

Art Autobiography: The Arts in STEM

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Part 1: Recall

I was always drawn to the arts from a very young age. I loved to draw. When I was in third grade I won an art contest and I still remember clearly what the picture looked like. I am definitely a visual learner and benefit from visual aides. I was involved in art projects throughout my elementary and highschool years. Among many small projects, I was art-editor of our yearbook, and painted a large mural in the school gym for my senior project in highschool.

Naturally, I considered pursuing a career that involved art. I was very much drawn to architecture, but was discouraged by my teachers because it involved “too much math.” I really wanted to use my artistic ability to help others and enjoyed working with at-risk teens, so I decided to pursue a degree in art therapy. I moved to the DC area, where I attended the art therapy program at George Washington University. While in graduate school I worked as an art teacher in a small high school for at-risk teens. I also interned as an art therapist in an inpatient adolescent drug rehab facility, as well as a juvenile detention center. While I was in graduate school I began teaching middle school art part time at a local private school. Because of my art therapy background I was always more fascinated with the process of art making, and less focused on the product. I especially enjoy ceramics and find it is such an engaging art medium.

I got married while I was in graduate school, and later decided to continue to teach art part time so that I could be home with my newborn son. As my family grew, I decided to stay in teaching and began working in an elementary school, a small Jewish private school, where my own children were enrolled. As a former art teacher, integrating art into my elementary school classes came naturally to me.

Part 2: Reflect

When deciding on a career, I didn't want to have a job where I would have pressure to produce art for others. I found art meaningful when it was used as a venue for self expression and connection, without judgement or pressure to produce a specific kind of product. As an artist, I was always drawn to famous artists who expressed deeper ideas and feelings such as Georgia O' Keefe and Winslow Homer. I also was fascinated by technical artists, especially M.C. Escher, whose artworks I still use in my classroom today when I teach about tessellations and math.

I was drawn to art therapy because it fuses psychology and art, helping people explore their inner selves through a creative means. One of my most interesting experiences during my years as an art therapy intern was when I worked with a selective mute. Her artwork was so expressive, and I felt like we communicated together through her drawings. As a teacher I look back at this experience and think of all the students I've had who struggle with expressing themselves verbally for various reasons. Often, I see that there are many students who are very bright, but need to express themselves in a more creative form.

Part 3: Connect

My perception of art is very much shaped by my background as an art therapist. Art is a deep form of self expression that can serve as a venue for allowing students to connect to what their learning in a more personal and creative manner. Art also allows students to utilize their left and right brain simultaneously when they are using art as an integrated tool to demonstrate their knowledge or skills.

I recently completed a unit with my first grade students on the sun and shadows. As a culmination activity, and informal exit ticket, I asked my students to create a watercolor painting of a sunrise or sunset, including an object on the horizon with an accurate shadow according to the position of the

sun. My students enjoyed the sensory experience of the watercolor painting process, yet they really had to think about how to place their shadow, based on what we had observed from previous activities in our class.

Art is a great tool that can engage students in a personal way and allows them to express themselves in a more open ended way that allows for multiple solutions. The art process reflects real life experiences, where problem solving is often messy, and the outcome is often not what we expected because it evolves as we progress.

Personally, I find art fulfilling when I am helping others express themselves through art. I see art as another kind of language, that has many dimensions, just like music and dance. As a STEAM teacher, I feel like I am fusing together my love for art with my passion for science. I love engaging young children and getting them excited about discovering the world around them. I find art is a natural fit for my STEAM lessons and gives younger students a way to engage in the lesson in a hands-on way that is personal and meaningful. Young children can be so expressive and the arts is a great venue that removes language barriers, allowing students to share a part of themselves and how they view the world.