

Rock On! How I Taught Focus to a Class That Wouldn't Sit Still

edu [edutopia.org/discussion/rock-how-i-taught-focus-class-wouldnt-sit-still](https://www.edutopia.org/discussion/rock-how-i-taught-focus-class-wouldnt-sit-still)



Natalie Catlett , Practicing Artist & Art Teacher

Posted 02/14/2017 11:00AM | Last Commented 03/23/2017 12:51AM

[Blogger](#)

Photo credit: ©Shutterstock.com/Menno Schaefer

As a teacher, every now and then we come across a class with an abundance of energy. Sometimes so much energy that teaching seems like an impossible mission. Students fidget with their hands, feet, dance in their stools and engage in constant side conversations with their classmates.

Any time is a good time to tell a secret or share an interesting dinosaur fact. (Don't we all love learning about dinosaurs?) Last year, I inherited a first grade class that fit the description above.

They were curious, they were bright, but it was clear from day one that they needed help to channel their excess energy. I didn't want or expect them to sit statue-still; much to the contrary. I always encourage active learning, collaboration, and ongoing participation in the classroom.



However, I wanted them to understand the importance of balance. When you come across a class that is constantly in a highly agitated state and this begins to interfere with their learning, something needs to be looked at more carefully. My fellow teachers and I were constantly asking ourselves, "How can we help this group?", "What strategies can we incorporate in our classrooms?", "What tools do they need to be more at peace with themselves?" The conversations were endless. The strategies were endless. And so was their energy.

Since our school works in a transdisciplinary manner, teachers across subject areas often collaborate. At the time, students were learning about rocks and the rock cycle with their homeroom teacher. In Art, I wanted to explore rock sculptures. I was hesitant to explore this theme at first, anticipating possible conflicts due to the groups agitated temperament, but decided to move forward.

Little did I know the powerful effect rocks and rock-sculpture building would have on them individually and as a group.

Front-loading

We began our rock sculpture inquiries watching videos of Michael Grab creating freestanding rock sculptures in the wilderness. Students were awed with Michael's each and every move. As he piled one rock onto another in the videos students reacted with "wow" and "ahh." They were amazed, so amazed that one student challenged the group: "This can't possibly be real, is it?" Once we finished watching the videos students shared some of their many observations. I then asked them, "What traits must an artist like Michael Grab have in order to build the rock sculptures we just saw?"

"Patience."

"Peace."

“He needs to know a lot about rocks.”

“Steady hands.”

“A lot of concentration.”

They were fascinated. They were involved. We were onto a good start.

Hands-on

The following class students came to the art room eager to build their own rock sculptures. At first, piling one rock on top of the other was quite an accomplishment, until they discovered they could pile 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 rocks onto each other. Every time a sculpture collapsed they immediately began rebuilding it. Students were open to constant trial-and-error, learning more from their failures than successes. Yet, little frustration was evident.

Weeks went by and their sculpture's became taller and far more elaborate. In small groups, they shared their discoveries and identified ways of making a stronger base. They realized that looking closely at the characteristics of the rocks allowed them to make predictions and anticipate possible outcomes. The rocks varied in shape and size: some were flat, some were rounded, some were jagged, some were pitted. All of this mattered once they began the rock balancing act.

The Calming Effect

Students were quick to notice how inner focus was important while building their rock sculpture. Bothered, one student shared with the class, “I can't concentrate with noise!” Another student claimed that someone spoke so loud in class that it destabilized his sculpture, making it collapse. Some even sought out hidden places and transformed it into their rock-sculpture-making oasis. They realized that in order to build a sculpture they had to align their physical and mental energy. They needed to focus on their intent and act upon it carefully. A quick unplanned move could jeopardize the stability of their entire sculpture making it collapse.

Their willingness to challenge themselves was extraordinary. They took risks however great they were and the open-ended nature of the activity allowed them to engage in constant problem solving. They also became more aware of their bodies in the art room. Students moved carefully within the class. Some began working on the ground because sharing a table was too much of a risk. If the person beside them dropped a rock it could initiate a domino effect of sculpture's collapsing. The class with endless energy became, to my surprise, the class with endless focus.

Collaborative Sculptures

Once students became more confident of their sculpture-making abilities they began working collaboratively. There were situations where the entire class was engaged in building one large sculpture together. Can you imagine one sculpture being built by 24 students? Their disposition to accept responsibility, cooperate, resolve conflicts and make group decisions in an egalitarian manner was visible during these moments.

There was an incident where students were building a rock sculpture collaboratively and one student ran to the sink. She found a sponge, soaked it with water and ran back to the sculpture. “I am going to press water from this sponge onto our sculpture. If it's strong it will stand still.” They approached this moment of uncertainty with excitement, gathered in a circle. Water dripped from the sponge onto the sculpture. The sculpture stood tall. They looked at each other and celebrated their success.

Rock Teachings

Elements of nature can become powerful teachers. Rocks, unlike twigs, leaves and dirt, cannot be modeled or reshaped with our bare hands. Rocks are hard, sometimes heavy and often resistant. In order to work with rocks students had to accept its traits and challenge themselves. When students were asked to reflect on their rock

sculpture-making experiences, most of them highlighted the importance of balance, patience and persistence. One student noted that, "I can only create a balanced sculpture if I am balanced." Once our inquiry cycle finally came to an end, they asked, "Can we have a rock corner in the art room for the rest of the year?" "Of course!" I responded.

An entire year has gone by since we first began exploring rock sculptures and students continue seeking the "Rock Corner". The class still has an abundance of energy, but every time they interact with the rocks, the world around them slows down. They tune inwards and focus permeates the room.