

## Blank Canvases Art Program: Altering the Landscape of Visual Arts Education in the Elementary School Classroom

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The author reflects on her experience of developing and managing a visual arts-in-the-school program, Blank Canvases, in Toronto. Borrowing heavily from the author's thesis research inspired by Reggio Emilia ateliers, the program provides art encounters that reflect the artistic process through emphasizing materials explorations and infusing the spirit of the studio as an elemental aspect of the program's pedagogy and classroom approach.

**Keywords:** Reggio Emilia; atelier/atelierista; art studio in the classroom; embodied learning; materials exploration; timeless learning

### Blank Canvases

It was fun. The teachers were really nice. We got to learn new things and had new experiences. We got to show what makes us happy. The lesson was 100% different from the art classes we usually have. (grade 4 Niagara Street PS student, May 22, 2013)

For several years I was employed as an art educator, both at Harbourfront Centre in downtown Toronto in their school visits department, and visiting classrooms through the Royal Conservatory's Learning Through the Arts program. I witnessed and taught countless art lessons as a teacher and a parent. Throughout these experiences, I became exceedingly concerned with how art, specifically visual art,

was being taught and communicated with children at the elementary school level, specifically kindergarten through grade 8. I saw that in these lessons, the educator often demonstrates to children how to mimic a product through technique and skill in ways already mastered by adult art educators or artists. While in some ways learning to manipulate materials to create a product is a productive and necessary skill to possess, I question the underlying messages and constructions that children are absorbing through this method of art education. How much of the lesson is really about producing an object with the goal to please and gain the approval of the teacher(s) or other adults in the child's life? How much of what children are doing is art making as exploration and knowledge building with materials?

In 2010, I eagerly entered graduate studies at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto with the intent of researching exciting ways that visual art could be taught differently in elementary school education. During my studies, I discovered Reggio Emilia and became intrigued by the model of having an atelier (art studio) and an atelierista (artist pedagogue) as a mandatory part of preschool education. This research led to my consideration of how implementing this approach in elementary school in Canada would look. While the task of creating artist studios in our school system may seem insurmountable, I believe that every idea has to start somewhere. An educator must start with a vision of an ideal system and then begin with small incremental steps toward a new framework. As a graduate student, I became extremely excited to pursue this ideal as a career goal and focus.

At about the same time I was graduating from the Department of Curriculum Teaching and Learning at OISE, my friend and former supervisor from an arts organization we both worked at, Ilene Sova, was putting together a proposal for a program she called Blank Canvases. As the artistic director of Walnut Studios in downtown Toronto, an old warehouse space that houses 45 artists from various disciplines, Ilene was responding to requests from parents in the neighbourhood who wanted more interactions between the studio and the local schools. The program was designed to use methods that allow children to create and express their own individuality to their utmost capability. This includes art practices that incorporate open-

ended choice making, risk taking, and encouragement of uniqueness, fostering of expression, and a focus on process rather than product. The goal of the lessons was to use art making as a vehicle to promote qualities of group camaraderie, mutual respect, positive self-esteem, and critical and creative thinking.

These art lessons introduce the artwork of local Toronto artists to children while providing lessons that reflect the artistic process. Blank Canvases provides a half-day visual arts lesson to children in Toronto public schools, from kindergarten to grade 8. Students are shown a PowerPoint presentation about a local artist or art group, while at the same time being asked questions to engage and involve them in discussion. Then they are invited to create art based around the themes, processes, or concepts used by the local artist. In terms of pedagogy, Blank Canvases veers away from product-driven art projects toward student-led explorations in materials, concepts, and encounters. Bernadette Wycks, a former colleague of both Ilene and myself, was the initial art educator to lead the program in both the local pilot school, Niagara PS, and the after-school art program at Walnut Studios. Bernadette brought her passion for social justice and environmental issues and her inventive lesson planning to Blank Canvases.

When I was engaged to be the Blank Canvases education coordinator, our goal was to expand the program into other schools in the Greater Toronto area. I was also responsible for research and developing lesson plans and connecting them to the Ontario Ministry of Education arts curriculum. We also secured a partnership with OCAD University (formerly the Ontario College of Art and Design) under their Experiential Learning Department initiatives. This partnership includes placing students from the Art and Design Education Lab and the Cross Learning in the Field program where aspiring artist educators undertake their placements under my tutelage in the Blank Canvases program. This exciting opportunity has given me the chance to implement the philosophical and theoretical ideas from my thesis in the classroom. As one of our OCADU students commented, “I feel that by incorporating a program such as Blank Canvases into a school setting, we were able to inspire the kids and allow them to connect to local artists and students that they wouldn’t normally be given access to” (W. Hollingshead, personal communication, February 25, 2015).

While Blank Canvases is not building actual studios in schools or hiring full-time atelier artists to run the programs, we are helping to bring the studio into the school, and we use local artists as inspiration for children’s visual art learning. Most importantly, we are able to offer an approach that offers space for the unknown and allows for mistakes and creating artistic “mess” in school. As Sylvia Kind (2010) suggests, “failure, struggle, uncertainty, and not knowing the outcomes in advance may be difficult concepts for education to embrace, yet these are essential elements of artistic practice” (p. 114). When the spirit of the studio is brought into the classroom, these elements of the creative process in an artist’s practice find their way into the landscape of the classroom space.



**Figure 1. Grade 4/5 students sketching and painting their graffiti tags. This lesson explores the Toronto street art scene, both the artwork and the moral issues around graffiti.**

This article is a reflection on my journey of applying theories from my thesis research on Reggio Emilia principles and my attempt to bring the inspiration of the studio into classroom spaces with the Blank Canvases program.

### **Blank Canvases in the Classroom**

When booking the Blank Canvases program, teachers either choose the lesson they want for their class from our suite of offerings or they leave it up to us to decide. Sometimes the teachers contact us on their own. Other times it is a principal or parent from the school council who bring us into their schools. On the whole, teachers welcome the Blank Canvases program into their classrooms and greatly appreciate having an outside expert in their class to enhance their teaching practice and curriculum. Camelia Marks, a grade 2 teacher at Elmlea PS, speaks about having an artist educator come into her classroom:

It is extremely important for kids to engage with members of the community outside the school. It is also very beneficial to have someone who actually specializes in art delivering this type of lesson. It is very authentic. (C. Marks, personal communication, February 2, 2015)

I believe that when Ms. Marks says “authentic” she is referring to the way in which the approach we bring into the classroom is very similar to the approach an artist uses when creating in the studio, that is, start with a central idea/theme/issue, then sketch or research possibilities, explore with materials, create, reflect, continue, discuss, explore more. While the classroom art experience we offer is brief, I feel that it introduces many of the guiding principles used by practicing artists, and by Reggio Emilia atelieristi.

Informed by research on the atelier/atelierista in Reggio Emilia preschools, focusing particularly on the writings of Veia

Vecchi in *Art and Creativity in Reggio Emilia: Exploring the Role and Potential of Ateliers in Early Childhood Education* (2010), the Blank Canvases program borrows from the atelier model by drawing on aspects of embodied learning theories of holistic education in relation to visual art education in the elementary school classroom. As one of the first atelieristi, Veà Vecchi offers a rich personal account of her three decades of experience within the ongoing project<sup>1</sup> within the preschools of Reggio Emilia, Italy. A majority of her work and beliefs centre around the importance of aesthetics and poetics in education. She wonders “to what extent and in what ways the processes of learning and teaching could change if school culture welcomed the poetic languages and an aesthetic dimension as important elements for building knowledge” (Vecchi, 2010, p. 16). In this sense, Blank Canvases offers a brief encounter into a pedagogical approach that features the aesthetic and poetic experiences of art making as an essential element in accumulating knowledge. The Blank Canvases encounter invites children to use art making as an extension of their language and thought processes in aesthetic and poetic forms that are aligned with the artists we introduce them to.

Often teachers will comment to me how much they appreciate us bringing all the supplies, materials, and preparation for the lesson. It is quite a bit of schlepping, but it is all worth it once the kids dive into the materials and start to build their sculptures or mix the paints and discover the noticeable difference in using acrylic over tempera. These kinds of engaged encounters with art making in the classroom are why I believe so passionately in the Blank Canvases program.

Part of the Blank Canvases mandate is to practice sustainable and environmentally friendly methods of art making. In the early stages of the program, because we were working without a budget, we approached sourcing our supplies with creativity. This resourcefulness became part of our educational message. Being community artists who are used to problem solving and often working within small budgets, we used what we had available to us, and this became a very successful aspect of our model. We held supply drives and reached out to friends, local businesses, and our own recycling bins to source materials for art projects. For instance, local frame stores donated the waste from their mat boards, which became the substrates for high-quality surfaces for paintings and drawings and even bases for sculptures. After the success of the up-cycling of the mat boards, our director approached several businesses, and two design firms began donating all their high-quality out-of-season product samples. This resulted in massive donations of beautiful carpets, wood samples, textured laminates, patterned fabric, and patterned papers. In a further stroke of luck, the design firms also donated high-end office supplies and furniture to our organization. The materials are perfect for the various lessons Blank Canvases offers. The wood and laminate are wonderful for the 3D map sculptures motivated by exploring the paintings of Chris Walsh. The design fabric is used for quilting as a subversive art form, which is inspired by the fabric art of Joyce Wieland. Discarded plastics were up-cycled into palettes and water containers.

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<sup>1</sup> As opposed to having a curriculum, the preschools of Reggio Emilia prefer to identify the educational work in the school as an ongoing project, or research. Thus “the educational work in Reggio Emilia never becomes set and routine but instead is always undergoing reexamination and experimentation. For this reason, the Reggio educators refuse the term ‘model’ when talking about their approach, and instead speak of ‘our project’ and ‘our experience’” (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1993, p. 9). See also Gandini, Hill, Cadwell, and Schwall (2005).



**Figure 2. Plastic water bottles, styrofoam cups, and toilet paper rolls are among the recycled materials used for the Blank Canvases lesson inspired by the sculptures of Tonya Hart. At the end of the lesson, battery-operated tea lights and “finger lights” are placed inside the sculptures. With the classroom lights turned off, the students are able to observe how light can add emphasis and meaning to their creations, transforming the experience of the materials.**

With this resourceful gathering of supplies, we are able to provide quality art encounters and inspire teachers and children that they can make art out of anything!

About a year and half into the program, Curry’s Art Supplies (a local Toronto art supplies chain store) came on board as our full sponsor and strategic partner. They now provide our basic materials (paint, brushes, glue, canvas board, drawing materials, palettes, scissors, and paper). They strongly feel that our program is aligned with their company’s goals to encourage kids to “get messy” and work with art in the classroom. This tremendous support not only means that we are using higher-quality art supplies, but each student who participates in the Blank Canvases program is now given a sketchbook to use during the lesson and to keep in order to continue their artistic exploration. This simple and generous gift is making an incredible impact in student’s lives and for teachers, too. Tuyet Binh Duong, a grade 3/4 teacher at Dundas Junior PS, describes the difference a sketchbook made for one of her students:

One boy in my class went through some kind of trauma/stress at home or in his last school, causing him to become (sic) selective mutism. He didn't come to school the morning we did the project even though I had called his parents that morning asking them to bring him as I expected him to enjoy it. I gave him the sketch book the next day and he was very surprised with this free gift! I told him that he could write or draw anything in there and it was his to keep. I noticed him bringing that sketchbook to school in the next few days and drawing various planets in it. He rarely brings any other work back. The sketchbook allowed him to express his passion, which was the planets. Other students in class still bring their sketchbooks to school wanting to sketch during their recesses. (T. Binh Duong, personal communication, January 21, 2015)

The sketchbooks offer multiple opportunities for children to create, collaborate, and communicate, as recognized by Miriam Zachariah, principal at Parkdale PS:

I still see students with their sketchbooks, drawing in their free time, sharing artistic ideas with friends. It was especially important for our many ELL learners to be able to express themselves through art when using the English language is difficult. (M. Zachariah, personal communication, November 21, 2014)

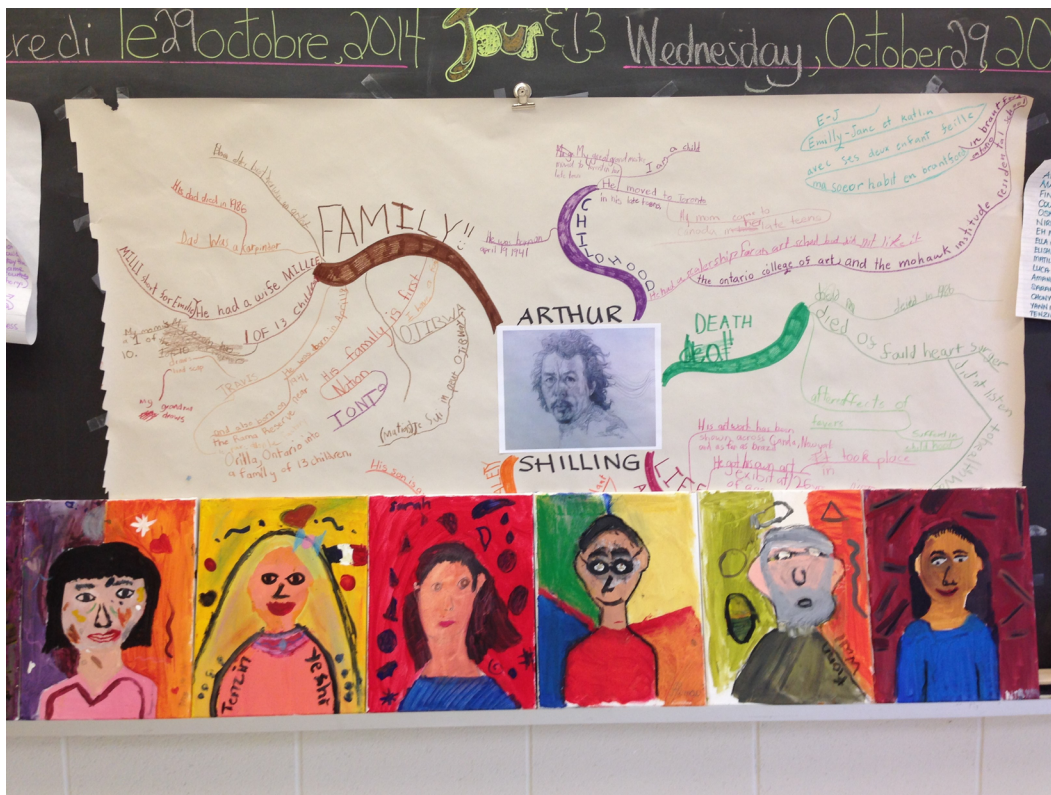


Figure 3. Children sketching their ideas for the 3D art project.

Having quality art supplies to bring into public school classrooms is a huge advantage and a mandate that follows the Reggio philosophy of using quality materials and products with children. Vecchi (2010) writes that “tools and materials that make it possible for children to have experiences in which their thinking takes on different forms (visual, musical, dance, verbal)” (p. 4). With the mixture of these donated items and high-quality up-cycled materials, we are able to emphasize in our program that art making does not have to be expensive and that you can source materials in your own community, home, and schools to have meaningful art experiences.

## Bringing the Atelier/Studio to the Classroom

In developing Blank Canvases pedagogy, I am attempting to encourage an atmosphere in the classroom that is guided by the principles practiced in the preschools of Reggio Emilia, particularly the aspects of coconstructed knowledge, solidarity, dialogue, being by the children's side, avoiding predetermined results, and listening (Vecchi, 2010). We particularly emphasize the aspect of process over project, although this is a challenge in a school culture and society fixated on results-driven assignments and polished products. Vecchi (2010) writes:

It is important to society that schools and we as teachers are clearly aware of how much space we leave children for original thinking, without rushing to restrict it with predetermined schemes that define what is correct according to school culture. How much do we support children to have ideas different from those of other people and how do we accustom them to arguing and discussing their ideas with their classmates? I am quite convinced that greater attention to processes, rather than only the final product, would help us to feel greater respect for independent thinking and strategies of children and teenagers. (p. xvii)

In our classroom visits, I remind myself and encourage our art educators to try to leave judgment and notions of "good," "right," or "correct" out of the situation. Instead, the focus is on the students' interpretations of the artist being presented that day and their subsequent exploration with the materials provided.

Another way I encourage our art educators to embrace our role is to take cues from the atelierista model rather than entering the classroom as an art teacher. Most of us are practicing artists and have either a degree in education or many years experience working in arts education. This is an important aspect as we are providing a different perspective and approach to explore art through a different kind of lens. As Becraft (2013) writes, "the job of the 'atelierista' is to support the development of an aesthetic quality within the learning experience" (p. 10). This support occurs when we work with groups of children to represent poetically, through the use of visual and expressive media, what the learning experience means to the learners (Becraft, 2013). The child then is viewed as an important partner in their own education and knowledge acquisition, rather than a vessel to be filled.

We want the child to engage in a holistic way, in an embodied way, where the sensations of touch, sound, taste, and sight all play a role. Yes, even taste! Several students have informed me that they taste the paint. Why? Because curiosity is part of learning, and using our senses is a way to learn. We are not just a head attached to an unfeeling body: We learn with the whole body. The atelierista model is concerned with children discovering with their bodies, and in proximity with other bodies, to feel the materials and develop connections between them. For Springgay (2005; 2008; 2011), Ellsworth (2005), and Pink (2009), this is an embodied way of knowing which allows for a deeper level of being with materials and bodies, a knowledge within the body that is gained from sensational experiences.

When children participate freely this way, they are experiencing ethical encounters (Grube, 2012, p. 40). Vicky Grube, professor of art education at Appalachian State University, witnessed this kind of ethical encounter among students in Room 13, an art studio situated as part of their schoolhouse in Fort William, Scotland, that is essentially run and operated by the children who attend there. Grube's observations echo a sense of what I experience in my half-day visits with students who participate in the Blank Canvases program. Providing the materials, space, and freedom for children to create freely supports an opportunity for self-awareness, while cocreating allows for dialogue and the possibility of change. According to Grube (2012),

the action of experimenting with assorted media, creating new assemblages, deconstructing cultural beliefs, and juxtaposing ideas is how children explore self. In collaborative artmaking, or the co-construction of knowledge, static self perception becomes fluid and malleable in the as-yet-unseen affects and ideas of another. (p. 40)

The studio is a place for bodies who are becoming (O'Sullivan, 2006, as cited in Grube, 2012), to be in a state of flux

(Deleuze, date, as cited in Grube, 2012). As Deleuze and Guattari (1987) explain,

between things does not designate a localizable relation from one thing to the other and back again, but a perpendicular direction, a transversal movement that sweeps one *and* the other away, a stream without beginning or end that undermines its banks and picks up speed in the middle. (p. 25, italics in original).

There are not many occasions in school where unknowns, flux, and becoming are desired states of being, and that is exactly the reason why bringing art encounters that encourage these are an essential experience for children to have. Teachers will often comment on the noticeable difference that is palpable during our visit. For example, Tuyet Binh Duong commented that,

on the whole, hands-on art projects can speak and relay more to students than typical pieces of writing. Students like to move around, think, and create. (T. Binh Duong, personal communication, January 21, 2015)

By bringing the spirit of the studio into the classroom, we are encouraging this aspect of embodied learning in the classroom space and inviting students to acknowledge the sensations that occur in art making. Drawing on the Reggio principles of coconstructed learning, solidarity, dialogue, a laboratory of research, being by the children's side, and listening to students, and by veering away from having a template to copy, this approach allows children to be freer to explore options and attempt challenges, without fear of "getting it wrong."



**Figure 4. "Look, I made brown!" A junior kindergarten student discovers how the primary colours make brown, and how brown paint *feels* on their skin, during an expressionist portrait lesson inspired by Arthur Shilling.**



As part of our attempt to bring a studio encounter into the classroom, we also want to impart that art making is often frustrating, challenging, and difficult, and that is often what artists experience in their practice. Whether working with materials to achieve a certain technique, working with a concept to achieve a desired outcome, or working with others in a confined space, art is not easy (Kind, 2010). Kind (2010) writes that art “can be messy, disruptive, and unsettling” (p. 119). Yet it is through tensions, difference, and unease that we grow, learn, and move forward. As a space of sensuality and proximity to others, the atelier supports “a (post) re-conceptualization of curriculum as *bodied curriculum* where the relationality between self and other performs curriculum as difference” (Springgay & Freedman, 2009, p. 32, italics in original). The atelier is a place where the senses are fundamental to learning. As Vecchi (2010) writes, “children learn through their bodies” (p. 56). A curriculum that provides for this space and type of learning allows for learning difference and embraces tensions, not as obstacles, but as givens in a world of change, otherness, and unknowns. As Springgay and Freedman (2009) argue, “bodied encounters . . . in and through touch, produce intercorporeal understandings and in doing so imagine and intimate curriculum premised on difference” (p. 28). Through the Blank Canvases program, our brief time in a classroom is a chance to allow for these bodied encounters to occur, and to leave space for the students and teacher to continue this type of approach after we pack up and leave.

Prior to becoming the education coordinator at Walnut Studios, my research was concerned with reimagining the elementary school experience as one in which there is a space and place for learning in a new way via the introduction of an atelier and atelierista in elementary schools, where the emphasis is on learning art, in one sense, but in another sense is about learning in a timeless, holistic, and embodied way, to offer a counterbalance to the current system of logic and “time bound” (Miller, 2006, p. 13) learning that is now the standard in most elementary schools. Timeless learning includes, but is not limited to, the following learning approaches: holistic/integrated, embodied, soulful, connected, participatory, nondualistic, and immeasurable, incorporating flow and mystery (Miller, 2006). I will explore these approaches further. With Blank Canvases, there is the opportunity to explore these approaches, albeit briefly, in the classroom. We focus on art practices and describe to children that what artists do in their studios is a different, yet interconnected, way of learning.

By bringing studio practices into the classroom, we are saying that there is space for questioning and uncertainty, of not knowing the outcome and working through that. We do this in a variety of ways: through introducing and discussing the sketching process, and through leading lessons that introduce concepts and techniques to explore, rather than a template for children to follow. We also do this by providing materials and supplies that children can manipulate and explore with, by demonstrating and talking about our own experiences as artists. We emphasize that making mistakes and trying out ideas are part of our practice and artistic development. Further, by wrapping up the lesson with a student “gallery walk” and a group critique of the pieces, we encourage children to self-reflect and to share their thoughts and comments about the experience. A grade 4 student at Crescent Town PS described his experience learning about expressionist portrait painter Arthur Shilling:

This is a painting about me. I put lots of colour into this self-portrait because my life seems boring and colours seem to make me happy. (April 13, 2014)



**Figure 5. Painting by grade 4 student inspired by artist Arthur Shilling.**

Through this we encourage children to articulate how they feel about the art making and to discuss what they learn from exploring their classmates' work. We also encourage the teachers to keep the process going after the lesson, as reflection sometimes needs time and space to be felt and understood. These authentic artistic experiences like those that would typically happen in a studio are drastically different from the product-based approach, where a child's experience is qualified only by how closely the object resembles what the teacher asked them to mimic.



**Figure 6. Grade 1 student “identity pattern painting” inspired by Charles Pachter. In the lesson we discuss icons and symbols and the children are asked to develop a symbol to represent themselves and create a pattern with it.**

Timeless learning is not limited to the intellect: It is also connected to the emotions, the body, and the spirit. Spirit is defined here as a vital, mysterious energy that can give meaning and purpose to our lives. Timeless learning recognizes that all these elements are linked interdependently (Miller, 2006, p. 5). For the atelierista, embodied pedagogy is when an adult has respect for children’s timeless approach to learning. Miller (2006) writes: “As teachers we need to embody qualities that are conducive to timeless learning such as caring, mindful presence, and conveying a sense of respect to the student” (p. 6). Children’s encounters with materials “are generally extremely rich in suggestive qualities, memories and meanings, without much intervention on the part of the teacher” (Vecchi, 2010, p. 32). Embodied teaching brings the knowledge of the head into the living practice of a whole person. As artist educators, and through the Blank Canvases program, our role is to respect each child’s participation in their learning experience. By introducing processes, concepts, and materials, we gently guide and assist the student in their learning as an individual whole person. A grade 2 student said:

Thank you for being here. I really like painting because I love painting, and when I paint, my mind opens up. (February 2, 2015)

As artist educators, we are not there to promote how well we as adults make art, but how art making is a valuable learning experience for each individual student.

With Blank Canvases, when we enter the classroom, I try to approach it like we are planting a seed. The goal is not to lead a lesson in the traditional sense of having the children complete a task, clean up, and be done. Rather, we look at our time with the students as an entry into *how* making art is learning in an interconnected, relational way that can continue and extend beyond our visit. We aim to create learning opportunities that demonstrate how art making leads to discoveries and possibilities. To encourage projects that spark further discoveries about the artist, themes, materials, techniques, elements

of design, and other elements of art development. Perhaps the day we visit the classroom is not the best day for a particular student (e.g., they are not feeling well, they have had an upsetting episode at home, they are hungry). We approach this by connecting with students to say, “It’s okay if today what you made didn’t turn out the way you hoped. This happens all the time as artists with our art practices. Keep trying, keep messing up, keep discovering—this is how we learn!” The sketchbook is one aspect in the continuing learning and development of art making. Leaving behind a sketchbook for the student symbolizes that this is not just a one-time experience. Asking students to think and reflect on what else they could still do to add, change, or enhance what they made that day is also part of the lesson. We emphasize that art making is a constant, ongoing part of learning in school, and in life.

For an artist, being in the studio offers a “map-like” approach to learning, where connections between one idea and another are created through engaging in art making. This is done by reflecting and communicating through the many languages that are part of an artist’s vocabulary. The map, like a rhizome, allows for endless access points, and in this way is an ongoing project or “performance.” As Deleuze and Guattari (1987) explain, “a map has multiple entryways, as opposed to the tracing, which always comes back ‘to the same.’ The map has to do with performance, whereas the tracing always involves an alleged ‘competence’” (pp. 12–13). In school, if educators only stay with what they *know* to be “right,” they miss the opportunity to find unknowns and the mysteries within/out us. In this way, the Blank Canvases art educator, similar to the atelierista, does not know what the outcome for the day will be for the students, but provides a safe space to explore knowing and unknowing, in a continuous dance that allows for both and either to exist. The artist educators aim for a similar outcome when working with children. They constantly reiterate to the students that it’s alright to trust their inner guide or to do something without knowing what they are doing—they are told to “just try.” Very often, I will be asked by a student if they can do something with their project. Instead of answering directly, I ask them to answer for themselves what it is that they are experiencing. This allows for discovery, for mystery, and encourages critical thinking on the student’s part. With art making, we want to encourage risk taking and allowing room for disruption, for rupture to play a crucial role in their classroom and in how they learn. These are the principals followed in the ateliers of Reggio Emilia and the theories of timeless and embodied learning.

We also hope to convey to the teacher the importance of observation and documentation of students’ process, for a teacher who observes a student can take some of that learning back into their practice, and carry on in what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) call the rhizome structure of being. The rhizome, like crab grass, knows no beginning or end, but moves in lines that connect and are in the process of becoming. This process of becoming is what in Reggio takes place in the atelier, with the atelierista as a facilitator and documenter of a child’s process. The relationship between atelierista and student is different from that of art teacher and student. In the former, the atelierista is a partner in learning, giving the student a presence that provides structure, safety, and support. The atelierista is not there to promote one way of doing something, but to ensure that materials, environment, and resources are provided and that the child is able to freely explore both, individually and collectively, so as to experience their education in an embodied, relational, and holistic way. In the half day with the students, with the Blank Canvases approach, I do my best as an outside artist educator to bring this atelierista-like presence into the classroom space and to leave the spirit of the studio lingering in the air, tangible and alive, so that it can create some kind of impact on as many people as possible.

### **How Is Blank Canvases Different?**

They delivered a great class that I could not have conducted without them. What made the lesson so valuable is that it exposed students to experiences in art that they wouldn’t otherwise have had the opportunity for.  
(grade 3 teacher, Allenby PS)

As opposed to a visiting artist who comes in to make their artwork for the children or with the children, Blank Canvases is focused on students being inspired by the artwork of a local artist in order to create art on their own with the support of an artist educator. Our program is also different from other art education programs because we are interested in emphasizing the process and ongoing learning that happens, both before we arrive and after we leave. Asking the teacher to be involved

and to be a partner in the art encounter is an approach we value. In this sense, we hope to establish, not only the connectivity of the art making, but also how the experience can keep continuing. Extensions are offered to the teachers offering examples on how to continue teaching dynamic lessons in the arts and how to bring this creative approach into other subject areas. We also encourage teachers to keep in touch with us and send us photos, writing, or invitations to shows so that we can follow up on the learning and life that continue after we have left the classroom.



**Figure 7. Photo of children's artwork in front of mind map about Arthur Shilling. Joanna Wardawa's grade 3/4 class researched and discussed his work prior to the Blank Canvases art educator visiting the classroom.**

Like the atelierista, the educators take the time to show they care about the children's stories in the classroom and then use the aesthetic dimensions to open up possibilities for learning in interconnected ways.

In the atelier, stimulated by what Malaguzzi (n.d.) called "the aesthetic vibration" (as cited in Vecchi, 2010, p. 6), students are open to knowledge of the body, mind, and spirit. From building relationships between themselves and others and among each other comes an empathetic understanding to the way in which all things are connected. By bringing this feeling of the atelier into the classroom, I encourage Blank Canvases art educators to use art as a vehicle to open up the channels to learn in interconnected and multidisciplinary ways. This may not result in anything concrete or an end product, but it is encounters of students cocreating together that is a vital aspect in their experience. As Vicky Grube (2012) observed in her time with the students of Room 13,

participating in an encounter, either as artist or audience, does not always result in the effervescence of exquisite or even adequate ideas. But the encounter creates affects that are the heart of art and life. Art is being together, whether an introspective engagement with materials that affects an audience or the companionship of art making with another person. (p. 41)

In these encounters, the experience goes beyond “this is what I made” to pondering ideas: “What interactions did I have? How did I feel? Who did I learn with and from? Where were the challenges and frustrations? How did I use the materials to create? What else is there?”

A detailed example of our program will help to illustrate these points and demonstrate how this happens in action. One popular Blank Canvases lesson called “3D map sculptures” is inspired by contemporary painter Chris Walsh. Walsh’s large oil paintings are based on the grid-like patterns of cities and maps. His use of texture, colour, pattern, and shape are emblematic of the excavation of layers where cities have been built on land, and habitats constructed. In keeping with our environmental and resourceful community approach to supplies, before entering the classroom we ask the teachers to have their students bring in recycled materials to use in the project. Teacher Tuyet Binh Duong said of this experience:

I enjoyed the process of helping to prepare for the lesson, such as asking students to collect recycled objects. The collecting process alone already promoted “teamwork” among my students. (personal communication, February 2, 2015)

On the day of the lesson and after presenting Walsh’s work and exploring the paintings, students are given sketchbooks to sketch out an area of their community that means something to them. They are encouraged to use colour, line, and shape to symbolize the parts of their map. However, they are instructed that, unlike a geography or mapping lesson, all of these design elements can be used in a way to communicate something personal about the place—letting go of the literal.



**Figure 8. Grade 1/2 student creating a 3D map sculpture inspired by Chris Walsh’s paintings.**

Next the students are shown a variety of materials that they will use to construct their 3D map. The materials come from both the recycling bin (i.e., those we asked the students to bring) and from donations from design firms. A quick demonstration is given on how to glue, methods are described for covering the package logos, and we inform the students where the hot glue stations are set up in the room. The rest is up to them. Usually there is a kind of frenzied rush to the supplies as children reach for materials that excite or appeal to them. Other times, there is frustration in not finding a colour or shape they are looking for. In all this, it is the art educator's role to listen to what the student is requesting and assist them in problem solving. The learning happens in the process of creating, and attentiveness to the child's voice is paramount from the instructor's perspective. When we come to ending time, all the children, finished or not, put their 3D map sculptures into the middle of the room to create a large collaborative city. The class forms a circle around the city, and this is an opportunity to ask questions about the project and the process. It is always emphasized that this is an ongoing project; the learning does not stop here. Some ways in which the project could continue are discussed, and the art educator also speaks with the teacher about how the art making could carry on after the class. The majority of the teachers I have worked with are excited about continuing the lesson in some capacity. The teachers often speak about giving the children more time or having the students write about their sculpture and experience. Others have told us about adapting the project to a different art form or linking it to another area in the curriculum (we also give teachers a list of extensions for lessons). In this way, the interconnectedness of subject matter becomes an integral part of the ongoing learning that happens with the art lesson.



**Figure 9. Viewing the map sculptures as a collective “city” at the end of the Blank Canvases lesson. Students are asked to speak about another child’s piece to encourage observation, reflection, and group camaraderie.**

This way of teaching art hearkens back to the timeless learning theory, where we do not know when or how or why learning takes place for each individual. In respecting that there is this unknown quality in learning, Blank Canvases acknowledges this as an authentic part of the creative process. They celebrate that artists accept this as part of their practice and understand its value in knowledge making.

## Conclusion

By using local artists to inspire the art lesson, Blank Canvases wants children to connect with and relate to the artists and feel respected for their voice in exploring with art. Borrowing from the atelierista model of having an artist pedagogue rather than an art teacher, the Blank Canvases art educator's role is more than only to instruct. It is also to offer insight, support, and skills and to observe students. Their role is to be a facilitator for the child in their learning, not to have the child adhere to a rigid code of standards for a project's outcome. When we come into the classroom, the supplies and materials are offered to students for them to feel, manipulate, alter, and explore what they do. Sometimes a child is so in awe of what paint feels like or discovering how to make brown from the primaries that they lose sight of the project itself. However, this is the learning moment, individually. They have discovered something very powerful and meaningful for them. As will often happen, children in this kind of art encounter will experience a kind of timeless learning: the zone of interconnectivity. In half a day, we can plant the seeds of this type of learning, and its value within education, in the students and ultimately in their classroom teachers. As partners in education within elementary schools and working with classroom teachers, principals, and parents, we are making an impact for students in the classrooms we visit.

From my experiences as an art educator and my subsequent research on Reggio Emilia principles, it is both exciting and frustrating for me to be carrying out this work. On one hand, it is rewarding and fulfilling to lead a program where we are doing what we can in the schools to bring a studio approach to learning art in the classroom. On the other hand, for many students, this is the only time they will have an artist educator come in to work with them and their class with art. However, I hold on to what I hear and see and experience from students, teachers, and parents—that this kind of art learning is deeply appreciated and so different from what normally happens in the classroom. So, even if it is brief, the spirit of the studio is powerful and disrupts traditional ways of learning and knowing in the classroom—something we need in elementary school education.

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