

# **Teaching Art as a Practice:**

*An Integrated Media Arts Curriculum Guide  
for Middle and High School*

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## Preface

The practice of art is about connecting with the world around us, giving us the skills and language to communicate our ideas clearly and constructively. It helps us build and articulate our perspective on all disciplines and endeavors, rather than applying only to the world of art. At all levels of instruction, the goal of art education is connection and communication.

At the Kingswood Oxford School, in West Hartford, CT, I have developed my approach to art education in a passionate and progressive institution, with the support of my department chair, Patricia Rosoff, and under the guidance of Gene Gort, professor of Media Arts at the Hartford Art School, University of Hartford. I have helped Kingswood Oxford clarify, contextualize, and create the Media Arts curriculum by writing courses and assignment scripts, shaping departmental language, and collaborating with other faculty.

Art education presents an opportunity. Its value is not in the acquisition of skills, creation of products, or development of craft. These attributes are by-products of successful art education, however the opportunity lies in teaching art as a practice. My approach to art education is based on my strength as a teacher: to actively engage with my students and help them apply the creative process to their own lives. As art teachers, we model how to work through conceptual and technical hurdles: how to be curious people, critical thinkers, and sensitive craftsmen. We must aim to help students understand art making as a communicative process, and to value the resolution and presentation of their ideas, experiments, and emotions through their work.

In order to teach art as a practice, it is necessary to engage with each student through discussion, finding unique ways to encourage reflection and thought. Every project has a purpose, and every discipline has a value; it's the challenge of the teacher to help students apply each task to his or her own ideas. Whether advanced students respond to a philosophical quote in their projects, or middle schoolers explore, photograph, and analyze "unfamiliarity" in their environment, every student approaches art as a practice. Art education generates awareness of our senses and surroundings, helping us respond to the world around us. I teach in this way because it creates thoughtful people, at every level of instruction, in whatever discipline.

With every endeavor, students learn a new language, translating their ideas through various disciplines. In drawing, they become aware of the ways in which their visual world appears, and what makes it look as it does. In sculpture, they influence three-dimensional space, considering the ways in which their constructions affect their environments. In painting, they use color to interpret their ideas, controlling their visual world and bending their reality. In photography, they engage with image culture, considering

issues of documentation, manipulation, and ethics, while finding their own creative uses for light and image making. In media arts, they learn to separate content from its medium, striving to find the most articulate ways to convey their ideas, whether through video, sound, animation, storytelling, design, performance, or installation.

Art education is a wonderful venue to develop critical thinking and problem solving skills. Students at every level are capable of imaginative ideas and divergent discussion. Creating an environment that values such depth of thought expands their mind, extending their creative experience to other areas of life and academics. Teaching art as a practice allows for intellectual development, collaborative problem solving, and individual application of techniques, approaches, and concepts. It applies to various academic environments, and is adaptable to any departmental or institutional need. The goal of this curriculum is to help art educators shape their own practice of teaching, and connect with students in various environments; engaging with them, mentoring them, and helping them develop into thoughtful, conscientious individuals.

## **Introduction to the Curriculum: *Media Culture in Art Education***

This curriculum presents an approach to art education that utilizes and cultivates interdisciplinary thinking. It aims to define and expand on the developing concepts of media arts, as well as facilitate the growing need for cross-curricular skills to be integrated into K-12 education. Specific skills include communication, collaboration, critical thinking/problem solving, and creativity/innovation (dubbed “The Four C’s” by The Partnership for 21st Century Skills, an educational advocacy organization).

Media arts students learn to analyze the ways in which they encounter, interpret, relate with, and respond to the world around them. They learn to decipher a medium from its content in order to actively interact with the information being conveyed, as opposed to passively receiving it. As media artists they learn to use the most appropriate mode of expression, or medium of communication, to convey an idea, using whatever tools and materials necessary for clarity. The discipline of media arts, and the practice of art making, employs a broad approach to education and expression, and introduces students to various analytical and technical tools.

The following art curriculum, designed for middle and high school, teaches the creative process from a conceptual perspective—the generation of ideas, inspiration and motivation—and leads students to convey concepts through production—the acquisition and application of technical skills in

pursuit of clear communication of their ideas. It defines the essential concepts of media arts and applies them to various disciplines, topics, and assignments. It is written as a tool for teachers who intend to integrate new concepts and approaches into their methods, as opposed to a word-for-word script. The assignments and essays are written as guides to frame these concepts, and should be employed flexibly, as needed. They are designed to begin and end with discussions, their durations depending on the dynamic of the group, depth of each project, length of class periods, and complexity of the particular assignment. They should be integrated into various teaching styles and methods, tailored to the timing needs of the teacher, and implemented in addition to other types of assignments.

Therefore, this curriculum does not include *all* assignments for media arts, but rather ones that best exemplify the basic concepts, and emphasize art as a practice. For instance, traditional still-life drawing should still be taught in introductory- and intermediate-level courses, and flash lighting should still be taught in a photography course, however it is not necessary to describe these assignments here. Ways of integrating the concepts of this curriculum into other projects can be inferred from the following assignments and essays, and should be integrated as each reader sees fit.

Many of the concepts, processes, and discussions within this curriculum are complex. The assignments and essays have been written for teachers to analyze and interpret, as opposed to students to comprehend. In order to translate such complexity to students, it is up to each reader to find creative ways to communicate the ideas. Throughout the essays and assignments italicized terms, phrases and questions have been provided, which are examples of successful approaches. Everyone uses different styles of teaching, however, and connects with their students in different ways. In applying these concepts to individual approaches, it is helpful to know that students respond well when the assignments are presented simply. The students do not need to comprehend every aspect of this curriculum in order to be positively influenced by it. The practice of art aims to build a foundation for complex, analytical thinking, as opposed to providing a set of terms and skills to be mastered.

In utilizing this curriculum, it is important to understand that the discipline of media arts does not aim to teach a trade. Technical fluency, such as comfort with certain computer programs or production equipment, is not the goal of media arts, but rather the by-product. Since it is necessary for students to make use of any tools available for communication of their ideas, learning a computer program might be required—but using a hammer and nails might be as well. As technology evolves, building off of itself quickly, making its previous generation obsolete faster than ever before, students must learn to *learn* whatever tools they need to achieve their goals. They must become comfortable exploring various materials and processes, as opposed to mastering a single computer program as a static skill, in order to apply technical proficiency to the communication of ideas. Technical skill

has no function unless aligned with applicable use—teachers must prepare students to acquire technical skills as they move toward a conceptual goal, making technical fluency a by-product of media arts.

To facilitate such a broad approach to art education, it is essential for teachers to help students think abstractly about solving creative problems. They must make as many tools available as possible, and remain able to learn new methods and tools along side the students as needed. For instance, a common question to a student is: *If you could do anything, what would you do?* It is up to the teacher to facilitate the student's exploration. (See section *Discussions and Methods of The Media Translation Project*, 63)

The defining factor of media arts education is the separation of content and medium. Students are taught to read the ways in which each medium, or mode of expression, relates to content, culture, and their understanding of the world around them. If students are able to dismantle the signs and stimuli that they encounter everyday, dividing the overwhelming amount of available information from its carrier (its medium), they will be more prepared to filter meanings, develop opinions, and communicate their own ideas expressively and articulately.

From introductory-level media arts education through to advanced levels, there is an emphasis on the development of content. It is important for young artists to understand that the creative process is not merely one of craft, but rather one that incorporates craft in order to convey content. Where content comes from, what defines it, and how it is conveyed are aspects of media arts at every level, reminding students that the creative process is an opportunity to present the world with ideas and information in ways that are innovative, expressive and new. When medium follows content, the resulting product is more articulate, unique and complex, and the benefit to the student is more personal, diverse and enriching. A common question from a media arts teacher to a student is: *What is the best way to convey this idea—this content? What technical, aesthetic, and creative decisions will communicate this idea as clearly as possible?*

Media Arts does not necessarily introduce different topics than traditional methods of art education. The same topics are still useful, however the ways in which we interpret the relevance of those topics are different. This is particularly true in introductory-level art education. Principles of media arts, integrated into introductory-level courses, are useful for a broad range of art educators, regardless of discipline, teaching style, or technological availability. In an introductory class that utilizes media arts curriculum, drawing is still important, as is painting and sculpture. These tasks must be discussed and explored, however, as ways of communicating with and understanding the world around us, as opposed to fixed disciplines that are separate and static. (See section *Media Arts in Traditional Introductory Art Practices*, 7)

To a media artist, nothing is *given*, allowing for creative exploration, risk and innovation when solving the problem of communicating an idea. It

is when the medium seems to vanish—when the viewer forgets that there is any medium at all—that clear communication has been achieved. The goal of this curriculum is for students to master the art of communication in such a way that eliminates barriers and allows for clear connections with the world around them, in whatever profession they choose, and in every endeavor they pursue.

## Media Arts in Traditional Introductory Art Practices

From a media arts perspective, traditional art education is a *practice of looking* (to use the title phrase of Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright’s book, an introduction to visual culture). Introductory-level students are in the process of developing an awareness of visual space. They are learning that they can translate their experience through various media and methods, beginning to shape a creative voice. Drawing, therefore, is not merely the act of rendering something on paper, but rather an opportunity for the students to look closely at their environment and learn the ways in which their eyes interpret space; they *learn to see*. A helpful question to pose to the students is: *Are you drawing with your eyes or your mind?* Drawing is essentially learning to translate 3-dimensional experience into 2-dimensional form, and as students work on a landscape or a still life, they gradually trust their eyes and draw what they see. (See *Eyes and Mind*, 27)

Sculpture, therefore, is not merely the process of making an object, but rather interpreting, utilizing, and manipulating *space*. *How does your structure interact with the space it’s in? How is the viewer confronted with the idea your project represents in an environment? How will it ultimately live?*

Painting, in this context, is not merely a variation on drawing, but rather an opportunity to analyze and manipulate the ways in which our minds interpret color, shape and composition. Though introductory-level students should still be instructed to *paint what they see* in order to understand the relationships between color, shape and perception, they are also able to bend their visual reality, first attempting to master it, then deviating from it. (See *The Pear Project*, 29)

To synthesize, traditional art education, in facilitating a *practice of looking*, cultivates awareness of visual experience through learning to see, interpreting and interacting with physical space, and manipulating visual experience in pursuit of a creative voice. Basic elements can be summed up as sight, space, and style.

In a thorough curriculum, however, one element from the previous list of

three is missing, which is *time/duration*. Time-based media such as video, animation, performance, audio, and to some extent, installation are missing from traditional art education, at least at the introductory level. Though facilitating time-based projects in studio and intro-level courses is often technically impossible, the topic of duration must still be addressed in order to prepare students for the broad range of intermediate- and advanced-level concepts they will encounter.

It is important to understand that a student does not need to make a movie in order to be exposed to the concept of duration. For instance, duration can be associated with other topics, such as space. A few simple questions posed to the students will address time and give it significance as an element of the creative process: *Does this project begin and end? When is it ideally finished—in this state or that? What is the difference in meaning between the two? How should viewers experience this project? Should they experience it all day? For only a moment?*

The following anecdote describes a project in which the concepts of space and time were addressed successfully within a sculpture assignment. (see *Space*, 33) As the student's idea evolved, guiding questions helped him to arrive at a final product that addressed the natural decomposition of his own sculpture.

The student began with the simple intention of building a ship, unsure of how he would integrate his structure into an environment—how his project would ultimately live. As he designed and built his ship, he was confronted with the question: *Would it actually work? Does it sail, or is it a static piece?* The student hadn't considered his structure to be something functional, presumably because this was an art class, as opposed to shop or engineering. The possibility of this structure actually floating began to spur him on to new approaches and ideas, and he proceeded to seal the ship as best he could.

He was then led to solve the problem of presentation: *How should this be viewed? If it is built for water, should it be viewed in water? Should this be viewed out on a lake? In a puddle? In a bathroom sink?* The student soon recognized that each possible decision would bring different meaning, and that it was up to him to organize his thoughts and present his project as articulately as he could.

After the student decided to present his structure in a large clear plastic basin, he gathered the necessary materials, poured water into the basin, and attempted to float his ship. When he attempted this, the ship sank. It had been made with mat board and hot glue, and quickly became water logged. Keeping himself open to new avenues for his project, the student soon realized that his structure was a perfect shipwreck—a carefully built ship sitting at the bottom of a basin of water. He incorporated rocks and rubble to the bottom of the basin, which weighed the ship down in place, and also added to the piece from an aesthetic perspective.

As an environment, this student's project was one of the most complete



and complex; and provided an opportunity to discuss time and duration within the creative process. Not only did the project evolve over the course of many experiments, but it was also a structure that would change and gradually disintegrate over time. During critique, the questions were posed: *What is the ideal state of this sculpture? Is it now, when the ship is basically in tact at the bottom of the basin, or in a few weeks when it's disintegrated and falling apart?* The class had differing opinions about the ideal state of the sculpture. In our discussions, they were addressing the significance of duration as an element of the creative process, and beginning to understand it as a kind of medium unto itself.

Performance is another great way to address duration in an intro class. Simply asking students to *do* something carries the element of time. As in the above sculpture project, critiques are perfect opportunities to have students present their ideas as *events* rather than *objects*, which have durations to them, and can be critiqued as active pieces of work. Designing site-specific assignments or exercises that are one-time occurrences, like verbal stories or time-based drawings, offer the teacher the opportunity to inject discourse regarding issues of time; how duration might influence our interaction with art work, and the practice of art making as a whole. *What is the difference between something being experienced for one hour as opposed to one year? Can duration influence meaning? How might we utilize duration to communicate our ideas?*

The concepts of sight, space, style, and time—and the ways in which they shape our ideas and processes as artists and thinkers—must be addressed in studio and intro-level art courses. These elements encourage a *practice of looking*, while cultivating a personal approach to the creative process and introducing a variety of technical skills.

## **Media Arts in Advanced Art Practices**

The following curriculum does not include a specific section for advanced-level assignments. Various assignments taught at the advanced level have been integrated into other sections of the curriculum in order to illustrate the assignments' versatility, and adaptability to various skill levels. It is still important to identify, however, what advanced-level high school artists should exemplify by the time they move on to college.

Introductory-level concepts—*sight, space, style, and time*—prepare the students for the various ways in which artists generate and convey content, before they venture into intermediate-level courses that tend to be more medium specific. Intermediate-level disciplines allow students to explore

specific tools in greater detail, while simultaneously developing a personal and conceptual *use* for each medium. At the advanced level, therefore, they are prepared to focus on the development of content.

Advanced students should be comfortable with the separation of content and medium, able to manage the question: *What is the best way to communicate your idea?* They do not need to be masters of every medium the school provides, however they must be comfortable with, and understand the value of, learning whatever methods and tools they need to create their projects.

As a result, advanced students work in various disciplines, rather than define themselves as “painters,” “printmakers,” and “photographers”. They are diverse and versatile because the following themes and questions are constantly posed throughout the curriculum: *Why are you using the medium you’re using? Your idea might be communicated best through your drawing, but what if we tried a different approach? How will your viewer encounter your project: On the wall of a gallery? On the side of the road? On a TV screen? In a theater? What is the most ideal way for your idea to be communicated?*

Advanced students are confident that anything is possible within the practice of art, so their solutions to problems become broad, personal, unique, and interdisciplinary. It is important that they work on various independent projects at once in order to develop time-management skills, making time for their work outside of school. This discipline will help them apply their spontaneous ideas to their art-making practices. Therefore, a course structure that is malleable is extremely advantageous for motivated and prepared advanced students.

Although projects should be independent, teachers must clarify and develop each project along with each student. Broad discussions should be frequent, introducing artists that are relevant to various topics, and debating relevant writings and theories designed to inspire the students and get them thinking. Having the students generate projects based on broad discussions forces them to be inventive about topics that are not objective. For instance, presenting the class with a series of quotes (from philosophy, science, art, pop culture, etc.) gets the students thinking about their own perspectives and opinions, as opposed to specific criteria and skills. The following are examples of such prompts:

**“The Medium Is The Message” – Marshall McLuhan**

Express one idea, project or concept through three different media. Keeping the content simple will help in executing this assignment. Focus on articulating your idea as clearly as possible, doing it the most justice you can, and keeping it consistent as the medium changes.

### **Disappearance**

Make something vanish or, short of that, demonstrate your attempt at making something vanish. Erase something. Conceal something. Is it possible to eliminate a thing? In this assignment, focus on your choice of materials and demonstration of your process.

### **Endless Description**

**“To be really realistic, a description would have to be endless.” – *Albert Camus***

Describe something realistically. Your method of description can be any medium you choose, or a combination of media. Clarify your creative process, as well as end product. How does your response to this prompt ultimately live? Does your project resolve?

Within this class structure, teachers often have to manage ten different *assignments* at once, each student requiring his or her own spontaneous direction, clarification and technical help. Although this method can be overwhelming, it creates an active, energized environment in which ideas are paramount, technical problems are solved through necessity and independent thinking, and collaboration is expected. The structure reminds the students that there are no rules within the creative process—that as artists we must be constantly curious, searching for ideas and motivation in various places, always aiming to communicate with our environment in innovative ways, through whatever means available.

Advanced students learn from each other because they are all comfortable with different disciplines and aspects of the creative process. They help each other solve technical problems, clarify artist statements, and resolve ideas, becoming intimately involved with the work of their classmates as a community of artists.

Community and collaboration must be cultivated in various ways by the teacher, since it comes naturally to some groups and not to others. Therefore, discourse is an essential element of this curriculum at every level. The success of each assignment and topic is absolutely reliant on the teacher’s ability to create discussion, pose spontaneous questions, and model an environment of curiosity, analysis, debate, and support. For instance, students should be invited into various conversations regarding the work of their peers, expected to voice opinions in order to help each other solve creative problems, as well as clarify their own views. At all levels, it is required that students participate in discussions and critiques, setting the tone in the curriculum early that discourse is expected, and that the practice of art involves thought and reflection.

Resolution and presentation are aspects of advanced art education that

are not heavily emphasized at lower levels. Leading up to the advanced level, students become comfortable working within various media, with an emphasis on process. It is important that students shape their creative styles, hone their technical skills, and develop their intellectual curiosity at the intermediate levels, without becoming distracted by final products and presentation. Although these aspects of art making should be introduced and considered, it is at the advanced level that resolution and presentation become actual problems to solve.

Advanced students must be required to show their work, not just during class critiques, but also to the community at large. They should be proud of their roles as leaders in the arts, and reminded that creativity can be the engine of their community. To emphasize the importance of this requirement, the teacher should pose the questions: *As artists we focus on the ways in which we communicate content, so when do we decide a project or idea is finished—communicated clearly? We labor over our projects, deciding on the best modes of expression, so how do we ultimately represent our ideas and offer them to the world around us?* Questions like these help the students address the material reality of their endeavors; that their work is not just for themselves, created in isolation, but also to connect with their environment, created and presented in the spaces around them.

Therefore, advanced students must consider *the viewer* directly by installing their work and standing by it. Installation allows them to solve the various problems of presentation that arise when working with an institution (such as the school), as they will in the professional world. While integrating their work into their environment as purposefully as possible, they face valuable problems, such as censorship (projects that are appropriate for high school senior critiques are not always appropriate for the school at large), logistics (how to install a project as intended using the materials and space available), and format decisions (ie: *If your video is to be public, should it be viewed on a screen? As a projection? Large or small? Will the audio interfere with the public space? Are you intending to interfere—to confront? If your project can be resolved in various different ways, how will you choose to resolve it here and why?*).

Advanced classes are represented by collaborative, supportive, articulate students who are adventurous in their own work, and motivated by the challenge of communicating with the world around them. Introductory and advanced art education are bookends, both offering a survey of materials. From intro to advanced, this curriculum aims to cultivate intellectual young adults who are versatile, innovative, collaborative, and think critically—characteristics that will help them at the college level, regardless of discipline or profession.