It Started with the Apple

We have all enjoyed or suffered through—depending on your perspective—painting the perfect still life in elementary school. At best, we were focused on using new brush strokes or choosing the most vibrant colors to reproduce that apple. At worst, we were too busy comparing our work to our neighbor’s to learn much at all. And to be sure, we were all just responding to our teacher’s decision on subject matter instead of figuring out how to create something that was a communication of ourselves.

As it turns out, there is another way.

Teaching for Artistic Behavior

Teaching for Artistic Behavior (TAB) is a nationally recognized approach to art education that gives students the opportunity to work more authentically as artists, making choices about their work in collaboration with teachers who are responsive to their ideas. This approach gives students the freedom to make choices about what they want to create, what they want to talk about in their work, and what medium to use—all with the goal of taking ownership of their learning.

And for the past two years, under the leadership of Mr. Nate Rogers, Upper School Art Department Chair and JrK-12 Visual Arts Curriculum Lead, and Ms. Krista Johns, Lower School Art Teacher, Cannon School has piloted a TAB-based program for the visual arts. Mr. Rogers has incorporated TAB into his Visual Foundations and Studio Arts I and II classes, and Ms. Johns has introduced her students in first through fourth grades to TAB. Based on their success, all visual arts classes in all divisions at Cannon School will be choice-based starting in the 2016-2017 school year.

The Scaffolding Surrounding Autonomy

But what exactly does “choice-based” mean? Mr. Rogers smiled as he began to explain, “It sounds like utter chaos, right? It sounds like we’re saying we just let students do whatever they want. But really, it’s not that. It’s very structured—there is scaffolding that surrounds the autonomy.”

“When I piloted the program, I found that I needed more structure and more robust rubrics,” Mr. Rogers continued. “Before, I was giving them all the structure through the narrow assignment. What’s changed

Mr. Nate Rogers, Upper School Art Department Chair and JrK-12 Visual Arts Curriculum Lead, and Austin Morris ’18

Teaching for Artistic Behavior

A new approach to the visual arts gives students the freedom to take ownership of their learning.
is their projects have opened up. We have curricular goals and skills I want the students to master. Now I’ll teach them skills, give them goals, and say, ‘You pick from the mediums you’ve learned. Here are the things I want you exploring.’ They’ll determine how they show me their learning. It might be part of their sketchbook, a small project, or a big project incorporating a number of smaller components. Then it’s just problem solving—I can see where they need more scaffolding, more support, more instruction. This allows for really deep, rich conversation and exploration for the students.”

And that deep exploration is not confined to Upper School students. Ms. Johns explained, “My third and fourth graders are planning their own projects based on things that matter to them, memories they have, what they’re interested in. On any given day, there will be kids working in sculpture, collage, painting, and drawing. What I’ve really found is it allows them to take more risks because they aren’t comparing what they’re doing to someone else because everyone is working on something different. It’s 100 percent the authentic work of each individual child.”

Beyond the Classroom

“This comes down to the root of why we teach,” Mr. Rogers went on to share. “Those skills in planning and problem solving serve students well beyond the art room—they are life skills that prepare students for success in all future endeavors. No matter what our students go on to do in any field or industry, they will have projects to execute or tasks to complete and will need to figure out what they need to know, what they need to do, and how they need to do it.”

“It’s a really dynamic environment,” he continued. “Each student has something they want to explore. They’re showing me work I would have never seen before, because it’s so personal. And that’s what’s so exciting.”

Ms. Johns took it a step further, “I hope that when kids bring their artworks home, they have conversations with their parents. When I’m talking to the kids, every piece has a story behind it. And you might not know that if you just look at the artwork. But then, when you hear the reason why they created this piece of work—it takes it to another level. But if you don’t have that conversation, you might never know, because they are 7 or 8 years old. But they know what matters to them, and I think it’s important we listen to what they have to say.”

Listening to What They Say

We agreed with Ms. Johns and interviewed a group of sophomores in Mr. Rogers’ class. They had a lot to say about the new approach.

Jordan Besh ’18 began by describing how she has taken a very personal approach to her subject matter by depicting surgeries she has experienced in a series of mixed media drawings. “Well, I guess my health issues in the past, they have truly made me who I am today. They’ve affected my tennis. They’ve affected school, and I’ve learned a lot from recovering from those. Getting to express that and bring awareness to who you are is really cool.”

Austin Morris ’18, on the other hand, has worked on depicting an otherworldly paracosm in several large-scale ink drawings. “It’s made it a lot more fun because Mr. Rogers guides, but it’s not really set in stone. That’s really helped me. Mr. Rogers is very flexible with the schedule, because my bigger pieces take months to complete. I would never have done something to the scale I’m doing now if he didn’t let us choose. We get great work done, but it’s not oppressive, so to speak.”

Abby Muraca ’18 shared how her artwork has made her think more openly and how art is almost a therapeutic time of day. “I got to test out what I wanted to do. I found a theme with my work and stuck with it. It’s a comic series working with people’s inner emotions that they’re afraid to share. It’s just kind of personal experiences sometimes, like dealing with friends and family, and so I can kind of put it in a different way through art.” She continued, “Art is definitely a period of the day I look forward to. This is a judgment-free zone. And I feel really close to the people in my art class. I just love the environment.”

And Ross Bertram ’18 took our thoughts in as many directions as he takes his art. “Mr. Rogers always tells me I have a really technical eye. I can see things in a lot of different ways, and that’s kind of what my art focuses on. I cater to lines and structure rather than form and softer things. The freedom he gives us really helps me because I don’t like to stick on one thing. I like to use marker and paint and draw with pencil, pen, and whatnot.” He continued, “In other classes, it’s helped me a lot too, just to see things in different ways or help me approach a problem differently. It’s also helped me kind of slow down my thinking and think before I finish a problem, or think before I speak—stuff like that.”

Listening is always time well spent.