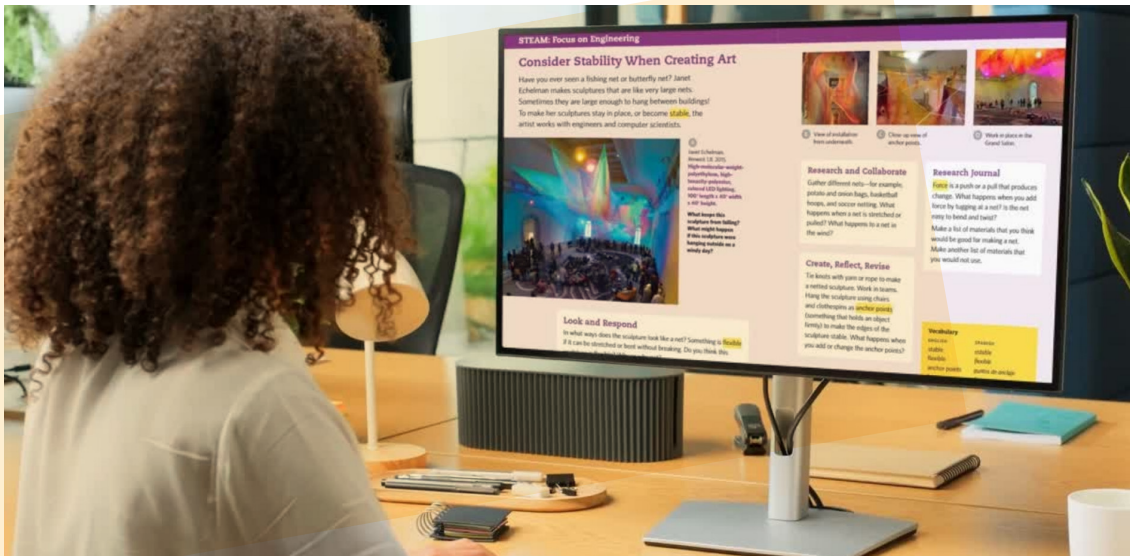




BEYOND THE LESSONS

The Thinking Behind High-Quality Art Curriculum

A curriculum can have all the right pieces and still fall short. Standards, lessons, assessments, images, and resources all have an important place in art education. But what makes instructional materials truly high quality isn't simply what's included; it's the thinking behind how those pieces are brought together.

High-quality instructional materials don't just give teachers projects to teach or students directions to follow. They are thoughtfully designed to help students ask questions, explore ideas, make choices, develop skills, and find meaning through art. For teachers, they provide a strong foundation while leaving room for professional judgment and responsiveness. For students, they create opportunities to engage deeply with ideas, make meaningful connections, and take an active role in their learning.

Curriculum is designed to help students find meaning through art.

At Davis Publications, this intentional approach to curriculum design is reflected in three interconnected practices: Big Ideas and Essential Questions, teaching through inquiry, and differentiated instruction. These aren't isolated features added to the curriculum. Instead, they reflect a larger philosophy about how students learn and what meaningful art education can look like.

CONTENTS

- 1 Introduction
- 2 What Does High Quality Look Like?
- 3 Give Students Something Worth Thinking About
- 4 Give Students Room to Wonder
- 5 Give Every Student a Way In
- 6 Where the Thinking Comes Together
- 7 The Thinking Behind the Lessons
- 7 Continue Exploring





Standards, concepts, artworks, materials, questions, activities, and assessments should work together to support a clear learning goal.

WHAT DOES HIGH QUALITY LOOK LIKE?

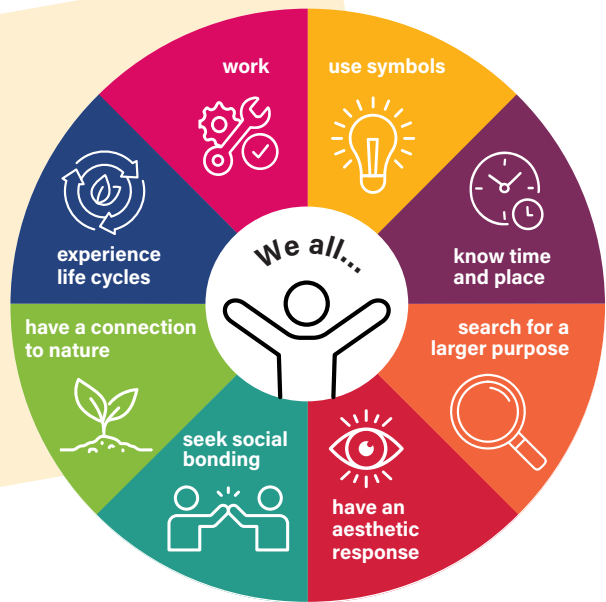
Before considering specific approaches to curriculum design, it is worth asking a broader question: What should high-quality art instructional materials accomplish? At its best, curriculum should help teachers create learning experiences that are:

- **Meaningful** — Students explore ideas that connect to their experiences, communities, and the world around them.
- **Engaging** — Students have opportunities to be curious, make choices, and take an active role in learning.
- **Rigorous** — Students develop artistic skills while also thinking critically, solving problems, and making decisions.
- **Accessible** — Students with different experiences, interests, readiness levels, and ways of learning have meaningful pathways into learning.
- **Coherent** — Lessons build on one another and contribute to a larger understanding rather than functioning as isolated activities.
- **Teacher-supported** — Educators have the resources, background knowledge, and flexibility they need to make thoughtful instructional decisions.

These qualities don't happen by accident. They come from **intentional design** that considers not only what students should learn, but how they will engage with that learning. That same intentionality extends to the connections among the different parts of instruction. Standards, concepts, artworks, materials, questions, activities, and assessments should work together to support a clear learning goal. Each element should have a reason for being there and should help students move from initial exploration toward deeper understanding.

This kind of design anticipates the decisions teachers and students will make along the way. It provides enough structure to support meaningful learning while leaving room for student choice, teacher expertise, and responsiveness to the classroom community. In this way, instructional materials become more than a collection of lessons; they become a thoughtful framework for learning. This is where the thinking behind the lessons becomes important.

Dr. Ernest Boyer identified eight human commonalities that connect us all, providing a foundation for Big Ideas in art education and helping students link their creative work to the human experience.



Curriculum provides a framework that supports deeper thinking while allowing educators to make the learning relevant to their students.

Give Students Something Worth Thinking About

A project gives students something to do. A Big Idea gives them something to think about. Big Ideas, sometimes called themes, are broad, enduring concepts that connect art to shared human experiences. Ideas such as identity and community can provide meaningful contexts for students to explore art and connect what they are learning to their own lives and the world around them.

Essential Questions help bring those ideas into the classroom. Rather than questions with one correct answer, Essential Questions invite students to investigate, discuss, and revisit ideas over time. They encourage students to consider multiple perspectives and develop understanding through their experiences with art. This approach changes the role of a project. Instead of being the endpoint of a lesson, art-making becomes one way students explore a larger idea.

For example, a unit exploring the Big Idea/theme of communication might ask, "How do people communicate through art and

design?" Students might examine how artists across cultures and time periods have communicated ideas, emotions, or experiences. They can then use what they've discovered to make their own artistic choices and communicate something meaningful.

The result is learning that extends beyond the individual project. Students begin to recognize connections among artworks, cultures, ideas, and their own experiences. This is an important part of high-quality curriculum design because the lesson has a purpose beyond the activity. Students understand not only what they are doing, but why the learning matters.

When Big Ideas and Essential Questions are thoughtfully embedded into instructional materials, teachers don't have to create those connections from scratch. The curriculum provides a framework that supports deeper thinking while allowing educators to make the learning relevant to their students.

EXPLORE THE APPROACH

Davis's "Teaching with Themes" professional paper offers strategies and examples for using Big Ideas and Essential Questions to create more connected and meaningful art learning experiences.





High-quality Instructional materials incorporate opportunities for observation, questioning, discussion, exploration, experimentation, and reflection.

Give Students Room to Wonder

Students don't learn only by receiving information. They learn by questioning, investigating, experimenting, and making connections. Teaching through inquiry shifts the classroom from delivering answers to creating opportunities for students to develop their own understanding. Instead of immediately telling students what an artwork means, for example, teachers can invite them to look closely, describe what they notice, ask questions, consider possibilities, and support their interpretations with evidence.

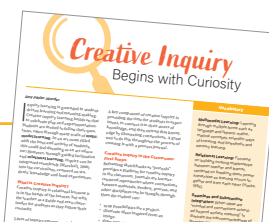
Inquiry can begin with artwork, materials, an idea, a problem, or a student's own question. It can continue throughout the creative process as students experiment, encounter challenges, reconsider decisions, and discover new possibilities. This makes curiosity part of learning.

Inquiry doesn't mean teachers stop teaching or that students are left to figure everything out on their own. The teacher remains an essential guide by selecting meaningful experiences, asking purposeful questions, providing relevant information, modeling processes, and helping students connect new discoveries to what they already know.

High-quality instructional materials can support this process by intentionally incorporating opportunities for observation, questioning, discussion, exploration, experimentation, and reflection. When inquiry is part of the curriculum design, teachers don't have to figure out how to add it after the lesson is written. The lesson becomes an invitation to think. Students are encouraged not only to find answers, but to develop the questions that help them understand.

EXPLORE THE APPROACH

Professional paper "Creative Inquiry Begins with Curiosity" examines how inquiry can foster curiosity, deeper thinking, and meaningful connections in the art room.





High-quality curriculum anticipates learner variability and provides practical strategies that teachers can adapt to their students.

Give Every Student a Way In

Every classroom includes students with different experiences, interests, readiness levels, strengths, and ways of learning. A one-size-fits-all approach cannot fully address that reality. Differentiated instruction provides ways to respond to the varied needs of students while maintaining meaningful and rigorous learning goals. Effective differentiation isn't about creating a completely different lesson for every student. Instead, it involves providing varied pathways for students to access information, engage with ideas, develop skills, make choices, and demonstrate what they know.

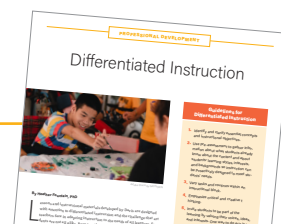
That might mean offering different ways to explore a concept, providing scaffolds or additional support, varying the complexity of a task, allowing students to make purposeful choices,

using flexible grouping, or providing multiple ways for students to demonstrate their understanding. The goal isn't to make learning easier. It is to make meaningful learning accessible.

This is another important consideration when evaluating instructional materials. Differentiation should not be an afterthought or a separate resource teachers have to seek out when a student needs additional support. High-quality curriculum anticipates learner variability and provides practical strategies that teachers can adapt to their students' needs. When differentiation is thoughtfully built into instructional materials, teachers have greater flexibility to respond to their students while maintaining the integrity and rigor of the learning experience.

EXPLORE THE APPROACH

Professional paper "Differentiated Instruction" explores practical strategies for responding to learner differences and creating pathways for students to engage in art.





The result is a classroom where students aren't just following directions. They are thinking, making, questioning, problem-solving, and making meaning.

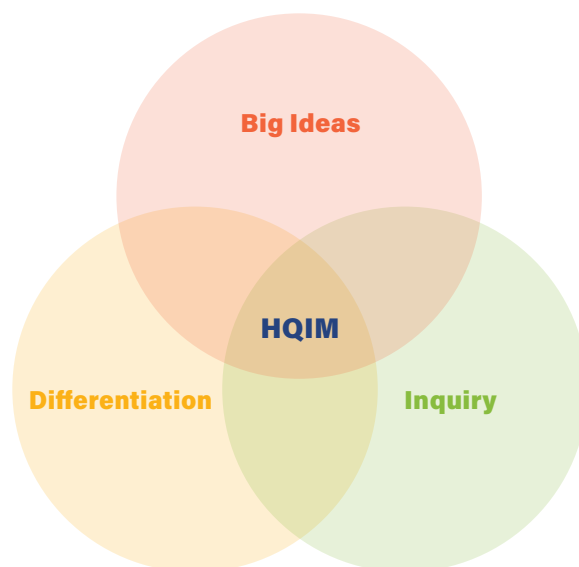
WHERE THE THINKING COMES TOGETHER

Big Ideas and Essential Questions. Inquiry. Differentiated instruction. These approaches are valuable individually, but their greatest strength comes from how they work together.

- **Big Ideas** and Essential Questions give students meaningful ideas to explore and questions to investigate.
- **Inquiry** gives them opportunities to question, investigate, and construct understanding.
- **Differentiation** gives students multiple pathways into learning.

Together, they shift the focus from completing a project to creating a richer learning experience.

Consider what happens when all three approaches are present in a single lesson or unit. Students begin with an idea that matters. They encounter artworks and experiences that invite questions and investigation. They experiment and make decisions as they create. Along the way, the teacher provides different supports and opportunities based on students' needs. The result is a classroom where students aren't just following directions. They are thinking, making, questioning, problem-solving, and making meaning.



The intersection of Big Ideas and Essential Questions, inquiry, and differentiated instruction creates richer, more meaningful, and more accessible art learning experiences.

This is why the quality of instructional materials cannot be measured by the number of lessons, images, activities, or resources they contain. Quality is also about the relationships among those elements and the learning experiences they make possible.



Big Ideas and Essential Questions, teaching through inquiry, and differentiated instruction reflect a broader commitment to thoughtful, student-centered instructional design.

THE THINKING BEHIND THE LESSONS

Creating high-quality instructional materials requires more than assembling standards, lessons, images, and assessments. It requires asking deeper questions:

- *How will students connect this learning to their lives?*
- *What opportunities will they have to think for themselves?*
- *Where will curiosity and questioning enter the learning experience?*
- *How can students with different needs and experiences meaningfully participate?*
- *How will today's learning contribute to tomorrow's?*
- *What will students understand—not just make?*

At Davis, approaches such as Big Ideas and Essential Questions, teaching through inquiry, and differentiated instruction aren't additional features placed alongside a curriculum. They reflect a broader commitment to thoughtful, student-centered instructional design.

Our goal is to create materials that support teachers without limiting them, provide structure without removing choice, and help students engage with art in ways that are meaningful, rigorous, and relevant. High-quality curriculum should do more than tell students what to make. It should give them something worth thinking about, a reason to explore it, and the support they need to make it their own.

CONTINUE EXPLORING

The ideas behind high-quality instructional materials are worth exploring beyond the curriculum itself. Davis Publications offers free professional learning webinars that take a deeper look at each of the approaches discussed in this paper:

Teaching with Themes

Explore how Big Ideas and Essential Questions can bring greater connection and meaning to art learning.

Teaching Through Inquiry

Discover ways to use curiosity, questioning, experimentation, and discovery to deepen student learning.

Differentiated Instruction

Explore practical strategies for creating meaningful experiences for diverse learners.

