

OPINION BLOG

Classroom Q&A

With Larry Ferlazzo

In this EdWeek blog, an experiment in knowledge-gathering, Ferlazzo will address readers' questions on classroom management, ELL instruction, lesson planning, and other issues facing teachers. Send your questions to lferlazzo@epe.org. Read more from this blog.

TEACHING OPINION

13 Ways to Use Art in Content Classes

By [Larry Ferlazzo](#) — October 24, 2021 ⌚ 12 min read



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(This is the first post in a three-part series.)

The new question-of-the-week is:

What are the best ways you have used art in lessons?

Art is used in my classes and not just in the art room. There are lots of different ways that teachers incorporate it.

This series will explore some of those instructional strategies.

Today, Wendi Pillars, Keisha Rembert, Delia M. Cruz-Fernández, and Irina McGrath, Ph.D., offer their suggestions. Wendi, Keisha, and Delia were also guests on [my 10-minute BAM! Radio Show](#). You can also find a list of, and links to, [previous shows here](#).

Seven Ways to Effectively Use Art in Any Classroom, With Any Subject and Why You Should



Larry Ferlazzo with Keisha Rembert, Delia M. Cruz-Fernández, and Wendy Pillars Art has the ability to be a powerful tool for engaging, differentiating, and humanizing virtually any subject. Join us as we cover several practical strategies for using art effectively in any classroom. Follow on Twitter: @klrembert @wendi322 @demacruz @larryferlazzo @jonHarper70bd @bamradionetwork

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You might also be interested in a previous post appearing in this blog, [The Role Of Arts Education In Schools](#) and many more resources [here](#).

Art Can Be a 'Bridge'

Wendi Pillars, a national-board-certified teacher, has used art in many forms in multiple content areas for more than two decades. She is the author of two books: [Visual Notetaking for Educators](#), and more recently, [Visual Impact! Transform Communication in Your Boardroom, Classroom, or Living Room](#). Find her on twitter @wendi322:

You've all seen it. You give instructions or present information to your students and swear up and down it was So. Clear. Surely everyone understood it because you explained it so well; undoubtedly, any assessment will prove this!

Alas. If only it were that simple.

Everyone thinks so differently, envisions words and information uniquely, and interprets information based on their own experiences and contexts. It's what makes life beautiful and interesting and serves as the basis for my use of art in class, whether creating, analyzing, or simply admiring.

Allowing our learners to reveal, enhance, and express their understanding in myriad ways brings learning to life. It's important to remember that art is more than "drawing pictures"; at its core, all art is a powerful thinking and feeling process. Producing and consuming photos, music, visual art, poetry, sculptures, videos, visual notes, role plays, and more, provides a richer focal point for learners. Art in all of its forms provokes questions and curiosity and readily serves as a model for much of the academic thinking we aim for students to embrace.

Art can serve as a model for claim and evidence: "What do you think caused this? What was the effect of this (either the content or the process of the art)? What makes you say that? How do you know? What was the artist's purpose? Who was the intended audience? ..." These thinking skills can then be transferred to more traditional text, but now students have an anchor.

Art can serve as a warm-up or pre- and post-assessment: "What do you see? Tell me more. What happened before this art was created (again, content or process of making it)? What do you think we will be learning about now, based on this art? How has your understanding about this art changed from the beginning of the unit? ..."

Art can serve as an assessment or to raise awareness like this novel use of [Show Your Stripes](#) to highlight our warming climate in a compelling yet simple way. [Visual notes](#) are a platform for students to connect past and present information, for active recall, and spaced repetition. [Video storytelling](#), photo essays, and podcasts encourage students to take risks and see and share life through an unforgettable kaleidoscope.

Art can also serve as a bridge among cultures. My students have participated in [Creative Connections](#) for several years, where students exchange art pieces on an agreed-upon theme with students from other countries. From this work, they've analyzed their own values and compared them with others' in widely different parts of

the world. They have laughed, wondered, questioned, and most importantly, remembered what they learned years on.

It's no coincidence that we relish art in all forms from different historical eras and regions of the world, that our curiosity is piqued, and that we linger just a little longer when more of our senses are involved in the experience. What might constitute "art" in your classroom context, and how can you integrate it to make content unforgettable?

'Art as Assessment'

Keisha Rembert is an award-winning educator who is passionate about anti-racism and equity in schools. Currently, Keisha is a doctoral student and an assistant professor of teacher preparation at National Louis University:

Art, in all its forms, is a text, and texts can be used in myriad ways. Art is often a text that humanizes and tells a story, and as a history and ELA teacher, I believe it is imperative for students to understand the human story and engage in its complexities. When tackling hard topics or concepts with students, I turn to art as an entry point. I find students eager to engage with art because they can often find elements of self or points of difference more readily given the visual and personal nature of art.

Here are some other ways to position art in your classroom:

Art as inquiry. Art naturally invites questioning, observation, discussion, and exploration. It facilitates critical analysis. I have shown videos of Indigenous dances and asked students to generate questions about what is being communicated. I have used historical photographs to start to unlock what they want to understand and know about a historical event. It becomes part of a larger text set that we continually come back to to question what we know and what we need to know.

Art as assessment. One of my favorite assessments is to give students an image in history class and ask them to use their newfound knowledge to dispute what they see. I could see this working also in an ELA classroom with illustrations and book covers. In one of my classes, the final project is to present a curated art gallery that reflects the learning they have engaged in through the unit, tying each piece to a concept and explaining that connection. These assessments centering art require students to apply their understanding in thoughtful and complex ways.

Art as cultural representation. Art is itself culture and offers additional opportunities to introduce cultural diversity into the classroom. It also offers students free expression to create and bring themselves fully into the classroom while challenging assumptions.

Art to facilitate writing. A photograph (a painting, a dance, a sculpture, etc.) is worth a thousand words. Those thousand words often flow when students are presented with art. It is an easy entry into writing. Art can be used to initiate, inspire, or extend writing. It also gives students opportunities to increase their visual-literacy skills.

Art as Differentiation

Delia M. Cruz-Fernández, has been in education for over 20 years. She has been a mathematics and Spanish teacher, high school assistant principal, and is currently working as a district ESL specialist and advocate for Multilingual Learners Education:

As a high school Spanish teacher, I used art in my class to teach about culture and to incorporate the use of vocabulary and grammar taught in the unit in a real-life situation. Using art as a means for students to communicate in writing. Incorporating pieces of art from artists of a Spanish-speaking country, students read about the painter's biography. As an expansion, the students researched the country of origin of the painter. The art was purposefully chosen with the thematic unit in mind. If we were discussing the topic of "the family" in class, for example, I used a painting from Botello that portrayed a family or "*Las Meninas*" de Diego Velázquez.

Incorporating art in my class allowed me to differentiate the activities according to the students' Spanish-language level of proficiency.

Native Spanish-speaking students were able to use an advanced academic language such as, background, front, in the middle, and even specific shapes and describe shades of color. Some students' writing activity was to write a story, narrating what happened before the painting or after the painting. For example, observing *Calle* (Street) from the Colombian painter Fernando Botero, my students described the family, their clothes, what day of the week they thought it was, and the time of the day. One student claimed that the people in the painting were going to have a nice lunch as a family.

For beginning students, I provided the following:

- Sentence starters
- Word bank
- An exemplary description
- Paragraph starters

For students who were intermediate, I provided the same as for beginners but added possible questions as a guide.

I found that by adding art in my classes, students were able to make connections to previous knowledge and other content areas. I recall a Spanish 3 exam about art. Students participated in structured conversations (Seidlitz & Perryman, 2010); one student was playing the role of a museum police officer and the other student was playing the role of the museum curator. In this scenario, there was a painting stolen from the museum, the police officer had to ask questions of the curator such as describe in detail the stolen painting. Each student is provided a color copy of the painting as a reference.

Reference

Seidlitz, J., & Perryman, B. (2010). *7 Steps to a Language Rich Interactive Classroom*. San Clemente, CA: Seidlitz Education.

Using Art for Creation

Irina McGrath, Ph.D., is an assistant principal at Newcomer Academy in the Jefferson County public schools in Louisville, Ky. She is a co-creator of the ELL2.0 Google site and enjoys creating and sharing resources to support English-learners and teachers of ELs. Irina is also a co-director of the Louisville Writing Project (LWP) and a University of Louisville & Indiana University Southeast adjunct professor:

Why Art?

Language, while a central and primary form of representation of thought, is not the only way humans communicate (Eisner, 2002). Visual art, drama, music, and technology are sign systems that separately or in

conjunction with language allow students, particularly those who are not proficient in the English language yet, to share ideas and demonstrate learning.

One of my favorite ways to use art in learning is during writing time. Several years ago, I collaborated with an ESL teacher on a unit focused on building peer-to-peer and student-to-teacher relationships that incorporated blending visual art with writing. The task consisted of each student writing a letter to his or her teacher and placing it in an envelope attached to the back of a self-made collage. The final products were displayed together as a large mosaic of stories.

Using Reading to Support Writing

In the unit, three texts were used to stimulate ideas for the student letters. *If She Only Knew Me* by Jeff Gray and Heather Thomas was used as a mentor text to set the tone and help the students develop an understanding of why it is important for teachers to know who they are and their diverse backgrounds. The book describes challenges the main character, Justin, faces at school and home. His teacher is not aware of these challenges, but if she only knew about them, she would have acted differently toward Justin.

The students also used *Let's Go See Papa* by Lawrence Schimel and “Immigrant Teens in Their Own Words: Interview with Pierre” to help them develop ideas for writing. They also participated in several “stations” where they were asked to view and discuss photos, poems, and videos describing the lives of immigrants and refugees and respond to the following prompts: *If these photos belonged to a student, what do you think would be important for the student's teachers to know about him or her? What connections can you make to your own life?*

Once the students generated a list of ideas, they picked one that they felt was most important to share with others. They wrote their first drafts and shared them in small groups.

Using Art to Tell a Story

At the start of week two of the unit, ELs learned about the five basic art elements that make up all objects in the world—dots, circles, lines, curves, and angles—and how artists manipulate these elements to express ideas. The students discovered that composition and the spatial arrangement of visual images in artwork is essential to how messages are conveyed by an artist and how a message is received by an audience. Additionally, the students learned that artists also utilize color, which is often categorized as either warm or cool, to evoke emotions. After learning the basics of art and the ways in which it can be used as a communication medium, the students were introduced to the concept of collages.

To prepare for the creation stage, the students were tasked with finding photos to include in their personal collages—many of which were brought in from home. Photos were carefully scanned using a school scanner and then printed on colored ink to preserve the originals. Additionally, the ELs were given old magazines and books to cut out pictures and letters to enhance their own photos and provide a stronger image story to the viewer. Each student received a piece of 9x9 white card stock paper to build his or her collage. Finally, the English-learners spent several days making final revisions and editing their letters before typing their final drafts. In the end, it was evident that combining art with writing was a powerful experience for the students. It offered them a new mode of communication and representation, making writing engaging and fun.

Thanks to Wendi, Keisha, Delia, and Irina for contributing their thoughts.

Consider contributing a question to be answered in a future post. You can send one to me at lferlazzo@epe.org. When you send it in, let me know if I can use your real name if it's selected or if you'd prefer remaining anonymous and have a pseudonym in mind.

You can also contact me on Twitter at [@Larryferlazzo](https://twitter.com/Larryferlazzo).

Education Week has published a collection of posts from this blog, along with new material, in an e-book form. It's titled [Classroom Management Q&As: Expert Strategies for Teaching](#).

Just a reminder; you can subscribe and receive updates from this blog via [email](#) (The RSS feed for this blog, and for all Ed Week articles, has been changed by the new redesign—new ones are not yet available). And if you missed any of the highlights from the first 10 years of this blog, you can see a categorized list below.

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