

The Accessible Gateway to Self-Expression

An essay on the importance of art for students with disabilities

By Constance van Rollegem

Let me start by making two seemingly innocuous statements: first, that everyone has thoughts, and second, that anyone can learn. These may seem banal at first glance, yet it has been my experience that we cannot take everyone's acceptance of these truths for granted. Too often, the fact that people's physical or neurological differences cause them to communicate more slowly, more repetitively, with less focus, with a unique vocabulary, or without words is used as justification to discount their basic ability to think. As if thoughts, left unsaid, did not exist. Art, therefore, is crucial for students with disabilities because it is a medium through which these two simple statements become self-evident to anyone paying attention; art is an accessible intellectual space where everyone can find a means of self-expression and where everyone has the opportunity to learn.

Art is the best and most accessible tool of self-expression since what matters is getting your thoughts out and sharing it with an audience that attaches meaning to it. The methods or techniques used in this expression, as well as how this expression is understood, are of secondary importance to this initial act of creation. In art, there is no right or wrong, and expression can take place freed from the limitations and expectations of society. Art is the only space that allows many of us to be ourselves and to control the way in which we are perceived by those around us. Furthermore, studying art also means valorizing and learning about individuals who often do not conform to the expectations of society. Artists alternate between following the rules of technique and breaking from them entirely, and their genius comes from needing to create even when their artwork (and their thoughts) are not understood. Art can provide a crucial means of belonging, while helping one cope with the ups and downs of life.

My goal as a parent has been in helping my daughter gain a toolkit of different methods for communicating her thoughts. She has taken classes across artistic mediums, in oil painting and mosaics, dance and drumming, poetry and theater. This has given her the freedom to recognize the mediums and settings that do not fit her (ballet), and to dive more deeply into those that excite her (acting, collage and mosaics, poetry). The word she uses to describe how her art classes make her feel is "energized." Like many parents, I've seen my daughter so motivated when creating or when in front of art that she overcomes the motor planning difficulties that usually limit her communication and expression.

It is crucial that we who consider ourselves "normal" validate whatever it is that our children and students create, even if we do not yet understand their meaning or personal importance. In art classes, I've seen instances of parents finding evidence that their children had been learning how to write, or had been paying attention to and understood a conversation that they had seemed inattentive to earlier. We need to

acknowledge our own limitations of understanding, and first and foremost allow every thought to be expressed.

Beyond self-expression, creativity and art are all about problem solving. Creativity is everywhere. A person with a disability has to be more creative than almost anyone since so many parts of society will not fit them. Simply to live as themselves, they will be required to adapt to imposed rules or to build systems to access the same activities as others. Artistic spaces, however, are ones where students can focus on their abilities, rather than their disabilities; where they can play and experiment with their bodies and minds, pushing their personal physical limits to explore and find new ways to use their strengths. My daughter, for example, cannot physically cut and arrange glass in the same way as other students do in her mosaics class. However, she and her team of educators have devised a system in which she designs mosaic patterns using her eye-gaze computer¹ and oversees others as they put the mosaic together according to her instructions. Such creativity is empowering.

This problem-solving nature of art also makes it a unique tool to encourage learning. Many artists use their work to deconstruct, then reconstruct in a new way, subjects or activities that they find difficult to grasp. Meanwhile, the pleasure of viewing or experiencing art often comes from having a subject presented from a new angle—one which might make the familiar unfamiliar, or which might make the previously inscrutable suddenly clear. Studying art perfectly complements studies in other subjects, as it allows all that is visual, auditory, verbal, physical, logical and social to be part of the process for understanding the unfamiliar. Furthermore, art often involves repetition, memorization, and duplication, which are also powerful learning tools. Once more, studying art supplies students with disabilities more intellectual tools, and thus opportunities, with which to explore the world.

A few years ago, I was with my daughter at a Create Ability class at the Museum of Modern Art with a group of students with disabilities when we stopped to discuss a group of six paintings depicting musical rhythm. In these visits, the educators usually ask students for verbal comments on each painting—an activity that can be a bit difficult for my non-verbal daughter. This time, however, given the painting's musical theme, the educator asked the students to express the noises that they thought the paintings represented. A cacophony of sounds emerged from the group. There was a “bang” and a “boom” and some “la-la-las,” but also some hums and other wordless sounds. The important thing was that every student, verbal and non-verbal alike, had vocalized in some form. Art is powerful because it is the world where one man can turn music into a painting, and where a dozen people with a range of abilities can respond by turning this painting into song.

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¹ “Eye-gaze” technology tracks where users are looking on a screen, allowing them to control a computer mouse with their eyes.

Constance van Rollegem is an artist and current Chair of the Museum, Arts and Culture Access Consortium (MAC), an organization that helps art practitioners engage with disability rights advocates and people with disabilities to strengthen the access and inclusion of cultural institutions. She is the mother of a young woman with Rett Syndrome who is herself an aspiring artist and disability rights advocate. This essay was written as a collaborative effort between Constance, her husband Christopher Stienon, and their elder daughter Audrey Stienon.