Designing the learning process in visual art classes in primary school

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Abstract

Contemporary theories of art education are founded on constructive learning strategies. In Estonian primary schools, however, the teacher-centred approach prevails; therefore, it is important to modernise the process of learning. These kinds of changes are also encouraged by the new national curriculum. In this context, questions arise as to what should the main changes be and how can they be implemented. The report presents an overview of an action research project which explored this topic, and suggests several models for art learning processes. The study provides principles which help primary school teachers plan the learning process in art classes.

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1. Introduction

Pupils enter the classroom and greet their teacher. They set out the materials and tools necessary for their art project. Then, everyone starts to work. One of the pupils puts the canvas to the easel and continues her work on a half-finished painting, another constructs a chair from materials found in nature or elsewhere, the third writes an essay or reflection on some art book, etc: every student has his own work and works independently on it. The teacher’s presence in the classroom is intended to give the students the opportunity to ask for advice, to discuss ideas, timelines of projects and principles of grading.

Contemporary theories of teaching and learning art (Wachowiak & Clements, 2001, 52; Eisner, 2002, 94-95; Räsänen, 2008, 38) are founded on constructive learning strategies which encourage the active
attitude of the pupils, support their creativity and autonomy. Art lessons conducted in the spirit described above manifest such principles and should become a wholly natural part of the learning process in the senior years of high school. But one should start to prepare pupils for such a process in primary schools already. So far, the results of the primary schools teacher survey showed that teaching art in Estonian primary schools has been based on the teacher-centred approach (Vahter, 2011). In case of this approach, particular practical tasks are planned by the teacher and assigned to pupils who are expected to complete these tasks during art class as instructed. This kind of teaching method inhibits students from being active, creative persons who direct their studies themselves and think independently (Schirrmacher, 2002, 220-225); therefore, making changes in the art learning process in primary schools is of paramount importance. Changes in the principles of art education are supported by the new national curriculum for basic and secondary schools approved in Estonia in 2010. On the basis of the new art curriculum (Põhikooli, 2010), it may be said that from now on the process of learning art is seen as naturally involving research, discovery of new ideas, reflection and interpretation of practical work. Carrying out actual changes in education, however, means “changing practices” (Fullan, 2001, 38).

As art itself, art education has undergone significant changes in the past decades. This has set new requirements both on methods exploited in teaching and ideas and outcomes that give meaning to art lessons. Traditionally, art education was mostly aimed at practical results where as now, supported by ideas of Discipline-based Art Education (Alexander & Day, 2001), discussions of art history and contemporary art form a natural part of teaching art in primary school classes (Barnes, 1997, 179; Wachowiak & Clements, 2001, 215). Although traditional theoretical attitudes such as the child-centeredness and discipline-centeredness provide a secure foundation for contemporary art education, they are insufficient, especially if the teacher must teach, discuss and interpret contemporary works of art (Gaudelius & Speirs, 2002, 1). One of the most crucial changes in contemporary art education is the clear comprehension of such differences in theories and in actual practices.

The main message of this both for education in general and for art education in particular is that teachers should provide pupils with knowledge about a wide range of possibilities of interpretation, and they should make pupils aware of continuous changes affecting understanding and interpretation. Flexibility of knowledge is decisive since this allows a person to genuinely think (Hart, 2000, 35). According to the principles of constructivism (Constructivist, 2008; Schaffer, 2006, 38), the actual process of studying is regarded as the most important factor in education: in this process, new knowledge is obtained and interpreted by relating it to previous knowledge, and it is constructed by the student in a cooperative process together with fellow students. The personal experience of each pupil plays a central role (Dewey, 1934), and the process of studying helps pupils explore their personalities (Eisner, 2002, 1). Constructive learning strategies contribute to the development of thinking skills in pupils.

According to Gagnon and Collay (2006), there are six elements characteristic of the constructivist learning process, which are suitable as a foundation for the process of art learning as well:
- situations that challenge the interest of students, take into account developmentally appropriate activities and connect the learning process to real-world experience (p. 40-41);
- groups that are organised so as to enable students to think together and create meaning on a particular topic (p. 59),
- bridges that help effectively surface the pupils’ prior knowledge or preconceptions and give an opportunity to find out what they already know about the ideas or techniques that the teacher is trying to get them to learn (p. 87);
- tasks that attract the pupils’ attention and keep them focused; the right balance between challenge and frustration must also be considered (p. 112);
- exhibition of final work as well as of materials, or a presentation that portrays the pupil’s process of thinking – how meaning was created and how some particular topic is now understood (p. 136);
reflection to invite pupils to reflect on the process of creating both personal and collective meaning during the learning episode (p. 163).

This kind of constructive attitude to art education gives rise to several questions concerning what the main changes should be and how new approaches should be applied to the actual teaching practice in primary school to support pupils in their subsequent studies and future life. Taking into account current theories of learning art and changes in the Estonian national curriculum, I suggest that the main changes to be implemented in the study process concern the treatment of art history and contemporary art, and that the study process should involve activities like research, interpretation and reflection. In planning art classes in primary school, the use of elements of constructivist learning is an important option. In the following overview it will be shown how to improve and innovate the art learning process. Also, some particular models will be proposed for designing this process.

2. Research design

To answer the research questions an action research (McNiff & Whitehead, 2009; Stringer, 2004) was carried out, because the aim was to clarify aspects of my teaching practice and carry out experimental lessons to monitor students learning experiences and performances (Norton, 2009, 87). In the course of the research different approaches to the art learning process were designed and tried out in practice.

Fig. 1. Research design

Every stage of this research may be seen as an independent cycle of action research. In the pre-research phase I conducted a survey by means of a questionnaire in order to find out the opinions and experiences of Estonian art teachers for grades 1-3. The results of the questionnaire and of each stage of research served as input for the design of the next stage. I began this research in 2005 when the previous national curriculum was still in use; in the final year of my research (2011), the new national curriculum was approved. Figure 1 gives an overview of the general plan of research.

Action research was carried through at the Laste Loomingu Studio (Creative Studio for Children). Normally, an art class at this studio lasted for 45 minutes (which is the usual duration of any class at Estonian schools). 18 pupils aged 7-10 participated in my classes. While doing the action research, I made field-notes in my research diary about pupils’ actions during the creative process; I also recorded and transcribed the conversations on art. In every research stage, I designed models for my classes based on different structures, and I applied these models several times. The next section of this article presents an overview of experimental lessons given in different stages of research. In order to analyse the suitability of various changes in art learning processes to real-life practices, the following key questions of the constructivist learning design were used (Gagnon & Collay, 2006, 2): what are students expected to learn?, where are students now in their learning?, how will students give meaning to what they are expected to learn?, and as follows, possibilities to implement changes in art learning processes are presented.
3. Implementation of proposed changes

3.1. Pre-research: questionnaire and experimental lessons

In a classic art lesson, the teacher first introduces the topic of the lesson, then pupils work with their practical assignment, and the lesson ends with the teacher’s summary and conclusions. An alternative to this approach is to fill class time with shorter structures layered more frequently (Hetland, Winner, Veenema & Sheridan, 2007, 29-30). The results of the primary school teacher survey (Vahter, 2008; Vahter, 2011) showed that teachers mainly give students short-time assignments whose outcome is the pupil’s creative work. The previous national curriculum (Kunst, 2002) guided teachers to assign short-term practical tasks during primary school which were expected to stress the content of art such as the study of colour, composition, techniques of painting. Such a starting-point prescribes the classical method of lesson planning to the art teacher: at the beginning of the class, the teacher assigns a practical task to the pupils which is then carried out independently by them. Such a lesson is schematically depicted on Figure 2.

Fig. 2. Learning process model I

At the beginning of my research, I started with the same model: as a child, I had experienced such kind of art lessons myself. My first goal was to try out all elements specified by the learning content of the previous national curriculum (Kunst, 2002), since before this research project I had never taught art at primary school: my pupils had been of pre-school age, or else they were students at basic school or high school, or even studied at the university, being enrolled in teachers’ training programs. When giving such art lessons I realised that I, as a teacher, had the greatest role during the class. I liked to invent new tasks and to see how students carried out the tasks I had assigned to them. I felt as if the assignments were my own creative work because I had tried to find the most interesting tasks. Although the assignments allowed for differing solutions, at some point of time I came to see that my clear expectations as regards the work of pupils robbed them of a chance to create unique works of art that the children themselves could respect and that would arouse interest in them. I saw fine results and developed well but contemporary art teaching should be more than that. However, I do not intend to say that the traditional teaching model should not be used at all any more. Surely, there are situations where such an approach is justified: for instance, when the aim is to learn some new technique, or to decorate a classroom, or when the main goal is that many similar objects should be produced in a short period of time. The students may perceive such an approach as a safe way of studying: you have to do exactly like the teacher tells you. But when such a model is applied it is impossible to know where the pupils find themselves in their studies, and one can only guess whether and how they give any meaning to what they learn. Moreover, this model does not provide sufficient opportunity and time for observing and discussing works of art. Conversations on art should form an integral part of study. In primary schools, conversations about art encourage pupils to express their knowledge and share their personal experience (Adejumo, 2002). The results of the teacher survey showed that 60% of primary school teachers never use art discussions; of 126 teachers, 6% use art discussions once a year, 12% use them once in a half-year, and
21% use them once in a quarter-term (Vahter, 2011). For this reason, I chose art conversations as a starting-point for the next stage of research.

3.2. Research stage I: Conversations in the art learning process

There are various possibilities for conducting conversations in art lessons. Adejumo (2002) points out that the absence of central ideas will enable the children to use their intuition and channel their original thoughts and experience into learning process. With the whole class participation, pupils can listen to one another and come to value a broader understanding of art. The conversation could start with the description of an artwork: such questions as “What do you see?” or “What does it express?” always serve as a good basis for discussion. After description, the next stage should be interpretation which means synthesising of descriptive facts and observation and includes the viewer's opinion on an artwork. (Barrett, 1997; Mittler & Ragans, 1999, 35). As underlined by Perkins (1994, 75), conversations can improve the ability to describe, analyse, interpret and criticise artworks of their own and the works of others.

During the first stage of the main research project, I explored the possibility of carrying on a 45-minute art conversation and the suitability of such lessons for pupils. For each lesson, I prepared a set of guiding questions, reproductions of various artworks (of paintings, architecture, applied art) and worksheets, which were filled in by the pupils at the end of the lesson or at home. But in the course of art conversation questions deriving from pupils' responses were also posed.

Partly, the results of this research have been published previously (Vahter, 2008). They indicated that pupils are very interested in discussing both particular artworks and art in general. It seems that one-lesson art conversations (Learning process model II) can be conducted successfully with primary school pupils. The success of art conversations with pupils can partly be explained by the fact that these conservations were conducted in comfortable environment, e.g. round the common table, or on the floor covered with carpets and pillows. At the beginning of conversation classes, I emphasised that there were no right or wrong answers to the questions asked during the discussion. Predominant importance was given to the pupil’s expression of his/her opinion and message, and to rendering sense to visual information. In the learning process, the pupils found their favourite artworks; then, through conversations, they had the opportunity to express themselves and to give meaning to what they had learned. The pupils had no previous experience of art conversations; so, when evaluating this stage of research it may be said that my expectations were fulfilled, since all pupils (n=18) observed and described artworks, and 14 pupils (78%) were able to interpret artworks. True, the answers of pupils lacked depth, and they still need the teacher to guide them into the process of analysing and criticising artworks. Yet it may be said that during this stage the number of questions asked by the pupils increased significantly. This shows their interest in art and artworks. Since the new national curriculum stresses the importance of creating connections, I planned for the next research stage to combine learning process models I and II.

3.3. Research stage II: Treatment of art history and contemporary art

Relying on contemporary accounts of art teaching (Barnes, 1997, 179; Wachowiak & Clements, 2001, 215) and taking into account the findings of previous stages of research, I found that combining theory and various practices – in particular, conversations on art and artists –, the students get a chance to create artworks inspired by these conversations as well as discuss what they have created. This enables them to give meaning to their learning process. The results of the primary school teacher survey had demonstrated that, of 126 primary teachers who participated in the survey, 32% discussed Estonian art and artists, 17% discussed general history of art, and 13% discussed mostly the biographies of artists because
“contemporary and art history are too difficult for primary school” (Vahter, 2011). My experience as researcher and teacher showed, however, that it is possible to discuss both history of art and contemporary art with the pupils and such discussions arouse interest in them. This agrees with what Treier (2004) has brought out: contemporary art is nothing unworldly, scary or foreign. Contemporary art is based on the attitude that it is interesting to explore the visual culture surrounding us from a wider perspective. Pupils who had taken part in the first stage of research mostly liked realistic, easily understandable artworks; therefore, in the case of contemporary artists also, I tried to find examples suitable for children at primary school, and I attempted to find opportunities for acquainting pupils with contemporary art in my lessons.

Based on Art Scope and Sequence (2009), Illeris (2005) and Räsänen (2008, 106-107), I created a model (Figure 3) for 4 x 45 min lessons, thus providing pupils with more time (in the course of one study unit) for thoughtful observation, meaningful thinking and creating. For example: during the first lesson,

pupils may get acquainted with particular new artworks, they can be offered examples of thoughtful observation and exposed to facts, so that they can then discuss what they see and give meaning to the experience gained from personal observations. Second, various kinds of art experiences encourage pupils to give new output which leads to the possibility of creating unique works of art. In this way, the process of creating art comes to be founded on genuine understanding, new experience is obtained through personal creative activity and becomes finalised with reflection. In the third lesson, I offered the pupils an opportunity to work and think in groups, because this too is important in art education: it provides pupils with the experience of a learning process which can be shared and depends on each member of the group (Gagnon & Collay, 2006, 59; Illeris, 2005; Räsänen, 2008, 109). Pupils were expected to express themselves freely, create unique artworks and respond to art. These types of learning activities were new for my pupils. The setting up of an exhibition during lesson time and the process of reflection gave pupils the chance to discuss their learning practices and to have the decision-making power over their study process. The pupils said, for instance: “I learned that if I want to draw something as I please... well, not like a pretty or actual picture, then I can do it”; “From now on I will only draw on large-size paper, and I will paint, too. I’ll take a huge brush and I will not just make drops but I will paint too. Maybe I will make some drops, too.” One of the pupils drew a conclusion: “Everything can be art. Running, talking and thinking is art. What matters most is the thought.”

On the basis of this part of my research I can say that the balance between creating and responding is the key to the planning of art learning processes. However, a learning process which includes both creating and responding is time-consuming, and it requires extra preparations and continuous presence of
the teacher. Furthermore, learning situations cannot be predicted and one should always be ready for constant changes. But still such a process of teaching-learning is possible in art education, and in contemporary society it is even necessary. Evaluating this stage of research, I may say that in general I was satisfied with the results; yet, as a teacher, I was still the one who directed the whole process, and the ideas for artwork were suggested by me. My next step was to find a way for the pupils to direct the process of study by themselves and to find entirely personal solutions.

3.4. Research stage III: Application of the creative cycle

One way of encouraging pupils to direct the learning process themselves and to find individual, personal solutions is to apply the creative cycle. This was the focus of my interest in the third stage of the research project. The creative cycle gives the teacher an opportunity to design and plan the study process as a whole, incorporating combined study activities from research to reflection, enabling him or her to describe continuity and the natural cycle of gaining new experience (Green & Mitchell, 1997, 31; Arts Guide, 2008). The results of the primary school teacher survey showed that, of 126 teachers who participated in the survey, 24% rarely assigned research tasks, 44% never gave pupils any opportunities for research and 32% left the relevant question unanswered. This may be an indication of the fact that teachers place no value on research as a separate kind of study activity; but, on the other hand, teachers say that they use reflection frequently (67%). If teachers give the pupils a chance to independently plan and conduct their study process, their behaviour could become more goal-oriented and accomplishments in various tasks will improve (Epstein, 2003). Using the creative cycle in art learning enables the teacher to address, within one study unit, all essential elements listed in the new national curriculum (Põhikooli 2010) – research, elaboration and refinement of ideas, creative application, interpretation and reflection. In addition, it is possible to incorporate into this cycle the models of the art learning process described previously.

![Fig. 4. Learning process design IV](image)

|   | Art conversation |
|---|-----------------|
|   | Teachers directions |
|   | Practical activities |
|   | Exhibition set up |
|   | Reflection and conclusion |
|   | Working with Art Book |
|   | Homework presentation |
In this stage, I introduced the use of the Art Book as an innovative teaching approach to encourage and support the students’ reflective processes. The Art Book may contain visual ideas and thinking processes, spontaneous and personal notes of inspiration, ideas and techniques which need further development; it is a place for storing ideas which occur more frequently than can be realized (Gee, 2000, 115; Robinson, 1995, 15). The Art Book gives the pupils an opportunity to take responsibility for their studies, to explore and discover things while being motivated by their personal interests, and to improve their skills of expression (Arts Scope and Sequence, 2009). As another innovation I introduced home tasks for research and design, and these also were to be recorded in the Art Book. Practical activities included planning, developing of ideas, sketching, refining and completing of projects.

New kinds of study activities increased the temporal duration of one unit. It is possible to use the creative cycle with shorter units also, but on the basis of my research I would say that, on the average, 6 lessons is the most suitable amount of time for one creative cycle (Figure 4). A 6-hour unit is a sufficiently long period of time, so teachers should be very clear about what the pupils are expected to learn in every lesson. At the same time, with such a longer unit, teachers have more time and opportunity to find out how their pupils are doing and in what phase of the learning process they are situated. In addition, longer units mean that there is more time for reflecting on each study task. When reflecting on the learning process, it is important to conduct conversations on each pupil’s successes and failures (Green & Mitchell, 1997, 43). Thinking together one can find strategies for further steps. Based on Gee (2000, 106), I directed the pupils to think about their study process, guiding them to ask such questions as: what can I do? what do I want to do? what do I know? what do I want to know? what shall I do next?

As a result of this research stage, it may be said that the main danger of long study units lies in the possibility of the pupils’ getting tired of one task, especially if the practical outcome and the technique used demand patience (like papier-mâché, for example). On the other hand, when I asked the pupils to describe what kind of art lessons they liked the most, all of them (n=18) mentioned some connection to art history, artworks or artists. In describing particular learning activities, the pupils stressed that it is exciting to explore things by themselves: “For example, when we made chairs, we first found out what kind of chairs exist in the first place – we glued pictures of chairs in our notebooks and made drawings of chairs ourselves” (Vahter, 2010). Or: “It was exciting to find out whether I will get the same answer as others”. Half of the students (n=9) said that each art lesson should contain research tasks, two students found that it might be better just to do projects. Developing one’s own ideas is good because “then I can see which stamp of those I made is the best and I can use it when preparing the final print”; “the Art Book is a good idea, I can use it for making sketches of drawings and for putting down things and ideas”. All students were of the opinion that they have the right to create exactly such works of art as they like: “The teacher should show how to do things, not just demonstrate completed works”, “If the teacher shows an example of a completed work, I will simply do the project by following instructions. Deciding for myself is fun.” Based on these answers, one may say that the main elements of the study process listed in the new national curriculum can be implemented on the first level (level I) of basic schools. The pupils who participated in this research were interested in accomplishing different kinds of study tasks. Also, it should be said that diverse kinds of activities as planned by the teacher enrich the study process and give the students an opportunity to think for themselves—to decide, direct and interpret their learning process.

4. Conclusions

At present, there exist various approaches to the art learning process. Model IV proposed in this study is a summarising model of how to bring more variety into lessons and how to integrate necessary modifications. Model IV consists of different kinds of lessons which may focus on one or another aspect of the study process. At the same time, depending on the goals of study and on specific tasks, models I-III
may be applied independently as well. For the teacher, it is an opportunity to “play” and design different processes for art learning according to his or her vision, and taking into account the needs of pupils and the particular content of teaching. Below, I will give some recommendations to primary school teachers on how to improve the process of art learning:

- one should develop the pupils’ ability to talk about artworks. For this reason, primary school teachers should find time for viewing and discussing works of art with pupils. Depending on the interests and skills of pupils, the teacher should choose artworks that can expected to be important, meaningful or understandable to the pupils of his/her class at that particular time;
- the balance between creating and responding is the key to planning the contemporary art education process; it is crucial though it may prove to be time-consuming and require extra preparation by the teacher and his or her continuous presence in the classroom;
- using the creative cycle gives the teacher an opportunity to address, within one unit, all the essential elements of the study process; these elements, as listed by the new Estonian national curriculum, are the following: research, elaboration and refinement of ideas, creative application, interpretation, reflection. To support the study process it is reasonable to use the Art Book and home tasks;
- longer treatment of a topic enables the teacher to design the learning process in the spirit of constructivist learning that encourages and supports the pupils’ activeness, creativity and independence.

To sum up the results of my research, it can be said that the innovations and changes introduced proved suitable for primary school pupils. These changes gave opportunity to the pupils to think independently and critically in evaluating different solutions; the role of discussion in art class increased as well. Application of Model IV supports the general goal of art study (Põhikooli, 2010): to acquire a sufficiently complete visual education, to develop skills of reflection, co-operation and self-expression, contributing thereby to personal growth and coping in nowadays rapidly changing world, and supporting pupils in their future studies and life. It should be stressed that, in Estonian primary schools, it is essential that the focus of changes lie not on the end result but on the process through which these results are achieved. In future research, it is necessary to study the process of training primary school teachers, so that the aforementioned principles may actually be implemented in schools.

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