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CPL Podcast: Visual Arts 7-12

Carly Boreland – Host
With Alexandra Johnson and Kristy Pugliano

INTRODUCTION:

You're listening to the JPL podcast from the Centre for Professional Learning. Here's your host, Carly Boreland.

Carly Boreland:

Welcome to the JPL podcast for the New South Wales Teacher Federation Centre for Professional Learning. I'm Carly Boreland and I'm the editor of the JPL. Today, I'm talking with Alex Johnson and Kristy Pugliano and we are talking about Visual Arts teaching in High School and how you can give great opportunities to your students and why it's so important that all students have access to Visual Arts education. Alex, Kirsty, welcome.

Kirsty Pugliano:

Thank you.

Alexandra Johnson:

Thank you.

Carly Boreland:

We're going to talk about Visual Arts and were going to spend a lot of time talking about why you love Visual Arts and why it matters so much. We're sort of in an unusual place at the moment in schools where there is a huge emphasis on English and Maths particularly and now STEM as well and things like that. And sometimes you can be in a little Visual Arts faculty where you can feel a little bit lost and so I want to acknowledge that straight away and as someone who has been in a really big HSIE faculty and LOTE faculty it's hard for me to imagine how it is to be in perhaps a smaller faculty. So can you start by talking to us about why Visual Arts is important for all students and maybe some of the experiences you've had in working in different school settings and some of the challenges you might have faced along the way?

Kristy Pugliano:

I think its I don't think there is an Art teacher in a state that can't say that their own upbringing and their own schooling hasn't impacted the way that they teach Visual Arts and the love that they have for it. I think there's always that Art teacher that has recognised something in a child and really fostered that and gone with it. The one thing I love about teaching Art is the relationships you form and the



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bonds you form with kids from a young age and if you are lucky enough to take them all the way through. And that's the thing - as you mentioned they don't always select the subject for 11 and 12 because of the value around it, and that's something I would love to change, the value that schools, parents and students put on Visual Arts.

Carly Boreland:

Alex, what about you?

Alexandra Johnson:

I think the best thing about Visual Arts teaching is the fact that we get to reach a range of students that normally wouldn't be reached. I am a Year Advisor at the moment as well and I know from a welfare perspective kids in that you know sort of engage in the Arts, it provides a platform for them to belong to the school community as well and that saying is really valued. I think obviously it's difficult. I am a Visual Arts and English teacher and I know that at parent teacher night's people want to see the English teacher but not so much the Visual Arts teacher. I think that it's something that we definitely need to change within the culture of the way that we think about the Arts and the importance of the Arts. So I think definitely what Kristy said; we reach students that sometimes wouldn't get reached or spoken to and I think the best thing about Art is we can work in creative and different ways to make sure we are engaging lots of students. I know that's difficult for Year 7 and 8 that's mandatory and we often have to answer those questions a lot about why Creative Arts or Visual Arts, in particular, is a valued subject, or why do we even do it. And I think that, in answering that, we always say that isn't it better to be creative; people are inspired by creativity and, more often than not, people are looking for creativity within jobs now. It's not just a stock standard this is how we work; it's about being really creative in how we think and, you know, inspiring others as well. I know I was definitely inspired by some pretty amazing teachers at my own school so I think the Arts is really valuable in how it engages possibly disengaged students as well.

Carly Boreland:

We talk at school about all kinds of purposes of school and you've both mentioned the importance of reaching students and what students need and that student's need Art but also connecting it to student's future prosperity, work and things like that. To me it's so important to emphasize too that the world needs Art, that society needs Art and it's not just about being creative for the sake of it but actually we communicate with each other our understanding of how our world is shaped by what we create and see back and how we represent ourselves sometimes. I know that as an adult you tend to get to a point in your life where you love going to Art galleries and you do it for pleasure and there's some wonderful books written about the power of Art as therapy. For some reason we sometimes forget that



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that's important at all ages as well and that appreciation is necessary to make us and connect us as humans separate from functional needs or other things like that. Am I kind of on the right track?

Alexandra Johnson:

Yes, I think so too. I think the best thing about Visual Arts it's a subjective subject, best and worse, it's a subjective subject so kids can have their opinion and have it valued. It's not one stock standard answer and, in fact, a lot of the time I encourage kids to and I say "Be brave today, have a different opinion". And I think that it is something we can really celebrate within Visual Arts also within English and you know those sorts of subjects too but we encourage difference and we encourage diversity in answering questions and I think that's a really valuable part of our subject.

Carly Boreland:

I've got to ask you because you just mentioned "valuing difference", often at school teachers see themselves as a teacher and that's what they are but Art teachers have this nifty little space where they're often Artists and Teachers. Is that how it is for you or what kind of Visual Arts Artist are you?

Kristy Pugliano:

It's one of those things where as a teacher I know that the most important that I do as a teacher is that I demonstrate and I model before I expect any child to go away and try and create any artwork or replicate a style of painting or sculpture or anything like that. So my favourite thing, and I've done it since my first year of teaching is, "okay everybody get up and come down the front, you're not staying in your seats, everyone come huddle around me and we are going to make a class artwork together". So I will be demonstrating the techniques and showing them what they are about to do, but then before they go back to their chairs or their tables they will actually work on my artwork. It takes the fear out of them actually starting. A habit of being more exposed to the art world and engaging in it and being a part in it really.

Alexandra Johnson:

Yeah, I think it also gives you validity as a teacher. Putting yourself out there and giving things a go yourself is something that we're promoting and it's often very hard for us to do that ourselves. And I know that in teaching Year 11 and 12 students going through the creative process with them, you're in awe of how amazing these kids are. They're 16, 17 and 18 and doing these things and are able to take these risks. I think that's something I can a little bit jealous of too. Probably the last year and a half I've gone back to painting myself but exploring inks and abstract work and I've gone out on a limb myself and given it a go and started an Instagram page and let the kids engage with that. I think it's really important to show them that you're also afraid of this thing I call the "white canvas syndrome". I guess



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it's about sharing your own experience with them and about creating your own artworks that gives you validity.

Carly Boreland:

And to show vulnerability

Alexandra Johnson:

Absolutely!

Carly Boreland:

At the right time, in the right moment, in the right space that can fit an appropriate persona I suppose but to show it's a working progress for everybody.

Alexandra Johnson:

And I encourage them to take calculated risks so we talk about obviously there is risk taking behavior but then we talk about taking calculated risks with your artwork. I've practised this, I've experimented it and now I am going to give it a go and I think that's an important thing that only comes from building rapport with the students particularly so beautifully in our subject.

Carly Boreland:

One thing I always admire in a High School with Visual Arts faculties because it's we talking about music and the whole thing is the way that you guys tend to become a part of the life of the school. There is always something happening in a way that some other subjects don't necessarily achieve and I can obviously appreciate that might take a toll on your lifestyle and maybe give you a few more grey hairs and wrinkles than you were hoping for. Can we talk a bit about how you can plan to meet these really high quality creative experiences for students and what are some of the ways you do that? I am kind of thinking about what does it look like in Visual Arts Mandatory, which I can imagine is a pretty big pressure point and a particularly unique stage in a child's life as well, like say Year 8, and then maybe in elective subjects and then HSC as well. So I imagine that can be similar and different but they are connected because your HSC students come from your Visual Arts Mandatory classes. Can you help us a bit with some of how you bring that all alive and get your classes up and running?

Kristy Pugliano:

One of the things that I implemented at my school was the end of year Art show called 'Art Attack', clever name, not really. That kind of gave students an end point and something to look forward to and to be celebrated and any child in that classroom and we have lots of classes in Mandatory, every single one of them would have at least one artwork in that show at the end of the year that their parents could



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come and say that “hey my kid did that” and there would be different things throughout the year that those parents would also engage in but the end of the showcase was something that, and even still is, the students really work towards. We’re not really, we’re meant to be assessment focused but for my staff and my own teaching I know that our end point is that curation and that exhibition at the end of the year which the students all take part in: they hang their own works up; they all involved in that curation, what’s going to look good here? what’s going to pull away from different artworks? That’s from 7-12 so they all engage in different experiences like that. But definitely, the celebration of their work is the most important thing and even if the work is not that great it still goes up on the wall and I think that’s really important too. Celebrating the little wins because you never know, a student might not necessarily like Visual Arts but they’re still having a go. I love that kids, they really find like Maths, English and Science hard and you hear other staff are saying they’re really finding the behaviour difficult. But then I’m thinking “that kid comes to my class and sits down and does beautiful artworks and never has an issue” and I always go through my head – “what is the difference?” Is it just the Art itself that they love? Is it the environment? Is it the relationship that we formed? I think the students also knowing the family involvement at the year, or end of the semester or whenever it happens to be, and their parents are going to visibly see that work. They take great pride in it which as a teacher makes me really happy that they are so excited to be exhibited and a part of something.

Carly Boreland:

I was thinking that one of the keys might be that when you say that “everyone’s work goes up on the board; even if it’s not that great”, but it’s their best work and so it’s that celebration of the best of that student and that’s really powerful. I think it’s something practical subjects do so well, and we’re getting there with written work but we may be not quite far along as we need to be of actually noticing the best work for that student and what it took to get there and then when you can show families as well that’s really neat.

Kristy Pugliano:

I think with social networking now, it’s also made things a lot easier for us Art teachers too. Not only can we access, and easily show students, a variety of different artists that are up and coming, the teachers can also post, for example, on the school’s Instagram page, or the school’s Facebook page that day, “this student’s been working really great in Visual Arts” so we put their work up online. Their parents can instantly see it or their friends and family can “like it”. That 21st century learning, they are so excited the next day when they come into school and they say “everyone saw my artwork or everyone saw me sitting in class working”. That is so exciting for them.

Alexandra Johnson:

Its instant recognition; it’s really great.



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Carly Boreland:

Okay, so we're starting in Year 8, I guess some schools might do that in Year 7, but basically at that very early age and you get everybody and where to next then for students as you go up the years and the stages?

Alexandra Johnson:

I think 7 and 8 is really important. Particularly in Year 7; you know they are brand new this so it's a whole sort of new way of thinking, moving from different classrooms and so on. I think it's about really engaging, or inspiring, their creativity at that point that is important. So, working on not only on practical skills, but also thinking about theory that is, relatable to them and something that they are going to enjoy. I mean, after that they get into Year 8, and they're a little bit, "I already know this school; I'm feeling good about this". So it's a little bit trickier with the class sizes that, at our school, are a little bit bigger. That kind of restricts the things that you can access, or do, in terms of clay work and kilns and all those sorts of things. But, making sure, I think, in particularly in Year 9 and 10 elective programs, or more so in Year 8, we recommend in their reports "This students worked really well. I would highly recommend for this student Year 9 and 10 elective subjects". I think what's particularly important, in relation to the question, is making sure we're engaging kids in programs with Artists and Artworks and Art History that they want to see; not just maybe so much what we want to see like the Renaissance or water colour works. Really tapping into their needs and their wants and the things they're engaged in.

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Carly Boreland:

The question I have in my mind is like "what is Art that is going to be acceptable at school?" and it must be a fine line, I mean it is with History as well, what do you want to teach them and that balance between things being relative and of interest because not everything has to be relative and interesting to begin with but that's the point of learning new things that can take you there. How do you get that balance right and how do you not be too high-browed, too snobbish?

Kristy Pugliano:

I don't know an Art teacher that isn't constantly thinking, reprogramming and planning. I know the staff that I work with they don't really ever teach the same thing over and over again. It's always been reevaluated and we'll often, we came across this same problem where different teachers across the Visual



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Arts faculty didn't feel comfortable, or didn't have the experience, or knowledge about a particular artist, so we came to the decision with our programming that the kids would do the same activity but the artist choice, or the style, would be left up to the teachers discretion. That also came in because the students' needs were different.

Carly Boreland:

So you get the vibe of it and go with what you're interested in as well a bit because that passion rubs off I guess?

Kristy Pugliano:

It's kind of nice because at the end of art year, there is not a whole class with the same work being reproduced which I think is really important. Because you start to, what I did notice, is that when it came to Stage 6, we would say to our students (and of course I'm in a very different context to what Alex is in), "okay now it's time to go do your Body of Work" and they say "okay give me ... what's my idea miss? What am I doing?"

Carly Boreland:

I am having this flashback to being in high school where I remember everybody in the class had to make this clay coil pot and everyone's is lined up there. Have we moved away a bit from that kind of hyper-structured...

Kristy Pugliano:

There was a few moments of realization from me as the Head Teacher as well because we had our end of year Art show one year and I went into the hall and the walls are covered, filled, well you've been there, filled with artworks and there was like a thousand 'Frida Kahlos' staring at me.

Carly Boreland:

That's a lot of eyebrows

Kristy Pugliano:

That's so much eyebrows! And I was like "wow" and the kids really accentuate the eyebrows too.

Alexandra Johnson:

Because it's fun.



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Kristy Pugliano:

The principal said “we’ll leave the artworks up for the presentation day”, so then again you sit in the presentation day again going “wow all the kids are doing the same thing!”

Carly Boreland:

What an intimidating space to be looking down on you during your presentation day

Kristy Pugliano:

Love Frida, powerful woman, but when you see the same work being reproduced, like, what are we teaching our kids? We are teaching them that they all have to be the same. No. And that’s why when they get to Stage 6 we say “okay time to do your Body of Work”, they go “aw miss what do we do?” because they have no independence; they can’t communicate an idea; they’re not meeting the outcome. So my belief is, that in Stage 4, we need to start to let them have some freedom of expression and let them explore things on their own.

Alexandra Johnson:

That’s the thing that kids love though; you can be different in VA like it’s really important. I know the question was about linking it back to, you know, those high-browed ideas and we created programming Year 7 and we do the ‘Castle Ball Prize’ (obviously Castle Hill High) and they get to, not only learn about the Archibald Prize, which is valued in Art History and in Australia, but they create a caricature of a teacher. Then we put them up and do the packing room prize and all that sort of stuff at our Art show. So it’s about having these really interesting ideas and engaging kids in their own sort of little worlds. Also lets them let out a little bit frustration at teachers sometimes as well. We can go Frida Kahlo eyebrows, and all sorts of stuff, and using all the signs and symbols for the teachers; but it engages them in their world at that time. And then you link it back to Art History, and to the core things we are trying to teach them. So they see that it’s valid and it’s useful and it’s interesting but it has meaning as well.

Carly Boreland:

So I wanted to ask you about the Syllabus then. Alex you’ve written an article for the Journal of Professional Learning, which teachers can read, and that goes to how important the Syllabus is for really finding your True North, I suppose, when it comes to deciding what you going to do in a world that is so huge and wonderfully filled with fabulous art and possibilities. Can we talk a bit about the Syllabus and what we need to do to get students ready for success in Stage 6 as well? Because it’s absolutely creativity, but there is also some head- down pen and pencil writing, and things like that, that are essential.



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Kristy Pugliano:

I mean the Syllabus is great, you know, everything we do comes from that, and the outcomes, everything, should align back come back to the outcomes. I think the most effective thing you can do, through from Year 7 to Year 12, is scaffolding. So from Year 7, I've currently implemented in each classroom, we do lots of pre-testing in the first one or two weeks. That's artworks we'd normally be doing, but that's just gaging where the kids are at. From there, we subtly group them into - we've got our Picassos, our Kahlos, our Da Vincis - and that's our way of differentiating the work for them; to allow them to reach those outcomes at their own level. It's kind of a new system that we're trialing out which we've seen really good results out of. They can also jump up; so they can swap groups as the term goes on. So that has been really effective in extending kids skills. We have found elective numbers have grown; choosing it in Year 9. Because there have been some kids who have come to us from primary school who were quite gifted in Art; they've been extended, but the kids who have done nothing in primary school for Art, which often happens, they've just been growing and developing and being heavily scaffolded. One thing that Alex taught me well, because we went to Uni. together, is how to scaffold.

Carly Boreland:

I was thinking too something you touch on there is the group-ness of what you're doing. Because often we can think of Creative Arts as a very individual experience, and you're describing setting your class up in very deliberate groups, and getting something out of them being together. Moving between groups, and aspiring to be in another group within the same class, but that it's actually a collective endeavour.

Alexandra Johnson:

But not just in the classroom as well. There needs to be collaboration between teachers, because at the moment, quite often, we have two VA classes. So at the moment we have two Year 11 classes and I know that we've got 4 Visual Arts teachers at our school (it's quite a big school) and each teacher has their own little niche, you know practical skill that they work on, so [they say] "I'm not particularly strong; my strength isn't photography and video". So I say "go and speak to this teacher; you know she has great ideas; she does her own photography and works on this". Whereas, they might send another student to me for help with written work or theory or painting or working with ink or whatever. I did my first prac. at Shelvey and there was only one Art teacher there; so it was really great to see her work and manage that faculty as well. But one of the things that she taught me was to reach out, ask for help, ask for resources because we were kind of talking about how hard this question would be earlier. We respectfully think that there are a lack of really adequate resources (or not adequate, there's adequate) or exciting resources and things that we want to work with. We mentioned before about engaging kids; we want to be engaged too. I know I've done a lot of professional development courses where I've kind of



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thought ah okay that was interesting but how am I going to implement that in the classroom? Or, how am I going to excite people about what I've just learnt? I think there is a lack in that sort of stuff. I know that the Art Express days (the teacher marking days) are invaluable.

Kristy Pugliano:

Probably the best thing I ever did was apply for marking. First time I did marking no one in my faculty had ever had marking experience so I would always reach out to other schools and ask them to come when we did mark for the assessment for the HSC. We would always double mark with a teacher from another school who had HSC experience and that kind of rubbed off on my staff. I'd also send my written works to Alex, who I knew was getting Band 6's, and I'd go "can you compare this so I just know where we're sitting?" So yes, 100%, the best professional learning I've ever done is the marking and going in and seeing other teachers' HSC exhibitions. So I'd always go to Alex's school. My school's quite far out so I send pictures to Alex.

Carly Boreland:

And it really does sound like at the moment there are so many teachers across, not just in Visual Arts, across high school and primary school where we're relying so much on each other and it really does seem to be a lack of systemic support and so we really are relying on connecting with each other and helping each other out at the moment. Maybe too much, but we're survivors so we always find a way to make it happen.

So, as we've been talking today, we really have said that Visual Arts is about the students: the relationship with their teacher, the things that they create and the world that we create at the same time in doing this in our schools and the community we create inside our schools at the same time. And we've talked about some of the particular challenges that are in your subject area such as the relative value that is placed on Creative Arts compared to some other things. We've talked about the challenges of achieving HSC success and building up Stage 6 courses, we've talked about how you can use the syllabus and teach students appropriate writing as well as creativity and how you can work to create calculated risks and encourage students to do things that are going to be safely risky if that's possible. We've talked about the challenge and maybe the fun of procrastination and how to make that work for you. We've talked about what Art is and what Art you should teach in your school. Can you tell me what you think Art means and how it can change the world or affect the world and why we should really care about it so much in all of our schools?

Kristy Pugliano:

I think it's something that, as a teacher, we need to take very seriously. We need to teach them to communicate, we need to teach them to be creative, we need to teach them to be critical analyzers and that they need to be collaborative learners. Art teaches kids all those things. And that's something I



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wish when I was at Uni and I said to my dad that “I’m going to be a teacher” and he said “Great, you’ll be a primary school teacher” and I said “No, I’m going to be an Art teacher” and he said “What! Why?” and at that time in my life, I wish I had that to turn around and say to my dad. I can say it to him now but it doesn’t mean as much.

Alexandra Johnson:

I think it encourages students - after this whole process of talking about collaboration, creating a body of work, working on mini projects - I think it creates sustained, self-directed learners and I think that’s something really important. If you can’t sit through something or engage in something whole heartedly and learn yourself and be reflective then that’s something that can correlate with any sort of job you engage in in the future. I think passion is something that we really instill in our kids too: a passion for Visual Arts, a passion for life, a passion for engaging in things with everything you’ve got and that’s something that we do. We tend to do pretty well, we hope we do it well, but it’s something that you can teach kids you know, show them your own passion and enthusiasm for things and it’s something that relates directly into moving into the workforce and that’s something that is amazing about our subject too.

Carly Boreland:

And I really hope that, not only you guys, but all of the teachers who are listening, think about what they are doing at school it’s not only about creating workers for jobs that might not exist but helping humans to become the people that will make their future the way they want it to be. We really appreciate having you in here and we would love to hear more of your ideas in the future as well.

Alexandra Johnson:

Thank you.

Kristy Pugliano:

Thank you.

Carly Boreland:

You’ve been listening to the JPL podcast for the New South Wales Teachers Federation Centre for Professional Learning. I’m Carly Boreland, and I’m the Editor of the JPL. I’ve been talking with Alex Johnson and Kristy Pugliano about teaching Visual Arts in high schools. And to find out more and to listen to further podcasts you can visit our website at cpl.asn.au/podcasts



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CONCLUSION:

The JPL Podcast is produced by the Centre for Professional Learning and the New South Wales Teachers' Federation. All opinions expressed in this podcast are those of the individual speakers, and do not necessarily represent the views of their employer or associated organisations. The host was Carly Boreland, technical direction by Jason Nicholas.

Alexandra Johnson currently teaches Visual Arts and English at Castle Hill High School and completed a Masters of Teaching in 2011. Alexandra has been a Year Advisor at Castle Hill High School, and this has driven her passion for student welfare and building rapport with students to manage behaviour and well-being matters. Her focus on improving achievement in Visual Arts has resulted in students regularly being admitted to ARTEXPRESS, recognition for excellent results in the HSC for Visual Arts and student artwork being purchased by the Wilkins collection and exhibited in the Department of Education building.

Kristy Pugliano is Head Teacher of Creative and Performing Arts at Baulkham Hills High School. She received a TeachNSW scholarship whilst studying at Western Sydney University and is now in the Department's Lead Development Initiative, as she is currently working towards her Lead accreditation. Kristy leads a diverse faculty in new approaches, innovation and student engagement. Her research interests are centred on Creative Arts, Aboriginal Education, project-based-learning and innovative pedagogy. Kristy Pugliano is Head Teacher of Creative and Performing Arts at Baulkham Hills High School. She received a TeachNSW scholarship whilst studying at Western Sydney University and is now in the Department's Lead Development Initiative, as she is currently working towards her Lead accreditation. Kristy leads a diverse faculty in new approaches, innovation and student engagement. Her research interests are centred on Creative Arts, Aboriginal Education, project-based-learning and innovative pedagogy.