

Action Research Brief

Understanding how sketchbook learning activities influence
the creative process in a high school art 1 class.

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INTRODUCTION

The idea for this research project was born out of my desire to support students to understand and trust their creative process. My first goal was to understand how different types of sketchbook learning activities could build knowledge that could be transferred to a summative assignment. My second reason for this research was to learn how to move students away from reliance on examples.

Research Focus: What happens when students use sketchbook journaling activities to develop artistic skills that can be transferred and applied to their own creative process?

Context/Setting: The school that I am at is a Title I, urban high school with roughly 1,200 students. The school ranks as 3rd most diverse district in the United States. Our population is 18% black, 7% white, 54% Hispanic, 9% Asian, 12% other smaller groups. The research was conducted in an Art 1 class with 36 students ranging from 9th-12th grade.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Round 1 Interventions: The interventions that I created for Round One focused on providing students with pre-learning sketchbook activities to support their creative process. The 4 areas of the creative process that I focused on were 1. Practice, 2. Revision, 3. Exploration, and 4. Inspiration. I chose these four areas because they are a way for students to build knowledge, while becoming familiar with their creative process. My intention for each of the four areas was to create an individual sketchbook activity to scaffold learning. Sketchbook entry #1 - Practice,

focused on an introduction to Frottage/texture-rubbing. The activity introduced students to a variety of materials for their texture rubbings, such as oil pastel, crayon, graphite stick, and colored pencils. The students were introduced to ideas about how the marks will change with pressure, direction, and how different materials make different marks. Sketchbook entry #2 - Revision, the sketchbook activities focused on introducing students to techniques artist use to express an emotion when drawing a face. Students used incomplete masks to express their particular emotion. Sketchbook entry #3 - Exploration, focused on how to create a variation by repeated shapes and adding small changes. Sketchbook entry #4 – Inspiration, continued the idea of variation and asked students to apply emotion and pattern to a mask from different cultures.

Research from Akca & Kavak (2021), explores how the creative process can be applied to other disciplines outside of art. My intension is to teach students problem solving skills via Art. The creative process offers students an opportunity to reflect on, what is working, what is not working, and how can adjustments be made? As a teacher, I am also observing and adjusting my instruction when needed. The sketchbook activities were designed with this problem-solving strategy to aid our class in developing an appreciation for our creative and learning process.

DATA ANALYSIS METHODS

Data: Student work samples, Likert scales, classroom observations.

Qualitative Data: I analyzed my data from an evidence-based rubric. The data from the work samples were coded as, high, medium, or low, based on the quality of the work. Likert scales (1-5) were used to collect data on how students felt about their learning/creative process. To analyze the data and gather evidence, I assigned codes to individual skills and compared the development of skills in a linear progression through the texture rubbing sketchbook activities

from step 1 (Practice), to step 2 (Revision), to step 3 (Exploration), and finally to step 4 (Inspiration.) Other data columns were compared in a non-linear manner to see how certain parts of the process affected other pieces.

Quantitative Data: Likert scales (1-5) were used to collect data on how the texture rubbing sketchbook activities affected the student's process. Excel spreadsheets were used to calculate an average for survey results and student work samples.

Round 1 Findings: By having four different parts to the learning activities, it was difficult for me to keep track of all the pieces. It was also difficult for students to know what step they were at in the process. There was confusion about when to turn in certain parts of the sketchbook for feedback. Students relied too heavily on me to tell them what the next step was. After the first round the data showed that students were not transferring knowledge from the beginning activity to the summative assignment. The whole round took 19 school days to complete. Students lost track of which step they were on, when to turn in work for feedback, and generally lost interest in the assignment.

Connections: Going forward into Round 2, I plan to make more streamlined sketchbook activities. Each stage of the creative process will not have its own sketchbook packet.

Round 2 Interventions: The intervention I created for Round Two focused on increasing the quality/craftsmanship of student's solutions. To increase the quality, I embedded a definition of a high, medium and low-quality example via a rubric within the Ornate Cartouche sketchbook activities. My second intervention was to provide students with multiple opportunities to try

their own ideas and thus become comfortable trusting their creative process. The purpose eventually is to develop confidence in the students to express their own creative ideas.

The Round 2 interventions were developed to guide students through their creative process by telling students what the expectations are from the teacher. By giving students a way to access immediate feedback, teachers can create a positive learning environment, Cunningham (2018). The rubric acts as a reflective process, which was shown by Cunningham (2018) to influence other parts of a student's education.

DATA ANALYSIS METHODS

Data: Student work samples, Likert scales, classroom observations.

Qualitative Data: An evidence-based rubric was used to assessment, high, medium, and low quality, based on how students followed directions and applied their knowledge. To analyze the data, I compared the student's solution to the embedded rubric that I provided for a high, medium and low-quality solution. I looked for changes in the quality for individual sketchbook activities to find trends through the process from beginning to the end. My data for progress was based on the student's ability to show evidence of improvement, understanding, and/or creative process as they developed. My data points were concerned with the development of skills, as students were required to use more of their prior knowledge to create their solutions, and thus improve upon the tasks near the end of the sketchbook activities.

Quantitative Data: to collect quantitative data, I used a Likert scale that focused on how the student interacted with the sketchbook activities. The student's answers were entered into an Excel spreadsheet to quantified the numbers into an average to find trends within the data.

Round 2 Findings: In this round I learned that the timeframe for a round of sketchbook activities was a balance between providing enough time to see growth in the student's creative process, and having a high-quality expectation for student's work. From my classroom observations, students were unclear about the amount of time our class would be working on the ornate cartouche activities. Another factor that influenced the timeframe was my intention for students to focus on a higher quality solution. The data shows that 62% of students felt confident about the pace of this assignment. 2 students reported that the assignment was too fast. The data also showed that 7 out of 15 students started with a high-quality-solution, and were able to maintain the understanding through the entire assignment. 5 students maintained a medium level of quality. 3 students maintained a low level of quality. The findings showed that the students in these categories were consistent through the ornate cartouche sketchbook activities and into the summative assignment.

Next, my research is focused on how to develop the confidence to allow students to engage in the creative process while moving away from the reliance on examples. By teaching students how to create a variation, I was able to steer students away from their reliance on copying examples. Students began working with variation in Round 1, and again were asked to use variation in Round 2, to see how their knowledge might be transferred to a different type of creative process. 92% of students reported that they felt the assignment allowed them to try their own ideas.

From my findings in Round 2, I now see that it will be necessary to build a growth mindset so students will, "trust that their ideas are good." My findings showed me that students are able to make variations of examples to find their own solution, but I was verbally reassuring the students that their ideas were good. This round showed me that I need to adjust my instruction away from me telling students, into a method that they gather their own understanding to trust their process.

The embedded rubrics were a positive scaffold for more than half of students. Students feel more comfortable to try their own creative ideas, if they have just enough scaffolded support. The data for the embedded rubric revealed that 8 out of 15 students found the higher expectations were beneficial. The remaining 7 students were not swayed by the embedded rubrics. This finding can be supported by the average grade for this assignment was a B (20.2 pts out of 25 possible points.) This finding was juxtaposed with the finding that 81% of students reported a feeling of being prepared by the learning activity (Likert survey results = 4.1 out of 5.)

From my classroom observations I find that I am moving toward a method that is opening up the opportunities for students to feel confident and comfortable enough to let themselves try their ideas. The way students interact with and understand the sketchbook activities shows me that I am finding a delicate balance between how to provide examples and scaffolding to support students, but not too much so they copy or follow the examples too closely.

Connections: I was very happy to see that 9 out of 15 students made a 100% unique solution, and did not rely on the examples. The connection between Round 2 and Round 3, will be a continuation of embedded rubrics within the sketchbook learning activities. Students need to be connected to how they can achieve the highest level of quality. The rubric was presented in multiple forms to be accessed by the students. To integrate the use of a rubric into the next Round I will need to develop ways for students to directly interact with what is required for a high-quality solution.

Round 3 Interventions: In Round 3 the sketchbook activities were focused on providing students opportunities to develop the skill of abstraction. I introduced the process of abstraction

as the, “simplification and rearrangement of visual information.” The concepts for abstraction were scaffolded by looking at abstract art by Theo Van Doesberg, 8 stages of abstraction of a cow. Students were given multiple opportunities to practice and apply how they saw best to simplify and rearrange. Students were given directions to apply the elements and principles of art to help develop ideas. A list of elements and principles were included on the last page of the abstraction sketchbook activity.

This round of activities, focused more on allowing students more freedom to create with a growth mindset, and confidence to trust their own creative process. To support a growth mindset, I embedded Quotes in large red type at the top of the abstraction sketchbook activity. One example of a quote was, “Give yourself permission to make art your way.” Research from Xiaoyu, Xu, & Zhang, (2022) found that a growth mindset can increase in divergent thinking solutions. I tried not to provide too many examples as inspiration, so I would not influence the student’s own ideas. This round was focused on allowing students to make their own solutions and trust their process and to feel comfortable trying different techniques.

For this round I gave students multiple opportunities to create solutions to open the possibilities for the students to try their ideas without worrying about messing up, or losing points on their assignments. The abstraction sketchbook offered 5 opportunities to practice, revise, and explore the process of abstraction, and the summative assignment required students to create 6, individual, 4” x 4” solutions. Students were instructed to discard an unwanted square if they were not satisfied with their abstract solution.

For this round I also continued the embedded rubrics within the sketchbook activities. This gave students a target to hit, and to allow me to push, or encourage students through their learning by pointing out exactly what was required in each activity.

DATA ANALYSIS METHODS

Data: Student work samples, Likert scales, classroom observations.

Qualitative data: To analyze the data from this round I collected classroom observations to find evidence of how embedded growth mindset quotes within the abstraction sketchbook activity, influenced the learning, and the summative assignment. I compared student's solutions, by creating groups of projects and observing their process and choice of materials and technique. These groups were helpful to see where outlying examples appeared. To understand where the learning first appeared, I referred back to the student's sketchbook to find evidence of how the student was introduced to the idea.

Quantitative data: To analyze the quantitative data in Round 3, I used a Likert scale with accompanying descriptors. The numbers from the Likert scale were entered into an Excel spreadsheet to generate an average.

Round 3 Findings: The findings from my qualitative data are focused around 3 areas. First, the format of the assignment, second, the materials that were used in the assignment, and third, the influence of a growth mindset quotes on the student's creative process. Based on the high score on this assignment I believe that this round of data provided the clearest picture of what it looks like when students are generating their own solutions, and transferring their ideas to their final assignments. This directly relates back to my research question, "What happens when students use sketchbook journaling activities to develop artistic skills that can be transferred and applied to their own creative process?"

SYNTHESIS OF RESULTS

The findings reveal that the benefits of a sketchbook activities are not one single factor, but a collection of different parts that will all support the student's creative process. There are three major findings from my three Rounds of research. The first finding was, that the format of the sketchbook activities was a factor in how the students responded to the assignment. The second finding is focused on understanding the balance in instructional formats and supports for prior knowledge and developing knowledge that also allow students the space and flexibility to engage their creative process. The third finding that was revealed was; to assess creativity and transferable knowledge, the teacher should look at a wider collection of data points, over a longer period of time to accurately determine if an activity was useful to build knowledge, or allow access to the creative process.

My first finding revealed that how I format the sketchbook activities will affect how the students respond to the assignment. In Round 1, I made the sketchbook activities too long, and disjointed. This finding was revealed by classroom observations. Students relied on me to inform them of what the next step was. The formatting did not intuitively lead the student. This finding was also further reinforced by the finding that students did not submit intermediate examples to me to get feedback. Students kept their practice pieces to complete as a final project. The sketchbook activities were intended to create a seamless flow and connect the stages of the creative process. But instead the multiple, disjointed pieces caused confusion.

My second finding in regards to my research question, is about, balancing how to create an example of what the project might look like, without overwhelming or blocking out space for the student's own creativity. A few very useful tools were born out of this process. The first tool that I will continue to use and develop in my teaching will be the embedded rubrics within

sketchbook activities. From my classroom observations I found it very helpful to support students in an efficient manner by reviewing the pieces within the rubric. As a result of those conversations the students were able to understand the expectations and feel comfortable that their solutions would work. The second tool that was created, and that will continue to be developed will be the use of growth mindset quotes to reinforce students to trust their ideas and not rely on an example to copy. Again, my classroom observations showed me that by giving students “permission” to be creative, they are more likely to investigate their creative process.

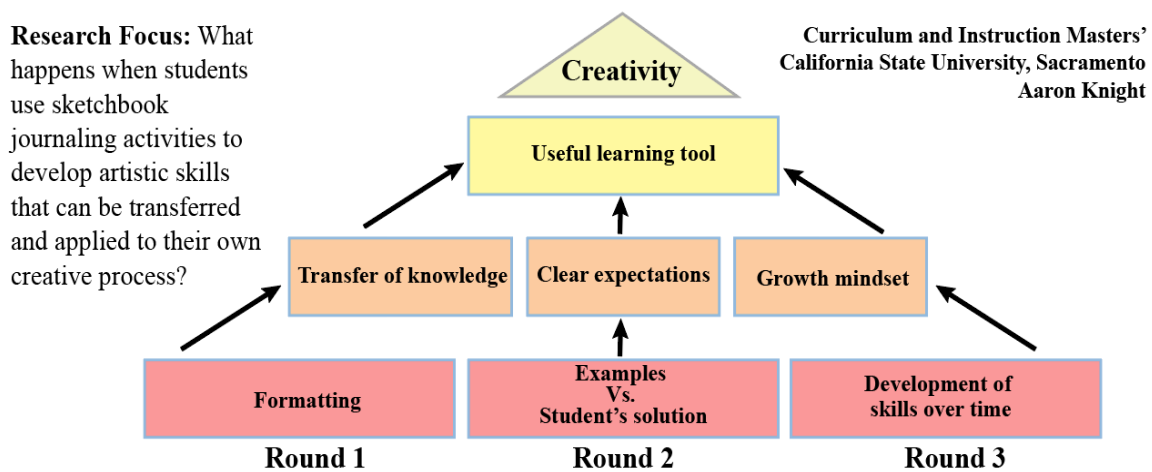
The third finding in regards to my research question, revealed that students should not be expected to level up their creative vision and show evidence within one activity or assignment, and should be observed/assessed over a longer period of time. My research question is essentially looking for building and transferring knowledge. My Rounds of research and data analysis have shown me that my perspective needs to be widened, beyond what I was able to do in these three Rounds. This is a result of my own growth, and refinement as my understanding of how to teach becomes deeper. The research has shown me that how I create activities and deliver instruction will also change and develop over time, as I learn.

The thinking behind my research was how to minimize student’s reliance on examples and allow the student to trust their own creative process. My interpretation of my findings, is that students want to, “get the right answer” and thus often find it best to be safe and get close to premade solutions that the teacher provided. By providing targets via rubrics and encouraging students with quotes, to trust themselves, I have seen that I am able to walk a fine line between providing and developing knowledge and allowing the creative process to work.

My interpretation of these findings has shown me, that to become a great teacher I must continue to make adjustments to my tools and look for new ways to provide knowledge. How

students learn is not a one-size fits all approach. Teachers need to continuously be engaged in their process, of teaching.

The pyramid below represents the three Rounds of research and the main findings as the based layer in red. The next layer in orange, represents the intervention that was used in the sketchbook activity for that Round. The yellow layer represents the guiding question, are sketchbook learning activities a useful tool? The top layer in green is the purpose, or direction that guides the research. “How can I support students to understand and use their creative process?”



DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In conclusion, my research has allowed me a new perspective on my teaching practice, by forcing me to be aware of how I structure learning, support growth, and encourage students. If my goal is to foster the creative process in students, then I need to have activities that provide students with the tools to build knowledge, and trust themselves as they practice, revise, and explore, while finding inspiration and new ways to express their ideas.

The implications of these findings will be a starting point as I continue to hone future sketchbook learning activities for other art projects we do in our class. My plan is to continue to improve which format styles students prefer. Students were very helpful in offering me ideas that they think would be helpful to their learning.

The most revealing implication from this research was exploring how to balance developing skills, and techniques without oversaturating the student's own creative vision. I feel that I have a new understanding of how to work on this razor's edge. As a ten-year veteran teacher this idea makes me feel excited that I still have a lot to learn to become the teacher that I want to be.

Lastly, the implication that I am very surprised that I did not see when I started this research was, that learning and transferable knowledge takes time. I feel like as I was developing my research and doing the analysis, I was expecting to see evidence within a very narrow set of data points. After completing the Rounds of research, I can now see that creating knowledge that can be transferred requires more time, space, and in a variety of different types of assignments. "As teachers we plant seeds, and wait to see if they grow."

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