



Using Words in a Visual Arts Class

An arts teacher colleague once accused me of wanting to “make us all into English teachers” when I suggested that our department (dance, music, theatre, and visual arts) integrate discussions and reading and writing assignments into our classes. Her response made me wonder why she thought being an English teacher was such a bad thing.

First of all, all English teachers ask their students to read and study poetry, plays, short stories, essays, and novels, and these are all indisputably art forms. Many English teachers once were and many still are writers. Many of them are skilled at teaching creative writing. Theatre teachers often live under the umbrella of English departments, as does their work with students in theatrical performances. What was my colleague really worried about?

She would have agreed that English classes deal with artistic content and artistic issues, and I know she was enthusiastic about creative writing, but I don’t think she would define the typical English class an “art” class: far too many analytical and interpretive discussions; far too many writing assignments – and all that grading!

I believe my colleague was justifiably concerned that if we inserted some of these activities from English classes, her students might lose the time to do the primary work of the artist – time arts teachers like my colleague and I have had to fight for and must vigilantly protect. In her mind, her students already had way too much of the “English class” work – work that might have

bored her when she was in high school – work that the kids in her classes might complain about if she assigned it. How could her visual arts students benefit from discussions? From reading assignments? From writing assignments?

My answer begins with a question for all high school students currently taking a visual arts class: “What do you expect to do in this course?” The answers would probably be some form of “I want to express myself artistically,” or, “I want to get better at this art form.” What if the discussions and reading assignments and writing assignments I propose were solely dedicated to the purpose of developing even more interesting expression and improving their art-making skills? And what if the students reported afterwards that these assignments were helpful?

If a visual arts teacher is primarily focused on developing specialized art-making skills, then the skill of close observation is indispensable. Students need “to see” their subjects first before they render them.¹ Students learn to notice subtleties when they are pointed out to them by their teachers. Language is, in many ways, a very sophisticated way of pointing something out to someone else. The same is true as students begin to draw and as they learn to improve their rendering of their subject – their teachers’ compliments and criticisms help them develop both their “seeing” and their rendering skills. And why can’t their peers become involved in this critiquing process, too? Drawing students aren’t substitutes for drawing teachers, but they may be capable of pointing out the same strengths and weaknesses, and they may

¹ See the work of Betty Edwards and Kimon Nicolaides

benefit from the experience of critiquing someone else's drawing and having someone else looking at their own work. (Ironically, I always notice a lot of conversation when visiting high school visual arts classes, but very little seems focused on the act of creating and refining original art.)

Secondly, there are effective instructional and inspirational readings in every art form that can be helpful to young artists. Asking students to read and discuss parts of these readings and to apply some of their suggestions: they could help their art-making – there were written for this purpose by master teachers.

Similarly, there are writing assignments that could help both the expressive and the technical aspects of a work-in-progress. "What do you hope to express in this piece?" or "Are you satisfied with this draft?" are both excellent questions. Even though they may seem worn-out from overuse, they will seem new and challenging to visual arts students who have never been asked them before, and if their answers improve their next drafts, their worth will be established. These two questions can also be renewed and refreshed with more specific follow-up questions.

When I suggest that visual arts students complete writing assignments, I am not envisioning students on their computers late at night doing something they don't want to do. One type of writing I am proposing should happen in the classroom while students are looking at their own work and at the work of their peers. Another type of writing could be done as homework, and it should be full of meaning for young artists because it would be about ideas or emotions they are trying to express in their artwork. Both types of writing assignments should be shared and discussed, and this process would be helpful during the conception of a project, during its draft process, and during its revision. With all due respect to the art and the skill of expository writing, these

writing assignments need only be as clear and specific as is necessary to communicate effectively with other human beings who are looking at each others' work and reading each others' thoughts with curiosity; they don't have to be finished essays.

We arts teachers often forget that an important purpose of art is to inspire thought and to communicate feelings. If we let our students think, and talk, and write about their thoughts and feelings about their work, these activities will help them become better artists, better observers, and better communicators.

If a student feels that a particular piece of visual art work must speak for itself and that attempting to describe its intention is futile – even damaging – then the teacher can ask this student why this is so, and an interesting and illuminating answer about the nature of visual art will come forth – an answer that will, in turn, help us perceive this particular work more deeply.

Words point to and explain and interpret and connect various phenomena in myriad ways – they provoke thought – they can be used to ask questions that may never be answered – to ask questions that only beget new questions. If words are applied with the crystal clear intentions of skilled visual arts teachers, they can help students develop their art-making skills and build their expressive powers.