

The Potential of Written Reflection by Art Students

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Reflection involves looking back on experiences to reconstruct, analyze, and evaluate what happened, after the fact. When applied to art lessons, reflection can serve as a way for students to learn more about things that are already known in some sense, but also know them in deeper and more meaningful ways. By “playing back” in the mind’s eye the videotape of the sequence of events in a lesson, using slow motion, stop action and instant replay, everything from the effects of major and minor decisions to the quality of outcomes can be examined. Key parts are studied and analyzed in the search for clues that will lend insight to future experiences (fellows & Zimpher, 1988).

At a time and place away from the immediacy of the experience, these mental reconstructions are converted into written form. To document their perceptions, students draft, revise, and edit their account of the total experience, starting with the preparation phase and concluding with the final product. In between, problems, struggles, and uncertainties are discussed along with inventions, solutions, and inspirations. The words they choose give form to thinking by affirming perceptions. By searching for new connections, examining ideas and seeking hidden meanings, writers expand what they know while clarifying fuzzy notions. Preparing these written accounts of what they have experienced takes concentration and care. Teachers can structure and guide this introspection by making written assignments that guide and focus this process (Stoudt, 1995).

Reflections should not be construed as automatic, intuitive, or reflexive. Rather, the intellectual traits involved can be taught, learned, and reinforced, much like other subject matter. The intellectual traits cultivated through the reflective process will be strengthened through practice and commitment to reflective writing. As students gain maturity and skill in writing reflections, they can begin to address increasingly more complex aspects of their performance and the effects of subtle changes in their actions (Canning, 1991).

Sources of Discussion Points

Reflective questions can be categorized into:

1. Personal values, expectations, and intentions.
2. Expected outcomes described in curriculum documents.

3. Learning from others.
4. Art concepts, process, and materials.
5. The evolution of ideas.
6. Uncertainties, limitations, and alternatives.
7. Relationships of choices made to outcomes achieved.
8. Personal strengths, weaknesses, and preferences.
9. Notes in journals.
10. Suggestions, ideas, and reactions offered by classmates and teachers.

To encourage students to elaborate on their thoughts, avoid posing questions that ask for “yes” and “no” answers. Consider asking:

1. In what ways did you take risks with this work?
2. How well did you understand the teacher’s expectations and directions?
3. How important were the planning and preparation phases of the lesson?
4. What were the three biggest (or most important) choices you had to make?
5. What problems did you experience? Which did you expect? What personal strengths did you draw upon to deal with them?
6. What helpful ideas or suggestions did you get from classmates?
7. What possibilities or ideas for future work did you get?
8. What role did critiques play in shaping your ideas about your work?

Among the options teachers may choose from when posing questions for reflection are (1) assigning specific topics that relate to a lesson or activity, (2) having students identify issues they want to discuss and (3) allowing them to select questions to respond to from a list provided by the teacher.

Assessing Reflective Writing

According to Kichener (1977), reflective judgment becomes increasingly complex over time, progressing through seven stages. As an individual’s view of the nature of knowledge matures, his or her ability to identify and use convincing evidence develops. As part of this process, willingness to accept responsibility for decision making increases and openness to alternate points of view grows. In the less mature

stages, the phenomenon being viewed is perceived as simple, knowledge is seen as finite, and authorities are thought of as the source of all knowledge. In the middle stages, different points of view are acknowledged as relative to varying perspectives. The individual shows an ability to interpret and evaluate evidence, but personal belief and whim are often used in making decisions. In more advanced stages, the reflective individual begins to make judgments based on reasoning and evidence. Advancement through the stages of reflection results from a combination of factors that includes experience, maturity, education, and practice.

Rubrics can be used to identify different levels of quality in reflective skill as well as in writing from excellent to poor. For example, the “awesome” category might include: (1) the reflection shows a high level of reflective skill, (2) content focuses on issues that relate directly to the lesson, (3) at least five sentences are used to respond to questions, (4) all sentences are complete and punctuation correct, and (5) at least four examples of art-related vocabulary are included in the narrative. Descriptors for the “admirable,” “acceptable,” and “amateur” levels can be adjusted to show fewer or less stringent requirements.

When writing their reflections, some students will be most comfortable with conversational rhetoric (expressive, personal, somewhat informal) while others may prefer a more technical approach (objective, mechanical, formal). They are sure to appreciate having an option.

Responding to Students’ Reflective Writing

Students must come to believe that they can have a serious conversation about their work with someone they can trust. Teachers can respond to what students have said by writing supportive comments in margins or on self-stick notes. As an approach to communication with students, written assignments enable teachers to provide a structure that guides thought and introspection. Teachers must be prepared to address concerns students have about the confidentiality of these exchanges.

Some students can be expected to say what they think the teacher wants to hear. In most cases these youngsters will be making a sincere effort to do what they have been taught—say what the teacher expects. In such cases, follow-up questions can be used to pursue unresolved issues and plant seeds for future reflections. In some cases, a student’s comments can be intended to provoke the teacher. Such individuals can be recognized as looking for ways to “push the teacher’s buttons.” Patience and persistence will be

necessary as students learn what can be gained from the reflective process. Care should be taken to avoid making defensive reactions.

Art students who have practiced reflective writing have said the process:

- 1 Made them aware of reflection as a tool for learning.
2. Helped them realize that although problems tend to stand out in one’s mind, most lessons include both good and bad points.
3. Gave them an opportunity to examine thoughts, frustrations, and concerns.

By experimenting with different formats for reflective activities, approaches that can be useful in a variety of situations can be developed. Questions that relate to when students should be expected to be reflective, where they should write, and how carefully written the reflective documents should be, await careful study.

If the goal of reflection is to encourage students to think beneath the surface of their experiences, multiple approaches to the use of this instructional tool may be necessary. For art teachers interested in educational invention, many challenges and opportunities in the area of reflective writing await.

References

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