

Guiding Students to Find the Stories Told in Art

Pam Stephens

Much like prose or poetry, works of art tell rich stories. Such stories can help us understand the past, contemplate the present, or anticipate the future. Indeed, visual narratives often teach, enlighten, and inspire with messages that are sometimes obvious and other times obscure. Guiding students to find clues and read visual messages is a skill that develops over time and with practice.

In my pre-service classroom I encourage future educators to prepare for their roles as art guides; a role that requires thoughtful questioning and careful listening. What follows are a few guidelines that I share with my students.

Pre-Reading

Processes already familiar to K–12 students provide a readymade approach to interpreting the varied stories that art tells. One such process is pre-reading; a strategy for gathering overt information. Pre-reading helps students figure out what they already know about a work of art. For example, students could list the most apparent structures and functions shown in a work of art and then brainstorm why these are most important. Likewise, the title (if known) or subject matter could be brainstorming topics.

Look for Context

Under what circumstances was the artwork made? Place, time, and culture contribute to meaning and help to tell the story.

Construct Specific Questions

Questioning strategies about works of art are not one-size-fits-all propositions. Instead, questions should be specific to a work of art and lead to reasonable and well-supported interpretations. Generic questions such as, “How does it make you feel?” lead to generic responses that rarely hit the mark of

finding meaning. Questions should be clear and open ended so that they prompt discussion about a specific artwork’s meaning or the artistic intent of the maker. Pose questions in a logical sequence that deal with discovering the answers to “why.”

Discussion

Never underestimate the power of group discussions. Exchanging ideas helps students uncover clues they might have missed. Beyond hearing the ideas of others, art discussions contribute to the development of civil discourse. Listening and then agreeing or politely disagreeing encourages students to value opinions of others.

Key to effective group discussions is a teacher who offers good questions, does not express an opinion, keeps students on topic, and prompts students to provide supporting evidence for all statements they make.

Draw a Conclusion

Based upon the information garnered and discussed, what story does the artwork tell? This is an opportunity for students to compile all information, discard that which is superfluous to understanding, and concentrate on that which is important.

Practice

The painting that accompanies this article was created by a high-school student. The painting is one of about a dozen that adorn a bank of storage cabinets in an artroom. Each of the acrylic paintings seems to tell a story about daily life from a teen’s perspective. I encourage you to try out the strategies outlined in this article and to share the story you think the painting tells.

Guidelines Recapped

1. What prior knowledge do you have about this artwork? Who are the characters? What colors are shown? What is the most important part of the painting? How did the artist make that part important?
2. What is the context? (who, what, when, where)
3. How does color contribute to meaning in this painting? What emotion is shown? How do you know?
4. What ideas in this painting are revealed after closer examination? Do you see anything that you overlooked at first? How does that contribute to your understanding?
5. So, what is the story? In a single sentence, sum up what you think the painting is saying. 🌀

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Storage cabinet in an artroom at Mingus Union High School, Cottonwood, Arizona.