



Choice Based Art Education



Interview with Katherine Douglas, co-founder: Teaching for Artistic Behavior (TAB)

AOE was granted the opportunity to interview Katherine Douglas (TAB co-founder and co-author of our text for this course)! Read below to learn more about her insight and experience.

The Interview:

What is the story behind TAB? How did TAB originate?

TAB, or teaching for artistic behavior, began for me in 1972 as a new teacher in the only elementary school in a tiny Massachusetts district. I had an impossible schedule of 30-minute classes, often no time between, few supplies, and 960 students per week grades 1-4. It was purely a survival strategy to cope with not enough of anything for 33 students at once, not enough time to set things up properly for random grade level projects, and students who finished quickly or who needed more than one class to finish. I also co-taught some classes with a practicing painter who was frankly aghast at my clever art ed school projects.



In the summer of 1974 he and I designed a summer program for mixed ages, with material areas set up for choice. I taught this class with great success, and imported it into the school year in the fall, grades 1-4.

Over time I tried many things that were successful and many that were less so. I tried many modified choices, portfolios, and various unit strategies. Many of these options work well for teachers to this day, but I was able to offer full choice once I had my “sea legs”.

A new colleague in my district, John Crowe, collaborated with me and we began presenting together at conferences, along with Pauline Joseph, who had developed her own version of choice in a large district nearby. We learned a lot from each other! By this time (1980’s) I encountered the writings of Peter London and George Szekely, and had contact with them. They were and are a huge influence on the philosophy of the child as artist, which is at the core of TAB.

In 1993 I completed my Masters Thesis, which was actually the first draft of what became ENGAGING LEARNERS. It wasn’t all it should have been until Diane Jaquith joined the project and made it in to the book that you see today. She is a marvelous thinker and writer.

Also in the 1990's we hosted our first big conference at the Massachusetts College of Art: The Child As Artist Conference. We had about 100 Boston Public Schools art teachers in attendance and Dr. Szekely was our keynote speaker.

A friend of mine was active in the design and branding world. He made a documentary in my classroom and we discussed how corporations can't manage the creative spirit of their design staffs, but they can manage FOR it—ie., set up the circumstances for creativity to emerge. With his permission I tweaked it a bit, and Pauline and I named our graduate course Teaching FOR Artistic Behavior—and Diane said, “that's TAB!”

In 2000 we were invited by the Regional Education Lab (Dept of Education funded) to create content for their website via Brown University. The knowledgeloam.com was our first Internet presence and brought us notice from NAEA. Much of the content from that site is now on teachingforartisticbehavior.org.

How has the movement evolved over the years?

Over the years we have hosted many regional gatherings in studio classrooms, teachers' homes and museums and retreat venues. The grassroots organization has grown via our content, which is also found in blogs, and on Facebook and Twitter. We have a regular column in Arts and Activities magazine, and publish articles in Art Education and School Arts.

How do you feel TAB has changed art education as we know it?

The national discourse in art education, as well as its curriculum, has been created in the world of higher education and in the corporate world of publishing and art supplies. While we appreciate the great contributions of these groups, we feel strongly that the art teacher in the classroom should have an equal or stronger voice. The grassroots nature of TAB is a unique example of this. Our published writing and Internet content is the result of real experiences in classrooms. Our teacher-to-teacher mentoring and sharing results in professional learning communities with educators who are intense about their work and are improving the pedagogy day by day.

What is one piece of advice you would give to someone who says, “I can't do TAB” because of limitations (for example: a small art room, art on a cart, no sinks, limited budget, lack of administrator support, etc.)

Given the challenging circumstances that led me to customize my teaching, I can report that TAB can offer solutions in varying settings pre-K through high school. We have strong TAB classrooms at all grade levels, in elite private schools, suburban schools and inner city schools with high-risk students. Teachers of special needs students report excellent outcomes.

Administrative support is essential, of course. Clear and simple information must be shared with supervisors (see LEARNER DIRECTED CLASSROOM, ch. 1) When done well, a choice studio results in increased student investment, far fewer discipline

problems, accommodation for special learners and the potential for high quality work. Most administrators are very happy to see these outcomes.

My best advice? Do your homework—read all the extensive content available online and in published sources. Interact with other choice teachers. Start small. Observe what happens and tweak what you do as a result of student feedback. If you are the sort of teacher who is comfortable with this pedagogy, it can be the best job in the world!