

Reflective Activity

Drawing Icebreaker (Drawing with Sticks)

Activity Description

This is the opening activity (after syllabus, etc) on the first day of classes in Drawing 1. Students are sent outside to find a stick or tree branch of 24 inches in length (close to their arm's length) or longer, and bring it back to the studio (they don't yet know what it will be used for). They are then paired up with another student (the same student they had previously been paired with for introductions at the beginning of class). The instructions are to use their chosen stick, held at arm's length, 18x24 inch paper and a cup of liquid black ink (provided) to draw a portrait of their partner in 7 minutes. The partners then switch places, so each student both creates and models for a portrait. The portraits are then displayed in the art building.

Preparation, Handouts, Resources

There are no handouts, but I frame the activity in several ways. When I tell them what they will be doing with the sticks, they are surprised, nervous, and excited. I talk about how I am asking them to do something absurd and nearly impossible. They don't know what kind of marks their stick will make, because they've never used it before. They can't erase, because they are using permanent ink. The ink will drip down their vertical paper, and because they are also instructed to hold the stick at full length, standing far back from the easel, their ability to control what it does will be minimal at best (those students who have brought 4-foot-long branches have to practically perform acrobatics to get the ink onto the paper). Some sticks are thin and fragile, some have leaves or twigs attached, some are multi-pronged. The combination of these factors "levels the playing field," as everyone will be facing significant challenges regardless of prior experience in portrait drawing.

During the drawing process, I walk them through the identifying of basic shapes within the face, as a way of beginning to see relationships of shape and size the way an artist does. I normalize any potential discomfort they may be feeling, by addressing it openly. After the 7 minutes are up, they write their partner's name on the drawing (also using the stick) and then reveal it to their partner and to the class.

As a conclusion, we look at the drawings and talk about the spontaneity and uniqueness of mark-making that resulted from each individual's process. We reflect on the slippery notions of failure and success that are brought out by this activity. We speculate on how the process would have been different (more stressful, unpleasant) and the results less enjoyable (and actually less accurate portraits) had they been asked to draw a portrait with pencil. We discuss how the portraits are actually much more accurate than expected, due to the specific way of looking, and the mental "looseness," that is fostered by the process.

Learning Goals

- Dismantling fear of failure. Nobody can "succeed" at this activity in any traditional manner, so failure is normalized and becomes something interesting and exciting.
- Experimentation. An incredible amount of problem-solving happens in those 7 minutes, with no prior preparation or experience.
- Visual markmaking. In drawing, marks are the fundamental visual vocabulary. Students make marks during this activity that they never would have made if given their own choice of materials or processes. This opens up a fairly sophisticated discussion of visual elements of line and composition.
- Community-building. Students laugh over the shared absurdity. They talk to their partners and bond with each other. They learn what it's like to draw another person, and what it's like to sit for a portrait -- both of which are

intimate experiences.

- Studio equipment/materials introduction. Students learn quickly how to set up easels and drawing boards, where the sink is, where the paper towels are, and what is expected in terms of studio clean-up at the end.

Challenges/Obstacles

It does require enough familiarity with the process to project confidence about it. Students pick up on any tentativeness or uncertainty from the person leading them, which makes them less invested. It definitely requires a lot of enthusiasm and energy from the person leading it. It also requires good timing: moving them through the activity quickly so they don't over-think it, but also making sure every student completes at least the basics of a head and face so as to negate any possible feelings of shame from not "finishing" it.

Recommendations

It's a chance to talk and work directly and openly with fear, failure, and risk. It's a fantastic way to introduce students to new materials and processes that they might be nervous about. It gives them a taste of working quickly and confidently, in spite of their hesitation. It is a low-stakes immersion in the type of experimentation and bravery that is required in studio art classes, and it helps to boost their confidence and enthusiasm.

Additional

This is easily adaptable to other courses (in Figure Drawing, for example, students do the same activity but as life-sized, full-body portraits on huge sheets of butcher paper. In Mixed Media, they make sculptures using things they find in the trash that day.). The combination of extreme simplification of materials, shortness of time, and working in pairs or teams could be easily translated to course material in other disciplines, including those outside the fine arts.

Tool Contributor

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