Constructing Meaning in Art:
A Reflective Process

Rational:

If someone looks at a piece of art or listens to a piece of music and finds no meaning, a teacher can not 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. Every 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. The reflective process can flourish in the art classroom if critical thinking and conflict resolution activities are incorporated into the art curriculum.

Background:

During my student teaching experience in a high school setting, I was disappointed to discover that 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 that reflects 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 quite some time with each convincing them they needed to communicate their purpose for their artwork. Admissions to art colleges are becoming more and more competitive. 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 are focused on improving critical thinking and constructive communication skills. Reflection in a group setting requires a large amount of trust. Integrating conflict resolution and critical thinking activities show consistent results in improving school climate (Heydenberk and Heydenberk, 2000). 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 occur. These materials will build a students ability to reflect, listen, view different perspectives, communicate and understand.

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.