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Author(s): Sydney Roberts Walker

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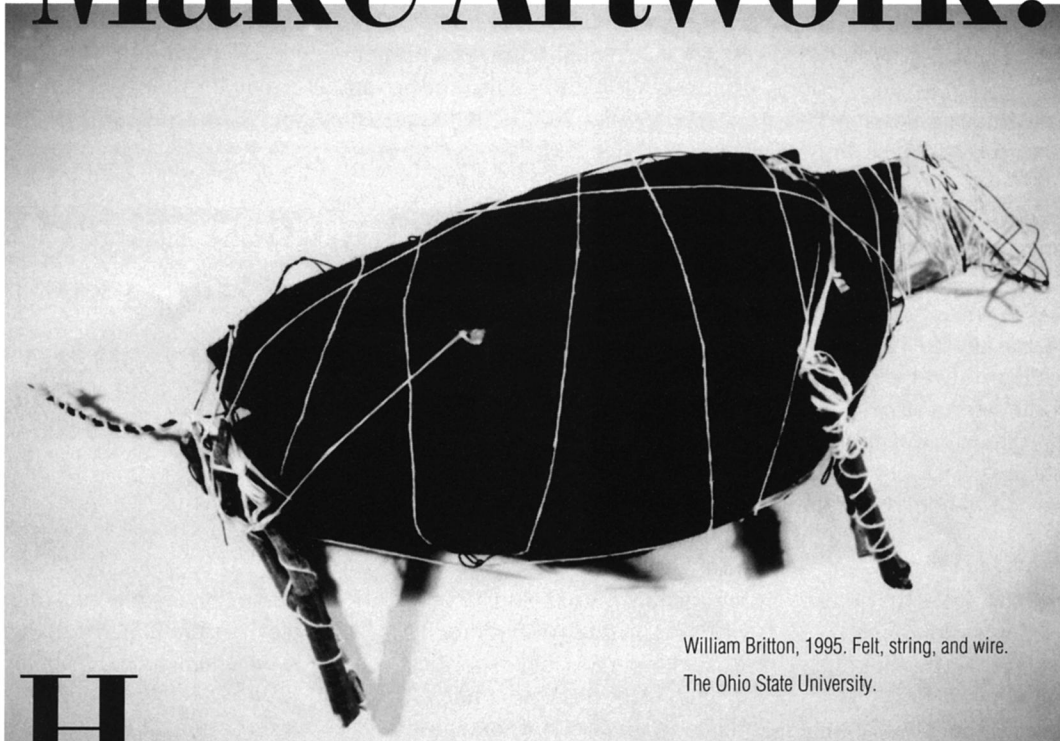
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Designing Studio Instruction: Why Have Students Make Artwork?



William Britton, 1995. Felt, string, and wire.
The Ohio State University.

How often do classroom studio experiences build skills of understanding art? Teaching for understanding is a central concern in current educational research (Cohen, McLaughlin, & Talberts, 1993; Gardner & Boix-Mansilla, 1994; Perkins & Blythe, 1994). Recent art education literature also evidences interest in cognition and teaching for understanding art (Efland, 1995; Koroscik, 1990; Walker, 1996). However, Perkins and Blythe, members of the Teaching for Understanding Project at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, concede that while most teachers admit to the importance of teaching for understanding, it is a difficult enterprise.

BY SYDNEY ROBERTS WALKER

Studio activity dominates classroom art education practice at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. If art education practice is to reflect a concern for teaching for understanding, it is imperative that studio instruction receive attention. How might studio activity develop art understanding and what is understanding? Perkins and Blythe (1994) view understanding as "being able to carry out a variety of performances that show one's understanding of a topic and at the same time, advance it" (p.6). These researchers argue that often what we consider good teaching activities do not press students to engage understanding. They illustrate their point with the following examples:

a *Jeopardy*-style history quiz, an art activity of drawing the Boston Tea Party, a follow-the-recipe-style science experiment can all be engaging experiments. But, typically, they do not press learners to think well beyond what they already know. (p.7)

Studio activity possesses the potential to engage students with understanding art; however, as Perkins and Blythe's examples demonstrate, engaging activities do not necessarily enact understanding. They argue that understanding is subtler than bringing forth knowledge or demonstrating a skill. "Understanding is a matter of being able to do a variety of thought-demanding things with a topic—like explaining, finding evidence and examples, generating, applying, analogizing and presenting the topic in a new way" (Perkins & Blythe, 1994, p.5). My basic assumption is that studio activity can

develop art understandings, if the instructional design permits and encourages it. However, if studio activities are to engage students with understanding, in Perkins and Blythe's sense, such activities need to be focused upon the student's expression of interpretive ideas. Studio practice does not always follow this model. Frequently, other concerns, such as technical skills, design principles, or media exploration, drive studio activity. These are valid concerns and significant aspects of the studio process, but

are: 1) *key ideas*, 2) *knowledge transfer*, 3) *personal connections*, and 4) *problem-finding*. I designed the studio scenarios to follow art criticism activities and to build upon knowledge learned in that context. Butterfield's sculptures engage a number of key art ideas which could be effectively taught through a combination of art criticism and studio instruction.

BUTTERFIELD'S SCULPTURES

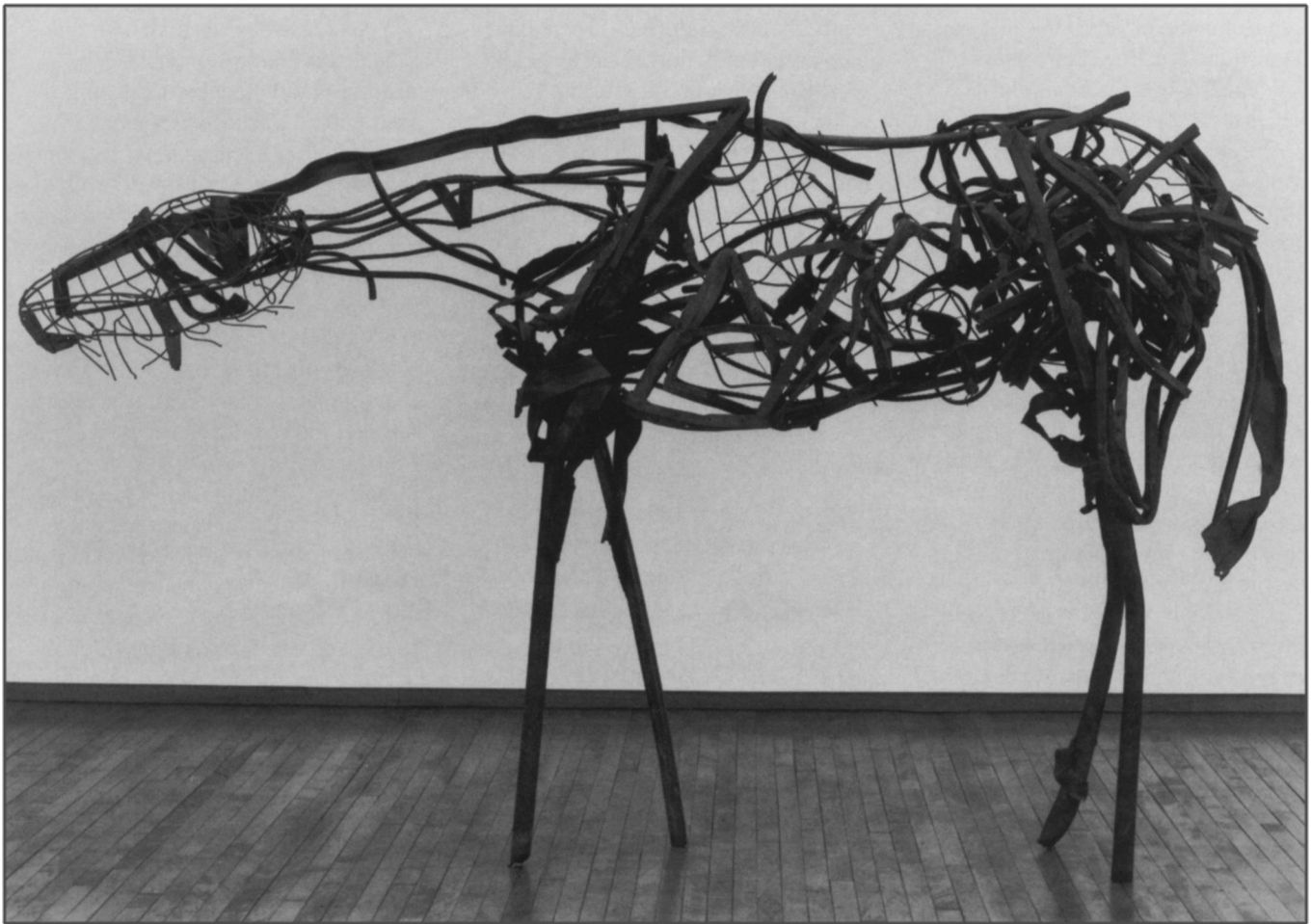
Butterfield is well-recognized as a sculptor who produces larger than life-

Materials, techniques, subject matter and formal qualities deserve attention in planning studio instruction, not at the expense of interpretive meaning, but in relation to it.

I argue that they should serve the interpretive goals of studio activity. To demonstrate this more specifically, I discuss three possible studio scenarios related to the work of contemporary sculptor Deborah Butterfield. Studio scenario one is based upon actual classroom practice in a fourth grade art class, scenario two is a fictional construction, and scenario three is from my personal teaching practice with undergraduate art education students.

To construct the three studio scenarios, I derived four instructional strategies from cognitive learning theory and educational research for the studio context (Getzels & Csikszentmihalyi, 1976; Perkins & Salomon, 1988; Prawat, 1989). They

size horses constructed from an array of nontraditional sculptural materials. For example, the reclining horse, *Untitled* (1978), is composed of mud, sticks, and straw. In contrast, she composed the bright orange standing mare, *Riot* (1990), of discarded sheet steel. Butterfield interprets the horse quite differently from traditional representations of power, untamed nature, daunting majesty, and superiority. She challenges tradition and most often portrays the horse as a vulnerable, maternal creature that possesses inward rather than outward strength.



Associating with horses since childhood, Butterfield developed a personal rapport and her titles—*Ferdinand*, *Chestnut*, *Verde* and *Palma*—indicate the significance of the horses' individual personalities for her.

Art critic Donald Kuspit interprets Butterfield's horses as metaphors for the crushing of the human spirit by modern science and technology. He describes the sculptural forms as an embodiment of modern death which allows us to appear outwardly alive while we are inwardly dead and out of touch with our vital selves. Kuspit (1992) interprets Butterfield's horses

as contradictions, "They are ironically insubstantial, made of seemingly durable modern material, but full of holes and fractures and hollow at the core" (p.62).

STUDIO SCENARIO 1:

Students will construct table-size three-dimensional horses from wood scraps of various sizes and shapes. This scenario is typical of studio instruction that fails to teach for interpretation because it focuses upon Butterfield's technical processes.

Deborah Butterfield, *Untitled (Atiyah)*, 1986, steel; 74" x 115" x 35" in. Photo courtesy of the Edward Thorp Gallery, New York. Photo by Yura Adams.

Although the scenario is simplistic and obviously not about creating interpretive meaning, I include it because classroom studio practice often follows this model. It is about relating found shapes to the horses' physical attributes. The activity, however, does not advance the students' understandings of the purposes and meanings behind Butterfield's sculptures.

The implicit message is that Butterfield's primary concern is to find and arrange found shapes into a horse-like form. This promotes a misunderstanding of what the artist is about. Butterfield organizes discarded materials into horse-like forms, not as sculptures in themselves, but as sculptures that express her interpretations of the horse. Combining found materials is a specific art strategy which Butterfield uses, but the strategy loses its connection to her expressive purposes when it becomes the studio activity's central focus.

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGY: KEY IDEAS

Butterfield's sculptures are more expressive than mimetic. This key interpretive idea is basic to understanding her work and provides a broad generative concept for related studio instruction. Kuspit found Butterfield's sculptures to be metaphors for human alienation and isolation by contemporary technology. Butterfield interprets her horses as symbols of inner rather than outer strength. It is not necessary that students use Butterfield's particular metaphors for their own expressions, but that they understand the notion of making artworks as symbolic expressions.

Locating a broad *interpretive* idea is a major first step in designing studio instruction. Barrett (1993) recognizes interpretation as the central objective for classroom art criticism, and Wilson (1986) views teaching the thematic meanings of important artworks as the justification for art learning. I, too, stress the importance of interpretive meaning for studio instruction. Too often we become enamored with materials and technical processes to the exclusion of other substantive content for studio instruction. Materials, techniques, subject matter and formal qual-

The most crucial question for artmaking is: What is to be expressed?

ities deserve attention in planning studio instruction, not at the expense of interpretive meaning, but in relation to it.

Interpretive ideas provide a large conceptual field for studio instruction, but it is advantageous to pursue more specific concepts as well. Expressionism, for instance, is a broad sweeping concept that characterizes many artists' approaches to artmaking, but not all artists use expressionism in exactly the same manner. Butterfield's approach to expressionism includes: 1) using personal knowledge of a known subject, horses; 2) incorporating diverse but compatible media; and 3) synthesizing forms for their essences. If studio instruction incorporates these

artmaking strategies for producing expressiveness, students are exposed to a complex set of art understandings. I make this point to emphasize the need to include specific artmaking strategies in studio instruction. Knowledge of the artmaking strategies artists employ to express interpretive ideas unveils students' understandings about how interpretive meanings are produced.

STUDIO SCENARIO 2

Students will produce a series of five paintings with the horse as subject matter. Each horse will be distinguished with a specific personality. This studio activity addresses a major theme in Butterfield's sculptures: expressing personality. However, other studio components are unlike the artist's work. Does it matter that the students' work is two-dimensional while Butterfield's is three-dimensional? Is it significant that the students work with paint while Butterfield collaborates with a range of materials? And of what importance is it that Butterfield works with intimate, extensive knowledge about horses while most students would possess limited knowledge about this subject? Just how important are these differences?

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGY: KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

This scenario raises questions about how closely the studio activity should resemble the artist's choices if the artist's work is to be a reference for the studio activity. Cognitive learning theorists find that knowledge transfer is not an automatic process. One must recognize the similarities between situ-

ations before they are linked. Students could create expressively rendered forms in paint as Butterfield creates them in sculptural materials; but otherwise, the students' and Butterfield's artmaking contexts are too dissimilar for knowledge transfer between the two situations. It is important to construct student artmaking contexts that

STUDIO SCENARIO 3

Students will produce a three-dimensional assemblage of a familiar human or animal figure. This studio activity engages students in depicting their own interests rather than Butterfield's. Nevertheless, it does not disallow using her sculptures as references for the students' artmak-

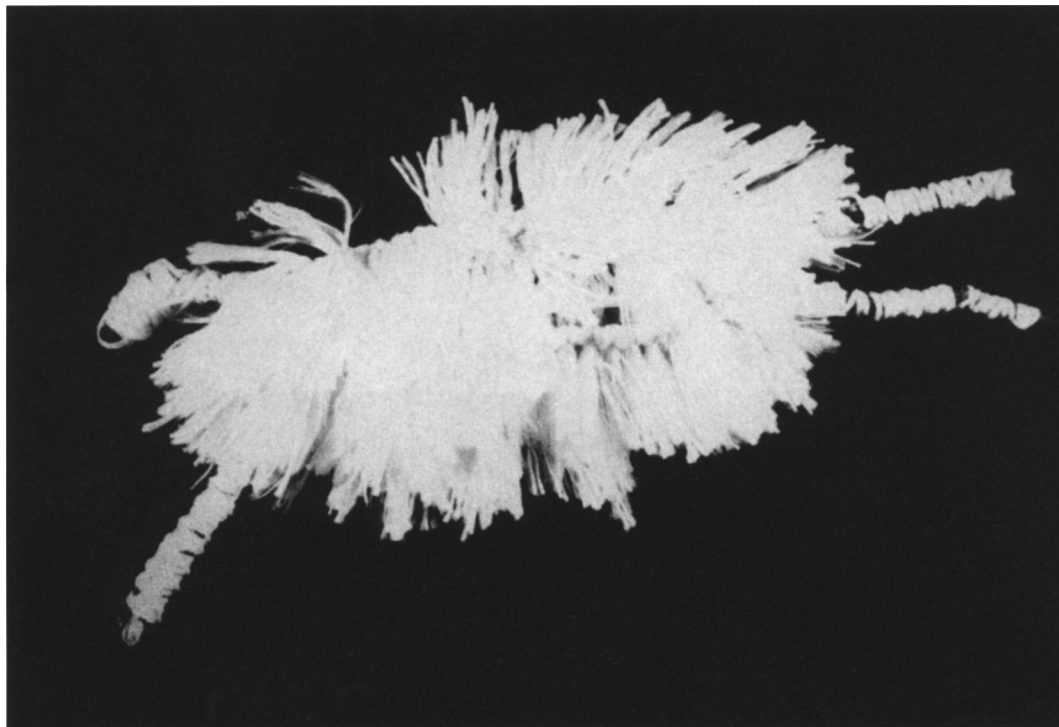
and select media from a variety of materials. If students use Butterfield's artmaking strategies, they will not be parroting or mimicking the artist's voice because they are invested with expressing their own subjects. Knowledge of her artmaking strategies can enhance rather than muffle their expressive abilities. Historically, artists

have always looked to other artists for direction and guidance. There is no reason to continually reinvent the wheel, but to advance its functions. When the artist's work becomes a reference for student artmaking, this is an opportunity to expand the student's art understandings.

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGY: PROBLEM-FINDING

Simply instructing students to produce an assemblage of a familiar subject does not provide students with sufficient conceptual direction. What is the purpose of this assemblage? Is it for physical

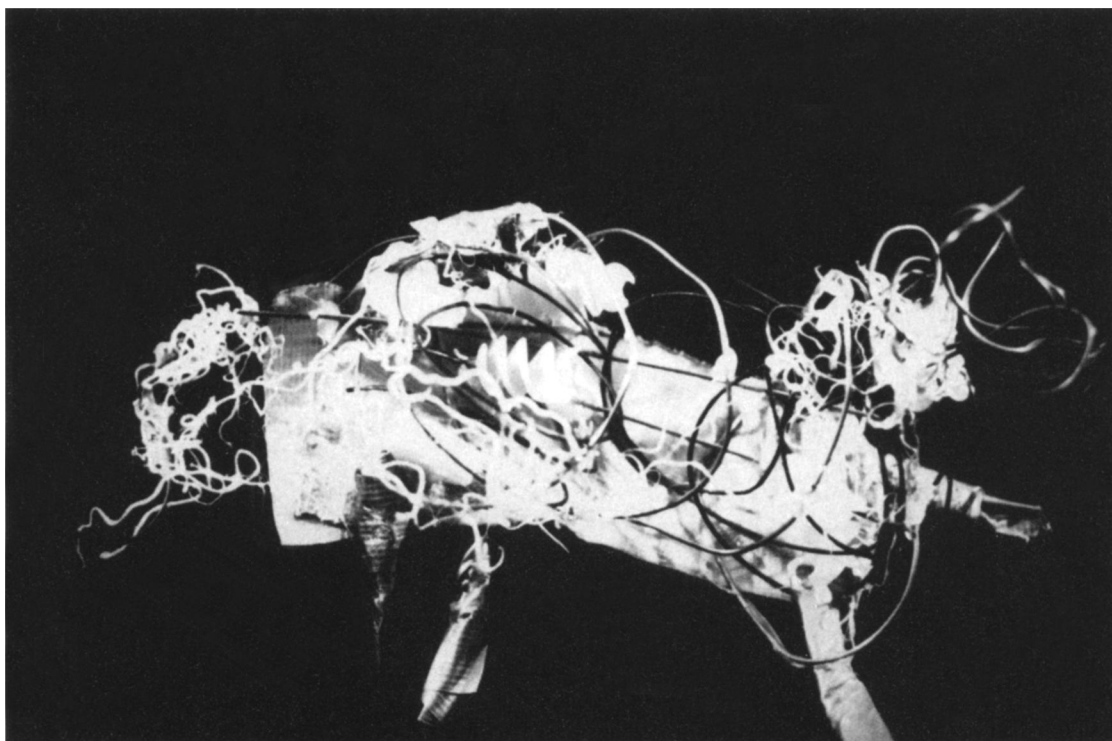
resemblance to the subject? Is it about depicting personality as well as physical traits? Students need guidance in developing interpretive ideas. Often studio instructors explain technical processes and visual decision making to students, but leave idea development entirely to the students. The most crucial question for artmaking is: What is to be expressed?



Myra Kaye, 1995. String and sticks.
The Ohio State University.

invite students to transfer knowledge from the artist's context to their own. Students can take knowledge from an artist's artmaking strategies and extend that knowledge in their own artmaking. The danger of using an artist's work as a reference is that students may be denied room for this extension and end up as mere mimics. I address this issue in the following section.

ing. The students' artmaking context is similar enough to permit knowledge transfer from Butterfield's work. Both artist and students grapple with a similar conceptual problem: *how to represent a subject from a personal perspective, work in three-dimensions,*



Frequently, studio problems are presented in a form that is too general for students. They are unable to grasp the problem's significant aspects and are fairly clueless about tackling the problem. Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi (1976) identify the early stages of the artistic process as problem-finding. Their use of the term *problem-finding* may be confusing since classroom studio instruction typically presents students with a problem to resolve. Why would students need to find a problem when the art instructor has already presented them with one? Problem-finding, however, refers to the student's need to find a particular problem within the larger presented problem. Students involved with creating the assemblage of a familiar figure know

the general problem to resolve, but they must execute problem-finding to determine what they might express about their subject.

In their landmark study of artistic behavior, Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi (1976) assert that problem-finding is one of the crucial steps in creative activity. These researchers maintain that "Given a group of artists with the same training and motivation, those who are concerned with problem-finding will produce works of higher originality and overall aesthetic value than will artists who are not so oriented" (p.130).

Prestudio activities can enable students to engage in problem-finding. As a pre-studio activity for studio scenario 3, students could list and identify the most essential physical and personality

Carissa McRae, 1995. Wire, paper, and string.
The Ohio State University.

traits of their subjects. This provides a thinking strategy for conceptualizing the problem at hand. As another pre-studio activity, students might select several materials that express their subjects' personality traits and discuss their choices. They may also choose several materials that do not relate to their subject and discuss these choices.

For example, choosing soft, spongy, foam rubber scraps to construct a large overweight bulldog

might be a better media choice than a few shiny gold filaments. Prestudio activities as these direct and organize student thinking about studio problems. Koroscik (1993) designates thinking as knowledge-seeking strategies which she defines as "The cognitive steps a student takes to construct new understandings, to seek new knowledge and to apply previously acquired knowledge, skill, and experience" (p. 23). Perkins and Blythe (1994) admonish that one reason students do not achieve understanding even when they tackle understanding performances is that they commonly get little guidance and feedback before completing the final product.

CONCLUSION

Since studio instruction is central to art education practice, it is prudent to carefully think about its role in teaching students to understand art. Too frequently we do not ask ourselves, "why we are having students make artworks." I believe that the four instructional strategies I presented represent important aspects of studio instruction.

First, *key ideas* related to interpretive meaning are essential for studio instruction that is about understanding art. These concepts represent the core of studio instruction. Second, *knowledge transfer* between the artist's and the students' artmaking contexts offers opportunities to engage students in extending their knowledge. Students should view an artist's works as strategic examples that engender new usages, not as mimetic templates.

Third, *personal connections* mirror current teaching trends that recognize the value of drawing connections between students' lives and classroom subject matter (Brown, Collins, & Dugund, 1989). Students are not only more engaged when the studio problem is personalized, but they can develop deeper understandings about the artist's creative process. If students do not have a personal investment in artmaking, it is difficult for them to realize why artmaking is about expression and not simply a technical exercise. Fourth, *problem-finding* is critical to the artistic process, but it is often neglected in studio instruction. Prestudio activities can guide and direct students' thinking strategies for conceptualizing studio problems.

Studio activity such as that offered here inherently qualifies as an area for teaching understanding. Perkins and Blythe (1994) point to the fact that the mainstay of learning for understanding is actual engagement: "The learners must spend the larger part of their time with activities that ask them to generalize, find new examples, carry out applications and work through others" (p. 6). Studio instruction adapts very well to this description of learning for understanding. As art educators, we are remiss in not devoting more attention to researching and developing better studio instruction.

Sydney Roberts Walker is Assistant Professor in the Department of Art Education at The Ohio State University, Columbus.

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