

Observations

Yogi Berra said, "You can observe a lot by watching." His statement resonates with me and gets at the essence of why I know teaching kids to work with clay is a valuable endeavor and should be part of every child's school experience.

Here are a couple of observations that illustrate Yogi's point and shine a light on how much inherent value young kids find in working with clay.

During the middle of my teaching career, I took six years off to be a stay-at-home dad. When my son was in kindergarten, I would go into his classroom once a week as a parent helper. His teacher would set up various stations for the kids to rotate through, and then she and the parent helpers would teach the kids in little groups of four at a table. I would always ask the teacher what theme or big ideas the kids were learning about in class that week. Then I would come up with a clay project for the kids to do relating to what they were learning. The kindergarten kids loved coming to my table and working in clay.

One day a grandmother was another one of the parent helpers teaching at a different station in the room. After she watched me working with the kids she pulled me aside to tell me about her first experience with clay. She told me that the only thing she still has today from all of her years in elementary school is a little pinch pot she made when she was in first grade. What I find remarkable about her story is the importance that this grandmother attached to this little object she fashioned in clay some sixty years ago. All of the worksheets, math problems and writing she did as a kid is all gone. The only artifact she valued enough to keep from her time as an elementary school student is the one thing she made with her own hands. The things and experiences we value as human beings stick with us and we keep them close.

I'm back in the classroom again teaching art at the elementary level to 800 students a week in two different schools. As an art teacher I make it my practice to watch how kids create and I pay close attention to what motivates them. One of the things I observed early in my career is that when kids work in clay, they invest a lot of themselves in the process.

The first thing they ask me when they return the week after they create a clay project is if it has come back from the kiln yet. They keep asking about their project all the way through the process until they get to proudly take it home and share it with their family. Kids don't do this in other areas of the curriculum. They don't come in the day after a math lesson and ask if they can learn more about place value or fractions and ask when they can take their math worksheet home.

An interesting thing to do during the last week of school is to watch kids clean out their backpacks, desks or lockers. They jettison everything. They throw out every math

paper, writing assignment and spelling worksheet almost as if they are tossing sandbags out of a sinking hot air balloon to keep it aloft. Interestingly, they don't throw their clay projects out, they've already taken those little jewels home. Like the grandmother in my son's kindergarten class, the kids have too much of themselves invested in the process to just throw it away. It's why parents of the kids I teach have purchased wall shelves or curio cabinets to display their kid's sculptures. You can observe a lot about what people value just by watching what they do.

So why is it that kids value clay work so much? I think the answer has its roots in the fact that for almost all of man's time on the planet, we have been makers of things. When ancient man became a tool maker it was a huge leap forward in human evolution. Our tools and our brains developed hand in hand in a symbiotic relationship throughout history. Making things is most likely hard wired into our brains. For thousands and thousands of years we have been makers of things. The act of making and creating are what make us human.

In our modern culture, kids are cut off from the process of making things. Most little kids do not get to learn how to cook, sew or use hand tools in the kitchen or the workshop. I once taught a second grade child who did not know what an egg yolk was. A kid who was born 100 years ago would not only know what an egg yolk was, but probably would have collected the eggs from beneath the chickens that morning and then went and milked the cow. When my son was little he sat on the kitchen counter while his mom was baking. He loved cracking the eggs into the bowl and stirring things up, those were his jobs. Sadly in today's world, not all kids get to do this.

There is a disconnect in the modern world when it comes to kids growing up and learning to use their hands and their imagination to learn. Even the games they play are changing. In the past a kid might build things with Legos, blocks or an erector set. (My favorite toys as a kid were a hammer and a bag of nails. I built lots of tree forts in my youth.) Today kids play video games that don't require any hands-on thinking. Then they go to school and today's schools are focused on abstract thinking. Kids learn about numbers, words and ideas but they get little hands-on experience processing the information they are learning about. They read books and fill out worksheets and teachers think they are teaching the kids something. Direct hands-on experience is how kids learn, unfortunately today's school curriculum is focused on abstractions instead of concrete real world learning experiences. I once watched a teacher present a lesson on rocks and geology without showing the kids any real rocks. The lesson was taught by filling in answers on a worksheet. I would love to unplug the Xerox machines at schools across America for a month. If it forced teachers to do more hands-on activities, I guarantee teaching and learning would surge.

Here is an example of abstract thought being valued more than direct hands-on experiences. Every year in my school district, kids in grades 3-12, start the year in science studying units of measurement. The kids learn about the metric system and

how to convert metric units to Imperial units and vice versa. What they rarely do is measure any real things using these metric units, or if they do some actual measuring, they only do it one time, on one day. Most kids have no idea how heavy something is that weighs ten grams. They can't visualize which would be more, one liter of water or one gallon. They don't have any idea of how far a 400 meter run would be. This is because while they have solved problems on paper for converting liters to gallons, they haven't had enough hands-on experience with the actual physical materials.

There is an amazing teacher in my building who teaches a unit on volume to her second grade students using water, measuring cups, and empty plastic pint, quart, liter, 2-liter and gallon containers. It's a messy lab with little kids spilling a lot of water on the carpet as they get direct hands-on experience learning what is larger, a pint, quart or liter. They learn how many cups fit into a gallon by actually pouring cups of water into a gallon container until it's full. In short, they gain hands-on experience by doing.

What's really strange is that this is not the norm when it comes to teaching kids in our schools, it's the exception. Most of the time kids don't get to learn by doing, they are expected to learn by listening. They have to sit, be quiet and listen to the teacher for hours at a time. Pop into any school and walk past the classrooms. In 99% of them the teacher is doing all the talking. Then walk past an art room where the kids are making things with their hands. They are the ones talking, sharing ideas, giving each other feedback, and acting as participants in their own learning instead of just sitting there as passive observers. This is why kids love coming to an art class and working in clay. They can take an amorphous mass of clay and through an amazing connection between their brain and their hands, they can give an idea life. Clay is a magical material in the eyes of a kid. It can become anything they choose to make it. It's one of few things in life that kids get to control from start to finish without some adult butting in and telling them how to do it.

Learning is about taking risks, trying new ideas, and being open to possibilities. In order for your brain to learn it has to be relaxed, engaged and given room to meander and make choices. This is how kids approach play and learning. If you observe how they approach each of these activities you'll probably have a hard time seeing where one activity leaves off and the other one begins. In fact the best learning happens when kids don't even know they are getting a lesson. The best learning happens when they are involved in something fun, engaging and challenging... an activity like making art.

Use authentic materials - set the stage for artistic success

If you want kids to learn by making art, you have to treat them like artists. They need to work with authentic art materials. In my elementary art program we draw, we paint, and we sculpt with clay. We do not make anything with paper towel tubes, toilet paper tubes, Pringle's cans or someone else's recycled trash. We do not make art based on the holidays or seasons. In fact every time I get transferred to a new school, I

fill up a dumpster or two with all the garbage left in the cabinets from the previous art teacher. Then I order liquid watercolor paints, tempera paints, a variety of quality paint brushes in different sizes, paper and 2000 pounds of clay, and just like that, I'm ready to teach art.

The materials I use in my elementary art program are the same types of materials that professional artists work with. We just don't create one clay project a year or one painting a year. Art skills don't grow that way. In order to become skilled at anything you have to have repeated exposure to it. Imagine trying to learn how to play the piano by only playing it once a year. That is what elementary art teachers do to kids when they jump from a glitter project to a crayon project to a toilet-paper-tube-Thanksgiving-napkin-holder project. (Who wants to use a napkin from a tube that was last being touched by someone taking a poop?) These kinds of art teachers think in terms of making cute little things to send home, instead of focusing on how they can teach a kid to think, work and create like an artist.

I once had a second grade student say to a new kid at our school "Here's how we do it in art, first we make a drawing, then we make a painting, then we make a sculpture of what we're learning about. That's how Mr. Post does it." This kid was right on the money. By using the same materials over and over again, my students gain skills and confidence. What changes from lesson to lesson is the idea and the content of what we are learning. Think of all the ideas and emotions that have been expressed in paint and clay through the ages. The materials didn't change all that much, but the way artists approached them sure did.

I don't have any students who are afraid to draw, or paint or sculpt because I teach them age appropriate skills in all of these areas. With kindergarten and first grade students I teach them how to look at an image and find the big shapes in it first. Then I teach them how to draw these big shapes on their paper. I tell them a true story about a high school student who put a painting of a toucan bird in our district art show. This high school kid started by painting the bird's eye, the smallest part and then the head. When he went to paint the beak, most of it wouldn't fit on the canvas. Imagine that, the most interesting part of a toucan is its brightly colored beak, and this high school kid wasn't taught how to layout the big shapes first so his image would all fit on the canvas.

When I teach kids to work in clay, I repeat this same process by having them identify the large forms of what they are trying to create. I ask them questions like... Is it made of spheres, cones, cubes or egg forms? Which form is the largest? Which form should they make first? I start teaching young kids to work like artists by teaching them how to see the basic shapes in drawings and paintings, and the basic forms in sculptures. I teach them to see the relationship between two dimensional shapes and three dimensional forms. I point out that shapes are flat, and forms are fat. This serves as the starting point for all of the drawings, paintings and sculptures they will make in

the seven years I teach them. They start with the big parts and add details near the end of the process. We even call the last day of working on something “detail day”.

I live near the General Motors Tech Center in Warren, Michigan. This is where they design GM’s cars. A friend of mine was in charge of a design studio there for years. His son is now a clay modeler there, and yes, they still model cars in clay today. Even with all of today’s technology and computerized machines that can sculpt full size cars from foam, there is still the need to model cars in clay so the designers can visualize what it would look like if they rounded off a corner another 1/32 of an inch or if they changed the profile of a fender just a smidge. At some point in the design process cars have to be seen in three dimensions and the medium of choice is clay. Ideas for cars start out as drawings, then get mocked up by machines in foam and then before they begin production, clay model mock-ups of the car are created. The creative process for designing cars begins with two-dimensional drawings and ends up with full size three-dimensional clay models. Since the process of starting with drawings and then working in clay is how today’s cars are designed, it just makes sense to teach kids how to think and create this way too.

My Job is to say Yes all day

All of the lessons I teach have goals. I tell the kids the goals up front, I even write them out on the dry erase board at the front of the room. They know what the goals are before they start. I then demonstrate how to meet the goals. Then I tell the kids that if they have met the goals of the lesson, they are free to embellish it, add details and their own personality to it.

I was teaching a lesson about clay portrait busts to 5th grade students. I showed them a PowerPoint presentation of Robert Arneson’s busts along with busts from Egyptians, Greeks, Romans as well as many other contemporary artists. The goals that I gave the kids for this lesson were that they had to create a self-portrait bust. It had to have an egg-shaped head. They needed to place the eyes in the center of the egg form and not near the top of the head like you see in cartoons. They had to make it look like them to the best of their ability. Then I told kids that they should bring their personality to the assignment.

Girls started using garlic presses as extruders and made braided hair or added bows to their hairstyles. Boys started adding baseball caps to their heads and logos on their t-shirts. When they would come up and ask me “Can I make my tongue sticking out?” I would answer, “Have you met the rest of the assignment’s requirements?” If they answered ‘yes’, then I would say “yes”.

You see, my job is to say yes all day to creativity. My overall goal for the assignment was to get them to think about how artists model clay busts and to understand how they use proportions and forms. Then when kids come up and ask me

if they can do this or that, of course I can say yes and they leave feeling empowered. They are working like artists, coming up with their own ideas.

I had a boy in a 5th grade class who was using a pencil to make the negative space for the mouth opening in his clay bust. He accidentally pushed the pencil all the way through the head creating a little tunnel. He then made a really long tongue that was shaped like a canoe oar. He could wiggle the handle at the back of the head and the tongue would wiggle in the front of the mouth. He started sticking his little bust's tongue out at all his buddies in the room who would then giggle hysterically. He thought I wasn't going to allow him to have his bust fired with this crazy wiggly tongue. I told him that his idea was brilliant and even went and got some red underglaze for him to use on the tongue. The idea caught on across the room and soon half the class was making busts with wiggly tongues.

Sometimes kid ideas just spread across the art room like a wildfire. I have seen boys make hippos that magically sprout wings and just recently fire breathing dragons eating ice cream cones (what a funny juxtaposition). Just like in the clay bust lesson, the kids met all of the requirements for their respective projects and were just engaged in the flow of the lesson when they came up with some really fun creative embellishments. My job and my days are much richer when I say yes to the kids' creative ideas all day.

Of course this might lead you to think that you could just give the kids some clay and let them create, and that you would end up with a bunch of wonderful things to fire in the kiln. Whenever I have tried this, I have ended up with just a few interesting things from a class of 30 kids. This is because creativity in the art room happens in relationship to some boundaries.

The reason I have goals for each lesson is so that I can teach some skills to the kids or get them to look at some art and gain an understanding of the purpose, choices and decisions an artist made while creating it. I like to think of my lesson goals as scaffolding. The scaffolding gives the kids enough structure for them to learn something new while at the same time allowing to them to build and create understanding for themselves. I don't expect an 11-year-old 5th grade student to be able to create a perfectly proportioned clay bust. What I want kids to learn in a lesson like that is that artists have been creating portraits for thousands of years. Artists use observation and analysis to capture a likeness of the sitter and that portrait busts can have a personality. These are clearly age appropriate goals for an 11-year-old kid creating a bust in clay. At the end of the lesson, the kids really have a new found appreciation for just how challenging it is to create a likeness. They also have a self-portrait that they created as an 11-year-old that they will keep for a lifetime,

If you are excited, they are interested

I have had other art teachers tell me that they can't do clay projects with their students because the kids don't behave and follow directions during simple drawing assignments. These teachers posit that because the kids misbehave during a drawing assignment, that a clay assignment will be totally out of control. *They have it exactly backwards.* The reason many kids misbehave is because they are bored. If a teacher presents a boring lesson, the kids will choose to find something more interesting to do like fooling around with their friends. If you as the teacher create great lessons that you are excited about teaching, this enthusiasm is contagious and the kids catch it.

Classroom control is easiest to maintain when the kids are engaged in work that is meaningful and challenging to them and that they perceive as fun. The learning sneaks in the side door.

The kids you teach in an elementary art program don't know about the history of the world yet. It's your job to teach it to them. In the art program, we have an advantage. Art is the history of the world told through pictures, objects and stories. Kids learn best by seeing and doing. In the general classroom kids have to read about history. In art, they get to learn about history by seeing images, analyzing them, discussing the artists' or cultures' motives and then creating their own art about it. The best thing I remember about my elementary school years was the coat of arms shield I made while learning about the middle ages. Thirty-five years later, I can still picture the griffin I emblazoned it with in my head. Creating images is a powerful form of communication, and a great method of teaching and learning and that's why it has been used by all cultures all over the world,

Kids love big ideas. They love to learn. Just don't talk to the kids for hours on end about what you are teaching. The classes I teach are only 47 minutes in length. I teach 32 classes a week. My rule of thumb is to get the information out to them in about 10 minutes. I can't teach the kids every single thing they need to know about clay in a single lesson. What I do instead is think of the big picture. I plan on having a kid over the course of seven years. I don't have to teach him or her everything at once. I dispense information to the kids in small bite-size chunks. If my presentation takes 10 minutes and clean up takes 5 minutes, then this gives the kids 32 minutes of working time.

You can easily teach big ideas if you break them into small chunks. Besides, our brains learn better when we learn things in chunks. That's why phone numbers and social security numbers have dashes in them. It's so our brains can remember the numbers in small discrete chunks. Use the brain's natural affinity for chunking to your advantage in the art room. Give the kids a small chunk of information in the 10 minutes of presentation time and then let them start to process what you have taught them by working with the art materials. Then if it's a big idea and you have more to tell them, do it in small steps throughout the class time or save it for next week's 10 minute presentation.

If you have ever asked a child “What did you do at school today?” The reply given most often is “nothing.” I used to think this was because kids didn’t want to talk about their school day when they got home. I now believe that is how kids really see their school day, they are in fact giving an accurate report of the day. This is because of the word “do” in that question. Kids are wired up to want to do things, but in school they sit all day and listen to the teacher talk, and to a kid, this is not doing. If you ask an elementary school kid what day it is, they are likely to reply gym day, music day or art day. To them these are the important classes. These are the places where they get to go do something. The rest of the day is the boring part. If you let kids design the schedule for the school day, you can bet that the time they allotted for art, gym and music would be a lot more than the grown-ups give them now. This is because they want to learn, they want to be engaged, they want to collaborate and interact with their peers but unfortunately schools don’t really take advantage of the way kids learn. Schools call these classes “specials” as if learning something by actually doing it is a special treat instead of the way schools should teach every subject. The brain learns best in situations that are interesting, novel and fun. Make your art room an interesting, novel and exciting place to learn. Make your art room a place where you can say yes to creativity all day.

Teach Little Kids with Big Ideas

Human beings have been making art for thousands of years. The best place to research ideas to teach elementary art students is to look at what various artists and cultures have made through the millennia. Don’t make art inspired by the holidays or by the seasons of the year. The kids get stuck making enough of that garbage in their regular classroom. Do research into things that interest you and then turn this research into lessons.

I was doing some research into Majolica pottery and glazes. I learned about how it spread along with Islam across Northern Africa. I learned how to formulate Majolica glazes using modern materials. I learned about how Islamic mosques are decorated with complex colorful tiles. I brought all of these ideas into my art room. I teach in a multicultural school and my students who follow Islam were impressed that I was discussing the decorative qualities of their mosques in art class. I have many clay lessons from kindergarten through sixth grade where the kids use the Majolica glazing process as part of the lesson. This all started when I personally became interested in the idea of Majolica glazes and started to research its history and process for myself.

The places that I frequently mine for inspiration for elementary art lessons are art history, artists, cultures, animals, and children’s literature. If you don’t have a broad understanding of art history and artists, then you better jump into learning about that first as that is the most fertile vein for ideas.

Little kids do not think in abstractions. They want to make things that look real. They already have anointed who they think the best artists are in the room based on who can draw the most realistically. The absolute worst kinds of kid art happen when adults try to have young kids create some kind of abstract work. Kids could care less about coloring in some wiggly lines or shapes that the art teacher has told them is an abstract painting. The kids call these types of art works 'designs' and most of them throw them out right when they get back to their homeroom. They would much prefer to learn how to draw something recognizable. I know this, because if I teach the kids how to draw an animal as part of a lesson, the next week they bring me more drawings of those kinds of animals that they made at home.

Kids have a natural affinity and connection with all things in nature. They are the ones who go outside and turn over rocks during recess to look at worms. I teach a second grade lesson that is all about the idea of contrast and how artists use contrast to make one part of an art work stand out from another part. The inspiration for this lesson is the skunk. We create high contrast skunk paintings in class, we make sculptures of clay skunks and then decorate them using Majolica glazes. I wax the bottom of the terra cotta skunks the kids make. They dip them into the white Majolica base glaze and then I apply a hot wax resist line down the back of the skunk's body and tail. The kids then go to their tables and paint black glaze over the top of their skunks. You can hear them ooooh and ahhhhh when they see how the wax resist creates the white stripe down the back of the skunk as they are painting on the glaze. A kid who is only in second grade then gets a first hand lesson in how hot wax resist works on a sculpture.

I teach a sixth grade lesson about archaeology and Egyptian Mummies. The kids create a clay mummy sarcophagus. It's around 9 inches from head to toe and is about two inches tall. It's a slab constructed piece with a hollow inside. When the kids are done creating them over the course of a couple of weeks, they set them out on the counter. I let them turn leather hard and then I cut an opening that becomes a cork at the base of the mummy. The kids think the important part of this lesson is the creation of the clay mummy. I like this lesson because it teaches the kids what an artifact is. I have them write a poem about themselves, answer a couple of surveys, exchange a letter with a best friend, make a drawing and get a letter from a parent. These all get rolled up into a scroll at the end of the lesson and they are placed in the mummy. Then I seal the cork into the bottom of their mummy with window caulk. What they have just created is a time capsule about what they were like in sixth grade. At some point in lesson we talk about Howard Carter and how he discovered King Tut's tomb. Naturally there is a discussion about all of the artifacts that were found in the tomb, and how archaeologists and scientists learn about what life was like in the past by the art and objects that they find. This is the only lesson that I have to teach every year. If I didn't, the sixth grade kids would be upset. They look forward to making the mummies just like their older siblings did. This lesson has almost become like a rite of passage in my art program. I design new lessons and come up with new ways to teach things all the time, but the mummy lesson is a standard that all the kids look forward to.

The Elements and Principles of Design are not deep enough to use as subject matter in an elementary art program. Realistic subject matter should be the driver of the elementary art curriculum.

I have never had a kid paint a color wheel. I wonder how many thousands of gallons of paint have been wasted on this assignment over the last 75 years. I can teach a first grade kid a lot about color, have them laughing at the same time, and without boring them to tears as they paint little circles of color.

I made my own color wheel using the tempera paints we have at my school. It has six colors on it. Red is at the top. Then going clockwise it reads orange, yellow, green, blue and violet. I put red at the top because it corresponds with what they learn in the science curriculum about color and how the wavelengths are arranged in the ROY-G-BV order.

I tell the kids a story about how you can choose any color on the color wheel and find its best friends in an instant by looking at the colors next to it. I pretend that I am yellow and I act out putting one arm around orange and telling orange that she is my BFF (Best Friend Forever). Then I put my other arm out and give green an imaginary embrace and tell green that he is my best pal too. I tell the kids that if they mix yellow and orange together, or yellow and green together in different amounts, that they will always end up with a fantastic color because those colors are friends.

Then I tell the kids that yellow has one color that it does not get along with. Whenever they get together they have a terrible time. Then I proceed to mix yellow and violet together and the kids all say "Eeeewwwww, what a gross brown color!" Then I ask the kids to look at the color wheel and explain to me where violet is in relationship to yellow. They point out that it is directly across from it.

Then I ask them to tell me the best friends of other colors on the color wheel. After we find each color's best friends, I ask them to tell me which colors are across from each other and would mix together to make brown.

They visually get it, a first grade kid can figure out how to read a color wheel. They know which colors to mix to make vibrant rich colors, and which colors when mixed together will make dull muddy colors. There is a lot of drama and acting when we talk about how the colors are best friends or how they don't get along. I just make it up as I go along. Kids like to play and laugh, so it's important to capitalize on this when you teach them. The next week when you ask them about the color wheel, they will speak in terms of friendships or call complementary colors enemies because these are concepts that make sense to them.

We never paint a single color wheel and yet the kids learn a lot about color from the friends analogy. I have them make a painting that has realistic subject matter that first day and at the same time it teaches them how artists work with color relationships. The element of color does not need a separate lesson, it is incorporated into a lesson that has subject matter. A kid can go home and say, I drew and painted a bunny, a winter landscape, a self-portrait etc. and the lesson about color sneaks in through a story.

I am disappointed when I see student art and it looks like the teacher stripped all the life out of something to just teach one element or principle of design. Good art is complex, when teachers dumb down art to focus on one element or principle they don't respect that kids can grasp complicated visual ideas if you let them grapple with them.

A great lesson in seeing is to just select two famous art works and ask young kids to compare and contrast them. I define compare for the kids as "finding things that are alike or similar in both". I define contrast for them as "finding things that are different or opposite". One year I had the kids look at Faith Ringgold's Tar Beach painting and compare and contrast it with Georges-Pierre Seurat's A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte. Both paintings feature people participating in recreational outdoor activities, but the subject matter and how it is represented in each painting is vastly different. What happens is that the kids make so many interesting observations about each painting that they are willing to discuss them for an entire class period and they enjoy the process. Kids are smarter and more visually aware than many adults give them credit for. Of course you can't find this out if you are having them make color wheels or just creating non-objective art works based on the elements and principles of design. You have to give them big ideas to think about, big ideas to hold their interest and big ideas to captivate their imagination.

Little Kids are People Too

One of my favorite parts of the school day is when the kids are coming into the building in the morning. They get about 10 minutes to take off their coats, hang up their backpacks, find their lunch money and homework before they have to go into class. This is one of the times when they are the most alive, like real people. They come in and start talking to each other about what they did last night, or something that some other kid said to them. They act like any group of grown-ups gearing up for their day. I love to just drop by and chat with them during this time or tell them little jokes in the hallway. But not everyone sees kids as people. Some teachers start badgering the kids to hurry up, get in line, be quiet, put your books away, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. Right from the start, these teachers lose the kids. Who wants to come into their job and get yelled at right away?

One of the things kids like to do is laugh. If you can make what you are teaching humorous, you do two things. First you help to put each kid's brain at ease. In order to

learn a brain has to be relaxed. The brain does not learn well under stress. Second, the brain loves novelty and funny things are memorable. When I teach my students about novelty and how the brain craves it, I tell them that I drive past many squirrels on my way to school. I see them so often, that I almost stop seeing them because they are so common. Then I tell them to imagine what would happen if I saw a bright blue squirrel on my way to work. I would be telling everyone I saw that day about it. I would tell other teachers, my students and my family, "Hey, I saw a bright blue squirrel today."

I apply this bright blue squirrel principle to some of the things I teach the kids in art class. I sing a song about contrast in a deep opera voice with them. It goes like this...

Contrast means OPPOSITE, OPPOSITE,
Like BLACK AND WHITE,
Like DAY AND NIGHT,
Contrast means OPPOSITE, OPPOSITE,
figaro, figaro.

They all crack up when they sing this with me, but the next week when I ask them if anyone can tell me what the word contrast means, the first word that pops into their head is opposite. The silly opera song has helped to make the information novel, and novelty sticks in the brain.

I have a little poem for joining clay...

Scoring is boring,
but I make lots of lines,

Slipping is dipping,
I like it just fine,

Smoothing is soothing,
it relaxes my mind.

I tell the kids that if they do all of these steps when they join something in clay, that their mind can be relaxed when they turn it in to be fired because the parts won't fall off.

It seems as though the sillier I make the information the more the kids remember it. If I was to try and teach little kids how to join clay or learn what contrast means in a dull monotone voice, I guarantee you, none of them would remember it a week later.

Humor makes kids feel safe. Every now and then on the first day of kindergarten, I would have a kid who was a crier. The first week of school can be

overwhelming when you are 5-ish. Then I got the idea to use a puppet to introduce how to do things in the art room. I do a pretty good Grover from Sesame Street voice, so I purchased a Grover puppet. I have Grover teach the kids how to throw away a paper towel (he eats it), I have him show them how to use a tissue to blow his nose (he eats that too). Whenever Grover does something wrong, I have a kid volunteer to come up and show Grover how to do it the right way. When he takes a bath in the sink to wash all of his hair, a kid comes up and shows him the right way to wash just his hands in art class. At the end of the first day I have made 25 or so new kindergarten friends through humor and I haven't had one crier since Grover appeared on the scene. If I disappeared and Grover could teach the class, I'm pretty sure they wouldn't miss me.

When I pass out clay supplies to kindergarten and first grade kids, I tell them that getting clay is like going through the lunch line in the cafeteria. First they get their tray (a brown piece of canvas to work on), then they get their silverware (a paperclip held onto a popsicle stick with electrical tape for scoring), and then they get their meatloaf (the clay). What's so funny about kindergarten kids is that as they come through the lunch line, when I give them the meatloaf, I say, "Enjoy your lunchie!" or "Enjoy your meatloaf!". Now you would think after I said this a few times the joke would wear off. Not with these little guys, I say this same joke to each kid as they come through the line, and they all laugh like it is the first time they ever heard it. On top of that, I can use it week after week and they still think it's funny. If I don't say it, they ask "Aren't you going to say enjoy your lunchie?"

When I have them gather around me for a demonstration, I always dismiss them by saying "OK, go back to your seaties." Somehow every year, every new group of kids always seems to blurt back "seaties?" whenever I say it. They continue to do this year after year. If I just say, "Go back to your seats." Even fifth and sixth grade kids will say, "Don't you mean seaties?"

Humor is also great at diffusing tattling. If a kid comes up to my desk and says, "Joey said the 'S' word, I say, "He said spaghetti?" Then the kid says, "No the real 'S' word!" and I reply, "Sausage?" I just keep making up humorous "S" words at my desk until the tattler starts laughing and then I send him or her back to their seat. If a kid comes up to my desk to tell me about some small trivial thing another kid said or did, I answer with "I'll tell my mom." They start to walk away and then they come back and ask, "Why are you going to tell your mom, shouldn't you tell his mom?" To which I reply, "My mom is really strict, he'll get in much more trouble if I call my mom. Do you want me to use the phone in the classroom? I can call her right now and let you talk to her." I just diffuse angry or whiny kids with humor because I would rather laugh with the kids than yell at them. After I diffuse the situation with humor, I say to the kid causing the problem "Now knock it off Nick, or I will call my mom." Then Nick laughs too and we all get back to making art.

Novelty, play and humor are powerful tools. If it's different and unusual kids will remember it. Take advantage of these features of how the brain works to create an environment in your art room, where the kids can laugh, they know they are safe and they understand that you like them and will treat them with kindness.

There is sometimes a kid who will test the limits of the rules in the art room. I have a small bench in the hallway right outside my classroom. I just tell the kid who is disruptive or disrespectful to go sit on the bench. The worst thing that can happen to a kid on a clay day is to not be able to participate in class that day. I often send students out there for just a few minutes so I can finish teaching. Then I go and have a small conversation with the student. If this student apologizes and is willing to change their behavior for the rest of that class period, they are invited back into art. If their attitude is disrespectful, surly or if they don't admit to what they were doing to disrupt the teaching and learning in the art room, then they stay out on the bench. The consequence of not behaving in art, is that you don't get to be in art. It's simple and the kids figure it out quickly.

Kids like to talk, take advantage of this

In a classroom, most often the person doing the talking and teaching is thinking at a higher level than the person who is doing the listening. When you have to talk to someone else about your opinion or teach them how to do something, your brain shifts into a higher gear. Art critiques are a way for you to get your student's brains to make that shift.

I recently discussed with my 4th - 6th grade students what a critique is. I had them come up to the dry erase board, choose any art work made by another student and critique it by discussing these three questions...

What is working in the art work?

What is not working in the art work?

What advice would you give this artist to improve it?

The kids were most often dead on in their critiques, saying just what I as the teacher was thinking in my head. They gave each other great feedback. This meant letting the kids talk for an entire class. I was thinking that the kids might not be able to sit still for a critique of everyone's work (they are just 8-12 year-olds) yet one kid at the end of one of my classes said "This was really fun." To keep the entire class engaged during the critique, I let the kid giving the critique call on three students when he or she is done to make additional comments about the art work being critiqued.

The most frequently asked question I get asked when a kid completes an art assignment is "Is this good?" During our critiques I tell them that when they ask me that question, they are asking me to make a value judgment about their art work. Do I like it

or not? I tell them that I prefer to answer them using the three questions above so that they get useful feedback that they can use as information. Of course schools set kids up for the question "Is this good?" by telling them how to do everything. How to write their name on a paper, how to fill out the worksheet the right way, what is good ditto coloring etc. Then when they grow up, we want them to be creative and think on their own to solve problems. If you want kids to analyze art and become critical thinkers, you have to plan times for this to happen and build them into the lessons you teach.

Nuts and Bolts - Keeping things organized

In order for your art program to be a success, your students have to be successful in your art room. They are the ambassadors of your program. If they go home and tell their parents how much fun they had in art that day and what they learned, your program will be valued by the kids you teach and their parents.

I have taught in ten different buildings and in four different school districts and only one time did I find a kiln in good working order when I got there. Every other building had an old, broken down kiln and no clay. One of the first lessons I teach to all the grade levels as the new art teacher is a clay lesson. I want the kids on my side, I want them to feel the magic of creating with their hands. I would bring clay in from my home studio. Then I would take their projects to my studio and fire them in my kiln. While this was going on, I would order repair parts with my own money to get the old junker kilns back in shape, and start looking for sources of funding to get a larger more modern kiln to work with.

At one building that I taught at, I was told there was no money in the budget for a kiln. A mom who had some artistic daughters at the building heard how long it took to get work through our tiny old kiln and she called the school board office. She was very active in the parent volunteer group and she told the school administration that if they didn't get Mr. Post a new kiln, the parent group would. The administration didn't want it to appear as though they were unwilling to support the basic needs of the the school. The next day the principal told me that I could order a new kiln. The kids and the parents were the movers and shakers in this because they were the school's clients. Because I was just the employee, I could have asked until I was blue in the face for one and never got it, but because the parents and kids in the school community saw value in what was happening in my art program, the administration supported it.

If you are going to teach hundreds of kids a week to make authentic art in an elementary art program, you have to be organized. If you are a right-brain, loosely disorganized person in your home or studio life, this will be your biggest challenge if you want to make real art with kids. Many art teachers dumb down the projects they make in class because they are not organized enough to structure their classroom so that hundreds of kids can make paintings and work in clay each week.

In my art room every kid cleans every day. Table captains is a bad idea. One kid cleaning up after four does not work. I have two big white cardboard cake circles held onto my dry erase board with magnets. One is for paint day, the other is for clay day. The kids look at these to know what job they have if we are painting or working in clay. They are divided into four sections. Each section has a picture I drew of the clean up job the kid has to do that day. Each of the four sections corresponds to a number I painted on the art room tables. If you are number one and you see a picture of the water bowl next to number one, filling it and emptying it is your job that day. If you are number two and see a picture of hands using paper towel and a spray bottle to clean the table, that is your job that day. Other jobs include getting and putting away drawing materials, taking care of paints, picking items up off the floor, or rounding up clay tools. The kids look at these circles at the beginning and end of art to know what they are responsible for. I spin the job chart one quarter turn each Monday morning, so every kid gets the opportunity to do every job over a month's time. Using this method, everyone cleans and not just 8 kids out of a class of 32. Pictures work better than words to inform kids of what their clean up jobs are. The first time each class comes to art I MODEL, not tell them how to do each job. I SHOW THEM what it looks like when the job is done right and what it looks like when the job is done the wrong way. Then I have kids come up and model how to do the jobs. If you don't model the jobs and instead just tell the kids what to do, they will never do them the right way. Kids are visual, use that to your advantage, teach by modeling what you want them to do at different times in the art room.

I use music to signal when it is time to clean up. I choose a different clean up song each year. When the kids hear the clean up song come on they know they have to stop working and clean up. This year's song is "You dropped a Bomb on Me" by the Gap Band. In the past I have used "Working at the Carwash" by Rose Royce, "Bang the Drum All Day" by Todd Rundgren, "Working in a Coal Mine" by Devo and a variety of other songs that are upbeat and get the kids moving. When the music comes on, the work stops and the cleaning begins.

In an elementary program it is a terrible idea to have a large garbage can filled with water and scrap clay to recycle. You will never have time to get to it. The best thing to do when you open a bag of clay to pass it out to the kids, is to have a separate empty bag to collect the clay they don't need on their project that day. The clay will be out in the air all during class and many of the inexperienced kids will over work the clay drying it out. When they return the clay to the empty bag, have a spray bottle filled with water and just blast it as the kids return it. Then close the bag and let it sit overnight. Use that bag of clay first the next time you need clay. In this way you don't let a large pile of clay accumulate that is either too wet or too dry to use.

There are some great slab cutters available for cutting slabs quickly in the classroom. They have a horizontal bar that you can adjust to cut slabs of varying thickness from a pug of clay. With one of these, you can cut clay slabs for your class as

quickly as they can pick up their supplies when they come through the line. Passing out slabs and tools to an entire class can take less than 5 minutes if you use one of these tools.

Clays

I use two types of clays with my students. I use a mid-range stoneware clay that is whitish and is designed to be fired to cone 6 or approximately 2200 degrees Fahrenheit. The other clay body I use is a terra cotta body with grog that I fire to cone 1 or approximately 2100 degrees Fahrenheit. (Please note that these are not the temperatures that most commercial glazes you can purchase in pint jars are fired to. Most of those glazes are fired to cone 06 which is approximately 1800 degrees Fahrenheit.)

In my opinion the absolute worst clay to use with kids in any school is a low-fire white cone 06 clay. This clay matures at approximately 1800 degrees Fahrenheit. There is a big difference between a cone 06 clay body and a cone 6 clay body. That's because there is a 400 degree difference in the temperatures at which they mature. I understand the rationale for a low-fire body, it is bright white and therefore supposed to work well with underglazes and low fire glazes. There are several problems with low-fire cone 06 clays in my opinion. The first is that this clay is made of half ball clay and half talc. Talc is a flux, it makes things melt. Talc is not very plastic. Since half of a low-fire clay body is not plastic, it is not very forgiving when it comes to working with it and drying it for the kiln. The other half of a low-fire clay body is ball clay and this has a high rate of shrinkage which when combined with the talc leads to cracks forming while the clay is drying.

On the other hand, many stoneware clays contain over 70% clay. This makes them much easier to work with because they are more plastic. Since they often contain several different types of clays, the variety of different particle sizes in the clays make a stoneware body much more forgiving when it comes to forming and drying.

The biggest problem that low-fire white clays have is that if the kiln over-fires, these clays can turn into a puddle. If my kiln over-fires and it is full of stoneware clay and glazes, the glazes might run off the pot, but the pots themselves won't melt down into liquid on the kiln shelves. I have seen kilns loaded with low-fire white clay and glazes over-fire and in many cases the kiln was ruined. The glazes melted, then the clay body melted and they both dripped off the sides of the shelf eating a couple of inches deep into the floor of the kiln. That's why I don't recommend or use low-fire white clay bodies in my elementary art classroom.

When it comes to glazing the two clay bodies in my classroom there are two approaches I use. For the whitish stoneware clay, I mix my own cone 6 glazes in five gallon buckets and have the kids dip their projects into these glazes. I usually have

about six different colors in my classroom at one time, though I usually only have two or three out as choices when we glaze. I have a table with a frying pan on it that has a bar of paraffin wax melted in it. I put the buckets on the floor in front of this table. While my students are working on a painting or drawing assignment, I call them up one at a time to glaze their sculptures. I read their name off the bottom of it, dip it into the hot wax, and then help them to get a comfortable grip on it with one of the 10 pairs of dipping tongs I have in the art room. With 10 pairs of tongs, I can keep calling up kids, have them dip their work in the glaze, carry it to the counter and then return the tongs.

Kids don't need a rainbow of glaze colors to choose from every time they work in clay. As long as my students have a choice, they are fine with it. That choice can be as simple as blue or green. White or brown. As long as they get to choose it works out just great. I always put out test tiles or past projects glazed with the colors, so the kids can get an idea of what the fired work will look like. If you ever have a glaze that you want to use up, just label the bucket "mystery glaze", and then tell your class that only the brave kids are allowed to use it. Whenever a kid gets ready to dip their sculpture into it, tell them that you're not sure if they are the kind of kid who is brave enough for that glaze. Naturally every kid will then just have to use that glaze.

I explain to the kids that glazes are rocks that melt to form a glass surface on top of their clay. I ask them if they would go out on the playground and eat rocks. Then I ask them what would happen if they did go out and eat rocks. Some kid always answers, "You'd get sick!" I tell them the same thing is true for the glazes in the art room, so while it's OK if a little gets on your hand while you are glazing, you should go to the sink and wash your hands when you are done so you don't eat accidentally eat any rocks with your food at lunch. My students understand that when you are done glazing, you wash your hands.

Because I make all of my own glazes, I know what is in them, and I don't work with any materials that might be hazardous to kids. I also let kids know that our bodies do need some rocks to stay healthy. These rocks are called minerals. You get these minerals in your body by eating healthy foods. The plants you eat suck up minerals from the ground, and our bodies need these minerals to stay strong and healthy. That's why if they read the side of their cereal box or the back of their vitamin bottle they will see that there are minerals listed on it. These same minerals are in glazes. The only difference is that in the food we eat and the vitamins we take, the amounts are way smaller than you would get if you happened to go outside and eat rocks.

I do use some commercial low-fire glazes in pint jars in my art room, but I have found a way to make them go much farther. I have the kids work with terra cotta clay that I bisque fire to cone 04 which equals 1922 degrees Fahrenheit on my computer controlled kiln. Then I wax the bottoms of their sculptures and they dip it into a cone 1 white majolica glaze. It only costs me around thirty dollars to make a 5 gallon bucket of this glaze. Then I have the kids go to various tables around the art room where I have a

variety of low-fire glazes poured in bowls. The kids then choose the colors they want and paint them over the white base glaze. I then fire their sculptures to cone 1. The commercial low-fire glazes are designed to be fired at 1800 degrees Fahrenheit, but they don't run at all when I use them over my white majolica glaze and fire it to cone 1, which as you may recall is approximately 2100 degree Fahrenheit.

There are two advantages to using this Majolica glazing technique with kids. The first is that the entire surface of the sculpture is glazed and doesn't have any bare spots. Kids tend to leave bare spots if they are only painting on commercial glazes. Dipping into the white majolica base glaze automatically covers the entire surface. The other advantage is that many commercial low-fire glazes require 2-3 coats of glaze in order to become opaque and glossy. Two coats aren't necessary when kids paint low-fire glazes over the top of my Majolica base glaze. The places where the commercial glazes go on thin look like watercolors. Where the kids paint them on thicker, they are more opaque. It's a win-win. No bare spots, beautiful painterly colors and you end up using a lot less expensive commercial glaze because the kids aren't painting on two or three coats.

A third method for finishing clay work that I use is paint. I first bisque fire the kids' work to cone 04. Then I have them paint it using tempera paint. They set their sculptures on the counter on to dry. Then once they are dry, I brush pearlescent acrylic medium over the top of them. I mix this quite liberally with water. I squirt a blob of it into a plastic bowl, then I just add some water from the tap to it. The pearlescent medium is quite shiny. Since it is full of plastic, it helps to seal in the tempera paint. It also gives a multi-colored kid art work unity because it dries to a shiny, glittery-like surface. And there isn't a kid on the planet who doesn't like shiny.

My students then end up with three types of finishes to their sculptures. Subtle, rich cone 6 glazes on stoneware clay. Colorful commercial low-fire glazes over a majolica base glaze on terra cotta clay. And lastly colorful painted surfaces with a shiny metallic sheen also on terra cotta.

Firing your kiln

The school day is usually between 7-8 hours long. That's too short for a kiln to complete its firing cycle. I don't rely on a cone sitter, computer controller or a custodian to shut off my kiln. What I do instead is to begin the firing when I leave the day before, but set things up so that the kiln is firing at a low to medium temperature overnight. Then the next morning when I arrive I can keep an eye on it while I fire it to its final temperature. Here's how I do that. On the kiln that I have that has 6 switches that go from off to on, I know that the kiln cannot reach its top temperature if only half of the switches are set to on. So in the afternoon, I begin firing the kiln, turning one switch up an hour until 3 of them are set to on. Then the next morning when I come in, the kiln is

half way through its firing and I can turn the rest of the 3 switches to on. In this way, I can keep an eye on it to make sure the cone sitter drops and the kiln shuts off. I also have a kiln that I fire that has two knobs that you can set to low, medium or high. To fire this kiln, I start them both on low after lunch, then I turn them up to medium in the afternoon. I fire it overnight on medium, knowing that the kiln will not be able to reach its final temperature while the switches are set to medium. Then the next morning when I arrive, I turn the switches to high and the kiln is done firing rather quickly while I am there to attend to it.

Of course the best kiln to have if you are an art teacher is one that is computer controlled. Then what you can do is set a delay time into your program and have the kiln turn on in the middle of the night. That's my preferred method of firing. I don't like to have my kilns reaching their top temperature when I am not there. This is when bad things can happen like a cone sitter not dropping or a relay on a computer controlled kiln not turning off. So if you plan ahead, you can fire your kilns so that when they are the hottest, you are there to attend to them and can shut them off manually if you need to.

Something that I find in many school kilns is exploded shards of bisque all over the kiln floor. Some elementary teachers will tell their students that their clay project must have had an air bubble in it that caused it to explode in the kiln. The real culprit in bisque firing mishaps is steam. At 212 degrees Fahrenheit, water turns to steam. Clay that is bone dry still has water trapped in it. If a kiln is fired too quickly at the beginning of a firing, then the clay objects inside will explode. The water that is trapped in the clay needs to escape slowly, if the temperature goes up too quickly, this water turns into steam. Steam is an incredibly powerful force. The steam engine changed the world. Steam engines pulled massively heavy trains. The power of water turning to steam is easily enough to cause clay sculptures to blow apart.

There is an easy work around to the steam problem. Since steam forms at 212 degrees Fahrenheit, I program my computer controlled kiln with a hold at 185 degrees Fahrenheit. For normal size kid work, the hold is two hours. For thicker work, I might hold it there for four hours. This is usually enough time to let the water make its way out of the clay without turning it into steam and causing an explosion. In a kiln with a sitter and switches or knobs, you can simulate this hold by firing very slowly on a low setting with the lid open a crack. I sometimes fire my manual kiln overnight with the lid open a crack and the kiln set at it's lowest setting. Then when I come in the next day, I close the lid and move through the rest of the firing.

For glaze firings, I do not fire slowly at the start of the firing process. If I am firing cone 1 majolica glazed wares, I load the kiln, shut the lid, and turn all of the switches on immediately or in the case of variable switches, I set them all to high. With the clays and glazes I use, there is no benefit to going slowly at the beginning of a glaze firing. I want the kiln to get to the desired temperature as quickly as possible, so the kiln gets

full power all at once. On my computer controlled kiln, I program in a rate climb of 200 degrees Fahrenheit per hour. This means that for a cone 6 firing to approximately 2200 degrees Fahrenheit, the firing will take around 11 hours.

A few principles guide my school firings. For bisque, fire slowly at the beginning to allow the water to escape from the clay. For glaze firings go more quickly, there is no benefit to firing slowly at the beginning. Lastly, make sure you are around when your kiln is reaching its final temperature so you can turn it off if something goes awry.

Consequences as the Teacher

My first year as a teacher, I would touch up kids' glazed projects as I was loading the kiln. Then I realized that if I did that, the kids would never learn to glaze correctly themselves. I was short circuiting the feedback that artists get when they make mistakes. So now, the way they glaze it, is the same way that it gets fired. When it comes out of the kiln and they get it back, they get to see the results of their efforts and make appropriate changes in the future to make the work better. When kids turn in wet clay work, I may push a few of the bigger pieces together but it is up to each kid to make sure they have scored, slipped and smoothed the pieces together. Kids in the first couple of years have more things like eyes and arms fall off of sculptures than kids in the upper grades, because after they receive one sculpture with missing eyes, they learn to do a better job the next time. Any pieces that are broken when they come out of the bisque firing do not get to be glazed, I tell them they can go home and try to glue it together with Elmer's glue. Consequences are the best teacher in this case. Kids learn over time that craftsmanship is important. It's not Mr. Post that determines whether or not their project survives the firing, it is up to them.

The one thing I do to make my life easier when collecting wet clay work is to write each kids' name on the bottom. I tell them that I am the person unloading the kiln, so I have to be able to read it. This is also a great way to learn kids' names. I have them tell me the correct spelling of their name as I write it on with a sharp pencil. I have a bisque stamp for each classroom teacher and grade level. Mr. Andrus' sixth grade class stamp reads A-6. To make the bisque stamps, I use a rubber stamp kit and impress the A-6 characters into a clay slab. Then I bisque fire the slab, and press the end of a coil of clay into the slab. I bisque fire this coil stamp and use it on every kids' wet clay project who is in that class.

Shining the Spotlight

In prison movies, they sometimes show a guard in a tower at night shining a bright spotlight around the walls and fences of the prison. As an elementary art teacher, I feel like the guy shining the spotlight for the kids. Wherever I choose to point the spotlight in the art curriculum is the place that gets lit up so the kids can see it. The

prison spotlight can't light up everything at once and neither can I as the art teacher. The great thing about shining the spotlight in the arts is that there are so many good places to point it.

One year I focused the light on some of the iconic, famous images in art. Many of the lessons I taught that year were based on the 10 most famous art works of all time. Naturally I made my own list of which ones I thought were the most important or well known and shared these with the kids. I would reference these famous art works as we worked our way through the art curriculum that year. Another year I worked my way through the art of different cultures across the globe, comparing and contrasting the images and ideas of different people throughout time. (It's amazing how many different cultures make art about fertility. Considering there are 6 billion people on the planet, this must have been an effective strategy.) This past year we have been exploring the idea of genre. The working definition I gave the kids for genre was that a genre is a category of art. We then created art based on the landscape genre, the portrait genre, the fantasy genre etc. The idea of genre helped the kids build a framework for understanding different types of art works. Genres are a shorthand way of describing what type of art an artist creates. If you tell someone you are a landscape painter, a potter or a jazz dancer then immediately it gives the other person an idea of what kind of art you make. Shining the spotlight by looking at famous art works, world cultures or categories of art is a way for a kid to see how art ideas are related. Its a way to teach big ideas to little kids and help create connections in their brains.

Running the spotlight is one of the best parts of being an elementary art teacher. It means the job won't be the same two years in a row. I think the best art programs grow and change the same way that artists grow and change. Every potter thinks that the best pots are going to come out of the next firing. The same is true of good teachers, they always look for new ways to engage their students. They know where to shine the spotlight.

I take the responsibility of being an elementary art teacher very seriously, but I approach it quite playfully. I use humor and kindness to make the art room a brain-friendly place to learn. I think it is imperative that kids develop skills through repeated exposure to authentic art media such as clay and paint. It's also important to let them make creative choices as part of their learning and making process. I try to ask more questions instead of always giving all the answers. When a kid asks me to make something for him or her, I reply. "If I do the making, my brain is the one doing the learning. Go try and do it for yourself and if you are stuck after a few attempts, I will give you a hand." They almost always figure it out for themselves. I give each kid all the latitude he or she needs to soar and be successful or to fail and start over again if needed. The lessons I teach are based on big ideas so that the kids learn that art involves critical thinking along with the development of skills. My favorite part of engaging kids with humor, stories, silly poems, and hands-on learning is that so much of

the real learning sneaks in through the side door when they aren't even aware they're learning. They just think they're having fun, and the way I see it, that's a good thing.