


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.

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How to Keep Art Front and Center in Instruction

By [Larry Ferlazzo](#) — October 31, 2021  10 min read



Larry Ferlazzo

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Larry Ferlazzo is an English and social studies teacher at Luther Burbank High School in Sacramento, Calif.



(This is the final post in a three-part series. You can see [Part One here](#) and [Part Two here](#).)

The new question-of-the-week is:

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

In [Part One](#), Wendi Pillars, Keisha Rembert, Delia M. Cruz-Fernández, and Irina McGrath, Ph.D., offered 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](#).

In [Part Two](#), Sara Rezvi, Gretchen Bernabei, Jeremy Hyler, and Kelsey Pycior shared their recommendations.

Today, James Rees, Jerilou J. Moore, Kerry P. Holmes, and Cait O'Connor finish this series by writing about their experiences.

Art is Not a ‘Side Street’

James Rees is an artist, researcher, teacher, and Scholastic Art magazine adviser. He was recently awarded National Art Educator of the Year 2021 by NAEA. He has served twice on the board of the National Art Education Association, as a vice president and as the secondary-division director. He is a Fulbright Memorial Scholar, a Teachers Institute of Contemporary Art Fellow, and an Art21 Fellow:

For years, many educational leaders have seen the arts as a side street, merely supplemental to other curricular “core” areas. Today, it is clear that art is a main artery for communication in an increasingly visual world. Instead of asking ourselves the best way to use art in lessons, perhaps we should consider what the role of art is in education. The arts take center stage when taught by competent teachers who know the power of visual literacy.

Art gives people a voice and is a particularly powerful way to express a variety of opinions, tensions, and experiences. The arts can have long-term impacts as students are empowered with confidence and tools to engage with and explore personal and societal questions.

Through art, we can adeptly take on essential roles of human endeavor, engaging students in contemporary topics, such as the Black Lives Matter movement, politics, human rights, emotional and mental wellness, equality, social justice, and much more. For example, teachers have seen how throughout the pandemic students have felt isolated. The arts can play a vital role in helping students deal with the aftermath of COVID-19 as they address the trauma, disruption, and loss of this last year. Art provides a vehicle to process and document experiences, and connect with others, even in separation.

Art gives students the power and nuance to articulate delicate, persuasive, and poetic perspectives that have potential to be broadly understood. For example, through a project called “inside out,” my students used the creative constraint of size and a diptych format to compare two views of the self—one being how they believe they might be perceived by people and the other showing how they really are on the inside. In another instance, my students created a series of public pronouncements by assembling a series of letters to form messages that are then posted in public spaces to share something they felt was worth creating a dialogue about in their community. These are powerful examples of how art teaches students to see within themselves and interpret the world in unique ways.

Art can also help examine identity, power, and what it means to be a citizen. For the past four years, my students have unpacked their national identity through an ongoing digital storytelling project called “Who is American today?” Students explore and express their identity by sharing personal narratives in a digital art format. Tackling timely and tough concepts such as these is the heart and soul of the arts and the domain of a good classroom.

Art is also about exploring divergent answers to questions that we all have about human existence, which students face at increasingly younger ages. The arts help students to see things with context, dimensionality, and complexity, to make space for, understand, and be empathetic to others, while sharing their own perspectives. In a past exhibit, Mapping the Self, my students represented five domains of their lives: geographic associations, artistic influences, and social relationships, as well as spiritual and emotional identity. Students employed multilayered maps to explore their own complexities and layers as they intersect with the world they inhabit.

The arts have the power to provide boundless opportunities for expression, promote open-ended thinking, engage students in contemporary topics, give students opportunities to examine and reexamine who they are, and explore while making mistakes, which is all part of the learning journey. With fluency in visual literacy, students can learn to interpret not only visual rhetoric and various levels of meaning but also use their visual voices to converse in richer, multidimensional ways. We must art keep front and center as part of our instruction.

‘Recycling/Upcycling’

Jerilou J. Moore is professor emerita in the School of Education at the University of Mississippi and has previously taught art classes for teachers.

Kerry P. Holmes is professor emerita in the School of Education at the University of Mississippi and has previously taught kindergarten and grade 1:

One of the memorable ways we used the arts to engage children in positive learning experiences was in a theme on recycling/upcycling. We found that the children had fun and took ownership as they learned the importance of recycling and their part in it. We knew it worked, because they continued to bring ideas after the project was over as did other children in the school and parents or caregivers. This project made it easy to integrate the arts into the content areas in a real-life way as the children problem-solved and used creative thinking. Below, you will find some of the ideas.

Visual Arts – Sculptures

We started with collecting recycled/upcycled manmade and natural materials. Parents, children, and anyone interested in helping could add to our collection. As our collection grew, we had the children sort (math) the materials any way they wanted, whether by material, size, color, or shape. The sculptures they made were so creative. One little girl made a robot and used nonstandard measurement (math) with a craft stick to cut lengths of yarn for her robot's hair. A boy used an iPad (media) to find pictures of sea turtles as he designed his sculpture. The pride they had on their faces when they shared their creations was priceless. They used a variety of art materials. The internet (media) and informational and narrative books were used by the children to research and get inspiration for designing their sculptures.

Music - Drums

The children used collected materials to make their drums. They selected plastic tubs, boxes, snack cans, and metal cans to use. The mallets they chose were varied from chopsticks to plastic spoons. Some made theirs with chopsticks and air-dry clay. We discussed vibrations (science) and whether the materials used made a difference in the pitch (language arts). We allowed them time to test their choices and change if they needed to. Next, we showed YouTube videos on the smartboard (media) to demonstrate rhythm and tempo. Then, we demonstrated a rhythm and had them replicate it. They took turns demonstrating and having the others repeat it. We ended by demonstrating quarter-, half-, and whole-note durations (math).

Drama- Puppets

The huge collection of materials was used again to make puppets. The students' creative ideas came easier after the sculpture lesson. The puppet ideas were endless and so different. They made puppets from water bottles, juice boxes, rolled-up newspapers, sticks, pine cones, and a combination. The children learned about materials and how to connect them, what glues worked and which ones were absorbed (science). We asked questions to encourage them to think about why and saw them Google it. The children also used materials to express personalities of their characters. We noticed how many of the children chose familiar book characters and saw them checking books out of the library, writing a brief script, and collaborating with other children to produce (LAlanguage arts).

Dance – Stick Horses

Again, we went to our collection of recycle/upcycle materials to make a stick horse. A couple of horses were made with newspaper and paper-sack heads and newspaper and wrapping paper tube bodies (science). It was a lot of trial-and-error measuring (math) for them to be satisfied with their horses. Some made yarn bridles (language

arts). Once the horses were made, we played classical music like Mozart's Eine Kleine Nachtmusik or Beethoven's Fur Elise on the smartboard (media) for them to move to the music with their horses. They were allowed to ride in pairs with a friend.

Media Arts – Selfie Bookmarks

The children went to the stash of recycled materials and got something to make a bookmark. They used cardboard from cereal and cat and dog food boxes, along with paint and markers to make them. Next, they dressed up like a favorite character and made a selfie using the iPad. We then sized and printed them for the children to glue on the bookmarks. They shared and talked about their selfie.

Picture Books

Cait O'Connor is a 9th and 12th grade English teacher in the Hudson Valley area of upstate New York:

One of my favorite ways to incorporate visual art and illustration into my lessons is through picture books. I am a secondary teacher of English, but my students love to “throw it back” to when they had story time in elementary school.

We use picture books to supplement our grade-level, whole-class reading, and students have been more successfully able to identify themes in their novel studies as a result. This year, we read *There There* by Tommy Orange, and reading beautifully illustrated books like *We Are Water Protectors* by Carole Lindstrom and Michaela Goede helped students see visual metaphors and themes in Indigenous culture and own-voices texts.

Using this work of art, we were able to see the metaphors used to discuss the Dakota Access Pipeline and connect our understandings of Indigenous culture to nature and natural elements. Michaela Goede's use of watercolor in the book and her illustrations conveying the four elements of the Indigenous medicine wheel led to discussions of theme, metaphor, and symbolism that the students could then connect to themes, metaphors, and symbols in a grade-level classroom text.

Thanks to James, Jerilou, Kerry, and Cait 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.

- [The 11 Most Popular Classroom Q&A Posts of the Year](#)
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I am also creating a [Twitter list including all contributors to this column](#).