

Adaptive Art and Art Therapy

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Artmaking can be one of the most meaningful activities in which a student with (and without) disabilities can be independently engaged. Many art educators have been minimally trained to work with a wide range of students with cognitive, physical, social or emotional challenges. These challenges can impede the students' ability to work with various media, art tools and techniques for personal exploration and completion of art tasks. Conversely, many special educators understand the challenges that their students face in the other academics, but may also lack training in the use of adaptive art strategies for their students' success in artmaking, either in the art class or in their own classrooms. This page is designed to help educators learn and implement adaptive art strategies for their students with disabilities.

There are two fields of study that are helpful for the educator to consider when looking toward artmaking with their students with disabilities, art therapy and adaptive art. Both fields-in different ways- have the potential to assist students with various challenges to engage in art as a meaningful lifetime activity. According to the American Art Therapy Association (www.arttherapy.org) Art Therapy is a field that believes that art is healing and life enhancing for individuals and groups in various settings from private practice, hospitals, residential treatment centers to schools, as well as many other settings. Art Therapists are credentialed (registered and board certified) through the Art Therapy Credentials Board (ATCB) and may practice in schools in conjunction with IEP teams, and as School Art Therapists may hold teaching licensure depending upon the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) of the specific state. Art therapists in the schools work with students dealing with social, emotional, cognitive and physical challenges that affect their ability to engage with home, school and community. Increasingly, students of all ages are coming to school with issues related to family or personal crisis, as well as trauma that manifest with behaviors (unusual quietness, acting out, verbal or physical outbursts, etc.) that interfere with the student's ability to function in school.

Oftentimes, students may not have the cognitive and verbal skills due to the issues to adequately be able to express themselves to persons who could support them. Educators, parents and guardians many times are the recipients of art images that may be considered unusual for particular students, and may seek out the support of other school staff such as school counselors or school psychologists to determine whether an image is an indication of issues to explore. Ideally, an art therapist or school art therapist should be consulted regarding the imagery due to the specialized training and subsequent therapy interventions to maximize the student's treatment. Many school art therapists specialize in working with specific student populations relating to emotional, social and cognitive issues.

Adaptive Art is a field that focuses primarily on the students' access to artmaking that due to their challenges have difficulty using art to express themselves. Adaptive Art Specialists (see article below) are trained to adapt the *tools* that students need to paint, draw or sculpt. This may include retrofitting handles on paintbrushes, building up drawing tools for a wider grasp and seeking the most appropriate adapted scissors for a unique contracted hand grip. They are also trained to adapt the *media* for students who may not be able to use traditional media due to oral issues and olfactory or other sensory sensitivity. Finally, the adaptive art specialist adapts the traditional art *techniques* to account for challenges in manipulating the specific tasks required for artmaking such as linoleum printing or silk screening. Many art and special educators are not aware of various adapted art tools, media and techniques that would increase their students' independence in artmaking. Too often, it is determined that students with physical challenges ONLY benefit from hand over hand intervention for the student to engage in artmaking. This encourages the student to rely on other persons for their artwork, and diminishes the desire to independently create, as the students no longer are given an opportunity to TRY by themselves. For students with physical challenges, adapted art tools may increase the ability to hold onto paintbrushes, drawing tools or scissors so that they can experience artmaking on their own. A tool as simple as a hand grip cut from a gallon milk carton with a marker or paintbrush pushed into the handle can create just the right angle for the student to make their own marks. Add a Connector Watercolor set (Faber Castell TM) that enhances color choice, and place on a wedge (Double Sided StoryBoard) for increased independent access. An Orbit TM chewing gum container with adhesive backed foam cut into shapes assists a student with stamp printing a design they created.

Students with sensory issues may need to have their materials adapted for the maximum engagement with the specific or exploratory art task. Students with visual impairments may gain a great deal of enjoyment from experiencing an art piece even AFTER it is created by choosing tactile materials to adhere to a poster paper-first, they choose the materials that are the most meaningful for them, glue them onto the mural with a strong glue, and then the final piece is hung accessible for the students to "see" well after the art is finished. Some students with sensory issues also use assistive technology supports such as visual strategies and voice output communication aids (VOCA's) to enhance their artmaking experience.

Art and special educators need to be aware of these supports in the classrooms that should be included in the strategies for success in the art class for students with disabilities. Speech and Language Pathologists can help educators create communication opportunities for students that are specific to the needs of students in artmaking. Digitally assisted artmaking is another strategy to consider for students with other specific art making challenges. Techniques such as linoleum printing challenge all students, but students with spasticity or strength issues can benefit from the use of alternative cutting

surfaces such as SoftCut™, pull type linoleum cutters instead of traditional push cutters, and lighter weight foam rollers instead of heavy brayers.

All students with disabilities have the potential to express themselves through art. It is our responsibility to create the opportunities for our students to independently as possible access artmaking. Through adapting art tools, media and techniques, students will have these opportunities! Please contact Susan Loesl, Adaptive Art Specialist/Art Therapist at sloesl@att.net for further information regarding adaptive art, art therapy and assistive technology for students with disabilities. She is available for consultation and onsite workshops for educators.

Below are links for art and special educators to explore adaptive art and art therapy for their students:

American Art Therapy Association (www.arttherapy.org) is an organization of professionals dedicated to the belief that making art is healing and life enhancing.

Miami-Dade County Public Schools (Florida) Clinical Art Therapy Program presents the school art therapy program for at-risk students and other students with exceptional needs. (<http://arttherapy.dadeschools.net/>)

The Adaptive Art Specialist: An Integral Part of a Student's Access to Art (www.kennedy-center.org/education/vsa/resources/FinalprofessionalpapersbookArticle3.pdf) White paper written by Susan Loesl, published by the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. 2013.

Upstream Arts (www.upstreamarts.org) is a Minneapolis, MN, based organization whose mission is to enhance the lives of adults and youth with disabilities by fostering creative communication and social independence through the power of arts education.

VSA Wisconsin (www.vsawis.org/) is the VSA affiliate for the State of Wisconsin. Please seek out the VSA affiliate for your own state.

ADAPTIVE/SUPPORT RESOURCES AND TOOLS: ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY

<http://www.timetimer.com>

Boardmaker™ software

Big Mac Switches

GoTalk <http://www.attainmentcompany.com>

Pocket Full of Therapy-lots of fidgets and adaptive tools <http://www.pfot.com>

**BIBLIOGRAPHY OF ADAPTIVE ARTS STRATEGIES AND ACTIVITIES FOR
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Compiled by Susan Loesl, MA, WATR, ATR-BC 2015. sloesl@att.net

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Susan D. Loesl, MA, WATR, ATR-BC, has worked for over 25 years as an Adaptive Art Specialist/Art Therapist for the Milwaukee Public Schools in Milwaukee, WI. She is an Art Therapy/Graduate Education Adjunct Faculty at Mount Mary University in Milwaukee, and a presenter at national conferences relating to art education, art therapy,

persons with disabilities and assistive technology related to the arts. She has presented workshops internationally in Canada, Puerto Rico and China. Susan is a consultant on adaptive arts strategies and low-tech adaptive art tools for schools, universities and organizations throughout the USA. Susan is an author of four chapters in books on adaptive arts.