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Important Dates

- **September 18:** CPS Partner Professional Development , 4:00-6:00
- **September 25:** Partner Connection, 4:00-4:50
- **October 16:** Fall Field Advisory, 4:00-4:50

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Using Art to Teach Vocabulary and Reading Comprehension

If you are looking for creative ways to teach vocabulary and reading comprehension there is nothing better than art. As a creative medium, art in itself is a form of communication: an extension of the person who has created it, a way of expressing internal feelings or thoughts, and a way of demonstrating understanding. Many students with disabilities, for example, have a difficult time expressing themselves in words or speech but can excel in different art forms that require movement, spatial understanding and negotiating the world through textures. They can illustrate their comprehension, with a range of guidance, through creative outlets. We asked special education teachers and current students with background expertise in art education to share with us how they think about art as well as work with it to facilitate reading comprehension.

Current student, teacher, and art therapist Ellen Holtzblatt enumerates three central ideas to consider when interweaving art into the curriculum to facilitate comprehension: students can use imagery, students can demonstrate and form meaning from the text(s), and build community through doing and sharing art. "I usually use a combination of reading, discussion, art and writing," she explains. "I start with text and then use a combination of the other modalities to deepen the students' experience. Art bypasses verbal limitations and intellectual expectations." Ms. Holtzblatt has been working on book making for the last few of years

and particularly enjoys using mylar (a clear plastic sheet) for several reasons: it is an unusual material that students find exciting, and when the sheets are layered on top of each other new images can be created. This helps students to find layers of meaning," she says, "and to see each layer as separate yet interrelated." As students create, solo or in groups, and show perspectives and meaning they have derived, they also form connections. They don't have to talk to have those connections, either. Peers need only look, and from looking, gain understanding.

Art does more than illustrate learning, Ms. Holtzblatt adds. Art enhances learning. The process of creating can be much more important than the product, and that process can be seen as a valid tool to understand students' meaning-making. Students will feel safer using art in this capacity if they know that they are not being judged critically on aesthetics. The teacher must be prepared to accept all expressions as valid. Rubrics and peer review can be incorporated as part of the process of creating and constructing understanding.

Expressions through art allow students to connect sensory images with multiple literacy skills and knowledge. Storyboarding is a terrific strategy for this, and can be used across subject matter. For example, students could create a series of images to reflect the plot of a story or the viewpoint of people during a certain time period. Discussion about why or how students chose to represent ideas as they did, and/or what images work

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Using Art (continue)

best to communicate to the audience, can expand the storyboarding strategy.

What about those of us who consider ourselves less developed artistically? Cheryl Janusz claims to have no art background or artistic ability and yet she, too, sees the value of art for reading comprehension. For those students who have difficulty with traditional academic tasks (reading and writing), art in its varied forms provides alternative expression through pictures, dance or drama activities. In her elementary classroom, she uses games such as Pictionary and "Vocabulary Charades" to give her kids a better visual image of what a word means and its usage. Versatile and easy to adapt, the games can be used in individual or small group activities. Dave Rench incorporates similar ideas into his classroom for students on the spectrum.

When planning vocabulary games, Ms. Janusz reminds us about the problems of over-reliance on dictionaries. Many provide incomprehensible definitions. While learning how to use a dictionary is important, she prefers to give students a vocabulary list in which word meanings are provided in understandable language while encouraging the more advanced students to rewrite dictionary definitions in their own words. In this regard she highly recommends the Longman Dictionary of American English as it has more clear and understandable definitions.

Individually, in small groups and even in whole group activities, the range of artistic expressions available to teachers (dance, drama/role-playing, visual media) are numerous, incorporating such activities into the day can allow a wide range of learners to participate on similar levels around similar ideas/content.

Digital Corner

While some students love to express themselves through the visual arts, others may feel insecure about their drawing skills and shy away from this powerful medium of expression. Computer graphics software can be a great tool for opening students up to the world of visual expression, as well as a rich opportunity to familiarize students with computer applications.

Kid Pix Deluxe 4 www.broderbund.com is a new software package from The Learning Company that allows children to create digital art using a variety of tools and mediums. The software simulates the effects of familiar items like chalk and crayon,

as well as introducing students to unique "zany" brushes, spray paint effects and more. The program also allows students to create movies and edit photographs, and a fun "Sound Art!" feature lets students combine visual and audio learning by manipulating the artwork with the sound of their voice.

Designed for student in grades K-8, Kid Pix Deluxe 4 invites children in with a colorful, easy-to-use graphic interface. The program has a variety of tutorials and support available to help you integrate the program into your lessons. www.edzone.net/~mwestern/KidPix/KPS.html is a particularly helpful resource for designing content-area lessons using the Kid Pix 4 software.

Research Corner

Hibbing, A., & Rankin-Erickson, J. (2003, May) A picture is worth a thousand words: Using visual images to improve comprehension for middle school struggling readers. *Reading Teacher*, 56(8), 758

Research shows that processing text involves many nonverbal systems. Words evoke many senses, including that of smell, sound, touch, and sight. In this article, the authors consider many aspects of how readers use or fail to use imagery to make sense of text. The authors examine imagery used for both receptive literacy (reading and listening, which is image-reading) and expressive forms (writing and speaking, which is image-making).

While text illustrations can be very helpful for struggling readers, the authors also show that illustrations can inhibit comprehension. For example, a mismatch between illustrations and text can be very off-putting and may result in lower comprehension. What is the student pictured it differently? Those mismatches can be useful teaching tools, however, if teachers pre-screen for them and ask students to make predictions based on the images. Have students confirm or refute those predictions, and compare/contrast them with peers' predictions as they read.

The authors also refer to numerous examples of using students' drawings to help pinpoint gaps in understanding. In one example, a student had drawn a picture based on the text. While it was the right topic, the image failed to reference any specific incidents, characters or details. In this case, the student artwork served as a powerful diagnostic tool for identifying gaps in comprehension.