
Using Visual Art to Assess Thinking in a Language Arts Classroom

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The students are quiet this morning (sleepy—not engaged). I decide against the overhead florescent lights and open the blinds. Most have their notebooks on the table and pencils in hand, but few are writing. I decide to meander around the horseshoe of tables and peer over their shoulders. I give them a lap to get used to the idea that I’m going to stop and ask some questions eventually.

“Anthony, which activity do you want to do?” I ask, nodding toward the three options on the board.

“I dunno. Write I guess,” he says, looking down at his notebook, its pages outlined in sketches of muscular serpents and symbols.

“Okay,” I say, pleased.

“But I already know how to do a three paragraph essay,” he says, still not looking at me.

What’s a three paragraph essay, I wonder. I say, “I haven’t seen you write in paragraphs. Show me.”

“But how could I have passed the BST if I didn’t know how?” he asks, this time looking at me.

“I believe you, Anthony. But I’d still like to see what you can do.” I’m not giving up.

“Man, I already know how.” He rolls his head, then his eyes away from me.

“All right. Then do it,” I say. When did this become a confrontation?

[Silence]

“Anthony, like always, it’s your choice.”

In my alternative setting, this is a typical and always dispiriting conversation. I work with students of average to high ability who lack what some researchers, like Shari Tishman and David Perkins from Harvard’s Project Zero, call the inclination or sensitivity toward critical thinking. They *can* think, but they are not *inclined* to do so in school, or are not *sensitive* to the classroom cues that call for critical thinking (Perkins 272). I don’t feel frustrated or angry about this. The baggage many of my students carry—addiction, periodic homelessness, depression, anxiety disorders, emotional/behavioral disorders, learning disabilities (both diagnosed and undiagnosed), broken families, isolation and alienation—this all overwhelms me. When I get a blank-faced stare in response to the question “What did you learn today?” I’m not bitter. I simply feel ineffective. I didn’t know how to teach Anthony. He wrote beautiful “flows” for me, but never a paragraph, or anything remotely “schoolish.”

I’ve experimented with using art as a motivator in recent years. These kids are all so creative, right? Unfortunately, I’ve had no personal experience with art since junior high. It has been frustrating to motivate students to perform a rap, draw a picture, or craft something—because my intuition told me that it would help them—and not know how to make meaning from the process or product. I graded those activities on whether or not the product seemed “polished,” gave extra credit for explicit (often awkward) references to *Gatsby* or *Mockingbird*, and hoped someone had learned something. Could art be more than a motivating novelty in my classroom?

Looking for Answers

In the summer of 2005, during my professional development activities with the Minnesota Writing Project, Melissa Borgmann, Director of the Juno Collective, demonstrated

a thinking routine called Critical Response Protocol (CRP). Similar to Abigail Housen's Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) (Housen; Yenawine), CRP poses a scripted series of questions to students to engage them in critical thinking:

- What do you notice?
- What does it remind you of?
- How does it make you feel?
- What questions do you want to ask?
- Can you speculate to answer those questions?

I sought further training from Judi Petkau, Education Director at the Weisman Art Museum, and my Hopkins Alternative Program Off-Campus Pavilion (OCP-HAP) version of the Weisman's Artful Writing Program was launched. I won a grant that I used to pay Melissa Borgmann to consult with me, and in Judi I found a wise and willing arts partner. I implemented a nine-week arts-infused literacy curriculum and saw my students' engagement and performance improve measurably. For example, in the 10-day period preceding Artful Writing, only 60% of my students made adequate daily progress in terms of their classroom participation. During Artful Writing, 90% met our program goal for participation. In the term preceding Artful Writing, I taught traditional literary analysis curriculum. Twenty-five percent of my students didn't attempt even a draft of the final paper. After Artful Writing, 85% of my students not only completed the final art analysis essay, but, using the same rubric focusing on evidentiary reasoning that I had used for the literary analysis essay, the average student writing score moved from a C to a B—and their writing skills scores improved slightly on the 6 Traits Rubric as well. Finally, I was feeling effective.

Inspired, I set out to find more funding for the 2006-2007 school year. Our district was cutting back and even our meager elective offerings were to be curtailed. I applied for grants from Target, the StarTribune Foundation, and others to fund a series of arts residencies. I reasoned that if our program were never to have an art teacher, our core curricular teachers needed to learn how to paint, dance, act, compose music, take photographs and make films by working with experts in these fields. My requests

totaled \$9000. I received \$400 from MCTE.

At the end of last year, I started reading about arts education. Google led me to arts in education advocacy reports. For example, the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities' 1999 report on the impact of arts education claims that arts exposure or arts-infused curriculum helps "level the playing field" for students from "disadvantaged circumstances" (Fiske viii; Catterall et al. 2). While arts participation, whether infused into core curriculum or a co-curricular activity, seems to benefit all students, this report suggests that it seems to help students from low-income backgrounds more. Not all OCP students come from low-income families, but they share a sort of resource-deficit profile: educational gaps, lack of appropriate role models, physical and mental health issues, and more. Although Judi helped me to question the validity of advocacy reports which implied but could not prove a correlation between arts and academic achievement, my initial research and my Artful Writing experiment were telling me that my students could be motivated by arts exposure. Fortunately, Judi Petkau agreed to volunteer as my arts partner, this year visiting my classroom to teach art as often as she could, 2-4 times per month. The \$400 would buy our supplies.

The Video Poem

After shepherding students through self-portraiture, manuscript illumination, and clay animations, all of which were peripherally tied to my curriculum, Judi and I found our footing. We collaborated to create a poetry unit in which visual arts activities were infused in the daily curriculum; that is, one where arts thinking was part of our daily routine. We had both read Kelly Gallagher's chapter on using metaphor as a tool of literary analysis in *Deeper Reading*, and Judi encouraged me to ask the students to interpret poetry through the use of visual metaphors. Her ideas reminded me of an MCTE presentation I had seen in which Mike Hazzard and David Bengston demonstrated video poems Bengston's classes had created.

We invented the parameters of the OCP video poetry

project with students, through trial and error, in one day across my three class periods. Students would use CRP both to perform close reading of a poem of their choice and then create a short video that would retell the poem in images.

Students spent several days culling their favorite poems from my classroom library. We practiced making visual metaphors by isolating lines in several of the chosen poems. For instance, the “broken vows” in Lord Byron’s “When We Two Parted” “seemed like torn paper” according to Kori. Amber thought lines from the same poem evoked winter images. Mo saw a dandelion in Deborah Keenan’s line “her nerve flared and fled.” After a few days of reading and creative writing experiments inspired by individual poems, I directed students to choose one poem for focused, analytical reading. They knew they would have to find or generate visual metaphors for their texts. Many students initially chose Pablo Neruda’s “The Mountain and the River” because, as Todd joked, it would be “easy to find pictures for it.” It was one of three poems that Kori chose, and she eventually narrowed to this text because she wanted to find pictures from Honduras, where she was born.

Kori began her reading by finding literal associations for the images in Neruda’s poem. A mountain was a mountain, a river a river. She was excited to share each image she found with me, sometimes to the point of my annoyance. On the second day of the project, I was relieved not to hear her calling for me. Between working with other students, I noticed Kori had left the room. I found her on the couch in our library area, crying. She had the poem in her lap and had annotated it. I sat next to her. “What’s going on, Kori?”

“This is too close,” she said. “Look,” handing the poem to me. The final two stanzas had been labeled “birth mom to me” and “Davy [her adoptive mother] said to me.” When she had read the seventh line of the poem “Who are those who suffer?” she began to personalize the text so that the eighth line, “I do not know but they are my people,” pushed her to read the text as a metaphor for her adoption. Instead of searching on the Internet, she brought in pictures from home the next day.

Kori has been my student for three semesters. She does a lot of negative self-talk: “You know I don’t write, Jen” or “I can’t read.” With coaching, she has completed enough assignments to get by as a “B” student and has passed her Basic Standards Tests in reading and composition. In her video interpretation of “The Mountain and the River,” she demonstrated advanced literacy and critical thinking skills. As a writer, she had to decide how to present her voice, transition between key ideas, maintain visual coherence, revise, edit, and proofread. As a reader, she had to decode the shifting mood of the text, the possible relationship between the speaker in the poem and those who suffer, the movement and pace of the text, the fluidity of the river metaphor, and the richness of possible meanings.

While the order of ideas in the poem was clearly already established, Kori chose to foreshadow her ending epiphany about the voices of her two mothers by inserting a photograph of herself under the text “I do not know, but they call to me” and a photograph of Honduran children under “We suffer.” By visually interpreting this shift in the poem, Kori demonstrated both her perceptive reading of its mood and the decision-making behind the coherence of her own visual text. As she neared the end of her video, she faced the complicated decision of how to represent her two mothers’ voices. “We’re lucky to have so many students here who speak Spanish this term. Why don’t you ask Blanca or Victoria to read her lines in Spanish?” I suggested. But Kori was adamant about maintaining silence in the film. She had experimented with music for a sound track but hadn’t been satisfied. She was becoming increasingly independent. Some time later, she showed me what she had decided upon—two converging lines of text, one English moving left to right (carrying her forward?) and one Spanish moving right to left (looking back?). Finally, she broke the final stanza of the poem into its three lines corresponding to three chronological photographs of her with her adoptive mother. I told her “this is the smartest reading I’ve ever seen you do.”

Kori edited for two days, and still when I see her show this film to others, she has her finger poised on the touch pad to

use the pause button to get the timing of the text just right.

One of the chapters in an arts advocacy report I had read asserted that being engaged in an extended artistic process helps students become risk managers, making choices about project outcomes and giving themselves permission to fail and start again—thereby building resilience (Fiske xi). Kori's project is the best example of this assertion from my class. Others' video poems weren't as fluent, didn't have what Judi called Kori's "cinematic eye." However, I paid close attention to their thinking while reading. They delved deeper than they had before, even if they didn't know they were doing it—as Mo said when I explained how beautiful his dandelion image was for Deborah Keenan's poem, "I did that?" Up to the last minute, they were making critical choices in editing their films, perhaps more intuitively than intentionally, but, as Shari Tishman points out in one article about habits of mind, "Sometimes, to know something is to feel it rightly" (Tishman 45).

Todd, who had chosen the same poem as Kori ostensibly because it would be easier, spent the last day of the project trying to layer his vocal recording of the poem, images, and key words he had lifted from the text. He was a particularly astute problem finder:

"Jen, how do I make that picture last longer?"

"Jen, I don't have a picture for that word."

"Jen, that line doesn't exactly match up with what I said."

While Todd's final product may not demonstrate the same level of cinematic sophistication or personal meaning that Kori's did, he did display much of the same thinking. He read the poem beyond the literal, created apt (if not totally coherent) visual metaphors, and arrived at a defensible and consistent interpretation of the poem, that the speaker was feeling isolated.

At the end of this project, I was satisfied with student engagement as a measure of success. I merely observed their thinking, didn't push metacognition. In the next unit, I would encourage students to articulate their intuitions.

Painting Our Visual Metaphors

We had experienced so much success with visual metaphors that I decided to use visual metaphors to organize a 20 day American literature unit. I surveyed my book collection and culled six themes that students could choose from: the American dream, immigration, women's issues, men's issues, religion, and mental health. Students voted on their three favorite themes, and I placed them in groups informed both by their choices and their abilities. Their first group task, before reading, was to create a visual metaphor for their understanding of their theme. For instance, the immigration group decided that immigration in America is like gasoline. Then, they searched for observable images of gasoline on the Internet and sketched a gas pump from observation. After creating their visual metaphors, groups read a common text that I had selected for each theme, ranging from "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" in the religion group to an excerpt from *A Gravestone Made of Wheat* for the American Dream. Instead of a traditional study guide, students applied their metaphors to the text to test their hypotheses. Some decided to change their metaphors; some decided to extend them. The religion group had chosen a heart as their visual metaphor, but ultimately specified that it had to be an anatomically accurate heart, not a Hallmark version, for example. Some students who had envisioned mental illness as a balloon decided that it was more like a storm after reading "The Yellow Wallpaper."

I presented each group with a range of classic, modern and contemporary American fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. I offered the American dream group *The Great Gatsby* and *Ragged Dick*, but they chose *There Are No Children Here*, *The Circuit*, Eminem's autobiography, and *A Hole in My Life*—all contemporary nonfiction, which simply meant that I had to help fill in the blanks by teaching them how the theme was presented in classic and modern American fiction to place their choices in context. I did this individually over the course of the 10 days we spent reading in class (we have a no homework policy in my alternative school), and as I did, I invited students to further complicate their visual metaphors. Stephenie added a lottery ticket and psy-

chedelic shadows to her initial wad of cash image after reading Eminem's story. Dennis added blood and a clock to his American dream visual after reading *The Circuit*. (Stephenie later told me that she had only pretended to finish reading the book and had made those choices based on what she already knew about Eminem. Dennis had been impressed with how hard Francisco Jimenez's family had to work just to get the basics that most of us take for granted.)

Groups also viewed films related to their themes before deciding on the final elements of their extended metaphors. Instead of writing thematic analysis essays as a final product, I invited students to paint their metaphors on canvas (without telling them they would ultimately have to write an explanation of their paintings).

Dennis is a bright, avid reader from a very large, supportive, deeply religious family. As a senior, Dennis had not passed his BST in composition. He rarely speaks in class, but always finishes his assignments. Writing in his class notebook is organized, but rarely punctuated or developed. During this unit he finished reading his book *The Circuit* so quickly that he decided to read its sequel also. Dennis' math teacher has often commented on his spatial intelligence, and he has said he wants to work on snowmobile engines as a career.

The first day working on his canvas for this unit, Dennis was unable to remix the particular shade of green that he had used to begin painting George Washington's face (observed from the dollar bill in his pocket). With Judi's assistance, he realized that he could use different shades of green to suggest dimension on Washington's face, opening a new range of interpretive possibilities for his metaphor. Because the left side of Washington's face where his eye appears became darker than the right, Dennis was able to conclude that "the face looks like it is sleeping and just waiting to be made or spent," adding a new dimension to his metaphor.

I saw this happen again and again as students worked to translate their original sketches onto canvas. The medium and their skill or lack of skill in it opened new avenues of thought.

They were *translating* their thinking from reading to the visual, from one literacy to another. Adam, working on his immigration metaphor, decided to place his gas pump in a desert at sunset because he liked the orange that he mixed, and the barbed wire of the border in his painting became sharper and more frightening because of the brush stroke he practiced. Erik's heart developed puzzle pieces because of the texture of the paint. Ben had to work in chalk pastels instead of acrylic paint because the paint couldn't capture his vision. He clarified his thinking through his choice of medium as others had extended or complicated theirs due to the limits and possibilities of the form.

Nearly all students were engaged and focused on our painting days, unlocked from what another advocacy report, *The Third Space*, refers to as their habitual "postures" of disengagement and cynicism, exercising their atrophied imaginations (Stevenson 22). My challenge was not only to make some meaning of their artwork, but to push them to articulate their thinking. I provided students with a metacognitive frame, which included these sentence stems:

- I chose (my theme) because...
- I see this issue in society/the world/my life...
- In classic/modern/contemporary American literature this theme...
- I know this from my reading because...
- In my painting this theme...

They worked on this assignment as they finished their paintings, and as they did that, I tutored individuals and small groups on how these themes have transformed over time as well as performing my own critical responses to their artworks. Judi literally turned their canvases upside down and asked them to reconsider their thinking. I saw many of them reaching for a richness and complexity of thinking that I had not seen from them in response to reading. I asked students to self-assess their thinking during the painting process using the Six Continua of Thinking published on the Harvard Artful Thinking website ("The Six Continua" online). Dennis felt that his greatest strength had been "essence-capturing" which describes student

work as “insightful, captures the heart of things. Identifies key themes, characteristics or elements. Sees deep structure. Shows an appreciation for the relative importance of things.” He also indicated that he had thought “beyond the given,” the continuum which describes student work that “probes beneath the surface, reaches beyond the obvious, stretches for new applications, questions, and connections.” He worried that maybe his thinking hadn’t been fully “multi-dimensional,” but all other continua he rated himself at a 3 or above on a 4 point scale.

As a summative assessment, students wrote museum placards to hang next to their paintings in our classroom. Dennis wrote of his painting

It seems that everyone wants the American dream. Now to today’s standard it is having a house, money, and a nice car. I see the American dream everywhere. It’s at school because you have to get an education to advance in life. Also at work, some people try hard get promoted and move up in life and get rich. On TV, the American dream is portrayed as being young, hot, rich, and having a house. The American dream has also changed over the years. It used to be focused on white males getting land and property; now it is about any one getting anything they want, but only if they are born into it or are lucky. In his memoir, *The Circuit*, Francisco Jimenez’ family was Mexican and as hard as they worked and tried, they never really got ahead in life. But only because the author of the book was so smart as a kid and got scholarships was he able to go to college. So unless fortune falls in your face you don’t have a good outlook on the American dream aspect of life.

So after all of my thinking and reading, I decided to paint a face on a dollar bill, money signs, and a clock because the American dream is money, time, and power. The face looks like it is sleeping and just waiting to be made or spent. The clock symbolizes that stealing is another way to achieve the American dream. And last the money signs going red to black symbolize the blood that sometimes surrounds money.

Dennis allowed me to coach him through two drafts—a first for us. But when I challenged him for a third time to include

more of his ideas (“Dennis, what happened to what you said about the farmer in *A Gravestone Made of Wheat* that ‘no matter what they take from him they can’t take his hard work?’”), he told me, “Come on, Jen. It’s done.”

Dennis successfully synthesized information and impressions from a variety of sources and in both a visual and written medium. Yet, I experienced the dilemma of the alternative school teacher: I wanted to praise Dennis for his progress and learning, but I also wanted to push him to reach for higher standards in his writing. Adopting the attitude of the artist’s workshop as a teacher allowed me to take from the experience what had been successful—student thinking. Rather than belaboring what we hadn’t accomplished, I could consider how what we did accomplish could be used again. Is this the rationalization of the alternative school teacher, or a healthy definition of achievement?

Serendipitously, during this unit I was reading *Teaching with the Brain in Mind* by Eric Jensen. Jensen echoes the idea of breaking students out of their habitual learning postures and adds the methodology to do so:

Once you learn to evoke a greater variety of learner states, you will begin to *uncouple the learner’s rigidity*. You’ll open up enormous flexibility because you will have artificially decoupled the stereotyped set of behaviors to which unmotivated students have become accustomed. (108)

Particularly for spatially oriented students like Dennis, visual arts activities seem to evoke a productive and focused mental state and a calm emotional one. In my setting, helping many emotionally challenged students learn to set aside their daily stresses, which can be as significant as worrying about where to sleep the next night or as insignificant (yet still seemingly insurmountable) as disliking a best friend’s boyfriend, is critical to classroom engagement and learning. For many of my students, visual arts activities seem like a shortcut to a healthy mental space. Dennis, who habitually faced a blank page with trepidation, drafted his short essay in one class period after having spent a week rehearsing his ideas on canvas.

Artful Writing

As we neared spring break, many of us started to feel fatigue. We had created an American literature museum in our classroom with students' paintings and placards, and I decided to reteach pieces of my Artful Writing curriculum from the previous year in preparation for a visit to a "real" museum. The unit would give us a rest from lengthy reading and allow students to enjoy some creative writing experiments. Judi and I scheduled a trip to the Weisman for the week before spring break, and I settled into a comfortable weekly routine of reading short excerpts of "artful writing," critically responding to works of art from the Weisman, and watching as students attempted some of the strategies they identified in the excerpts and art. For example, we surmised that visual artists use color to move our eyes around a canvas, and perhaps writers use punctuation or line breaks to control the pace of how we read their texts. Then, students would experiment with purposeful run-on sentences and fragments to control the pace of a piece, or try to build a motif with color. Our essential questions for the unit were, "When is writing art?" and "What do artful writers do?"

I had such success with these activities and exercises last year that I was unprepared for students to resist. But they did. Maybe they were tired of winter. Maybe they were too eager for spring break. Maybe we had too many interruptions in our routine—a snow day, advisory groups, fluctuations in student attendance. Whatever the case, I ended up working so hard keeping everyone caught up and on track that I feel as though I lost sight of making progress. But in these hectic times, one student caught my attention.

De'Andre had enrolled in our program at the beginning of our American literature unit. He had chosen to read *There Are No Children Here* by Alex Kotlowitz and had connected with it deeply, he told me, because he had "lived in the projects in Chicago." His art in response to the book, however, was an uninspired bag of money on a black background. I was excited about my initial success in matching De'Andre with a book so soon after his arrival (I'm not usually so lucky.). In our advisory

meeting, he told me that in the mainstream high school he felt like he “was always in trouble.” He would go to class, and then “they” would pull him out to go to the office. Or he would come to class late, and teachers would “disrespect him.” Already in his first few weeks at OCP, he had experienced the significant success of finishing a book. I told him that I was surprised to hear he had been in trouble at the high school.

When we started our writing experiments, De’Andre just didn’t get it—or he just didn’t want to do it. When I asked him to take an object from his pocket and describe it, he chose his cell phone and wrote, “It’s blue It has numbers It has a battery”; when I asked him to revise to show how he felt about his phone, he added, “I chose my phone b/c it is very important to me. B/c I need to call people and people need to call me. I love hearing my ringtones and the pics I have.” By day two, we had read a few excerpts of descriptive writing including a short passage from Ann Morrow Lindbergh’s *Gifts from the Sea* and some enigmatic imagist poems by William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound. We had started to talk about how details evoke emotion. I asked De’Andre to write a description of his hand. He wrote, “My hand is rough and bruised and also scared. My hands are also big. Brown on one side and the other side is lighter. I have big knuckles on my hand.” I stopped by his table to read his work.

“De-Andre, how do you feel about the bruises and scars on your hand?”

He smiled a little.

“Are you proud of them?” I guessed.

“Yeah,” he said.

“Can you describe your hands in a way that shows how proud you are?”

“Yeah,” he said.

Then De’Andre wrote, “My hand is rough like sandpaper, b/c of fights. I have brusied and scared hands b/c I earn it. They are also big, very big. They are brown like the coat of a lion. The other side is light and soft like the belly of a alligator. My knuckles poke out b/c their so big.” With enthusiasm, De’Andre read this revision aloud to the class.

Day by day, we made incremental progress. Unlike other students, De'Andre hadn't been in my class when we had previously practiced CRP. His initial efforts in analyzing art were rushed, his conclusions sometimes off base. For example, he thought the purpose of the photograph *Men's Fashions* by Eugene Atget would be "an advertisement for a store." Yet at the same time, when I asked him to speak in the voice of the figure in the photograph, he wrote, "I don't feel or see anything I feel very stiff like I can't move," an accurate insight into the mood and perhaps meaning of the piece. While he wasn't analyzing or articulating very deeply, he was beginning to "feel rightly."

One of the Weisman's Artful Writing activities, "Traveling Through," asks students to pretend to enter into a work of art, to imagine how they would have to change physically to gain entrance, where they would travel, and how they would exit. I happened to have a book of medieval religious art by Hieronymous Bosch that Judi had loaned me when we had read *The Inferno* earlier in the year. Several boys had connected with the graphic oddity of the images, so I tried it with De'Andre. This day, his description took flight:

First I shink myself
I entered through the maze of vines as I attemp to
climb, I realize that the only way out is up so I strive
to get to the top but I'm approached with another
problem. These two humans are hunting the dog
looking creature. so I climb into the fresh wound of
the beast and I exit through the mouth of this mon-
ster. Now I'm curious should I go back?

Tellingly, this page in his notebook has four words or phrases crossed out and the word "fresh" inserted; the line "So I climb into the fresh wound of the beast and I exit through the mouth of this monster" is underlined as his best work. De'Andre started to see himself as a writer in our classroom.

Before the end of the unit, De'Andre drafted and revised two poems in response to art. The first began as a description of the color blue in *Untitled #10* by Alexander Corazzo. He wrote, "Blue in the heart reminds me of the midnite sky with no

stars and it also looks like a intense blue. The light blue in the background is like moving stream of water on a tropical island.” I told De’Andre, “This reminds me of a poem. Why don’t you try breaking what you have here into lines?” So he wrote, “The Meaning of Blue” in class that day through several drafts.

Blue in the heart
reminds me of midnite
sky with no stars
The blue is solid
compared to its context,
a swift blue
Does the blueish,
Purpleish heart mean a dead heart,
or just a broken one.

De-Andre’s second poem was a monologue in response to the photograph *Young Boy Coal Miner* by Lewis Hine. He had successfully practiced monologue at our museum visit. The field trip was too quick, as usual, because our students only attend school from 8:15 until 11:35; with time for transportation, that gave us two short hours in the museum. Judi and I focused on two works of art: *Madam Twisto*, a sculpture by Judy Onofrio and *The Pedicord Apts* by Ed and Nancy Kienholz. We split into two groups and flip-flopped visiting the two pieces. With the sculpture, I facilitated the writing of a simple diamond poem using words from a student-generated bank (an activity that Judi had modeled in Artful Writing training). We celebrated the best word offerings on the list (“burlesque,” “princess”) and compared interpretations arising from these words. Then we cooperated to write the poem telling our predominant impression of the piece.

During all these activities at the museum, De’Andre fell into his typical physical posture, as if he weren’t paying attention. Yet at some point he started a monologue in his notebook in response to *The Pedicore Apts*: “I’m tired of being here, in this place. I hate the smell in the walls. My Neighbor’s need to shut there dogs up. the old man has his radio on blast and I can’t sleep. the family down the hall keeps singing they need to keep it down.” Undated in his notebook, I found his second poem, his

response to *Young Boy Coal Miner*:

I'm tired
I'm tired of working
I'm tired of being dirty
I'm tired of smelling coal
I'm tired of doing dangerous jobs
My hand are raffuled and my head throbs
I'm tired, my back hurts and This
chewing tobacco irritates my teeth and
gums, my chest burns of anger,
Now I lay me down
to sleep, I'm tired.

Over the course of the unit, I saw both De' Andre's writing and his thinking deepening. Most notably, he began to take creative risks with word choice and form. He began to revise recursively, scribbling out lines and starting again in his notebook. He practiced shifting perspectives and using allusions. What he was writing started to remind him of other things he had heard and seen.

Our visit to the Weisman fell on the Tuesday of the week before spring break. Even my most dedicated students, including De' Andre, were losing momentum. Their final task during the museum visit was to find a work of art that "matched" an excerpt from our reading packet in any way that they could determine and explain. My plan for the last few days before break called for students to type those impressions into a short piece of analytical writing. De' Andre had made an incredible juxtaposition: "How Do I Love Thee?" by Elizabeth Barrett Browning next to *World's Fair Mural* by James Rosenquist. When I asked him about his choice in class on Wednesday, he said, "You know. They both feel so big. The painting is big, you know, but it *feels* big." "Another word for that feeling is vast," I told him. He worked quietly in his notebook for the rest of the class, and I let him do his thinking.

The next day—the Thursday before spring break—De' Andre said he lost his notebook and wouldn't be able to finish the assignment. He would try to remember it and write it again. During breaks in his animated conversation with another

student, he wrote

The painting World Fair Mural reminds me of this called How I love thee? both of these thing gives me a vast feeling about them. The reason I say that is because they both had variety, it gives you a chance to explore your mind. The painting was very big, the poems has a vast feeling to it also. The painting has different pictures in one, like it had a spoon, a picture of the moon, and a box of popcorn. The poem talks about the different types of things the author loves. The poem also says, "I love thee to the depth and breadth and height by soul can reach. These are examples of variety both the painting and the poems has. Another thing that caught me was the mood or tone of both. The mood and tone was good. Because the painting has good feeling pics and the poem was talking about love and love is a sign of good.

I had told De'Andre earlier in the unit I was excited about his progress and wanted to write about him in this article. He was pleased and brought me a signed permission form to use his writing. Shamelessly, I used this article as a plea for revision: "Come on, De'Andre, I know you can do better. I want to use this for my article." That Friday, the day before spring break, while his classmates were in the multipurpose room playing charades, De'Andre worked with me to lift an outline from his first draft, and then alone, he wrote a second:

The painting World's Fair Mural reminds me of the poem "How Do I Love Thee?" Both of these things gives me a vast feeling about them. The painting was very big. The actual size of the painting is 240 inches. On reason I say the poems gives me a vast feeling is because of something the author said. The author said "I love thee to the depth and breadth and height my soul can reach. The two of them also had variety. The painting had different pictures like, a spoon, a picture of the moon, and a box of popcorn. The poem on the other list 16 reason why she loves him. Another thing that caught me was the mood or tone of both. The painting had good feeling pictures involved. Who wouldn't want to go to the moon? Who wouldn't want to drive that car? The poem had touching words that made me feel good, it talks about

love and love is a good thing, it makes you feel good.
They both show excitement.

De'Andre's final writing wasn't entirely the typed, polished discussion I had hoped for. It was short, handwritten, and slightly formulaic. But consider what else it is: organized, developed, carefully spelled and punctuated, insightful. He showed a precision in this final draft that I hadn't seen before.

I suspect that De'Andre may have been capable of this all along, and that he is probably quite capable of even better, more careful writing (He did recently tell me he has three notebooks full of his writing at home.). However, my success with him was to reengage him in a learning process that, by his own account, he had disengaged himself from some time ago.

Some Answers and More Questions

After last year's unqualified success, I had high expectations for my arts curriculum this year. I examined my grading and attendance data, and I can't support any claim of improvement—other than I found more A's and fewer D's or F's during the video poetry unit, as much a support of technology use as visual art. Of course, this is not a reliable collection of data. I have different students, unreplicated curriculum, a difficult time of the year, a different focus. Last year, I was looking for an improvement in literacy skills. This year, I was learning how to assess thinking.

The stories of Kori, Dennis, and De'Andre, while not representative of all students throughout the project, are certainly representative of many students, sometimes most. I saw them demonstrating what David Perkins calls *mindfulness*: “perspective taking, comfort with ambiguity, and looking below the surface of ideas and concepts” (284). Perhaps more importantly, I saw students connecting with curriculum personally, intuitively, emotionally. I had questioned novelty as an appropriate reason to include art in my curriculum, but Jensen points out that “Novelty creates a stronger opportunity for new learning and pathways in the brain” (120) and furthermore, “emotions give

us a more activated and chemically stimulated brain” and “help us ... form more explicit memories” (71). Most students did think more deeply—or, perhaps more demonstrably, they shared their complex thinking more often and with more confidence and enthusiasm when it could be shared under the guise of art. I believe that they will remember this learning.

Beyond the thinking they demonstrated in their artwork, writing, and conferences with me, I was struck by how my classroom environment changed on “art days.” Most students were consumed by their tasks, didn’t want to stop until they got it just right. Usually, I have to fight a bit for attention and dance a little to keep focus. But even those students who were unsure of their assignment, even ignorant about what art had to do with anything we had read, wrote, or discussed in class, even those students fell upon the art supplies as if my classroom counter were an all-you-can-eat buffet. There is an energy here to be harnessed and put to use: I just don’t completely understand it, yet. Clearly, I look forward to more scholarly research, more classroom practice.

During our American literature unit, Kori finished reading a book for the first time she could remember doing so since elementary school. In February, Dennis passed his BST in composition with a 3.5. Since term 4 started, De’Andre’s attendance rate has been slipping, not yet irreparably. Next year, OCP will see 70 more students just like them, trickling out of mainstream classrooms in search of learning that is relevant, meaningful and manageable. After my first two years of attempting arts-infused teaching, I’ve come to believe that art is an effective way to deliver it to them. As a language arts teacher, I feel rewarded by the insight visual art has given me into the minds of my students.

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