



Betinte village, Syria, 2021. Young people light sky lanterns.  
MUHAMMED SAID/GETTY IMAGES

## **Values, influences and identities:**

# **Understanding yourself as a mentor and teacher of art and design**

**Robert Watts**

**2019**

This is a draft version of a chapter I contributed towards a book aimed at mentors of student teachers of art and design. The project seems to have stalled. If you want to reference it in your assignment, you could try...

Watts, R. (2019) *Values, influences and identities: Understanding yourself as a mentor and teacher of art and design* (unpublished book chapter)

## **Values, influences and identities: Understanding yourself as a mentor and teacher of art and design**

### **Introduction**

The process of mentoring beginning teachers offers opportunities for experienced practitioners to reflect on their own values, influences and identities as teachers of art and design. Beginning teachers watch experienced colleagues very closely. As a mentor you have a responsibility not only to model good practice in the art room, but also to articulate the principles that underpin this practice, to explore and explain the many decisions you make every day. While your teaching experience and classroom confidence may enable you to make these decisions instinctively, beginning teachers will need help to unravel the secrets of your success: strategies that come easily to you will appear mysterious to them. And while these strategies may be underpinned by sound values, the pace of classroom life may mean that opportunities rarely arise for you to pause, reflect upon and articulate these values. Communicating your values about teaching and learning in art and design is a key part of the process of becoming an effective mentor.

However, the process of modelling and sharing your values with beginning teachers can be complicated. In the early stages of their career, almost all of your mentee's experience in the classroom will have been as a pupil rather than a teacher, and many find that long-buried memories of classroom life rise unexpectedly to the surface. In my role as a lecturer in art and design education I have observed hundreds of lessons. Recently I visited a London comprehensive school to observe a student teacher midway through her final placement; she was a gentle, quietly spoken young woman who was always happy, thoughtful and positive during her university lectures. However, I saw none of these qualities in the lesson; she shouted at children, criticised their behaviour and found little to praise – or to value – in their work.

I left the classroom and stood in the corridor by a long wall of lockers storing children's belongings. Looking at their little labels, I saw they offered a metaphor for the unsettling transformation I had just witnessed. In this first locker, I thought, are stored the values that this student teacher has learned from her lectures. In this second locker are values that she has learned from her mentor. *In all these other lockers*, however, stretching along the length of the corridor, are the many, many values – negative values – she remembers from her own experience of school as a child. It was these values that were dictating her approach to teaching.

After the lesson the mentor and I talked this through with the student, who acknowledged the extent to which her own personal experience of education – in schools where rules were strictly enforced, and children discouraged from speaking – was exerting a negative influence on her own teaching. Like many other beginning teachers, this woman was in the process of unravelling the threads of her own education and re-constructing a model that would eventually make her an effective teacher, one who absorbed new influences and developed sound values to underpin her practice. Mentors have an important part to play in this complex process – and those who are

aware of the values that have influenced their own identities as art teachers will be best placed to provide appropriate support.

## **Objectives of chapter**

This chapter will prompt you to reflect on your values, influences and identities as a teacher, mentor and creative practitioner. In doing so, it should also help you to support beginning teachers as they work towards meeting the Teaching Standards: it offers strategies for promoting good progress and outcomes (TS2), highlights the value of good subject knowledge (TS3) and the importance of planning and teaching well-structured lessons (TS4). Above all, it will offer ways of helping beginning teachers to meet the first Teaching Standard: to set high expectations which inspire, motivate and challenge pupils; to establish a stimulating environment and to set challenging goals and to demonstrate positive attitudes and values. The chapter will encourage you to reflect critically on what has influenced your attitudes and values as an art educator, and on how you promote these values through your classroom practice.

The chapter begins by reflecting on some theoretical perspectives on the values of art education. It will then prompt you to reflect on your own values as a teacher of art and design and to understand what has shaped your principles as both a creative practitioner and teacher of art and design. The chapter focuses on the question of how you can articulate these values to beginning teachers, through your planning, teaching and your reflection on outcomes.

### *Box 1 – Chapter objectives:*

*By the end of the chapter you should be able to answer the following questions:*

*What are your values as a teacher of art and design?*

*What has influenced these values?*

*How can you communicate your values to beginning teachers?*

## **Values in art education**

*'Miss... why are we doing this?'* It's a question I often hear children ask when I observe lessons taught by beginning teachers. A few decades ago, it was a question that generally prompted teachers to reply, *'Because I'm telling you to.'* But today's teachers need more considered responses up their sleeves, answers that not only help children to understand the reasons why we make art but that also reflect their own personal philosophies for teaching and learning in the subject. There is no shortage of literature that reflects on the value of art education and, while no two art educators articulate their priorities in quite the same way, there is plenty of common ground between the views of different authors. But before reading any further, you might find it useful to list your own reasons why art should be taught in schools. Imagine being asked that awkward question in class. What would be your instinctive response? Or what would

be your considered response – what would you come away *wishing* you had said in reply to the question ‘*Miss... why are we doing this?*’

Many responses to this question will include the word ‘creativity’; we make art because we want – or even *need* – to be creative. The national curriculum for schools in England proposes that art and design embody ‘some of the highest forms of human creativity’, while art education ‘should engage, inspire and challenge pupils, equipping them with the knowledge and skills to experiment, invent and create their own works’ (DfE 2013). Few people would disagree that creativity is a *good thing*. Yet even fewer would agree on what, exactly, it means; creativity is a disputed term and hard to define. Space does not permit a full discussion of interpretations here, but mentors could begin by looking to Robinson’s (1999) definition – ‘Imaginative activity fashioned so as to produce outcomes that are both original and of value’ – or to Wyse and Ferrari’s (2015): ‘A person’s ability to create something that is regarded by appropriately qualified people as new [/original] and of value’. Each perspective you investigate will help you to refine your own notion of the term.

One theory of the value of art education is that artistic activity is instinctive, something that humans do naturally, and have done for many thousands of years (Dutton 2009). Authors who have explored art making in early childhood emphasise the value of ‘child art’, spontaneous artistic activity made without adult intervention: ‘Don’t impose your own images on a child,’ wrote Victor Lowenfeld, ‘Never give the work of one child to another. Never let a child copy anything’ (Lowenfeld 1947, quoted in Cox 1992). Further reading should take you to a range of recent writing on the theme of the value of art. In 1999 Swift and Steers re-set the agenda for art education with a ‘manifesto’ that drew upon the principles of ‘difference, plurality, and independent thought’ (1999: 7), arguing that teachers needed to adopt innovative, contemporary art practices in order to make the subject meaningful to pupils in a rapidly changing society.

Should you want to reflect in greater depth on perspectives on the value of art education, two authors offer essential texts on the subject. Firstly, in *Why we Make Art and Why it is Taught* (2010), Richard Hickman provides a comprehensive overview of authors’ perspectives on the value of art education, drawing on the theories of various educators including Herbert Read (1943), Howard Gardner (1973) and Arthur Efland (1990). Hickman emphasises that it is important for teachers to make explicit the values that are often implicit in their work – in other words, to step back, reflect and articulate how art is valuable because it can not only stimulate creativity but also help us to question existing knowledge, provide opportunities take risks, manage failure and to communicate ideas, aspirations and values (Hickman 2010: 48). He concludes by arguing:

I believe that the value of art lies in its potential to give new vision... to surprise, to break down barriers to thinking... [to] enable individuals to develop their understanding of themselves and the world around them. Through making, experimenting with materials and critically engaging with a range of visual forms, people celebrate their humanity.

Hickman 2010: 157-158

A second essential source of reflection can be found in *The Arts and the Creation of Mind* (2002), in which Elliot Eisner builds upon ideas he had previously explored over some 30 years. He proposed five principles for learning in art and design:

*Art education should help students:*

- To give pride of place to what is distinctive about the arts
- To foster the growth of artistic intelligence.
- To learn how to create satisfying visual images, how to see and respond to... visual forms and how to understand the role the arts play in culture
- To recognize what is personal, distinctive, and even unique about themselves and their work
- To secure aesthetic forms of experience in everyday life.

(adapted from Eisner 2002: pp. 42-45)

Eisner's principles offer an inclusive vision of art education. He identifies the process of *making* art as only one of several key aspects of the subject – art education can also enrich our experiences beyond the art room or the gallery, a notion he encapsulates beautifully when describing how it can help us ‘to secure aesthetic forms of experience in everyday life. As one Chinese scholar is said to have commented, “First I see the hills in the painting, then I see the painting in the hills.” After a while it is not art that imitates life; it is life that imitates art’. (Eisner 2002: 45).

Each of Eisner's principles is worthy of reflection. You will probably already be making connections between his words on this page and your actions in the classroom. Some may connect with more immediacy than others but be re-assured that you need not subscribe to one over another. Rather, try to be conscious of how these principles are complementary rather than conflicting – at times you will draw on one principle to inspire your teaching, at times another.

*Box 2 – Art educators' values*

*List three values identified by art educators that connect with your own experience of teaching and learning in art and design – and three more that you feel you need to reflect upon in greater depth.*

## **Your values as a teacher of art and design**

Almost all teachers of art and design will have experienced learning in an art school environment. Whether you trained as a painter, sculptor, printmaker, architect, graphic designer, ceramicist or fashion designer you will almost certainly have found your time at art school to be one of rapidly changing values and identities, a time when you were challenged to rethink what you thought you already knew. As you take on the role of mentor it is worth reflecting on how the experience of being a beginning teacher is, in some ways, similar to a student's first year in art school. Beginning teachers, like art students, experience a rapid re-appraisal of their values and identities. As they move swiftly from being a painter, designer or ceramicist to becoming a teacher they need to make sense of their shifting identities. During this period of transition they need to

reflect critically on the knowledge and understanding they acquired through their art school education and to assess how it influences their values as an art educator.

Our values should enable us to define ourselves as art educators. While some may be shared, no two art teachers will hold precisely the same values – the notion of individuality is widely valued by art teachers. Yet, despite our desire for individuality, we can never quite ‘be ourselves’ in the classrooms. As teachers, we are *edited* versions of ourselves – we foreground aspects of our personalities that help us to be effective in the classroom while marginalising those that might disrupt the process. Your values will influence what you prioritise in your teaching, your expectations of children and the ways in which you interact with them in the classroom, and before we can understand the children we teach, we need to understand ourselves. So what are your values as an artist, craftsperson or designer? What has influenced these values? And how do your values inform your approach to teaching art and design?

***(i) What are your values as an artist, craftsperson or designer?***

You might begin to answer this question by reflecting on whether you identify specifically as either an artist, craftsperson or designer, or whether you actively seek to challenge such boundaries. This is an intriguing theme to reflect upon, one that Grayson Perry memorably drew attention to in his acceptance speech when awarded the 2003 Turner Prize, noting that ‘It’s about time a transvestite potter won the Turner Prize’. Perry was hinting here that the contemporary art world perceived his identity as a ceramicist – pottery being one of the less fashionable processes – as far more problematic than his identity as a cross-dresser. He was also highlighting how winning a prestigious award for contemporary art meant that an individual could no longer be defined as an artist or craftsperson simply by the media they used in their work: what mattered were the maker’s values and their awareness of how their work was both conceived and perceived within a broader cultural context.

Grayson Perry’s challenge should prompt you to question yourself about your own values and identities. Do you value being an expert in a particular aspect of art, craft or design? Or do you enjoy experimenting with unfamiliar processes and working across different disciplines? Do you value the use of traditional media such as drawing, painting or printmaking in your work? Or have you embraced the potential of new technologies and digital media? Do you value visual work that communicates a clear message to the viewer? Or are you more interested in images and objects with ambiguous qualities that audiences can interpret in multiple ways? Do you value the aesthetic qualities of art and design? Or do you believe that artists should be principally concerned with communicating meaning through their work, perhaps through challenging aesthetic conventions? Do you value the work of ‘great’ artists for inspiration? Or do you seek out new work by contemporary practitioners? Each of these questions, to a greater or lesser extent, should help you to define your values as a maker of art, craft or design.

While these issues are raised here in the form of ‘either/or’ questions, you will appreciate that you need not subscribe to one set of responses and reject another – you can be amazed by Rachel Whiteread’s sculptures and still be entranced by Rembrandt’s paintings. In fact, some experienced teachers find, as their identities shift from artist to

artist/teacher, that they are able to engage with a far wider range of visual media than they did before becoming teachers. Whereas artists can often become immersed in studying work that connects closely with their own practice, teachers are able to take on board a broader range of influences. You may have found that you now approach works of art, craft or design with your ‘teacher goggles’ on: the work might not directly appeal to *you* but you recognize its potential to inspire your pupils. Consequently, your values as an artist, craftsperson or designer can happily co-exist with your values as a teacher.

***(ii) What has influenced your values?***

One useful way of understanding what might motivate your pupils to learn is to reflect on the values that have influenced your own development as a creative practitioner. At the time of writing there is a fashionable notion in contemporary discourse that we communicate best by *telling stories* about ourselves, accounts of events that may have seemed inconsequential at the time but, on reflection, take on significance. My own story, for example, would start with a paper boy who delivered the wrong newspaper to my house one Sunday morning in the late 1970s. As a teenager I’d never seen a colour supplement before, and this edition featured on its cover a reproduction of a recently re-discovered painting by Constable, of Dedham Vale in Essex. I kept the magazine for many months – the paper boy didn’t make the same mistake twice – and grew to love the little landscape. Forty years on, there are several books about Constable on the shelf behind me as I write, and I often visit the Victoria and Albert Museum to see the large-scale sketches his widow sold to the museum for a few pounds after his death. And though I never made a painting that looked anything like Constable’s work, I often ‘see’ his landscapes in the real world – his paintings helped me to notice and to value my own environment.

Moments that change our perspectives on art are memorable. Most art teachers will have a similar story to tell, and many describe how art school influenced their outlook. What was your own experience? Did tutors encourage you to value the art, craft and design of the past? Or were you persuaded to draw inspiration from contemporary practice? Were there certain techniques tutors taught to enable you to complete specific projects? Or were you expected to be different from other students, to make work that was unmistakably your own? Were you expected to articulate reasons for decisions you made about your practical work? Or were you encouraged to resist intellectualising your practice, to follow your instincts and ‘go with the flow’? What you draw from your art school experience is particularly significant because it is a key element of what you have experienced in the past – and of what you should want your own students to experience in the future.

***(iii) How do your values inform your teaching of art, craft and design?***

Reflecting on the questions raised above should help you to articulate your values in art, craft and design. But how can these values inform your approach to teaching? Consider the following questions. Do you depend upon well-established schemes of work inherited from your predecessors when planning and teaching your lessons? Or do you draw fresh inspiration for your planning from contemporary art practice and

students' own visual culture? Do you believe your students' work should be recognizable as *your* students' work? Or do you encourage them to make decisions that help make their work distinctive from that of other students? Do you expect students to follow your instructions in order to reach prescribed outcomes? Or do you provide starting points from which they are able to make a range of diverse responses? Your responses to questions like these will help you to define yourself as a teacher of art and design – in much the same way as you will have previously sought to define yourself as a practitioner of art, craft or design.

While you may share some essential values with colleagues in your department, think about what makes you different from them, or different to your colleagues in other subject areas and other schools. Or think of it this way – picture two of your students waiting at the bus stop at the end of the school day and imagine they are talking about your art lesson. When one of them asks *What's your art teacher like?* what does the other say in response? What do you think they would say? What do you *hope* they would say? And how might their responses reflect your values for art education?

### *Box 3 - You as a creative practitioner*

*Take a critical look at your personal journey from pupil to student to artist / craftsman / designer to teacher and create a visual map of your influences as a creative practitioner and art educator. Where are the connections and contrasts? What were your 'moments of realisation?'*

## **How can you communicate your values to trainee teachers?**

Your values as a teacher of art and design should be evident in the ways that you plan, teach and reflect upon your lessons. You might decide to make your values explicit to your mentee: before they observe you teach a lesson, you could explain to them that you will emphasise certain values that you want to highlight for them. Alternatively, you might decide to challenge your mentee to identify the values *they* see as they observe you teach: as they observe a lesson they can note down evidence of the principles that they think underpin your approach. This can be a useful experience for you both, as our actions often differ from our intentions.

This section of the chapter offers advice on how you can communicate your values to beginning teachers, both explicitly and implicitly, in the course of a lesson. It focuses on ten values that could underpin your philosophy for teaching and learning and identifies the ways in which each might manifest itself in your classroom practice. The ten values listed here are drawn from those that beginning teachers and experienced colleagues have shared with me over the years, and they relate to the following areas: innovation; children's ideas; the learning environment; artistic knowledge and skills; the enjoyment of making art; experimentation; decision-making; the unexpected; the individual, and finally the value of children's voices. The structure of this section parallels that of a lesson: it begins by reflecting on values that underpin the planning of the lesson, before focusing on those that inform the demonstration and



teaching of practical activities and concluding with values that impact on your responses to children's work and the ways you encourage them to reflect on outcomes.

***(i) Communicating values through your planning and the classroom environment***

**You value innovation.** Try something new. Encourage mentees to experiment with different ideas and processes. Beginning teachers are often over-dependent on online searches and are unlikely to find inspirational images by simply feeding terms such as 'portrait' into Google, so suggest they search for inspiration from museum and gallery websites. Explain that experimenting with activities themselves before the lesson will help them to both sharpen the focus of their planning and to anticipate some of the challenges – and joys – that children will encounter during the lesson. Also, from time to time, extend your own subject knowledge, for example by taking ceramics classes or attending digital animation workshops.

**You value children's ideas.** While beginning teachers will always draw inspiration from the work of artists, craftspeople and designers, encourage them to also allow children to inspire their planning – to find out about children's interests and to build upon them in art lessons. You might consider drawing inspiration from children's own visual culture. If you analyse the range of images they encounter through films, television, gaming and other media, you'll find that their designers often draw on artists' work (for examples see Watts 2019).

**You value the learning environment.** What does your art room look like? What are visitors' first impressions? What makes it different from your colleagues' classrooms, or other art rooms? How does the room reflect your philosophy for teaching and learning? Demonstrate to your mentee that you allocate time to preparing resources, and experiment with changing the space from time to time to freshen it up. Can you create areas where children can gather together to watch you demonstrate a technique? Or others where children can work quietly away from others? Alongside a digital screen, a whiteboard or flipchart is useful to make notes during a lesson, emphasising key learning points, new vocabulary and children's contributions to discussions.

***(ii) Communicating values through your teaching***

**You value artistic knowledge and skills.** Firstly, take time to demonstrate different processes in class, explaining what you're doing by 'thinking aloud' and encouraging questions. It's easy to forget how much practical demonstrations impress children, and I often hear children say '*Miss, you make it look so easy!*'. Children sometimes think art is about talent alone; teachers can challenge this preconception, by explaining that it took them a long time to learn about the process. Secondly, encourage children to make connections between different areas of their learning. For example, if you have been teaching colour mixing in a painting project, remind children to carry on experimenting with mixing colours when they move on to a printmaking project.

Thirdly, keep a sketchbook in the classroom and show children pages that will help them to understand the tasks you set them. Remind beginning teachers that their sketchbooks can be a really important tool – they can give children the crucial message, subliminally or otherwise, that art-making continues beyond the confines of the school timetable.

**You value the enjoyment of making art.** If you ask younger children why they make art, they'll tell you 'because it's fun'. Demonstrate to your mentee that you are still enthusiastic about art – that you still enjoy making art. Model the process of being *immersed* in art – from time to time, let children arriving for their lesson 'catch' you quietly making your own work, which you can later show them as inspiration for the lesson. Look up as they arrive, acknowledge them – then carry on with the work for a minute, and find time to return to it during the lesson. You'll give children the impression that, once they leave your art room, you simply carry on *being an artist*. For some children, this might be the most valuable lesson they ever learn from you.

**You value experimentation.** Provide children with time to experiment. At the start of a lesson, or sequence of lessons, encourage children to play with materials without seeking a specific outcome. Use pages from your sketchbook to illustrate that ideas don't always work well at the first attempt – that you need to repeatedly return to ideas, refine them, re-think them.

**You value decision-making.** 'While the teacher of spelling seeks uniformity of response', wrote Elliot Eisner, 'The arts teacher seeks diversity of response' (2002: 44). Always offer children choices– encourage them to make decisions. This principle should be visible in your planning for the lesson (in terms of the resources you provide), during the lesson (the conversations you have with students) and at the end of the lesson (when you ask students to articulate the learning that has taken place).

### ***(iii) Communicating values through your reflection on outcomes***

**You value the unexpected.** Be flexible and open-minded in your expectations. Encourage beginning teachers to look for surprising responses from students, rather than those that match the expectations they had at the start of the lesson. Show students that you value their unique perspectives – that you have high expectations of them and are optimistic they will make something amazing. Allow time for reflection on children's artworks and celebrate outcomes through displays in the art room and around the school.

**You value the individual.** When you select examples of children's work to share with the class, choose examples that illustrate diverse responses to the task. Emphasise to children that you had not anticipated work like theirs and that you are pleased to see it. Some children who struggle to achieve in other subjects see art lessons as opportunities

to shine. Your mentee should make sure to know who these children are, and when and how to provide additional support and encouragement.

**You value children's voices.** Beginning teachers often worry that children will not listen to them. Teachers ask for silence, children ignore them, teachers stop teaching and children stop learning. Model a more positive mode of interaction with children by *encouraging* them to speak – in purposeful, polite, thoughtful and constructive ways. Children need to hear each other speak in relatively formal contexts. When you demonstrate an activity, encourage them to describe and question what you are doing; when you are midway through a lesson, pause the class and encourage them to articulate the challenges they are facing; and when you conclude a lesson, encourage them to question each other about their work and to talk about it in appreciative ways.

*Box 4 – Putting your values into practice*

*Map your values on to a lesson plan – what opportunities are there for you in each part of the lesson for you to model your values for beginning teachers observing you and for the students in your class?*

## **6– Conclusion – summary and key points**

In summary, being a mentor for beginning teachers of art and design offers opportunities:

- to revisit and refresh your values as an art educator
- to be conscious of what you do and why you do it – the various ways you communicate your values as an art educator
- to nurture trainee teachers – to share your values implicitly and explicitly

Finally, be conscious that beginning teachers need to emulate your practice without *being* you: encourage them to develop their own values. Remind them of the value of flexibility – accept, acknowledge and welcome the fact that values are not set in stone and may change over time.

Some of the questions raised in this chapter may prompt you to reflect on difficulties, disappointments – and downright disasters – that you have experienced in the past. We all have a locker or two in the corridor, into which we have stashed memories of negative experiences in education. Your role as a mentor involves helping beginning teachers to notice when they are allowing these negative experiences to cloud their judgment and hinder their development. Yet these memories can offer a useful starting point from which beginning teachers can reflect upon the values that they want to embody in their classroom practice – and, with the support of their mentor, to develop their teaching to its full potential.

## References

- Cox, M. (1992) *Children's Drawings* London: Penguin
- DfE (Department for Education) (2013) *The national curriculum in England: Framework document*.
- Dutton, D. (2009) *The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure, and Human Evolution*. Oxford University Press, USA.
- Efland, A. (1990) *A History of Art Education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Eisner, E. (2002) *The Arts and The Creation of Mind* London: Yale University Press
- Gardner, H. (1973) *The Arts and Human Development*. New York: Wiley.
- Hickman (2010) *Why we Make Art and Why it is Taught* (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition) Bristol: Intellect
- Kennedy, M. (2003) Turner prize goes to Perry – and Claire *The Guardian*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2003/dec/08/arts.turnerprize2003> Accessed 18-1-19.
- Lowenfeld, V. (1947) *Creative and Mental Growth*. New York: Macmillan.
- Read, H. (1943) *Education Through Art* London: Faber and Faber
- Robinson, K. (1999) *All Our Futures* National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education. London: Department for Education and Employment and Department for Culture, Media and Sport.
- Swift, J. and Steers, J. (1999) A manifesto for art in schools. *Journal of Art and Design Education*, Vol. 18, No. 1, pp.7-13.
- Watts, R. (2019) Stranger things in the classroom: Drawing inspiration from children's visual culture in S. Ogier (Ed.) *A Broad and Balanced Curriculum DETAILS TO FOLLOW*
- Wyse, D. and Ferrari, A., (2015). Creativity and education: Comparing the national curricula of the states of the European Union and the United Kingdom. *British Educational Research Journal*, Vol. 41, No.1, pp.30-47.