## Observations: Best Practices

In this pilot study the researchers have had the opportunity to watch successful teaching artists work in a variety of classroom settings, leading different types of projects. Even from the limited research in this pilot study, a number of best practices became apparent. The practices and examples, listed below, are a preliminary list of LTA classroom practices that may facilitate the development of creativity. As described in the recommendations for further research, later in this report, further research could expand this list and/or add nuance to the application of these practices in different classroom contexts.

### *Modeling:*

As previously discussed, modeling is a particularly important technique for facilitating creativity in classrooms. In the four projects observed, the teaching artists modeled artists' thinking or working processes in a variety of ways. Research in creative development indicates that these practices are important in helping students develop a deeper insight on what they are doing, or can do, as artists.

<u>Modeling artists' thinking processes</u>

***Best Practice: Present reflection exercises as part of an artist's work, sharing as much detail as possible in examples of how the teaching artist thinks.***

EXAMPLE: Modeling an artist's reflection process in the accordion book project.

In an exercise at the end of the accordion book project, the teaching artist described questions that the artist asks herself as she works on projects. The teaching artist had slips of paper with questions about these accordion books on them. She asked each student to draw one and paste it in their sketch book to answer. The questions related to choices of materials and content in the accordion books. For instance, one of the questions asked, "What material did you use most in your work?" Another question was about what was surprising about the accordion book. The teaching artist explained to the students that artists ask themselves questions while they work. In addition to posing

questions about the accordion books, the teaching artist also asked if the students had their own questions.

Note: this example is also an exercise in cross-modal thinking, asking the students to transition among viewing, speaking and thinking, while framing the experience as part of an artist's work. See discussion of cross-model thinking later in this section.

Modeling artists' working process:

***Best Practices:***

- ***Demonstrate the experience of making art as an artist, using examples such as warm-up sketches and consideration of choices of materials and approaches.***
- ***Model pausing, standing back and looking at an artwork in progress, both in demonstrations and in giving feedback to students on their individual work.***

EXAMPLE: Modeling artistic warm-up in the self-portrait project.

In addition to presenting reflection exercises as something artists do, the teaching artists can consider using various ways to demonstrate artistic processes. For instance, when students began working on the self-portrait project, the teaching artist explained to them that they were going to do a warm-up as an artist. She talked about her own experience as an artist mentioning that when she went to her studio, sometimes she did some stretching or sketches to warm up. In this instance, she modeled how artist does warm-up exercise before they start working.

EXAMPLE: Modeling openness to choices in the accordion book project.

In the accordion book project, the teaching artist demonstrated one way that ribbons could be used to make a tie for the books by cutting the ribbon in half and gluing a piece of ribbon to each side of the book. She then explained to students that this was only one of the ways that ribbons could be made and described other ways the ribbon could tie the book. When one boy asked if he had to put on a tie, she said he did not have to include

this element, if he did not want it. The teaching artist reported that she had revised these instructions after the previous class in which she described only one way to construct the ribbon tie. In that class almost all of the students had constructed the tie exactly as she demonstrated. In this class, where she described more than one approach, however, the students used a wide range of different ways to construct this element, some of which had not been mentioned by the teaching artist.

Note: modeling more than one option becomes even more important when students' own works are used for demonstration. This kind of demonstration may be helpful as students consider their next steps in an ongoing project, but it can also limit that same set of considerations. If only one set of options is discussed in front the class, or if the class discussion reaches a conclusion about what the young artist should do, the student may feel compelled to implement the ideas discussed without exploring options.

EXAMPLE: Modeling pausing and looking in the sustainable communities mural project.

In second to the last session for the sustainable community mural project, the teaching artist noticed that most students were very engaged in the physical experiences of applying paint on the canvas and were tending to overwork their image. In the last session, the teaching artist started the class by explaining to her students that artists often step back from their work, look at their work from a further distance, then decide the next step that should be taken to continue with the work. The teaching artist adjusted where she stood in front of a work, demonstrating to students how they could step back to examine their work after being very focused and engaged in a painting. She modeled and explained that stepping back can help artists see the painting differently and artists do that. This simple modeling can important because, in learning skills such as painting, part of the process is coordinating visual evaluation with kinesthetic actions. Modeling the process of pausing, standing back and observing can also be easy to forget in the classroom. The researchers in this study noted that they found themselves often tending to bend down, close to the students' work, without standing back to look at it from different perspectives.

EXAMPLE: Bringing the artist's studio to the classroom.

In describing the print-making process, the teaching artist for the urban landscape project explained that it was important to keep materials away from ink trays, blotters, rollers, etc. until the actual printing process. She compared this classroom protocol to her own, and other artists', studios which are divided into "dry" and "wet" areas to assure that ink did not inadvertently mess up other materials.

This teaching artist had previously organized trips in which students visited her studio. Without any solicitation of the information, a student in the class explained to one of the researchers that she had been to the teaching artist's studio. The student remembered exactly which pieces in the teaching artist's studio she liked most, and said that she would like to become an artist just like this teaching artist. This example lends support to the findings of other research, described earlier, about the importance of role-models in the development of creativity. For other examples and detailed description on modeling, see case study "Modeling the Printing Process," later in this section of the report.

### *Students as Artists*

***Best Practices:***

- ***Address students as artists.***
- ***Provide students with tools and clothes appropriate for artists.***
- ***Maximize autonomy and choice in use of materials.***
- ***Encourage peer feedback and collaboration as students adapt each other's innovations.***

In any group setting, like a classroom, roles are important in defining behaviors. Reinforcing the students' roles as artists can encourage them to act like artists, taking on the responsibilities of artists and attuning to aspects of their environment that are important for their artistic work.

EXAMPLE: Addressing students as artists in self-portrait project.

When having conversation with students at the self-portrait project, the teaching artist referred the students artists. Repeatedly saying, "Mrs. Hughes' 3rd grade artists," instead

of “class” or “everyone,” strongly emphasized the roles that the students were expected to take on.

EXAMPLE: Wearing smocks in the sustainable community mural project.

Many roles are signified through specific clothing or uniforms. At the sustainable community mural project, students wore smocks so that they did not have to worry about getting clothes dirty and could move their hands and bodies with more freedom. The smocks also helped put the classroom teachers at ease with the potentially messy process of painting. In addition to these practical effects, wearing smocks can also reinforce the students’ roles as artists.

In interviews, the teaching artist explained that purchasing the smocks was a strategic decision about how to allocate the funds for this residency. They are expensive, but will be used more than one year. As students in subsequent years wear the used smocks, the teaching artist may be able to emphasize the continuity in artistic work – how these clothes connect current young artists to those in subsequent years, just as she feels connected to past artists within the traditions that she works.

EXAMPLE: Providing free access to materials in the accordion book project.

The accordion book project consisted of students making a series of connected, collages about themselves in the book. For this work, the teaching artist taught the students how to use a wide range of materials, including photographs, paint, hand-made papers, ribbons, rub-off lettering, and hot glue. The materials were all provided at central places, where students could come and choose the materials that they would like to include in their project. A central cart contained most of the materials; a hot-glue station was run by the teaching artist assistant, and scissors were kept in a box near the door of the classroom.

This “cart approach” allowed the students to take on the responsibilities of artists in deciding on the materials they needed and organizing their resources for their own creative goals. This setup also addressed the inherent challenge of students working at

different paces. Although one class session may focus on using one kind of tool, material, or one step in a production process, such as using a particular kind of brush, some students will inevitably work faster and/or out of order. For those students, maximum access to materials and tools can facilitate exploration of the materials and more nuanced expression of ideas.

Some aspects of the classroom were important to the use of this approach. The room was large enough to allow a good deal of movement by the students during the work process. Also, there were few class management issues with this class, where both the classroom teacher and teaching artist had several years of experience.

EXAMPLE: Using peers' comments as resources in sustainable community mural painting project.

In the art world, like other domains, there are formal and informal collaborations, and artists' works are evaluated by others (the "field" of gatekeepers for the domain). Indeed, as previously discussed, some analyses of creativity focus on the imitation and adaptation of other's ideas ("memes") as the ultimate measure of artistic value. (See section on The Concept of Creativity.) Therefore, the use of peer feedback, adaptation of their ideas and more extensive collaborations are key resources that students can learn to use for their own creative goals.

The use of the "walk around" in LTA classes is one way to provide a structured approach for peer feedback. For example, in the community mural painting project, the teaching artist and classroom teacher began the last session by asking groups of students to rotate around the classroom to see other groups' mural paintings. Students were encouraged to write brief notes, providing constructive feedback or suggestions. At the end, each group went back to their own mural painting to read the feedback from their classmates. The teaching artist encouraged the students to think about the feedback they received and to decide which comments they would consider incorporating in their murals.

EXAMPLE: Collaborating in urban landscape project.

In the urban landscape project, one boy included an image of a large apartment building being struck by lightning with a cloud and thunderbolts as part of the arrangement. This boy's neighbor at the same table had a row of apartment buildings with a line of clouds above, all with lightning striking the buildings. A researcher asked the boys how they had thought of these ideas. The boy with the row of apartment buildings had thought up the lightning. The other boy had adapted the element to his more naturalistic composition and added the use of a jagged line around the buildings to indicate the electricity going through the building. The first boy then adapted the jagged line, electrification symbol into his composition.

Note: the classroom challenge here is to help students learn to adapt and build on others' ideas for their own creative visions, rather than simply copy what others are doing. The lines between inspiration and copying are not necessarily distinct, and the initial steps of adapting another's idea may look like copying. In keeping with the importance of organizing all resources for creative vision, discussed earlier, the teaching focus here would not need to be on where an idea came from, but on how it is being used in relation to each student's creative goals.

### *Cross-modal Thinking*

***Best Practices:***

- ***Give students the opportunity to write their plans of how to approach a project.***
- ***Have students write reflections.***
- ***Engage students with multi-modal experiences within the art making process.***

As previously discussed, cross-modal thinking can be important to creative processes. Emphasis on cross-model thinking can be built into the basic structure of LTA projects, and can also be part of the presentation of specific activities.

EXAMPLE: Writing the mission for the sustainable community mural painting project.

In the sustainable community mural project, each group of students got a statement on a community that was in danger such as a community near a volcano or a village surrounded by a swamp, with contaminated water. Each group began the project by defining in writing five elements they considered necessary to build in order to make their community sustainable. In the example of the volcano community, for example, students listed constructing architectures with bricks and steels as well as building underground pathways as some the important elements for their community. Students then used this "mission statement" as a plan for their community mural painting by translating the written plan into images. By referring back to the mission statement, throughout the project, students linked the written concepts to the emerging painted vision.

Note: a challenge to this approach is to always keep both planning and emergence within the process. The sustainable community mural project provided opportunities for cross-modal thinking and the linking of new ideas (emergence) to existing plans. As will be discussed in the challenges section, however, the classroom teachers in this project, at some points emphasized rigid planning over the emergence of new ideas.

EXAMPLE: Comparing works of art through diagrams.

Throughout the LTA program, students' sketchbooks are used to a variety of purposes, often facilitating cross-modal thinking. For example, in the urban landscape project, the teaching artist asked students to compare the elements in a work by Pissarro and one by Vuillard, using a Venn diagram to indicate elements particular to each work and those that were similar in the works.

EXAMPLE: Writing reflections on artistic process in the sustainable community mural project.

In the sustainable community mural painting project, students also used sketchbooks to facilitate cross-modal thinking. The teaching artist asked the students to write their reflections on creating the mural at the end of each session. In this exercise she was

asking students to link the experience of mural painting (visual, kinesthetic, interpersonal) to verbal concepts.

The two examples above also demonstrated the possibilities of using sketchbooks as one of the ways to help students think about their own processes. At points the teaching artists can ask students to look back over the different ways they have thought about a project as they look for new inspirations.

EXAMPLE: Using tactile experiences in the self-portrait project.

In the self-portrait project, the teaching artist guided students to do preliminary sketch for their self-portrait print. In order to help students understand their own features better, the teaching artist demonstrated how sometimes artist use her tactile senses to develop a more thorough understanding of her facial feature. After modeling to students how it could be done, she guided students through the same steps to use their index fingers to trace slowly their own cheeks, eyes, lips, nose, neck, and shoulders. She explained to students that they were getting a tactile sense of features and shapes of their own face and artists did that. She then had students working on their preliminary sketches.

### *Use of Language*

***Best Practices:***

- ***Use vocabulary related to creative concepts, such as "inspiration," "emerging ideas," "curiosity," "discovery," and "surprises."***
- ***Emphasize artistic vocabularies, such as "composition," "brush stroke" and "depth of field"***

EXAMPLE: Asking students open-ended questions in urban landscape project.

Remember that the researchers had asked the teaching artists to integrate teaching on use of curiosity and surprises in any ways the teaching artist thought would be effective. When discussing artists' works in the urban landscape project, the teaching artist incorporated language related to creativity as she modeled thought processes. For example, demonstrating placing prints on page, she spoke as she would think. Having

first placed the two buildings on the sample page separated, at the bottom of the paper, the teaching artist said (approximate quotes from notes), "I'm *curious* how these might look if the buildings overlapped." A student responded that the buildings looked like one was in front of the other. Then the teaching artist said, "Now, I'm curious about how this might look if I moved one piece off the bottom of the page, toward the middle of the paper. Hmm, that's interesting – how does that look to you (the students)?" One answered that it looked like the one building was farther away. "That's right – it gives a sense of depth-of-field to the page, doesn't it?"

EXAMPLE: Emphasizing artistic vocabulary in sustainable community mural project.

In the sustainable community mural project, the teaching artist put emphasis on artistic vocabulary, for example, she often talked to students about "brushstrokes," "composition," and "background." In addition to her own use artistic vocabulary, the teaching artist encouraged students to use the vocabulary in reflecting on their art-making experiences.

### *Teacher Involvement*

***Best Practice: Encourage teacher involvement in helping students think cross-modally and in helping them use each other as resources.***

EXAMPLE: Classroom teacher's suggestion on lesson structure in sustainable community mural project.

Throughout this pilot research, the observers noted that the classroom teachers were most helpful when they helped link the art work to other work the students were doing or simply to other modalities (usually verbal or writing).

For example, in the previously discussed "walk around" peer-feedback exercise for the sustainable community mural painting project, the classroom teacher suggested that students should consider *writing* down their comments about each painting as suggestions for their classmates. After the lesson, the teaching artist commented that the classroom

teacher’s suggestion on this activity made it a more rewarding learning experience for the students.