

Teaching Writing in the Art Classroom

Ozark Writing Project Demonstration
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Providing a comprehensive, high-quality education that gives every student the arts literacy advantage by developing his or her skills in the “four C’s” – communication, culture, cognition, and creativity – should be our aim ... Our public schools must educate children to be fully literate, which in the 21st century will clearly include arts-derived knowledge. (Longley, 2003).

My challenge began this way, I was looking for a way to open-up discussion in my art classroom with 5th and 6th grade students and show them how to ***think*** about art and art history other than just creating production and memorizing facts.

Art grade level expectations ask students to compare and contrast works of art – emphasizing style, period, and technique, and quite frankly, I was struggling. Basically, if I were to simply list and note similarities and differences and have students discuss and study them, I knew they would be forgotten the next day. I also knew that I would only get a small percentage that would retain this knowledge, since I only see these students once a week for 60 minutes. I wanted to engage students in a way that they could understand art from a personal level. If they made a connection, created something in their own words, then I felt they would have an understanding deeper than I could ever demonstrate for them.

By taking this holistic approach to a work of art I wanted students gain self-confidence in their art, take time and become reflective with it as they learned the background for a particular method.

One of my goals as an instructor is for students to begin their projects with this understanding: *there is more to art than just being technically talented*. Often with this load off a student their interest and productivity takes a new direction. There are students who do not enjoy art, they don’t get it, it is not valued or understood, and I realize that this may be their last exposure to this subject matter in their educational life – so I want to make this as comfortable as possible.

How I began – I selected a generally recognized and somewhat interesting work for our study – Van Gogh’s *The Starry Night* (18). I

asked students if they had seen this work before (kind of a joke in my classroom as I have a large cabinet, 6' tall x 4' wide, in the middle of one wall in my classroom painted with this). Hopefully a few notice it and some actually know the title and who did it. I ask students what *do they* think makes a work of art appealing and so famous?

My students and I share ideas in an open discussion about Vincent Van Gogh, his life, and the artwork he created. Connecting the student to the artist in some way helps the student understand more than just the artistic aspect of a work. Van Gogh faced many failures, was very passionate, and died rather young – 37 yrs old. His actual painting career was short in years, producing over 2000 works, and yet his paintings today are probably some of the most valuable in the world, a recent auction of *Sunflowers* sold for a record-setting 141 million dollars.

I wanted students to have more of an art experience than just the 60 minutes a week, and I wanted them to have something that they would remember and connect with in other areas of life.

Vygotsky observed that individuals need an opportunity to verbalize their thoughts ... students were limited in development when solving problems independently but that their potential was increased significantly when assisted by peers with greater capabilities. (Yenawine, 1998).

I use writing in my classroom to help students clarify or organize their thoughts before they begin their work. I value my studio time with them and know creating a reflective work provides an opportunity for all learners to balance their experience.

Before we paint, I ask students to take a few minutes to think about this work and make a list of a few of the ideas they are having about the work – what is it that they like, feelings they get from the colors, lines, shapes – look at this setting, what does it remind them of, what are interesting things they found in the work? Students may write a

list, do a diary entry, or begin a story – imagining that they are in the painting. *My purpose is to capture the first initial feeling that they have.*

From the start students are asked to back up interpretations with evidence. Visual thinking strategies provide students strengthen their observation and literary skills by digging into their existing stores of knowledge and expressing themselves thoughtfully. (Yenawine, 1998).

After students list their observations, they are asked to set them aside and begin painting; we discuss the style and technique and whether or not they have tried something like this. Students begin their work and paint practicing duplicating the style, brushstrokes, and color scheme.

Upon completion, students are asked to return to their lists of impressions they had made earlier and to go back and think about what it would be like if they were making this work, if they were there painting it, what messages would they like to convey, what ideas do they have from their own experiences, what would make a good story for this work they are creating?

I have used a variety of ways for students to develop their writing for this assignment, using sensory details and “Show not Tell” fit easily into this project.

Students use their list and new ideas they have and construct a paragraph to describe their painting or interpretation. They work alone at this point and then are asked to go back and find just one line or phrase that they like the best.

This line is what they will put in their work – they can weave it into the clouds, along the tree line, around the moon or the stars. They decide how their writing fits in.

I encourage you to try a variety of artistic and creative methods in your classroom – even if you think you are not artistic – just throw it in and see what happens.

If teachers provide experiences and assignments that engage all four areas of the cerebral cortex they can expect deeper learning than if

they engage fewer regions. The more brain areas we use, the more neurons fire and the more neural networks change-and thus the more learning occurs. (Zull, 2004).

To train students to see critically and to create in multiple modes should be an essential component of a liberal education. That will require not only reenvisioning our curricula and teaching practices but also supporting faculty, librarians, and others in learning to both value and use visual representations in working with students. (Felton, 2008).

From Delacroix's Model for Writing as a Creative Process.

When we give ourselves entirely to the habits of daily existence, of the social order, it is difficult, if not impossible, to express "the treasures which we carry in our hearts."

Delacroix 1824.

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