Art is for All

NEW BOOK HELPS ART TEACHERS INCORPORATE UDL IN THEIR CLASSROOMS

STORY BY LORY HOUGH

For Liz Byron, Ed.M.’08, writing her recent book, *Art for All*, was harder, in some ways, than running a grueling 155-mile marathon in the Sahara Desert — something she did over the course of six days in 2013 to raise money for laptops for her middle school students at Gardner Pilot Academy in Boston.

“I find running to be mentally cathartic and physically cleansing, while I find writing to be an uncomfortable challenge,” she says. “Sure, running an ultramarathon, or any race for that matter, takes preparation if you want to do your best, but for me, the path to writing a book was less clear” and, as someone with dyslexia, one of her least favorite things to tackle.

It’s also why, since being diagnosed with the learning disorder in high school, years after struggling to read and write and stay on top of her homework, Byron has come to understand the importance of providing all students with multiple ways to learn and express what they know. It’s why she started using the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) approach with her special education students after struggling, on her own, to create 15 unique lessons. And it’s ultimately why, after transitioning from math to teaching art, now at Mildred Avenue K–8 in Boston, she wrote *Art for All* as a guidebook for visual arts teachers who also want to use UDL in their classrooms but don’t know where to start.

“I’m a huge advocate for UDL and have taught many different courses and professional development sessions on UDL,” she says, but, “there was not a single book that specifically discussed UDL and visual art. I wanted to help fill in this hole with a practical resource for art teachers.”

In her book, Byron gives real-life, often humorous examples of how she has used UDL to work with students. For example, when a project is ending, students have 10 options for next steps. They can write fan mail to another student artist, provide feedback on a classmate’s work, curate their hallway display space, or compose an artist statement — all things, Byron says, that adult artists might do.

“The ultimate goal of UDL is that students become expert learners,” she says, “so I’m trying to provide options that will push them in the direction of becoming purposeful, motivated, and resourceful artists and learners.”

Byron says that if teachers had been using the UDL framework in her schools when she was growing up, she might not have struggled so much.

“I definitely would have been able to express what I knew through multiple options, not just through reading and writing,” she says, noting that assignments that involved reading or writing typically took her three times longer to plow through than the average student. “I also would have probably learned and retained more information if the content had been presented with multiple representations. In general, school would have been a richer, more rigorous learning experience filled with more joy and less confusion. I probably would have learned to read prior to the fifth grade and would not have spent so many years floundering with print and being perplexed with my own thinking: knowing I wasn’t dumb, but not being able to keep up with my peers in reading and writing.”

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