



Creative Inquiry

Begins with Curiosity

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Inquiry learning is grounded in student-driven learning and meaning-making. Creative inquiry learning builds on that to celebrate play and experimentation. Students are invited to follow their questions, often through many trails of **multimodal learning**. In an art room filled with the buzz and activity of students, this could feel daunting as an art educator! However, through guided facilitation and **relational learning**, inquiry can be integrated seamlessly (Marshall, 2006) into the curriculum, centered on students' knowledge and lived experiences.

What is Creative Inquiry?

Creative inquiry is relational because it is in the hands of the learner, but with the teacher as a guide and even cheerleader for students as they follow their curiosity.

Lines of inquiry emerge as students draw from their lived experiences, beginning with playful and multisensory experiences and moving into choices that develop an idea and concept. This is where play moves to work, where experimentation (play), through multisensory and multimodal ways of learning, moves from an idea to imaginative applications (work). In the art room, this comes in the form of what is created in the process, the artwork.

Play provides opportunities for experimentation and problem solving, and through work, experimentation moves to deeper understanding and knowledge (Dewey, 1933). New forms of knowledge emerge from the process of creating and continues a cycle of making and knowing through iterations of the artwork following new trails of inquiry.

A key component of creative inquiry is providing the time for students to experiment, to connect it to their stores of knowledge, and then extend that knowledge by illustrating connections. A great way to do this throughout the process of creating is with a process journal.

Creative Inquiry in the Classroom: First Steps

Reframing sketchbooks as “journals” provides a platform for creative inquiry in the classroom. Journals are learner-centered repositories where connections between materials, product, process, and other disciplines can be thought through. Here the student can:

- map possibilities for a project.
- illustrate ideas inspired from an image.
- draw prototypes based on investigation.
- take visual and verbal notes.
- include writings related to the process of making.
- juxtapose two unlike images to see what emerges or use metaphorical relationships between ideas.

Creative Inquiry learning begins the first day when the teacher records responses to questions such as, “What topics and themes do you want to learn about this year?” “What materials are you most interested in using this year?” This might occur every unit or lesson, but the guiding light of creative inquiry is that learners and teachers engage in knowledge-building side by side through a range of activities.

Vocabulary

Multimodal Learning: Learning through multiple forms such as language and literacy, mathematical concepts, scientific ways of knowing, and kinesthetic and sensory learning.

Relational Learning: Focused on building trusting relationships between teacher and learner, centered on breaking down power hierarchies so learning occurs together and from each other (Hooks, 1994).

Seamless and Substantive Integration: When ideas are “minded and connections extended beyond surface meaning” to illustrate the interconnectedness of learning (Marshall, 2006).

Research/Process Journal

The research/process journal is more than a sketchbook—it is a space where creative ideas emerge. It is a place to explore tools and techniques using a range of modalities and a space where students can respond to art and the world around them.

As you introduce the research/process journal to your students, highlight and emphasize that it provides many entry points as they explore ideas over time. Tell students, “The journal is yours; see it as a place to ‘stretch and explore’ with materials, tools, and techniques and generate new ideas.” Prompt students to ask themselves, how is this work personally meaningful?

Examples of Creative Inquiry

In an elementary classroom, creative inquiry and play might begin by experimenting with materials. For example, young children explore the mark-making of a range of markers and pens. Drawing from their lived experiences, the teacher may guide the mark-making through prompts like “Make a mark that shows you when you are filled with energy.” “Now create a mark that shows you when you feel tired.” The teacher also guides the learner to contribute to the prompts, developing generative ideas as a class. “What if we make tiny marks? What if we make large marks on our paper?” “Let’s try switching materials.”

Walker’s (2021) approaches to play provide excellent examples of creative inquiry. Consider using “new rules” or challenges in your classroom to encourage non-linear ways of learning. For example, using a prompt such as “What happens when we tear up our artwork and reconstruct the pieces,” or using a “chance action” such as rolling a die to determine the next step of students’ work.

In the example on the right, the teacher explores the possibility of layering paper. Additional layers with drawings and foam squares were added through conversation and brainstorming with students.

These non-linear forms of making create more space for inquiry as learners embrace chance, follow the trail of an idea, and bring play to fruition through a work of art.

Creative inquiry is also centered on learning over time. This is where the research/process journal is a key component. Learners need time for ideation throughout the process, time to reflect on their learning and discoveries, such as recording the marks they loved best, a new discovery made about material, or the subject matter and interdisciplinary connections made throughout the process.



Instructional example of layering techniques created by Mary Kate Bergh, elementary educator.



Layering activity student example.



Rethinking Curriculum Using Creative Inquiry: An Example

In the following example, I discuss a transformative moment in my teaching where I shifted from teacher-directed to more student-directed learning by allowing time for inquiry, discovery, and connection through science.

The “bubble fish” project was a delightful studio encounter for my third-grade students. They had opportunities to draw fish and add patterns and layers of color through a crayon and wax resist using watercolors. Families enjoyed the thematic “Under the Sea” display.

Although the work created a warm reception, my graduate studies, along with reading Julia Marshall’s article “Substantive Art Integration = Exemplary Art Education,” transformed the curriculum in my classroom. Her work resonated with my curiosities at the time. I wondered how art instruction could be more meaningful for students, less teacher-driven, and more engaging. I remember poring over the words and beginning to change my lessons to involve student research (creative inquiry) to build more layered opportunities for embracing creative connections. Marshall’s words occupied my brain:

“Art as research calls for a radical rethinking of the premises for making art. Art as research also fuses learning with creative process. It understands creative process as the way in which artists create new knowledge through experimentation, reflection, and imaginative synthesis and projection.”

Instead of a teacher-directed lesson focused on line, shape, and color, I provided students with books focused on fish species for them to conduct their own research. Using a prompt sheet, students made sketches of fins, tails, body shapes, and mouth shapes in relationship to the science behind the fish species. For example, they considered how the fish’s mouth shape evolved over time based on the type of food eaten, as well as how the shape of the body and fins were related to the fish’s habitat. From here, students used their imagination to create a new species, including details on what it ate, where it lived, and how it survived. Here creative inquiry was at work as their fish emerged from sketches, dialogue, and research. My favorite fish included one with very large lips because its food of choice was an extra-large cheeseburger!

Why Creative Inquiry: Final Thoughts

It provides the following meaningful experiences:

- Emphasizes a learning process that moves forward in a meandering, nonlinear, and emergent way (Marshall, 2019, p. 5).
- Embraces more adventurous creativity of experimental and imaginative play with ideas and possibilities (Marshall, 2019).
- Engages deeply in knowledge that has interdisciplinary threads and breaks down barriers between the disciplines.
- Provides powerful meaning-making opportunities that help students interpret, understand, and make sense of the world and their place in it.

Moving to creative inquiry can also be a playful leap for educators. Lessons are deepened as students direct non-linear ways of learning and the stage is set for relational learning, where together the teacher and student explore new possibilities for making. Considering all of this, how might you bring creative inquiry to life in your classroom?

References

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- Hooks, B. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. Routledge.
- Marshall, J. (2019). *Integrating the Visual Arts Across the Curriculum: An Elementary and Middle School Guide*. Teachers College Press.
- Walker, S. (2021). *Artmaking, Play, and Meaning Making*. Davis Publications.

Other Suggested Books

- Marshall, J., & Donahue, D. M. (2014). *Art-centered Learning Across the Curriculum: Integrating Contemporary Art in the Secondary School Classroom*. Teachers College Press.
- Marshall, J., Stewart, C., & Thulson, A. (2021). *Teaching Contemporary Art with Young People: Themes in Art for K-12 Classrooms*. Teachers College Press.