



The Value of Open-Ended Art

Christine Maynard and Kara J. Ketter

Five-year-old Andrew works at the easel with a few cups of paint, a big sheet of white paper, and his own imagination to guide him. Standing back from the easel to view his work, he looks deep in thought.

"What are you thinking, Andrew?" I ask.

"Well, I was thinking that with all these paintings, maybe we could have a gallery."

"A what?"

"A gallery."

"Oh, you mean like an art show?"

"YES! We can have an art show and our moms and dads can come! We can make signs to tell them!" Andrew's imagination and love of art have been let loose.

CHRISTINE MAYNARD, PhD, is an assistant professor in the Human Development and Family Studies Department at Iowa State University. She previously taught preschool in mixed-age classrooms and now teaches undergraduate students in early childhood education classes. She continues to research children's individual experiences in classroom contexts.

KARA J. KETTER is a quality advisor with the Indiana Accreditation Project at Indiana AEYC. She provides technical assistance to early care and education professionals working to improve program quality through national accreditation. She previously worked as both a classroom teacher and a program director.



PHOTOS © MARIA WYNNE



Materials to Encourage Open-Ended Art

Keep available all the time

- Pencils
- Crayons
- Markers
- Glue
- Scissors
- Playdough or clay
- Paint
- Brushes
- Envelopes
- Various types of paper, such as construction, wallpaper scraps, tissue

Add or remove to follow children's interests

- Cardboard boxes, tubes, shapes
- Ribbon, yarn, string
- Wrapping paper
- Wire
- Beads
- Wood pieces
- Pom-poms
- Crepe paper
- Buttons
- Pipe cleaners
- Stamps and ink
- Various painting tools, such as toothbrushes, toothpicks, tongue depressors, cotton balls, cotton swabs, feathers

Include based on special events or interests (a class trip to the beach, a school visit from a florist)

- Leaves, sticks, pinecones, acorns
- Biodegradable packing peanuts
- Flowers and flower petals
- Fabric scraps
- Sand
- Shells
- Rocks
- Toy cars, toy animals, bubble wrap, and other items for texture painting
- Recyclable items such as plastic bottles, bottle caps, newspapers

When I (Christine) was first learning to be a teacher, I drew shapes for children to color in. When challenged to do something different, I interpreted that to mean I should cut out stars for the children to paint instead of drawing a star outline. The end result was the same—I drew the boundary and decided on the finished product. The children had little opportunity to express their own creativity, problem solve, or determine when their project was finished.

During my year teaching Andrew, however, I encountered a number of influences that challenged this thinking. My supervisor, the preschool program coordinator, encouraged me to provide fewer crafts and more open-ended materials to see how the children would experiment. For me, this was a process of giving the children more and more control. Ultimately, having the power to decide what to do, how to do it, and what to do with the end product greatly fueled Andrew's learning.

Why open-ended?

Young children actively construct their knowledge by interacting with the world around them (Piaget 1928).

This means that they need to touch, see, explore, and manipulate objects and ideas to develop and learn. Young children should have "daily opportunities for creative expression" (Copple & Bredekamp 2009). Open-ended art is the perfect outlet for young children to process the information they take in.

Creative, open-ended art taps into three key developmental areas for young children. First, it allows an emotional outlet, encouraging children's active expression and communication (Pitri 2001). Second, it builds executive function (the ability to plan, monitor, and adjust behaviors to achieve a goal). This skill is important for focusing attention, problem solving, managing one's own behavior, and overall learning in school and in life (NIH 2012). Open-ended art materials challenge children to plan and solve problems as they create. They can focus their attention on an engaging task of their choosing and persevere to a conclusion. This may be an end product or simply the end of an experience (Pitri 2001). Children use these same planning, problem solving, attending, and persevering skills to write, do math problems, and solve disagreements with

Reflective Questions

You can find joy and delight by observing, taking photos, studying work samples, and reflecting as children engage in art experiences. Ask yourself questions like these using a Thinking Lens™.

Know yourself

- Can you think of a time when you made a change in your teaching practices? What did you do and what did you learn? Are there other changes you would like to make? What can you learn about change from the author's description of her transformation?
- Are you drawn to crafts and their orderliness? Do you find it pleasing to offer families and others a recognizable item as proof of learning? How might you combine your goals with providing children with open-ended art experiences?

Find the details of children's competence

- Demonstrate to yourself and families the value of open-ended art experiences by observing children engaged in them. Look for examples of children's strengths and competencies. What do you think is valuable about this experience? How can you share the story of children's competencies with families?

Seek the children's point of view

- Observe children engaged with open-ended art materials. What are children drawn to and delighted by? How do their actions demonstrate their thinking and understandings? What skills and competencies do you see that reflect your planned goals?

Examine the environment

- Assess the kinds of materials and experiences you have available for children. Which ones allow children to explore and discover through their own initiative, using their own ideas and understandings? What might you change or add?

classmates. Third, open-ended art helps to build, strengthen, and refine motor skills necessary for buttoning, zipping, writing, and typing.

How do open-ended art experiences offer so many opportunities for learning? Consider the difference between open-ended and close-ended questions. Close-ended questions, such as "What animal is this?" or "Did you have fun?," tend to result in one-word answers and limit children's thinking. However, open-ended questions and prompts—such as "How do you think this animal builds a home?" or "Tell me about what you are building"—challenge children to use creative and critical thinking skills. This same concept applies to close-ended and open-ended art. Close-ended projects such as coloring in a coloring book or gluing precut pieces to make a craft may support fine motor skills, but open-ended art builds these skills while challenging children's creativity and critical thinking.

Seeing this contrast convinced me about open-ended art. I had been trained to provide theme-based crafts with everyone doing the same project. As a result, I often grew stressed trying to convince all of the children to do the art. They in turn were upset because they were not interested in the pre-defined stars that had taken me hours to cut out.

Finally I stopped trying to force art and started offering open-ended materials. By observing children at work, I gained information and used it to make decisions about what materials to provide. Children created more art than I had thought possible. They painted sheet after sheet when art interested them and chose other activities when they were not as interested. I also saw more children choosing to create art. Overall the children were happier, I was less stressed, and the art processes and products were richer, as children explored color, texture, and tools.

Planning open-ended art experiences

Teachers can provide a variety of inviting materials that children can use in their creations. In addition, teachers can plan specific activities that are open-ended by nature. As you consider an activity, ask the following questions to determine if it is truly open-ended.

1. What is my goal?

Goals should focus on the activity's process rather than the product (Kohl 1994). Consider the different ways a child might use the materials. Perhaps the goal is for the children to mix various colors of paint to make new hues. Another goal could be for the children to enhance their fine motor skills while experimenting with drawing tools of various thicknesses. Maybe the goal is for the children to communicate in a new way by telling a story or expressing a feeling through art.

2. Will the children be able to make significant choices on their own? Are the children taking the lead in this activity or is the teacher?

Giving children choices opens up their creativity without setting limits. To determine if the activity allows children to take the lead, ask yourself, "How many decisions have I made for them?" Have you told them what to paint, what colors to use, what surfaces to paint on? Have you decided what each end product should resemble by giving them a model to copy? If so, let go of these limits so the children can make choices on their own. A child's goal may be to explore textures while painting with different tools, rather than painting something specific. Remember, in open-ended art the process matters most.

3. Are there enough materials to encourage creative exploration?

There is no right number of materials for any given art experience. In fact,

how much variety you include may depend on the amount of experience the children have with the medium or tools you are exploring. For example, if this is their first time using wire for sculpture, begin with a few different lengths of wire so children have time and freedom to get comfortable with manipulating the material. If they have plenty of experience with wire, offer small wire-working tools and items like beads or metal nuts and washers so children can explore their interests and creativity.

4. Is there enough time for thorough exploration?

The creative process takes time as children explore new and different ways to use the materials. They need plenty of time to work. Keep the schedule flexible so children can come and go as they please. Children can decide for themselves when their work is complete.

Conclusion

We incorporated Andrew's idea for an art show into our end-of-year celebration. This gave the children an opportunity to display their drawings, paintings, and collages. We overheard a few children ask their parents, "Do you like it?," while many more told their parents the stories behind their art. **TVC**

REFERENCES

- Copple, C., & S. Bredekamp, eds. 2009. *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children Birth Through Age 8*. 3rd ed. Washington, DC: NAEYC.
- Kohl, M. 1994. *Preschool Art: It's the Process, Not the Product*. Beltsville, MD: Gryphon House.
- NIH (National Institutes of Health). 2012. *NIH Toolbox Training Manual*. www.nihtoolbox.org/HowDoI/HowToAdministerTheToolbox/Pages/TrainingManual.aspx.
- Piaget, J. 1928. *The Child's Conception of the World*. New York: Routledge.
- Pitri, E. 2001. "The Role of Artistic Play in Problem Solving." *Art Education* 54 (3): 46-51.



MASTER YOUR FUTURE

with Champlain's Online Master's Program in Early Childhood Education with Specializations in Teaching and Administration.

- **PROJECT-BASED LEARNING APPROACH.**
Apply graduate-level knowledge immediately into your early childhood education classroom or center.
- **ACCESSIBLE EDUCATION FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS.**
Combining academic excellence with a low residency requirement.
- **HIGHLY ENGAGING CURRICULUM.**
Connect with your local early childhood education community more deeply.
- **RESPECTED DEGREE.**
Champlain College has been providing quality education since 1878.

For more information:

Call 1-866-282-7259

champlain.edu/med



EXPERIENCE LEARNING.