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# Opening the Art Doorway

Mary E. Richmond

"Why do we have to read this?" "This is boring!" A litany of similar complaints are heard every year as students slog their way through English 1, 2, 3 or 4. Every year teachers sit through long, boring in-services. Each proclaims the key to higher test scores is learning styles or multiple intelligences or right brain/left brain awareness or global thinking. Still students feel trapped and teachers feel frustrated. Is there really a solution?

Educators have always known that students who are interested in their subject matter do better. The question is how do we attract the student's attention? Our students are increasingly more visually oriented. Television, video games, and MTV all clamor for their attention. And they get it. Why? Bright colors, action, and rapidly changing scenes are common elements of all three. How can teachers compete with that? Consider the effect a bright Van Gogh or Renoir enlarged on the wall of a darkened classroom could have. Aside from capturing students' attention, the inclusion of visual art in the English classroom can be used to augment and extend students' learning.

## **Art Encourages Inquiry**

Using visual art is one way in which inquiry-based learning can flourish. Inquiry-based learning, learning through questioning, lets students

discover for themselves the facts, ideas, or concepts in the material presented. Inquiry-based learning teaches children to use higher order thinking by asking them to observe the world around them and make connections with it. From that base they can begin manipulating ideas and forming postulates; then they can test those ideas to see if they are valid. In short, the students are thinking analytically.

One of my students' favorite art works is Winslow Homer's *The Gulf Stream*. It depicts a black man straining to keep the open boat he is in from capsizing into the stormy, shark-filled sea. A Jaws-sized shark is leering at him from the gunwale of the small boat while on the horizon a small ship is seemingly sailing away from the scene. Initially I ask the students to observe the parts of the picture. What do you see? Where? What colors do you see? What shapes? Is there a center to the picture? What is it? Why is it the \_\_\_(boat)\_\_\_ instead of the \_\_\_(shark)\_\_\_? What is in the foreground? Background? This trains the student to look carefully at every part of the picture just like they should examine every part of a newspaper article, the first page of a story in the literature book, or the first page of a standardized reading test. They learn the importance of attending to details through close observation of art.

Once we have identified the parts, we move to discovering underlying meaning—the next advantage of using visual arts. We again focus on

what was observed, but now we look for connections to prior knowledge. This helps form a bond between the student and the item studied. I ask if they have ever seen anything like this. What does it remind them of? If a part of the picture were removed or reversed would the picture be the same? Why? And finally if there is a reason for the artist's placing everything in those positions, what is it? What is the artist's meaning? Then we move into symbolism. What could the shark represent? The man? The boat? The ocean? The ship on the horizon?

By now the students are discovering that they know more about the subject than they thought they did. Once they feel comfortable in identifying the parts of the composition, they feel confident moving the parts around. With careful guidance through questioning, students can learn to take apart, put back together, manipulate, and synthesize. These are all valuable thinking skills but they are presented subtly. The student feels free to express ideas when importance is placed more on the student's ability to think clearly and to communicate effectively rather than on the "rightness" of the opinion.

### **Art as a Stimulus to Writing**

I have used *The Gulf Stream* as a ready-made introduction into a short story project. Think of the possibilities arising from asking simple questions. What is he doing out there? How did he get there? Who is he? When did this happen? All the basic elements are there: the time and place of the setting, the protagonist, the antagonist, the conflict. They can readily identify with how dangerous the situation is for the man in the boat. Writing an introduction and sketching out the rising action is easy. Now the fun part! If this is the climax, what will be the resolution? Can he survive or is he fish food?

At this point their imaginations are fueled and they are ready to write. Ideas come easily and they generate a first draft quickly. Often short story assignments are made with little guidance and the students feel intimidated. By using a carefully chosen art work, they can jump into the scene and go forward and backward in time to complete a story with all the required plot elements. Younger

children experience the same thing when told to "go play." Think of the difference between being sent "to play" without anything to "play" with and being sent out to play with a few action figures. They grab a Batman and they are ready to go. They can imagine a dialogue, setting, conflict, and whatever else they need because in the toy they have a springboard to propel them into the world of creativity. Just like the toy, the picture draws students in and then launches them to tell the rest of the story. They are not told to "go write" without anything to write about.

Admittedly not all children need this; some are gifted storytellers and they can create their own stories if they choose. I always allow them a choice whenever it is possible or practical. This type of writing should not replace the students' choosing their own topics; but for children who are frozen by the sight of a blank sheet of paper, using art works very well and the students enjoy it. I have used this strategy with students who are predominately non-English bilingual speakers or ESL students who are now in their first regular English class. These students have special needs that must be addressed in the classroom. Drawing them in through the artwork seems to assist them in getting their writing started. But the benefit of using art in the classroom does not end there.

### **The Impact of Using Art**

The most important effect of using art in the classroom is that connections made in students' minds are often more vivid and complete. I realized this for the first time while I was presenting a unit on Arthurian legend. We were examining the symbolism of light and dark in an excerpt of Mary Stuart's *The Hollow Hills*. Discussion was minimal and the examples of dark and light in connection with the story were being made slowly. Suddenly, I recalled an illustration several pages ahead in the text book. Flipping over to it, I led the class through a session of observing the picture in which Arthur is portrayed standing alone in a ray of light looking heavenwards and placing a crown on his own head. All around him is the debris of battle. The background is so dark that any details are barely discernible. The questions about dark

and light now made sense to the students. They easily made the connections between Arthur and goodness and how his coming put an end to the darkness and chaos of his father's kingdom.

The clincher for me as to the effectiveness of using art was the unit test. One of the essay questions dealt with the symbolism of dark and light. On the test more than half the students chose to discuss the symbolism of dark and light in the picture, not the story. Those who wrote on the picture did a better job in answering the question more completely and with more detailed examples. Their answers clearly made more precise connections between the plot and symbolism than those who used examples from the story. I could see that learning had occurred. Did it matter to me that they did not refer to the literature excerpt in answering the question? Not at all. Did their understanding of symbolism in the picture relate to the plot of the legend? Of course. Had learning occurred and was it transferable? Yes!

Art is always a reflection and product of the time period in which it was created. In effect, it is a magic window that allows us to look into the past. The literature text our district uses has carefully chosen illustrations for the stories. The Arthurian unit also includes examples of how Arthur was depicted by 12th, 14th, 19th and 20th century artists. The details in the pictures offer excellent chances for brief mini-lessons on chivalry, heraldry, divine right of kings, medieval beliefs, the feudal system, fashion, or whatever the viewer sees in the picture. One illustration was dated just a few years from the date that Mallory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* was written. The students can see what Mallory's contemporaries may have looked like. Does this help breathe life

into these old stories? I believe so. The girls shudder at the thought of plucking their hairlines and boys can't picture themselves in tights and turbans. What about modern literature? Shakespeare? Romanticism? History can complement English, and art can deepen the students' understanding of both.

### ***Finding Ways to Begin Using Art***

You may be feeling uncomfortable conducting history mini-lessons or leading discussions on art composition. You don't have to be an expert. You can learn a lot by spending a few minutes in the library or talking with your campus art or history teachers. You don't have to give a scholarly lecture; just learn how to ask the right questions. The kids do the rest. Are there "right" or "wrong" answers? Unless the answer is obviously facetious or intentionally obscure, most responses are valid and excellent points to question further. Teachers may feel that art resources are too hard to find, but really they are everywhere once you start looking. Local public libraries often have a lending library of art work. Poster size prints can be ordered through the gift shops of art museums. I have found suitable prints in music shops, frame shops, large discount stores, or even movie rental stores.

Bringing art into the classroom is not a panacea for all classroom problems. I do believe it is an excellent way to get our students' attention. Once you have that, art can be a doorway that opens their minds to self-taught learning.

### ***About the Author***

Mary E. Richmond, a New Jersey Writing Project participant and trainer, teaches English at Lopez High School in Brownsville, Texas.