

Imbali's approach to art teaching

Every human being is creative, and with the correct support and encouragement, everyone can explore this creativity and build confidence and agency. Imbali believes strongly that all children should have access to creative education in order to fully develop their own creativity, thinking skills, capacity for innovation, capacity for healthy self-expression, and to develop the potential to later become independent and resourceful adults. Much has been written about the dismal quality of basic education in South African schools. It is well documented that arts education develops creativity and problem-solving skills, improves judgment, shows children that there are multiple perspectives on issues, and encourages inventiveness - helping to foster innovative thinkers and individuals who can engage not only creatively, but also empathetically, with the world and their surroundings. There is extensive research on how art education can benefit students in multiple ways, including improving student performance across the whole curriculum, keeping low-achieving students in schools much longer, fostering closer ties with peers, and creating community-oriented environments.

After many many years of creative arts teaching in a variety of contexts, Imbali foregrounds a particular methodology and approach to teaching visual arts.

Looking at artworks - learning to see

If you feel you've never had much opportunity, time, or reason to really look at art—really look with a questioning eye, to look closely, attentively, and deeply—you may find the idea of facilitating this process with your students a little daunting. But there is no need to feel intimidated. You will soon discover that this journey is not only entirely possible, but far more exciting and rewarding than you might have imagined.

If, for you, looking at art seems to raise more questions than answers, you are already on the right track. Much of looking at art is a process of *asking questions*: each work of art will present you and your students with questions - and more questions. You will find that many of the answers to those questions are found in yourselves: answers will come through your and your students' honest *looking, thinking, and discussing*. (There are, of course, other kinds of questions that may need some research and a further journey of exploration – but those are the relatively easy ones.)

At Imbali, we understand the process to include:

- how meaning in artworks is constructed between the artist, the work itself, and the viewer;
- how to look at artworks as a self-conscious, rigorous process: that is to look with real attention, with deep curiosity, with thought and contemplation;
- how to go beyond preconceptions or quick judgements, and to see beyond superficial impressions;
- how to look for factual and contextual information - finding out more about the artist or about the work. What kinds of sources are useful? And how can they be used?
- how such additional information might shift your understanding and reading of an artwork.

The lack of quick closure or of a single “right” answer, when interpreting images, is what makes the process so interesting - but also challenging.

Looking at art involves a very personal engagement and personal responses, but that does not mean that in those responses “anything goes”. This needs to be a considered, honest, and open-minded process, in which the work is allowed to speak to you. Or, to put it another way, we talk about “reading” what is in the images.

The work itself embodies the source, the stimulus, the prompts, to which your response must always somehow refer.

Learning about looking at art is a little like learning a language, or learning to play an instrument: in this case, you are learning to see. Like any other skill, the more you do it, the better you are at it – and the more you are able to achieve in doing it. In the same way, in looking at art, the more images you look at, the more you will see in them.

How to ask questions, and hear the answers

When we design questions about an artwork, they need to facilitate careful looking and thinking. They should be mostly *open-ended* questions, rather than closed, “factual” questions. There may be many valid or “correct” responses to these kinds of questions about artworks. This is because we are asking the students for *their own* ideas, thoughts and feelings. For this reason, there needs to be a different way of listening to the responses. We are not simply listening out for one “right” answer.

We need to show in our style of questioning that students should not be fearful of giving a “wrong” answer, that they should feel free to engage in a personal, authentic way.

How do we ensure this? We must give adequate time to hearing each student’s response (or that of as many students as possible in the time available). We should listen to their reflecting, thinking and responding process, and we should acknowledge each answer with attention, even if briefly. We need to teach students to be respectful of each other in these discussions and to listen to every other person’s different perspective. By listening to each other in this way, the students all extend their own understanding of the artworks.

Qualities we nurture

Creativity and independent thinking

Students should be encouraged to think critically and creatively. They should be challenged with activities and projects that require them to think independently, and not rely on rote learning, imitation or copying. When encouraged to come up with their own ideas, students will develop confidence and their own creative vision. Encouraging students to draw on their own personal experiences in a meaningful and relevant way will support this process.

As human beings, we all have creative skills and abilities. We all have the capacity to make something that is new from ingredients in the world around us, and our creation, be it a song, dance, poem, painting, garden or a chocolate cake can give us tremendous satisfaction. Because each person is different, everyone brings something special to the world that deserves the chance to be expressed.

As a teacher, there are definitely things that you can do to facilitate this important process. Firstly, you should try to create an atmosphere that is filled with possibility. What does that mean? Your students must be engaged in something that interests and excites them. Boredom can feel directly opposed to creativity and

inspiration, so your task is to inspire your class by always presenting something interesting that will challenge them to want to explore and create. Try to surprise your class. Art classes should not be predictable.

Encourage students to ask questions about what they are doing and the world around them. They should never take anything for granted. One who asks questions and critically engages with the task at hand and the surrounding world is likely to be more motivated, stimulated, and awake to creative possibilities.

Non-competitiveness

Each student is an individual and will have their own strengths and weaknesses. It is important that every individual is acknowledged for who they are and for the contribution they make to the group. Every student's work is unique and should be recognised. At the end of an activity, all work should be displayed – no student should be left out.

There should be no comparisons between students or between their works to the detriment of any one of them. The learning environment should not encourage competitiveness - it is more important for each student to feel appreciated for the uniqueness they offer.

And most importantly, ideally, each student should produce work that *they* feel satisfied with, rather than only to please the teacher.

Positive encouragement, making the art room a safe and supportive environment

In the art class, students (of any age) need to feel comfortable and secure. If the class feels anxious, threatened, and afraid, then they won't feel free to explore or express their individuality. You should ensure you are being encouraging and warm in your approach to your class, and also make sure that all the participants in your creative arts classes are non-judgmental and supportive of each other. There must be a culture of mutual respect for creativity to flourish.

Students develop confidence when they receive positive encouragement and constructive criticism. This encourages them to learn and grow. Negative criticism discourages and inhibits learning and can make them fearful, which can have a lasting negative effect. Sometimes, a bad experience with a teacher can discourage them from making art for life. Therefore, a safe and supportive environment in the creative arts classroom is crucial. All students must respect each other's work, for example. If students laugh at each other's work, their classmates will begin to feel self-conscious and not want to put their work up.

This does not mean that you cannot have conversations in your classes that engage in serious discussion, regarding any aspect of the students' artwork (whether it is the subject matter, the technical achievement, the composition, the degree of commitment, or any other aspect). But these conversations should *affirm* that you take each student and each piece of work seriously, and are genuinely interested in their intentions and practical outcomes.

Setting ground rules at the beginning of the year (such as “no laughing at each other or each other’s work”, or “only one person speaks at a time” etc.), can help to create a respectful space and supportive environment for both teaching and learning. It is a good idea to sit down with your class at the beginning of the year and develop a code of conduct for working together. Once everyone has agreed on the code students can write this up on a large piece of paper and everyone can sign it.

You and your students

Listening and Respect

Students need to be respectful of each other, and responsible for themselves and for their behaviour. They need to develop a sense of care, self-reliance, and resourcefulness. Everyone should play their part: do their homework, for example, take some initiative at times, and make independent decisions in their artwork. They also should be willing to actively participate, in a balanced and fair way, in group activities. No one should dominate, distract or interrupt anyone else. If an environment of respect is created and maintained in the art classroom, students will respect each other, their work, the tools and materials and the environment.

How do you help to facilitate this? Start by simply listening to your students. It is important for students to experience being heard, and both giving and receiving respect. If a student experiences being listened to, and acknowledged, they will in turn listen to and acknowledge others. This may take time, and patience. Don’t despair if this process is difficult: the culture of most of our schools and classrooms is, too often, very far removed from this: where the teacher has all the answers, and imposes the only discipline and authority in the room. Students’ expectations in this regard need to be understood, and they may need to make a serious adjustment - as might you, the teacher!

Reflection

It is important for students to have the opportunity to reflect on the activities they have participated in and the art objects that they have made. By reflecting – looking back and thinking and talking about what they have done, and exchanging thoughts and perceptions with classmates, students are able to see and notice things they may not have been aware of during the creative process. During reflections, students, of course, also have the opportunity to see what their peers have done and learn from each other.

Meaningful art lessons

Subject-matter or content

As the teacher, it is important for you to carefully consider your students’ ages and stages of development when you select the content you are going to teach. However, every group of students is different, of course, and the form and content of lessons must be tailored to their specific needs.

It is also important to remain flexible and adapt lessons to deal with issues that arise in the lives of students or the country at a specific time. Where possible, a good creative arts teacher can find ways of integrating these topical events meaningfully into the lessons, in this way allowing students space to process and deal with them. The content of an art lesson should never be arbitrary. Students are most engaged when the content relates to their own experiences, needs, and interests. Art teachers need to talk with students to find out what is going on in their lives, as a point of departure from which to learn something new or gain a more in-depth understanding.

Art techniques and the art elements are important, but not merely for their own sake: technique and the art elements are taught in conjunction with meaning-making and content. The art elements, techniques, and materials should never be ends in themselves; they should be used as means to communicate, explore, express, and process ideas.

Active learning and engagement

The learning experience in creative arts must be interactive. People learn when they are actively involved in doing, thinking, and discovering. All students should be encouraged to participate fully in discussions and activities.

A good way of encouraging active learning is to have a very good supply of interesting stimulus materials available. This means that you should build up resources that can be made available to your students such as pictures, stories, interesting objects (both natural and machine or hand-made), magazine articles and books. Try to take your class out into the world to look at things too. Organize excursions if possible. Invite interesting people to come to your class to talk about their lives and skills or to do a performance. Keep abreast with what exhibitions are on and what arts and culture events are happening in your area; go to art galleries and museums if you can. Go for walks in the street around your school.

If you are lucky enough to have a dedicated art room, you can give different classes the responsibility for putting together mini exhibitions of their work. You can also encourage students to bring in interesting found objects or even things that they have made at home. The more exciting, interesting and interactive the space is, the more inspired and engaged students will be.

Your classroom space

Freedom within structure

The creative arts classroom should be an exciting and stimulating place. We want students to have the freedom to explore, ask questions and freely express themselves, but we don't want chaos. In order for this to be the case, there need to be very clear boundaries. It is much easier for students to feel free when they know what behaviour is acceptable in the group. They need to know what the boundaries are. Many discipline problems can be avoided if boundaries are made clear at the beginning and if projects are meaningful and well-structured. This encourages a sense of responsibility, self-discipline, focus, and participation of all students.

Classroom organisation

This will take much thought and planning. Being well-prepared and having a well-organized classroom are crucial factors in presenting successful art lessons. But many classrooms are very short of space. Try to set aside a corner, with a cupboard or simple shelves: you can construct these from planks of wood and bricks.

Students should play an active role in keeping order, as they will be more likely to maintain it if they have been involved in setting it up. And, anyway, you will need their help! At the beginning of the year, allow students to help organise the tools and materials. They can make labels for shelves, crates, and boxes, help pack in materials, and create an inventory of all tools, materials, and equipment. This, too, will depend on your having carefully prepared and having the necessary storage containers and labels.

Collect ice cream and yoghurt containers with lids, shoe boxes, paper boxes, and lids from your photocopy room, and old milk crates - as these all make good storage containers. Milk crates can be stacked on top of one another, and the smaller shoe and ice cream containers packed inside. This is a good way of dealing with space and storage challenges, as the crates look neat and don't take up much space when stacked. Even if you don't have a dedicated art room, you can find a corner somewhere to store the crates (you can even get students to decorate a piece of fabric to cover them!).

To store their two-dimensional artworks, each student can construct portfolios out of two thick, strong cardboard sheets recycled from boxes, joined with string or strips of fabric. This is worth spending some time on at the beginning of the year; and the portfolios can be decorated by each student in their own personal way.

Some art-making activities involve working with waste materials such as the inside of toilet rolls, empty tissue boxes, polystyrene punnets, bubble wrap, etc. It is important, particularly when working with such materials, that it is sorted and presented to the students in a way that inspires them. Therefore, it helps if you separate the materials into different piles - all plastic containers together, all cardboard packaging together, all natural materials together, etc. When there is order evident in the presentation of the materials, the way students work with and think about the materials is likely to be more coherent too.

It is also important that students take responsibility for cleaning up; each student can have a particular task that they are responsible for and take pride in. Cleaning up can be made into an enjoyable activity. Always ensure that you leave enough time for cleaning at the end of the lesson.

The display of student artwork

Putting up completed work is an important part of the process. Work should always be displayed with care so students can take pride in what they have done and appreciate each other's efforts. Ensure to use enough tape or prestik so that the work doesn't fall down easily, and leave a small border around each piece so the work can 'breathe'. Always ensure that you display the work in straight lines, so it looks professional and well presented. If you have work in landscape and portrait format, try to keep the same formats together; this makes for a more coherent display. Three-dimensional work can be hung from the ceiling or stood on tables or

plinths. Displaying completed artwork can also serve to show the rest of the school what students in the art class have been doing and beautify the school environment.

Safety and environmental issues

Make sure all the products and art materials you introduce into your classroom are safe to use. Check that paints, inks, and glues, for example, are non-toxic (their labels should tell you, but if they say nothing, investigate further). All cleaning materials and fluids should be non-toxic.

Even materials from nature and found materials may need to be vetted: you should scrutinise found or recycled items for sharp edges, rust, or any toxic substances they may have been in contact with; and unfamiliar leaves, berries, roots, petals, etc. must be carefully checked in case they are from poisonous plants.

There are often delicate or dangerous tools and equipment in the art classroom – for example, you may have cutting knives, cleaning materials, or needles; and even very sharp pencils can cause injury among careless or misbehaving students. Students must know how to conduct themselves around these. They need to know how to use and care for materials and equipment, and for things they have brought from home as well.

Find out about what materials are environmentally friendly, and teach your students about this important issue. Materials should be disposed of in an environmentally-friendly way: paper, glass, and plastics should be properly recycled (find out how this is carried out in your area). Cleaning fluids should be poured away into the correct disposal systems – and so on.