Constructing Meaning in Art: A Reflective Process

By Jennifer Patton

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Rational:

If someone looks at a piece of art or listens to a piece of music and finds no meaning, a teacher cannot simply say, *the meaning is this*. Individuals must construct meaning for art within themselves. A core element of the constructivist foundation in curriculum is reflection. Meaning is sculpted by a person’s reflection of the past, present, and hopes for the future. Each piece of art is viewed differently by every individual because art acts as a mirror. We relate our memories to art. Art can move us to tears, to laughter, to fear, and to hope.

The art classroom must be an environment where students feel safe in exploring meaning. Searching for meaning is an activity that can leave a person emotionally vulnerable, so art educators must ensure the classroom environment is filled with open discussions and freedom to explore personal thoughts and feelings. The reflective process can flourish in the art classroom if critical thinking and constructive communication activities are incorporated into the art curriculum.

Background:

During my student teaching experience in a high school setting, I was disappointed to discover students did not know how to talk about art. Especially disturbing was their inability to talk about their own art. Art is a vehicle of communication reflecting society and the times. Not taking the time to find meaning takes away from the entire purpose of art. I worked with four students who were planning on pursuing studio art in college. I spent time with each student, convincing them they needed to communicate their purpose for their artwork. Admissions to art colleges are becoming more and more competitive, so high school art students must find their artistic voice. The key for this to happen is to practice reflection in the classroom.
Summary

This collection of high school art activities is focused on improving critical thinking and constructive communication skills (verbal and written). Integrating conflict resolution and critical thinking activities show consistent results in improving school climate (Heydenberk and Heydenberk, 2000). Reflection in a group setting requires a large amount of trust. When students feel emotionally and cognitively safe in the art classroom, they will be able to find meaning in art through the reflective process and open discussions.

The world has no shortage of real life problems. It is crucial to make sure students leave school with the critical thinking skills necessary for understanding our society and themselves. Art can provide students with an opportunity to deal with everyday stresses such as divorces, grieving, peer pressure, and trauma. However, students must be given the chance to think critically and participate in constructive communication for meaning to develop. These materials will build a student’s ability to reflect, listen, view different perspectives, communicate and understand.

Recommended Resources:


The authors provide an in-depth Conflict Resolution-Critical Thinking Curriculum (CR-CT). The CR-CT portfolio is created by students as they progress in the CR-CT activities. Activities enhance the following skills: active listening, questioning, mapping understanding, quantum questions, brainstorming, conflict-positive communication, and cooperation.


This book is a great resource for using art as a tool for discussing feelings, bullying, conflict, body image and group building. Most of the activities are short and can be incorporated into any classroom environment as topics may arise.
Weekly Journaling and Discussion:
Art History as a Reflective Process
(Weekly art history lesson to be incorporated in a high school Studio Foundation Course)

Lesson Objectives:
Knowledge
• Students will be introduced to a wide variety of artists throughout history
• Artistic movements will be identified
• Artwork from different cultures will be explored
• Events in history will be reviewed to increase understanding

Skills
• Interpersonal communication skills will develop through classroom discussion
• Critical thinking skills will be used to interpret different perspectives
• Reflective writing skills will be enhanced through weekly journal assignments

Attitudes
• Students will actively participate in classroom discussions
• Mutual respect will be presented to all who share opinions

Handouts:
Students will be given a copy of the “Images Responses” worksheet to put in their journal and a copy of the “Grading Rubric”.

Grading Rubric
Students will be given 10 points each week for their art journal writing and 10 points for their classroom discussion participation. Grades will be distributed as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Your Points</th>
<th>Possible Points</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Journal Entry</strong> (due on Friday of every week)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of critical thinking in your interpretation and evaluation (Provided evidence to make beliefs persuasive)</td>
<td></td>
<td>4pts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflection (feelings, thoughts and attitudes included)</td>
<td></td>
<td>4pts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proper grammar and legible handwriting</td>
<td></td>
<td>2pts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>10pts</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Classroom Discussion</strong></th>
<th>Your Points</th>
<th>Possible Points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shares at least one item from journal entry</td>
<td>4pts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responds at least once to a classmates entry</td>
<td>2pts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrates a positive attitude during discussion (Actively listens and shows respect)</td>
<td>4pts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>10pts</td>
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Teaching Activities:
1. Present a piece of artwork every Monday (preferably through a slide or large format poster). Have students write in their journals the identifying elements of design and describe what they see.
2. Tell students the name of the artist, the title of the artwork, the date it was made, ask if anyone knows the artistic movement of the piece.
3. Have students listen to the background of the artist.
4. Review what was happening during the time and place the art was made.
5. Students have a week to write a well-written and thought provoking Image Response.
6. 20 minutes towards the end of the week is designated for classroom discussion. Students can refer to their image response within their journal. The teacher takes a back seat role in the discussion, occasionally contributing to keep students on track.

Standards Addressed:
- Apply methods of art criticism in writing and speaking about works of art.
- Analyze and interpret the way in which the theme or meaning in an artwork expresses a social, political or cultural comment and use examples from the artwork to support the interpretation.
- Understand and apply knowledge of art history in oral and written discussions about selected works of art.
- Compare the ways in which the emotional impact of a specific artwork affects the interpretation.

Teacher Reflection
- Monitor individuals for progress in their contributions to classroom discussions.
- Review artworks from previous weeks to test if students are retaining information.
- Encourage comparing and contrasting arts from different weeks.
Image Responses for Weekly Art Journals

My initial response to the image or object was:

The image or object left me feeling:

My primary question about the work was:

The artist intent appeared to be:

How good or bad is the work of art? Provide reasons for your beliefs.
Ex: Is the art useful to society? Does it express a powerful enough message?

Other considerations and ideas:
Example I:
Art History Reflection

**Frida Kahlo** (1907-1954)
Tree of Hope, Stay Strong, 1946

Historical Events:

*Spanish Civil War* (July 1936–April 1939): *Spanish Republicans* and left-wing groups fought against a nationalist rebellion who succeeded in overthrowing the Republican government and establishing a dictatorship. Political and cultural differences characterized the two Spains: Red Spain represented liberals who went along with democratic principles and those advocating communism. Black Spain was represented by the Roman Catholic Church and conservatives.

**World War II** officially ends in September 1945.

Frida began to paint in while recovering from a streetcar accident that left her permanently disabled. She underwent more than thirty operations in the course of her life, and many of her approximately two hundred paintings directly relate to her experiences with physical pain.

Frida met Diego Rivera in 1928 and married him in 1929. She shared his faith in communism and passionate interest in the indigenous cultures of Mexico.

The period between 1934 and 1940 was tumultuous for Frida. Although her husband, Diego Rivera, had been unfaithful in the past, an affair with her sister Cristina was too much for her to bear. During this period she divorced Rivera at his request. They did reconcile and remarry in 1940.

Although her life with Rivera had become more stable in their second marriage, her health had taken a downward swing from which she never fully recovered. Much of her painting was done in a specially made easel so she could paint while confined to her bed. Rivera was spending much of his time away to work on his own art, so she was alone for much of this ordeal.

Frida held her self up, both in her art and her life, as the ideal post-Revolutionary Mexican. She was **politically active** right up until her death in 1954.
Example II:
Art History Reflection

**Henry Fuseli** (1741 - 1825)
*The Nightmare* (1781)

Historical Events of the decade:
American Revolutionary War

Romantic Era

Fuseli was influenced by writers
William Blake and Shakespeare

Fuseli was born at Zürich in Switzerland, the second of eighteen children. His father was Johann Caspar Füssli, a painter of portraits and an art historian. Many of Fuseli’s brothers and sisters became artist, however, his father directed him towards priesthood.

Fuseli has often been regarded as a forerunner of the Romantic art movement and a precursor of Symbolism and Surrealism.

Fuseli himself was an avid theatergoer. In particular, Shakespeare in The London theatre charged his imagination and over the years he painted, etched and drew numerous scenes from the plays. (Lady Constance, Arthur, and Salisbury; The Three Witches, Hamlet & the Ghost)

His method included deliberately exaggerating the proportions of the parts and throwing his figures into **contorted attitudes**. One **technique** involved setting down arbitrary points on a sheet, which then became the extreme points of the various limbs--rather like creating a constellation from the unintentional relations of stars.

**Quote:** Fuseli once said, that "one of the most unexplored regions of art are dreams and what may be called the personification of sentiments."

He was comparatively rich at his death.
Time Machine
(High School Group Research Project and Mural Design)

Lesson Objectives:

Knowledge
• Students will learn about different art movements
• Students will conduct research on artists from a specific movement
• Historical events will be reviewed from different cultures and times

Skills
• Interpersonal communication skills will develop through classroom presentation
• Critical thinking skills will be used to interpret different perspectives
• Collaborative art design will be practiced through the creation of a group mural
• Research skills will be used at the library and via the Internet

Attitudes
• Students will create an engaging classroom presentation
• Teamwork skills will enhance as group members collaborate and make a mural

Project Introduction:
• Groups of 3-4 students will develop a “time machine”
• Groups will be assigned an artistic movement:
  o Early Renaissance
  o Baroque
  o Romantic
  o Realist
  o Impressionist
  o High Renaissance
  o Post-Impressionist
  o Fauvist
  o Cubist
  o Surrealist
• Groups can also be assigned by Non-Western Art Influences:
  o India
  o China
  o Japan
  o Southeast Asia
  o Highland Asia
  o The World of Islam
  o Native North American
  o Africa
• Groups will research 3-4 artists (depending on group size) from a particular movement. Each member will research a different artist and prepare a 3-5 minute presentation about the artist.
• All group members must conduct research on the time era of the movement and find enough information to reflect the society during the time period (theater, literature, architecture, religion, politics, music, inventions, etc.). The group will create a presentation about the time era.
• Each group will create a mural illustration reflecting their collaborative research of the time period as well as the style of the art movement.
• After presenting to the class, group members should answer questions from their “tourists” on the time machine.

Standards Addressed:
• Understand and apply knowledge of art history in oral and written discussions about selected works of art.
• Research and report on the historical, cultural, social or political foundations of selected art forms.
• Analyze major changes to selected artistic styles in art history and determine the historical, social, political or artistic factors that influenced the change.
• Research and explain the relationships between specific artworks and major historical events.

Teaching Activity: Rivera’s Mural
• What’s a mural?
• Introduce Rivera’s Mural of Pan American Unity is in the Diego Rivera Theatre.
• What important people, places, and events in history does the mural show? (SF/US/Mexican/South American history, inventions, constructions, explorations)
• What are some themes in the mural?
Contemporary Conflicts
(Art about today’s concerns)

Lesson Objectives:
Knowledge
• Students will be introduced to contemporary artists
• Students will choose a contemporary artist to create an A-Z biography

Skills
• Students will apply all areas of art criticism to interpret a contemporary piece
• Research skills will be used at the library and via the Internet
• Students will create a mixed-media artwork depicting a current issue in society of personal importance

Teaching Activities:
• Write conflict on the board
  o Ask students to brainstorm words associated with conflict
  o Can a conflict be inside a person?
  o Can a person have a conflict about what to eat for lunch?
  o Can a conflict be a friendly discussion?
  o Why depict conflict in art?
• Brainstorm with students current concerns in our society (example, environmental concerns, violence, drugs, media, poverty, War in Iraqi)
• Slide show of Contemporary artwork (include list of artists with powerful statements about current concerns)
• Students will complete the following:
  1. An A-Z biography of a contemporary artist.
  2. A 1 page art criticism about an artwork (by your artist- See Handout)
  3. A mixed-media project about an issue in society that concerns you

Standards Addressed:
• Analyze a work of art and explain how it reflects the heritages, traditions, attitudes and beliefs of the artist.
• Describe various sources (e.g. personal experience, imagination, interests, everyday events and social issues) visual artists use to generate ideas for artworks.
• Research an artist or work of art of personal interest and write about the historical, social, cultural or political factors influencing the artist or the work.
• Apply various methods of art criticism to analyze and interpret works of art
• Apply methods of art criticism in writing and speaking about works of art
Contemporary Artist List

Art and the Environment (and architecture)
- Andy Goldsworthy (British, art in nature)
- Lynn Hull (American, art and ecology)
- Christo and Jeanne-Claude (Bulgarian & French, large-scale works in the Environment, fabric)
- Mierele Laderman Ukeles (American, art and ecology, sculptures, installations)
- Chris Drury (British, art in nature)

Painting/mixed media/prints
- Faith Ringgold (African-American, paintings, story quilts)
- Juane Quick-to-See-Smith (Native-American)
- Sue Coe (British, mixed media, paintings, social/political activist artist)
- Leon Golub (American, paintings, social/political issues)
- Keith Haring (American, paintings, billboards, prints, graffiti art)

Installations/murals/large scale projects
- Red Grooms (American, Large-scale sculpture, humor)
- Howard Finster (American, “Outsider Artist”, paintings, sculpture)
- Judy Baca (Latino, painted public murals, community collaboration)
- Pepe Osorio (Latino, installations)
- Tyree Guyton (African American, installation)

Ceramics/ceramic Sculpture
- Robert Arneson (American, ceramic sculpture, drawings, humor)
- Richard Notkin (American, ceramics, teapots with social messages)

Photography
- Barbara Krueger (American, photography with text, social messages)
- Sally Mann (American, photographer)
- Mary Ellen Mark (American, photographer)
- Sandy Skoglund (American, installations, photographer)
- William Wegman (American, photography)
- David Hockney (British, photocollages, paintings, homosexuality concerns)

Sculpture
- David Hammons (African American, sculpture, installations)
- Deborah Butterfield (American, sculptures of horses)
- Beverly Buchanan (African-American, sculptures, drawings)
- John Ahearn & Rigoberto Torres (American & Latino, sculpture, Bronx)
- Joyce Scott (African-American, sculpture)
- Maya Lin (Viet Nam Memorial, Martin Luther Kind Memorial, sculpture)
A-Z Suggestions

**A:** Approach to their art, i.e. Realistic, Abstract or Non-objective

**B:** Date and place of Birth

**C:** Country/Nationality

**D:** Date and place of Death

**E:** Education

**F:** Facts about their Family

**I:** Influences

**M:** The art Movement and or Medium(Media) he/she is associated with

**Q:** A “Quote” by the artist

**R:** Religious affiliation

**S:** The Style in which the artist worked…or Subject Matter

**T:** Themes present in the artists work

**W:** Examples of their Works (titles, dates, museum)

These are just suggestions: The rest is up to your creativity!
Four Phases of Art Criticism
Use this sheet as a guideline for your 1 page art criticism

1. **Description** - What do you see (only the facts - no interpretation yet!)

2. **Analysis** - What impact do the use of elements of art have on the piece? (color, space, balance, unity, emphasis, texture, line, shape, scale, repetition)

3. **Interpretation** - What do you think the piece is about? Why? **Use evidence to support your beliefs!!!** There can always be multiple interpretations.

4. **Evaluation**: How good or bad is the work of art? **Give reasons for your beliefs so your evaluation is persuasive.** Examples: Is the art useful to society? Does it express a powerful enough message? Was it made well?