Making Art Lessons Come Alive with Web 2.0

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Abstract: Web 2.0 technologies have been seen to be making an impact on teaching and learning. It has the potential to attract and excite learners and transform the way art lessons are conducted in the classroom. For the students who are digital natives found in schools today, Web 2.0 technologies seem appropriate. Blogs and YouTube videos, for example, can be incorporated where relevant so as to engage their attention in the classroom. The paper describes how an art teacher in a private secondary school decided to use these technologies in her art classroom, an initiative which later also caught the attention of the school management including the Chief Executive Officer of the school, following which some new directions were set for the coming academic year.   When compared to the past, students were found to be more interested and engaged in the art lessons taught. They also participated more actively in the classroom. In addition, compared to performance in the past, students who were exposed to technology in the classroom were found to have scored higher marks in the class assessment. More important, the success of the initiative has led to a new direction for students in art in the school.

Introduction

Art plays a small but important part of a well-rounded education program. Art teachers can stimulate students' imaginations by engaging them in open-ended projects that require creativity and advance thinking skills by encouraging them to express themselves freely. It is also expected that Art teachers will help students to expand their perspective by inspiring them to view things in innovative ways. Art teachers of the 21st century need to infuse technology into their teaching and into their student's learning as students are less tolerant with a one size fit all solution stereotype of lesson delivery in the classrooms. Our students demand more than just the normal art lesson in accordance to the school curriculum. They are keen learners seeking fast, responsive, impactful customized and efficient lesson delivery in which the contents are expected to be more insightful and fostering creativity in learning media.

The infusion of technology into the teacher education and modeling the use of technology in a variety of ways have the potential to make art lessons come alive in the classroom. As Sendall, Ceccucci, & Peslak (2008) reported, students are likely to have their knowledge improved and become more comfortable in classes that have technology infused in them. As Downes (2005) earlier suggested, some of the latest technologies are about enabling and encouraging participation. It can be agreed that effective learning processes will take place naturally when students today are learning what they want to learn and what will be of interest to the.   Although lesson plans and schemes of work act as guidelines for teachers to deliver their lessons, a student-centric approach to learning in integrating technology can be essential in maximizing learning in classrooms. Students need to be engaged in the process of creating and learning. Art programs can help draw students out of "formal "ways of achieving outcomes and developing positive perceptions. The paper focuses the attempts of an Art teacher in Sapura Smart School to infuse technology into her classes and how the initiative has led to positive results.

Background

Sapura Smart School is a modern private school for primary and secondary education adopting innovative teaching-learning practices to nurture children in a creative and enriching learning environment. Students come largely from the high or upper middle social economic group. The students are of mixed abilities.   Each class has a maximum of 28 students and every classroom is equipped with a computer projector and access to the Internet. Internet is accessible via wireless broadband. In addition, students are provided with a smart card with attendance and e purse facilities. The school has established a Web-based school administration environment comprising the E-info Board, E-Attendance and access to class performance online as well as supporting online communication with parents. The school also provides interactive multimedia courseware to its students.

The philosophy of Sapura Smart School is to ensure that every student, irrespective of abilities, is able to learn. The school provides a conducive learning environment for students to explore, do research and hence, develop some of the qualities of excellence amongst them. The school has a fully equipped ICT laboratory comprising Apple Macintosh computers to provide an up-to-date technology-based learning environment for students.

Art is part of the school curriculum with a period of 80 minutes per week allocated for every class. The art curriculum is based on the Malaysian National School Curriculum. There is no national Art examination for Lower Secondary Education (Secondary One to Three).   As such teachers are given a free hand to bring the best out of each individual student by modifying the art syllabus to fit what works for students. Art lessons are conducted in the in the school Art Room where the set up and ambience of the room are more conducive and stimulating. The Art Room is also equipped with a built in computer projector. It also has access to the Internet via a wireless broadband connection.

Students of Sapura Smart School are digitally literate. They typically access the internet from home daily. They check email, keep in touch with friends via social networks like Facebook, MSN and Skype as well as utilize applications software like imovie for the Apple Macintosh to carry out school projects. It is with this in view that the school has supported the need to gear up students so as to move them ahead into the Web 2.0 world and hence, benefit from the integration of technology into art lessons.

Introducing Web 2.0

At the start of the 2009 academic year (semester one), presentation via Power Point was used in class to demonstrate examples of work, references and techniques relevant to the selected theme. Resources downloaded from Google images, Youtube and real work by peers were digitized and compiled as output for Power Point presentation. This has enabled students and the teacher to facilitate discussions on the content projected. This also helped students develop aesthetic understanding by looking at art pieces and allowed students to create their own creative thinking exercise. The teacher (author) also captured students in action while doing art by using a digital camera. These resources were later downloaded, transferred and disseminated to students to make imovies with. Movies were made utilizing the application of imovies available from Apple Macintosh in the school's ICT Lab.

During the second semester, a blog (www.yunyun-expressiveart.blogspot.com) was created for posting students work and movies made with students in action. The teacher also uploaded relevant internet links and videos from Youtube onto the blog and shared with students via projection in class. The purpose of this projection is to inspire and to instill a sense of creativity in students to express freely. The use of the blog as a tool to conduct art lessons in the classroom has inspired and stimulated students in learning art.   The introduction of the blog started in the second semester after exposure to the potential benefit of Web 2.0 tools during the in-service training conducted by the Open University Malaysia to Sapura Smart School teachers. It was felt that the necessity for Web 2.0 to be considered for implementation where relevant so as to engage the interest of the students today who are part of the millennial generation was real. As Riedel (2009) reported, Web 2.0 is about putting the power to learn and create in the hands of the students. It was decided that Web 2.0 would be introduced to Art students to provide a platform for them to explore their potential and to further develop their creative and critical thinking skills. Art as a school subject is neither an academic nor examination driven subject in the school curriculum. It has, however, the potential as a vehicle for students to express their creativity and enhance their learning more effectively.

Response and Feedback from Students

The integration of technology into art lessons began at the start of the first semester and gradually increased with the incorporation of Web 2.0 tools in the second semester. About 150 students aged between 13 and 15 years old participated in this initiative since the start of the first semester. Students were asked to put forward their thoughts and view on how they would like their art lessons to be conducted as well as what they intended to achieve by the end of the semester.

After the incorporation of Web 2.0, the teacher sought feedback from students. The teacher was keen to know if students had enjoyed Art more now than before and whether the use of Web 2.0 tools had created additional interest in Art among the students. In order to obtain their views and feedback, students were invited to express their feelings about Art on a piece of paper which the teacher collected. Some of the feedback from students include:

> "I love art, I can express myself and be creative",
> "I hate art before until now …art is awesome"
> "Art helps me express my feelings and stress"
> "At the start I thought art is boring but now I think it is awesome. I feel relaxed because I can release all my stress through art."
> "I feel happy because I get to learn many things, before this I hate art, art is bored but now I realized art is fun."

Feedback and suggestions given were considered and lesson plans were modified. It was gratifying to note that after the introduction of Web 2.0, students who had absolutely no interest in art were observed to be more participative in class and had put in more effort to complete their Art assignment. It was also most satisfying to see more male students developing the interest in art as well as enjoying it.

Students welcomed the idea of having their art pieces posted on the blog and showcasing their work that are projected during art lessons in the classroom. It was found that since the creation of the blog, students were observed to participate more in class. They also put in extra effort to complete assignments. Students were motivated and inspired by viewing the relevant links posted in the blog at the start of the art lesson, that is, before they started their own project. This also acted as reference and inspiration for students to create their own masterpieces. The self-esteem of students had also elevated as a result of scoring higher marks in examinations.

Feedback from students indicated that positive learning had occurred. They were motivated and had developed a greater interest in furthering their learning about Art. Students were also requesting to that digital photo editing and digital scrapbooking were included in their art lessons. They also reflected that their potential had been optimized as they were allowed to create projects of their own interest and imagination. Awareness on integrating technologies into art lessons has been created among students from the feedback received at the end of second semester.

The Way Forward: Art in 2010

Sapura Smart School's vision is to produce Articulate, Confident and Successful students through five guiding principles which are Academic Excellence, Health and Sports, Character Building, Civic Mindedness and Language & Communications.

Confident

Articulate

Successful Students

Innovative Projects

Funding

New Learning Approach
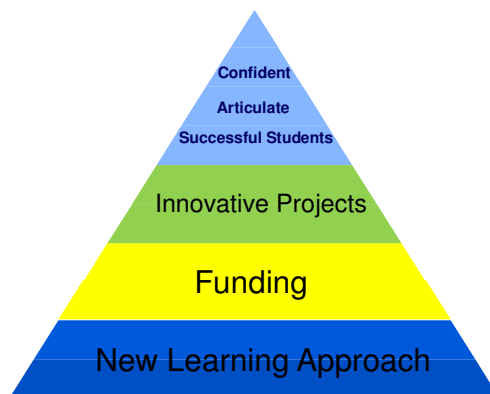
A new learning approach has now been conceptualized and is planned for students in the 2010 school year. These initiatives include:

- Implementation of new learning skills,
- Motivation of students to develop innovative ways of thinking,
- Exposure of students to new media resources, and
- Development of imaginative thinking skills.

Following the success of the initiative in 2009, 10 innovative art projects have been designed to support and enhance the growth of students' creativity, innovativeness and imagination through art. These projects will be very much technology based. For example, free photo editing applications (e.g. Picnik from http://www.picnik.com) can be downloaded from the internet and used to produce greeting cards, posters and so on.

The new learning approach for Art will still involve 80 minutes for each art lesson but it will now be divided into two parts. Students will spend the first 40 minutes in the Art Room doing initial groundwork and then proceed to the ICT Lab for the remaining 40 minutes to complete the art lesson. To illustrate, students draw a self portrait in the art room using oil pastel, upon completion , the drawing will be digitized and uploaded into the computer and by using photo editing application, the self portrait could be transformed and output into another creative expression like oil painting, line sketching etc. To retain the original art expression, the colour of the self portrait can also be further enhanced. Students will have to write a short story about their final art expression and present it in class during the next Art lesson. In this learning approach, both art and technology are being utilized as tools for enabling teaching-learning in a fun and innovative way.

Students will be engaged in more creative team-based projects involving group participation rather than being limited to doing art creations individually as was previously done. Students will be given opportunity to present their projects in class. Utilizing the technology facilities available to them such as the use of the ICT Lab, students will be required to produce movies from resources downloaded from the internet or from using their own personal resources. Students will also be encouraged and/or taught on how to create a blog and will be expected to post their work online. The objective is to have them share their work with their peers and possibly have their peers to post constructive comments, as is typical of online communities today.

Concluding Remarks

It is believed that 2010 will prove to be a very exciting year for the lead author, who is the Art teacher implementing the ideas described above. It will also be an interesting year for the school, parents and students.   Art, not being an academic subject is, typically, a subject given low priority by the school leaders, parents and students. It was rarely seen as an opportunity to support and expand the potential of students with visual or kinesthetic intelligence nor has it been seen as a tool to create innovativeness and enhance a student's creativity.   It is expected that the use of Web 2.0 tools in Art will help the teacher and school achieve more than what was possible before. It will in fact be a positive feature in the school, thus contributing to the overall personality development of the students.

Acknowledgments

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