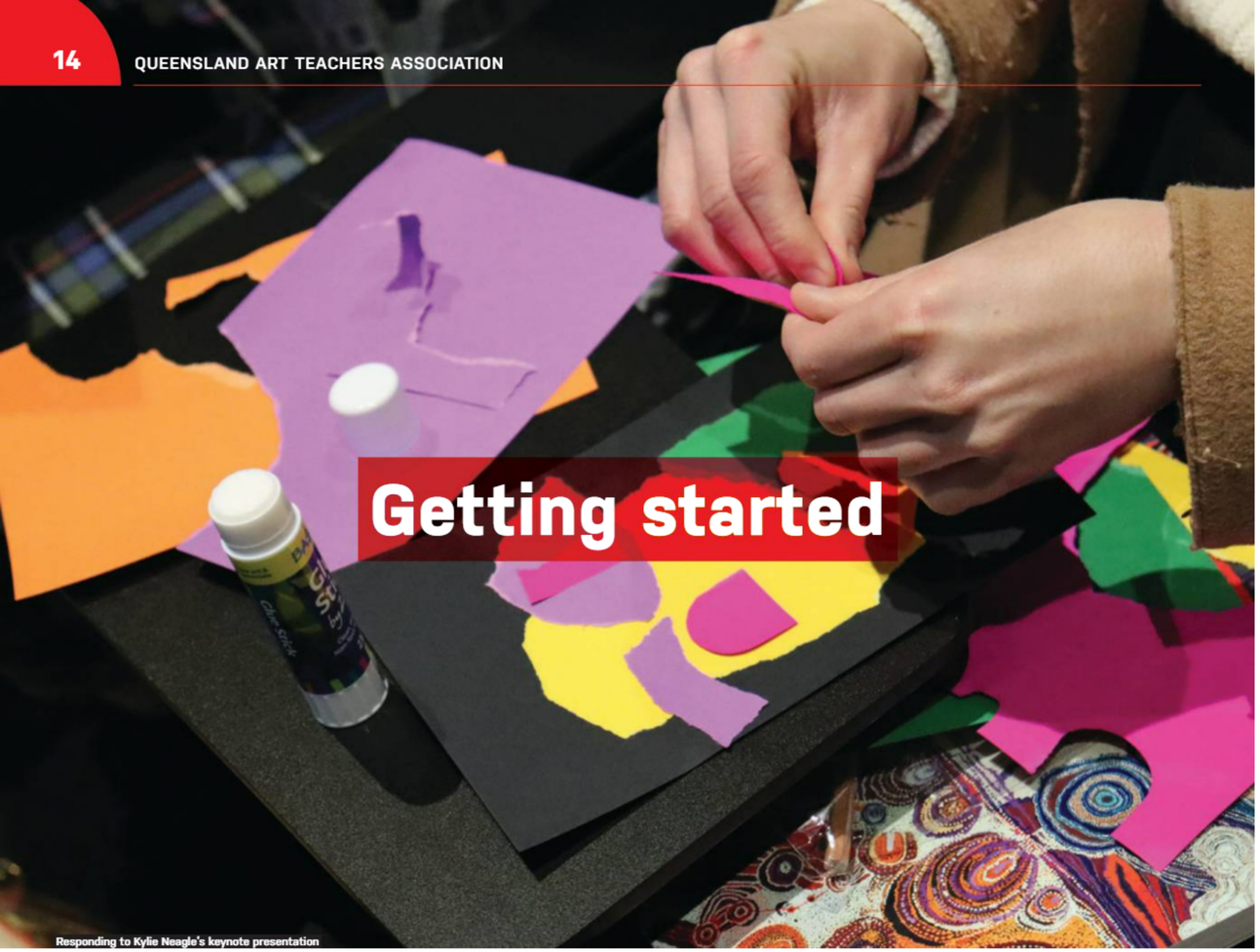
Getting started



Responding to Kylie Neagle's keynote presentation

Every arts teacher in the world has heard the phrase, "I don't know where to start," and if they haven't, it's because their students are too busy staring into the void or stabbing pencils into erasers to put their frustration into words.

In the junior years of visual art, we step our students through inquiry learning, encouraging them to develop curiosity as they respond to and make artworks. Students' independence with this process develops over their years of study, until they lead their own inquiry in senior years. We like to call it a creative inquiry.

There is an argument separate to this article, as to whether creativity is innate, or if it can be taught. The answer seems dependent on whether creativity is a behaviour, skill, temperament, sensibility, or something else.

The Cambridge Dictionary doesn't help, defining creativity as, 'the ability to produce original and unusual ideas, or to make something new or imaginative.' Ability can be innate or taught, but almost always requires practice to improve. Being creative, coming up with original and unusual ideas and producing artwork that's something new or imaginative are the behaviours of a successful art student. It is a teachable way of working.

But the hardest part of being creative and teaching creativity can be crossing the starting line. How can we respond to our eraser-stabbing students with patient, practical advice about getting started?

With this common creativity roadblock in mind, the Queensland Art Teachers Association (QATA) set their 2022 conference theme as Starting Points. Over 300 Queensland arts educators attended the three-day professional development event in July, focusing on creative sparks or inspirations that get our students moving in the direction of a resolved artwork.

It's difficult to encapsulate the learnings of a conference within two pages, but here are some of the many ways Queensland teachers are encouraging their students to get started.

- *Research*
  I know no student who wants to hear this, but research is what practicing, successful artists do first. Research gives your work purpose and context, and therefore value. If you're sitting there doing nothing, pick up a book, watch a documentary, walk in nature or visit a gallery or exhibition (virtually or physically). While you're observing, have a pencil in your hand. Sketch, write down anything that you think, feel, or learn. Research will eventually uncover your stimulus, and finding your stimulus is the place to start. Once you have your stimulus – it's time for more research. It's important to be curious – to seek out things you don't already know. Ask yourself, what don't you know? What do you want to know? This leads me to the next point...
- *Follow your interest*
  Choose a stimulus that makes you feel something (any feeling will do, e.g. anger, disgust, longing, fear, joy, anticipation, pride), or you will quickly lose motivation. If your teacher or your friends are using stimulus that you find boring, don't follow suit. You need to find something that makes you tick. Put your stimulus in the centre of your mind or page, and then find how it's connected. Ask yourself, what happens when I take this thing out of context? What are its rules and when does it break them? What is it similar to? What came before? What is likely to follow?
- *Play*
  Letting yourself "be silly" or work loosely can have surprising results. Try experimenting and bending rules – mix media that usually don't work together; make your work digital and start adding effects; cut it up; put it underwater; ask your peers to look at your ideas and think of one word or action; look at it from another perspective; hide sections; repeat the same thing over and over; change its dimensions. The important thing about playing is quietening that critical part of your brain, taking creative risks, and being open to fun alternatives.
- *Let your body lead*
  Automatism is a way of working associated with surrealist artists (the most famous surrealist artist is Salvador Dali). The idea behind the technique is to work in a spontaneous way, allowing the subconscious mind to take the wheel (or paintbrush). The resulting artwork is equal parts chance and reflex. A more contemporary technique termed neurographic art (aka intuitive scribble) falls into this category too. Want to try letting your body lead? Start with a stimulus – a song, sensation, text, emotion, experience, object, problem – select your media of choice and let your hands make art without thinking about it. With this strategy, and the one above (play) it is important to evaluate the results and extend. The good news is you've started! Now you can go on.
- *Focus on small steps*
  Bite your project into small parts and then focus on achieving one step at a time. If you only know the first step, that's okay – get it done. Focusing on only one step means you're less likely to feel overwhelmed or fatigued before you even start – by the scale of the project, or by the fact you mightn't yet know your end goal. Feel a sense of accomplishment after achieving each tiny step.
- *Adjust your expectations*
  For some of us (author included), who can overthink until the smoke alarm goes off, another important part of getting started is to adjust your expectations. This means beginning a project without expecting the work will be the next Archibald Prize-winning portrait, or even without needing the work to be fully resolved. It means being flexible enough to allow the work to morph or reshape as you discover new things.

Every student works differently, so it's helpful to use and teach different ways of getting started. At the end of the day (and the Term), it doesn't matter how creative our students are if they don't begin making. And if all else fails, they might just find their creative inspiration in that void.

Being playful during Dr Martin Smith's photography workshop

Justene Williams' workshop encouraged teachers to have fun

Taking creative risks in Kim Herringe's printmaking workshop

QATA QUEENSLAND art teachers association

Bethany Loveridge is the Vice President of the Queensland Art Teachers Association (QATA). Since 1961, the QATA has supported arts educators and students through professional development, advocacy, and mediation. QATA is developing advocacy projects to highlight the value of studying senior Visual Art. For more information, and to connect with us, visit our website at www.qata.qld.edu.au