

When everyone's

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Teachers are slowly getting to grips with the new visual arts curriculum, but changing the views of parents who doubt the value of the subject is proving more challenging, writes **Kate Whitehead**

a critic

The new visual arts curriculum introduced five years ago for senior secondary students in the public sector made some teachers anxious. They worried about how to teach a much broader syllabus that demanded not only artistic talent, but the ability to critically analyse creative work.

On top of the challenge of negotiating a new curriculum came the reluctance of many parents to encourage their children to take up a subject without obvious benefits for career prospects.

But the tide is beginning to turn as art teachers find strategies to approach the subject, supported by valuable teaching aids such as those provided by the Asian Art Archive's (AAA) Teaching Labs.

Half of a student's final grade is determined by a school-based assessment – a portfolio of four artworks accompanied by a research book and critical appreciation of their work – and half on a four-hour public examination. It's the written appreciation of art section that causes the most concern.

"The critical writing is a challenge," says Florie Tse Siu-wah, visual arts teacher at the Jockey Club Ti-I College. "In the past, if you did a beautiful artwork or design you could do well, but now you have to document your critical thinking, you need to use language to show your understanding."

The new curriculum also opened up the scope of visual arts, making it a large subject.

"The curriculum is too broad now," says Yuen Kit-sum, panel head of visual arts at HKSKH Bishop Hall Secondary School. "The examination includes contemporary art and traditional art. There's limited time to teach art criticism and art history and to balance it with their own interests because we want them to have fun and also enjoy art."

Tse believes teachers must be committed to constantly improving their own knowledge. "We need to admit that although we are teachers, there are a lot of areas we don't know. We need to go to seminars and visit exhibitions, or go on exchange programmes," she says.

The Education Bureau has been supportive in providing useful vocabulary on its website that will help students with their critical assessment of art, but Tse says it isn't enough. Her most useful resource has been the AAA and she is one of dozens of teachers to have benefited from the Teaching Labs that started in response to the challenges of the new curriculum and is now in its third year.

"I've learned a lot from the AAA and put it into the curriculum. The issue isn't how beautiful can you make your work, it's how much you know about yourself, the world and your environment, that's the starting point to think about what to do," Tse says.

Yuen has special-needs students in her class who are often gifted creatively but struggle to express themselves in their writing. The best approach, she believes, is to take things slowly.

"I cut the material into pieces and go step by step. Students in a band one school might be able to write a good passage in 45 minutes, but I will take four lessons to direct them how to write," says Yuen, adding that she motivates students by publishing their work in a class book which is made available to all in the library.

Looking for additional teaching aids, Yuen stumbled across the AAA course online. She attended a class led by art critic and curator Oscar Ho Hing-kay and found the interaction with other teachers as valuable as class content.

"We had some circle time and shared with other art teachers from different band



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YUEN KIT-SUM, HKSXH BISHOP HALL
SECONDARY SCHOOL

schools and did some problem solving. This I found very helpful," says Yuen.

Susanna Chung, the AAA's head of learning and participation, says the labs are structured to help develop a learning community among teachers. She has found that the main concern for teachers is the new art appreciation and art criticism elements of the curriculum, so this year they offered classes with a special focus on critical writing.

"The ideology of the curriculum is nice. Artists need to write artist statements and articulate the process, but the teacher training is not enough. Most of the teachers trained at a time when they didn't need to teach art appreciation and criticism," says Chung.

It's rare for an art archive to open its library and cater to the needs of teachers, but the Hong Kong art scene is unusual in that most contemporary art is in commercial galleries.

"In America there are many contemporary art museums and opportunities for students to see contemporary art, but in Hong Kong they don't have that exposure," says Chung, who hopes the AAA helps address that need.

But it seems that changing the mindset of Hong Kong parents might be more of a challenge. Tse says that when she discusses subject selection with parents, there is always a debate about the "economic value" of art.

"Most parents think art is just a hobby and students can't make money from it in the future, so it's not popular," she says. Tse is trying to turn the tide, one parent at a time, and explain that art is not just about drawing pretty pictures but can teach valuable skills such as creativity, flexibility and a high tolerance for risk. She would like to see more parents talking to art teachers and better understanding the merits of the subject.

Yuen reaches out to parents of secondary students by publishing a student-led newspaper and reporting on student art exhibitions and competitions, showing how the subject can nourish students. But she has seen class sizes dwindle from about 30 students 20 years ago to about 15 today. But the smaller class size has an upside because it means students get more interactions with the teacher.

She says the curriculum is now very exam-orientated and she'd prefer to see more of a focus on the students. For Yuen, the critical issue is how to allocate teaching time so that students are equipped to pass the exam while also developing their skills.

"The government needs to do more. It should listen to us teachers and learn first-hand the difficulties we face, especially with the exam and assessment," she says.
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