other fields of the visual art in the problem, he first needs to clearly define the artistic problem together with students and provide some guidelines that will help the student to express himself in the visual art. Older students (from fifth grade on) already possess more complex abilities in the visual art – accurate and perceptive observation, recollection of visual concepts, creative and logical thinking, imagination, emotional attitude, technical skills and motoric sensitivity. Those students as well need to be instructed and to be aware of the artistic problem.

The teacher can present the artistic problem in several possible ways:

- The younger the students (first and second grade), the more appropriate it is for them to discover the visual art concept through their own visual expression. Older students have already developed the capability to synthesize familiar visual art concepts and use them in their work.

The teacher can design the task in such way that the students, using certain visual motifs (younger students from their imaginary world) and an appropriate technique in their visual expression, work on a theoretical artistic problem

¹ Strmčnik, F. (1992). PROBLEMSKI POUK V TEORIJI IN PRAKSI. (PROBLEM-BASED LESSON IN THEORY AND PRACTICE). Ljubljana, Didakta, page 32.

without being aware of that. Instead, the teacher knows very well what they are doing. The most stress lies on the activity and not on the problem itself. The assessment of the finished work enables the students to get a perspective of the treated visual concepts and to confront the solved problem under the teacher's guidance. The recognition and motoric activity are in the function of the impression. The artistic problem is being solved by students, under the teacher's (discreet) guidance.

- The teacher can challenge the student to solve the problem by using a new, interesting technique. He carefully selects a motif that can be presented in that technique. The students are not burdened with solving the problem and only during the assessment get acquainted with the visual art concepts which the whole technique was based upon. The visual solution to the problem was reached through the technique with the right motif. Here are the impression and the recognition in the function of the motoric activity. The teacher gives clear instructions and guides the students towards the visual solution to the artistic problem. The teacher has in both cases designed the problem-solving activity without defining the criteria in advance. The students reveal the problem by comparing phenomena, rules and processes of their creation.

- The teacher first explains new visual concepts and presents them as an artistic problem. He selects an appropriate motif and a technique, which are subordinated to the artistic problem. What is dominant is the aspect of recognition. Motoric activity and the impression are in the function of the recognition. The students are maximally engaged in the problem, which they try to solve completely independently, whereby their creativity is released. The ideas how to solve the artistic problem visually stem from their own thoughts, experience, memory and knowledge. The process of solving the problem is in this case complete, because the recognition is key to the solution of the artistic problem. The theoretical problem was solved independently, only the criteria were set in advance.

Another important factor are the circumstances of the problem that exists "outside the students". The teacher's task is to motivate the students by stimulating their creative thinking according to their abilities, interests and will. In order to achieve that, the teacher has many different methods of work at his disposal. The students are successful if they comprehend the artistic problem emotionally (irrationally) and rationally, an important role also play the previous knowledge, experience and individual abilities in the visual art. Rational comprehension is connected to student's intelligence, whereas irrational comprehension depends on student's emotional diversity. Whether a student will successfully solve the artistic problem or not depends on how much independence and creativity they are allowed to express. If the teacher encourages independence, the students will be self-secure, confident about their own creativity, they will want to succeed, they will be persistent and curious. It is very important that each presented artistic problem is new to the students, otherwise it would not encourage neither the efforts to find the solution nor new ideas and combinations. If artistic problems repeat or are too much alike, if the teacher does not provide any new information about the problem, it is likely that the students come up with already used, conventional visual solutions and do not discover new connections between different concepts of the visual art or its techniques. There are no new things to learn, no new experiences, the students are not and cannot be creative.

There is no such thing as creativity without independence. Discovering new things is about making free choices. However, the teacher can sometimes notice that his students are able to solve an artistic problem completely independently, but not in the way that includes creativity. Creative abilities are not just "given", at least not to the majority of students, and they are certainly nothing more than "potential". It is the teacher's task to stimulate those potentials by using the appropriate approach and methods, as well as by understanding the way his students express themselves in the visual art. The teacher should create a special, very pleasant atmosphere that will stimulate student's creative ideas, questions, plans and self-expression. An inappropriate atmosphere – if the teacher is too demanding, uses inappropriate methods of work, does not pay attention to student's personality and ability in the visual art – results in fear of self-expression and a disappointing outcome. This is the case mostly with younger or less talented students. The teacher should nurture the development of creativity of his students in all levels of the learning process: first by describing the artistic problem with the help of a theoretical background (perceiving, defining and elucidating the artistic problem), than during the creative process (where there are many different possible ways of visual expression), and finally during the assessment – seeking causes for student's success or failure.

The problem-based learning in the visual arts education is carried out on every didactic level. Strong motivation before and at the beginning of the visual expression is extremely important. Clear instructions are also important: if the students understand the artistic problem properly, they will be able to solve it successfully and creatively. However, it is also important that teacher's instructions do not limit students' independence and creativity.

The problem-based learning in the visual arts education must not be based solely on verbal communication. Artistic problems have to be solved primarily through the visual expression in order for students to gain experience in visual arts. Using theory to present, perceive and answer artistic problems can only supplement the communication through the visual art. The teacher must therefore establish the right balance between the theoretical and practical aspect of the learning process in the problem-based visual arts education. The problem-based learning in the visual arts education does not exist without the theoretical presentation of the visual art concepts, the artistic problem and his visual solution through visual expression.

The problem-based learning in the visual arts education is not complete if the teacher specifies and, after the work is finished, analyzes only the motif and the technique, deliberately omitting the theoretical artistic problem.

In order for students to solve the artistic problem successfully, the teacher has to determine:

- which fields of the visual art the student prefers,
- how much is the student motivated to learn about the concepts of the visual art and how much for the visual expression,
- student's ability to comprehend the artistic problem (whether the problem can be understood),
- whether the artistic problem can be solved visually in one or more possible ways,
- student's ability to produce a solution to the artistic problem independently through visual expression (under guidance or self-directed, whether the student overestimates or underestimates his ability),
- student's ability to produce creative visual solutions to the artistic problem.

Once the teacher has detected all students' cognitive and psychomotoric abilities and perceptual tendencies, he can proceed to the volume and complexity of artistic problems, the methods and types of work, ways to motivate the students, organizing the theoretical presentation of artistic problems and stimulating students to express the visual solutions to the artistic problems in the visual art.

A healthy interaction between the teacher and the student in problem-based learning results in:

- flexible thinking,
- involving emotions and impressions (making connections between the rational and the irrational),
- curiosity and strong motivation,
- creative thinking,
- making connections between the artistic problem and own experiences,
- deeper perception of visual arts concepts,
- making self-directed visual solutions to the artistic problem,
- making generalizations and comparisons, transfer of knowledge,
- better understanding of visual art concepts and their application to the real objects from the environment.

The problem-based learning in the visual arts education on all elementary education and secondary education levels requires from a teacher a special preparation and devotion in order to be able to sort all methods of solving an artistic problem, all information, stimulations and guidelines that lead the students towards a practical solution.

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