

## Using the Arts to Improve Student Reading Comprehension

*Anne Marie Esposito*

“Be the change you want to see” may have been the catch phrase of this decade but as a veteran teacher of twenty-plus years it has been a personal and professional mantra. To survive in the classroom, a teacher has to be committed to professional growth and that means not only knowing exactly what skills her students need to master but also recognizing how she needs to tweak/realign classroom curriculum so that it meets the needs of and requirements for each new group of students. Since the new Common Core Standards adopted by the Delaware Department of Education place greater emphasis on student analysis, synthesis, application, and presentation of information, classroom teachers need to provide more opportunities for students to channel their learning through a variety of classroom activities and products, ones closely aligned with the new state assessment tools. Also, a more structured focus on speaking and listening skills are required because today’s students are expected to design and share information using both online and offline modes of communication. The transition from twentieth century to twenty-first century skills requires that students be more information savvy and that means being more sensitive to the verbal and nonverbal ways people communicate. Consequently, students will need to have additional practice in processing and sharing what they think and learn through more multimodal activities. This doesn’t necessarily mean more technology. In fact, it can mean a simple return to a more arts-centered approach to teaching and learning.

### **Rationale**

In his article “Blending with Purpose: The Multimodal Model,” Anthony Picciano explains that teachers need to design instruction so that it engages and meets the needs of a diverse group of learners. Today’s students access information through a variety of sources, so teachers need to engage students through a variety of modes. He cites the work of Howard Gardner, stating that “Gardner recommends that instruction should use multiple modalities that allow learners to engage in ways they prefer/have interest/have ability in while also challenging them to learn in other ways where they have less preference, interest or ability” (1). Although Picciano may be using Gardner’s work to push the need to integrate more technology into our instructional design, I have learned through a class I recently completed at the University of Delaware, Examining Multimodal Literacy, that online reading demands literacy in a variety of modes – including those that are visual and audio. Online reading, unlike typical offline reading, requires students to process and respond to visual, audio, and graphic cues and those cues can alter the way a student “reads” the text. Mastering this new literacy is critical for my incoming ninth grade students, not only for their success on the Smarter Balanced testing program adopted by the state of Delaware to assess student achievement as outlined by the new Common Core Standards for reading and writing, but also for their success in meeting the needs of a twenty-first century workforce.

Moreover, the new Common Core Standards require students to read a variety of text, both in print and online, within the appropriate lexile band for ninth and tenth grade students. Now, although reading on grade level is a common classroom expectation, many teachers know all too well that even though some students may be able to decode the words in a challenging reading selection, they often do not truly comprehend what they have read. Therefore, if teachers want students to work with more difficult text then they need to have their students approach text in ways that will help them sustain their interest and motivation long enough to make the kinds of connections that will help them understand what they have read. According to the guidelines issued by the International Reading Association in October of 2012, English Language Arts teachers are still required to provide students with opportunities “to read texts with an intensive focus on meaning, and with lively and critical discussion of ideas in the text” (2), yet adopt the “gradual release of responsibility’ models, in which teachers model the use of a strategy, then have students use it with teacher guidance, subsequently reducing the amount of guidance and support so that students come to use the strategy independently to understand and remember what they read” (3). This, of course, is nothing new to instructional veterans of the Delaware Standards Initiative. Since the early 90s, Delaware teachers have been challenging their students by requiring them to complete more and more independent reading and writing assignments and assessments. However, these new guidelines can be more of a challenge now that all classroom materials and resources must fall within the designated reading band of 980 to 1300 for ninth and tenth grade students. Obviously, students will need more strategies for tackling these selections and that is where a more multi-modal approach can make the difference.

Therefore, if we, as teachers, want our students to successfully interact with challenging text, then we will need to provide them with strategies that will play to their strengths, allowing them ample opportunity to use a variety of cognitive skills to make the appropriate connections within and between text. Fortunately, several textbooks and reference materials have provided suggestions on how to use art, drama, and even music as a means for helping students unlock text. For me, this means a more structured and focused return to using the visual and performing arts as vehicles for helping students to improve their reading comprehension skills.

### **Instructional Background and Demographics**

As an ELA teacher in a vocational-technical high school, I am charged with the task of preparing students for the workplace as well as a variety of post-secondary educational settings. Currently, I am scheduled to teach four sections of ninth grade honors English and two sections of regular ninth grade English. Even though I may not have the latest technology in my classroom, my students expect some technical training and experience and so does the newly adopted state curriculum and assessment program. Of course, according to the requirements outlined by Component Five, my students and I will be assessed/evaluated based on the results of their performance on the state-mandated assessments in reading and writing. The one online test will require that the students read various selections, respond to text-based questions, both multiple choice and open-ended, and then respond to a more

extended text-based response. Since this Smarter Balanced test is multi-modal, I can best prepare my students for this test by sharing information with them through a variety of modes.

Therefore, in accordance with the new Common Core Standards for reading, writing, speaking, and listening, I want to design a series of more performance based activities and assessments that will require my students to use a variety modes to not only gather, analyze, and synthesize information but to then design products that showcases their learning through different modes of communication. For example, last year I piloted the recently adopted Springboard curriculum with my ninth grade honors English students. As part of their study of *Romeo and Juliet*, students not only read and analyzed the written text but were also required to analyze selected scenes from two different film versions of the play. This meant that my students paid careful attention to the choices the directors made concerning costumes, music, setting, and the actual blocking/placement of actors within a scene. Based on the choices made by the directors, we, as viewers, often had a slightly different read on a character or a situation. Moreover, one of the assessment pieces required that students, working in small groups, perform a selected scene from Acts III, IV, or V. The performance required that students actually stage the scene, making use of costuming/props, music, scenery, and blocking. Students who never gave a second thought to sound in a film, either diegetic or non-diegetic, or whether one character faced or turned away from another character, suddenly realized those choices could convey meaning. As we watched each group share its dramatic interpretation of a selected scene, we evaluated the groups' choices, identifying what did or did not contribute to the overall effectiveness of the performance. Our conversations were thoughtful and engaging, and they contributed to our growing knowledge that even the smallest choices can impact a reader's or viewer's understanding of a story, a book, a film, or a play.

To better prepare my students for our multimodal world, I want to add at least one activity and one assessment to each of my existing units that will require students to gather, analyze and synthesize information and then share it within groups or between groups through some vehicle that requires them to make choices and interpret information in a form other than a typical writing assignment. I want as many opportunities as possible for my students to synthesize information and then share it with the class through another mode of communication. In our opening class work for this seminar, students interpreted text and presented a tableau. As part of another activity, we conveyed our understanding of a concept through a series of choreographed movements. I want my students to actively interpret information and then have a significant number of opportunities to practice sharing ideas and concepts through a variety of modes. Ultimately, providing my students with the opportunity to process and channel their learning through both the visual and performance arts will enhance and strengthen their understanding of key instructional targets in my ELA curriculum.

Twenty-first century literacy demands that all students be able to access, process, and share information through a variety of modes. Since this is how my students will be assessed,

then I want to make sure they have adequate opportunity and preparation to be successful, whether it is on a state test, in a college classroom, or in the work place.

### **The Instructional Challenge**

As mandated by the newly adopted curriculum in my school district, the students in my regular ninth grade English classes must use only those reading selections included in the Springboard textbook and the students in my ninth grade English honors classes must use only those selections that have been authorized by the district. Consequently, the students in my regular English classes are reading selections that do not fall below a lexile level of 1000 and the students in the English honors classes are reading selections that do not fall below a lexile level of 1300. In most cases this would not be a problem; however, with the adoption and implementation of any new curriculum there can be a serious disconnect among the requirements outlined by selection recommendations, the standards or KUDs (know, understand, do), and the skills assessed on both district and state assessments.

In its effort to comply with the expectations mandated by Race to the Top and prepare students for the new Delaware Smarter Balanced testing program, my district has adopted the Common Core Standards and the Springboard Instructional Program published by College Board. For the ninth through eleventh grade English teachers who are teaching the regular education classes, this means they are actively working to blend the instructional program outlined by Springboard with the KUDs and reading recommendations mandated by the district as outlined by the Common Core. For the ninth through eleventh grade English teachers who are teaching the honors classes, this means they are actively working to create the instructional context and purpose for the study of a predetermined reading list. For me personally, it means identifying the KUDs for each unit and its recommended readings, and then adopting the appropriate instructional strategies and designing and/or using the instructional tools that will best help my students master the KUDs. This seems simple, right? Yeah, right.

After a careful review of the KUDs and reading selections mandated by my district as compliant with the Common Core Standards and the instructional targets and strategies outlined in the teacher edition of the Springboard workbook, I learned that, as always, my students must be able to analyze and synthesize a wide variety of textual information and then design or create a product that showcases that understanding. Students must also understand that all text is designed for a purpose and that good writers, filmmakers, and even marketing executives use particular literary, cinematic, and rhetorical devices to achieve that purpose. How to best meet these targets means that I must, as always, employ instructional strategies that tap into other modes for the processing and sharing of information. In the past, when I used art-related strategies as part of my instructional practice, I was often told by an administrator that processing strategies like those were really only classroom activities rather than well-designed tools for assessing student understanding of complex concepts. Additionally, when I had students work together to create a script to showcase their understanding of a term or concept, I again was lead to believe this was merely a

classroom activity rather than a well-designed tool for assessing student understanding. Fortunately, in many ways, the shift from twentieth century learning to twenty-first century learning has placed a greater focus not only on the use of new technologies but on the analysis and synthesis of information that is often presented through a variety of modes.

Surprisingly, a recent piece by Maureen McLaughlin, current president of the International Reading Association, discusses the importance of both read-alouds and recreational reading as part of a teacher's instructional practice. In her president's message, titled "Read-Alouds and Recreational Reading Always! Round-Robin Reading Never!," McLaughlin notes that patterned partner reading offers a variety of ways to have students engage in approaches to reading that encourages their understanding and response to text (4). She goes on to outline in her examples of patterned partner reading the *Read-Pause-Sketch and Share* strategy that requires students to visualize what they have read. This strategy has been adopted and recommended by the Springboard curriculum as part of its instructional approach in helping students understand the cinematic techniques employed by filmmakers to convey important aspects of setting, mood, characterization, and point of view. In fact, as part of its instructional recommendation for teachers, Springboard recommends that as students read the poem "The Poison Tree," penned by William Blake, the teacher is to direct students to complete a sketch at the end of each line in the poem. I took it one step farther, by distributing computer paper and having students fold the paper so that there were eight boxes of equal size – one for each line in the poem. By the end of the reading students had a quick storyboard of the poem, which became a springboard for their conversations with classmates and our discussion of the work as a class. Dawn Baker, in her article "Art Integration and Cognitive Development," shows that this rudimentary visualization strategy can improve student comprehension and understanding. In her examination of data showing the impact of an arts integrated approach to student learning, she notes that Lev Vygotsky, educational psychologist, asserts "that individuals learn and develop from the outside in, or in other words development moves from the interpersonal to the intrapersonal (5). Notably, the sharing and discussion of the artwork gave my students the opportunity to interpret their understanding of what they had read, compare and discuss their interpretation with their peers and then test and assess their understanding through our discussion as a class. The *Read-Pause-Sketch and Share* approach not only prompted a close reading of the selection but laid the ground work for examining the literary and cinematic choices writers and filmmakers make when creating a story or film.

Interestingly enough, soon after completing the sketching activity tied to "The Poison Tree," students do a very interactive, close reading of the short story "The Cask of Amontillado," where they are required to mark the text and record their thoughts in the margins. When they have finished reading the story, Springboard directs students to create a picture depicting the very last scene from the story. The directions given require that students, working with a partner, reread the closing paragraphs of the story and to record on a chart select dialogue from the text that could be included in their drawing as well as key descriptive textual details. From their notes, students were to then draw a picture of the last scene and share their work with other students. Analyzing the text and then synthesizing the

key pieces of textual information was required and students had the opportunity to compare their interpretations with others and evaluate their work. Once again, visualization and a student-centered work of art became the instructional approach for a close and rather engaging rereading of text. This task had students examining an author's use of both diction and imagery that helped them, as readers, better understand character, conflict, and theme. The visualization exercise actually created a conversation about the choices the student artists' made and how those choices impacted the thinking of other students.

Recently, Sylvia G. Feinburg, an early education specialist, wrote in an article published by *Early Childhood Today* that "art experiences can be a sound and effective means of addressing the physical, social, emotional and cognitive needs of young children" (6). However, I think the same can be said to some degree for older students as well. I am supported in my thinking by Dr. Gail Burnaford, who states in "Arts Integration Frameworks, Research & Practice: A Literature Review," that "the arts help students develop the thinking, social, and motivational skills needed for success in school, work and life" (7). According to these educational specialists, having my students continue to use the *Read-Pause-Sketch and Share* approach both during and after reading will help improve their ability to analyze text and synthesize information in a purposeful way. Consequently, as in past years, I will have my students extend their visualization skills by having them create illustrated plot diagrams for another required reading selection. Working in their small groups, students will have an opportunity to share their thoughts on what story details and/or events are critical to the reader's understanding of what transpired in the course of the story, how the conflict was resolved, and what the main character and readers learn about life as a result of their experience. Completing this task will force the students to reread parts of the text, analyze and evaluate their significance, and then synthesize the information so they can create a product to share with the class. After reviewing all the work, the students and I can discuss some of the choices made and how they impact our understanding of character, conflict, and theme. Student understanding could be further assessed through a summary writing exercise.

Now, to continue and extend the use of art in my classroom instructional practice, I will need to have students consider the choices artists make when creating a picture as well as their purpose. This is critical because so much of the information we process today is accessed through digital media. In the article "Learning in a Visual Age: The Critical Importance of Visual Arts Education," I learned that today young people "spend more than four hours watching television, DVDs or videos; one hour using a computer; and 49 minutes playing video games." To go on to note that in most cases youths "are engaged in two or more of these activities at the same time" (8). To ignore these statistics would only provide a disservice to the students who trust me to make sound instructional and curricular choices. It is my job to help my students to see more clearly, and Elliot Eisner, Professor Emeritus of Child Education at Stanford University, states, "with the arts, children learn to see" (9). Therefore, I want to have students explore some selected works of art so we can examine them for perspective and/or point of view as well as visual content and theme.

To continue our examination to the visual arts, since my students are required to read the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, I plan to use the opening scenes from the film to explore how the filmmaker establishes the setting, introduces us to the important characters, seen and unseen, adopts a point of view, creates a mood, and hints at the main conflicts to be explored. Learning how to read and interpret film and video is just as important as learning to read printed text. Fortunately, the Springboard textbook augments our continued interaction with film by pairing key scenes from the film with a close reading of key passages from specific chapters in the text.

By this point in the curriculum my students will have learned some key concepts from the performance standards in Visual and Performing Arts and English Language Arts. As a class we will continue to use the visual and performing arts as a means of doing a close reading of the play *Romeo and Juliet*. However, it will be up to me alone to build the bridge between close reading and the visual arts for my English 9 Honors class. Initially, I plan to focus on integrating the visual arts into my curriculum since the Common Core recommends that students analyze portraiture and narrative artwork and then slowly add aspects of the performing arts.

When we finish our work with *To Kill a Mockingbird* and move into our study of *Romeo and Juliet*, I can employ some of the performing arts to assist them in beginning to make their own dramatic interpretations. In a recent blog post, "Common Core in Action: Using the Arts to Spark Learning," Courtney J. Boddie, Director of Education/School Engagement at The New Victory Theater, explained that during her participation in a session on the Common Core State Standards at the Conference of the National Council for Teachers of English she realized how the performing arts can be used to "ignite" a passion for learning. If the mission of Common Core is to provide standards that are "robust and relevant to the real world, reflecting the knowledge and skills that our young people need for success in college and careers," then teachers need to design lessons and activities that actively engage students. Ms. Boddie said that since "students work best when they learn kinesthetically," teachers should use theater techniques that "hook students into creative learning, which enables them to deepen understanding"(10). To help third-to-fifth teachers breathe life into a unit on fairytales, she designed a series of activities for "Sleeping Beauty" that would help students examine the text using different theater techniques. One of the theater techniques included in her lesson plans was the tableau. The tableau, or "living picture," is also an instructional strategy recommended by the Springboard textbook to help students imagine the characters they will be reading about in *Romeo and Juliet*. From experience, students have enjoyed this activity immensely because it required them to think about how they could best project the characteristics or attitude of a specific character. Since they were not permitted to use words or dialogue, students had to rely solely on physical and facial cues, forcing them to think about how our bodies convey all kinds of information about our feelings, attitude, and actions.

As we progress through our reading of the play, and students view how different filmmakers interpret key scenes from the play, they will begin to prepare their own dramatic

interpretations of selected scenes from Acts III, IV, and V. Students will have seen first hand how costumes, staging, music, and lighting all contribute to how an audience will “read” a story. The visual and performing arts will come together, helping students experience a story in a new and different way.

### **An Instructional Plan**

Although the teacher’s edition of the ninth grade Springboard textbook provides detailed teacher notes for addressing ELA learning targets through the use of both formative and summative assessments that incorporate the visual and performing arts, I have little to no direction or resources for my English 9 Honors curriculum. Moreover, there is no real integration since none of the content standards for the Visual and Performing Arts are mentioned. Therefore, if I want to use those standards to strengthen and enrich the reading and composition instruction for my English 9 Honors students, then I have to identify the instructional targets where I can build bridges between the two disciplines. Fortunately, there are some areas where the content standards converge. I plan to build these bridges in a series of 45-minute lessons that effectively and efficiently address the content standards for ELA and integrate some of the content standards for visual art.

First, the opening unit in the ninth grade honors curriculum addresses personal narratives. Students, as required by Common Core, do a close reading of selected personal narratives, focusing on how good writers create voice through the use of diction, syntax, and imagery. We often come to know and understand a person, or a character, and his/her story through what they do and say. Moreover, my district recommends that our English teachers use many of the additional resources outlined in *The Arts and Common Core Curriculum Mapping Project*, resources that include famous works of art. Students meet the Common Core State Standards for ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.1 and RL.9-10.2 as they learn that good writers know how words shape a reader’s understanding so they carefully choose their words and craft their sentences to help readers make the appropriate inferences (11). Like good writers, good artists also make choices and this is the first standard for the visual arts – Standard 1: Understanding and applying media, techniques and processes (12). Common Core requires that my students analyze two self-portraits by famous artists. I plan to augment their recommendation, a close look at “The Desperate Man” by Courbet and “Self-Portrait 1889” by DeCarava, with a short YouTube video, “Durer, Self-portrait, 1498,” where two art historians make inferences about the artist and this particular self-portrait by examining the artist’s choices. As we watch this short video, students can take notes on what artistic choices the two art historians are referencing, which we can later be used as our criteria when we view other famous self-portraits. Of course, this “close reading” of the self-portraits can be easily assessed by having students write a short paragraph explaining how the technical choices made by the artist shaped their understanding of the artist and his purpose.

This lesson on the thoughtful choices that artists make when creating works of art can be easily continued when we, as a class, examine how to structure a personal narrative. Obviously, this would be my second lesson. Pictures, like memoirs, tell a story and Common



Core recommends that my students examine “Washington Crossing the Delaware” by Leutze, “Marina’s Room by Barney, and “Untitled” by DeCarava. In looking carefully at these visual narratives we will actually address the Visual Art Standard 2: Using knowledge of structures and functions. Before looking at the required artworks, I plan to show my students another short YouTube video titled “Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Hunters in the Snow (Winter), 1565. In this video the art historians at Khan Academy walk viewers through the landscape, focusing us on specific images and providing a close reading of what viewers can infer about the people and the situation. Now that my students have seen a model analysis, we can create a list of the criteria we can use when analyzing the paintings required by the Common Core. Using a graphic organizer we have created as a class, students will examine “Washington Crossing the Delaware,” “Marina’s Room,” and “Untitled.” They will pair/share the details they recorded and then, after selecting the painting of their choice, write a narrative paragraph describing what they believe is happening in that artwork. If time permits, I will extend this lesson by having students create drawings that are directly tied to the personal narratives, or memoirs, we have been reading and discussing as a class. These student created pictures should generate a lot of good discussion on what we as writers/artists choose to include, or omit from, our depictions and how we make inferences and draw conclusions based on those artistic choices.

My third lesson, modeled on the teacher directions given in the Springboard lesson, will be tied directly to storyboarding. In the past I always had my ninth graders create an illustrated plot diagram for the short story *The Most Dangerous Game*. Students were directed to carefully select the specific incidents from the story that comprised the narrative exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution. I was delighted to discover that one of my students’ favorite collaborative classroom activities had suddenly received the Common Core “seal of approval” once it had been christened “storyboarding.” Storyboarding is a “writing format, generally a set of boxes (or rectangles, circles, or other shapes) placed in a logically sequenced order. Each box or frame is a place for the writer to put information, pictures, symbols, or text” (12). As explained in Scholastic Teaching Resources, storyboards “are one of several tools recommended when working with students for whom the visual and the concrete are helpful elements in absorbing abstract ideas” (13). Research has shown that this technique is especially helpful in reading and writing instruction, and I think it would be especially helpful to my students to use the technique first with a poem. Since my students and I will still be focusing on personal narratives, I plan to use the poem *Oranges*, written by Gary Soto. Although it is not a particularly challenging poem, many of my ninth graders still found it difficult to read. They had trouble chunking the poem into a series of small events and recognizing the significance of each one. Storyboarding can be a creative way to help them visualize both the character and the sequence of events, making it easier to understand why the incident depicted was a significant one for the narrator.

As I have done in earlier lessons, I plan to open with a YouTube video that provides a basic overview of storyboarding. Created by an art student, “Telling Stories with Pictures” is one writer’s explanation of how storyboarding helps her with characterization and plot. I will

then explain that we will read the poem *Oranges* aloud once to listen to the language and then a second time to carefully mark the text, underlining or highlighting the words (diction) or imagery that help us see the character, the setting, and the events that begin to unfold. Next, students will read it silently, taking the time to quickly draw at least five or six small pictures of events in the poem that they believe are important to the narrative. I will then have them share their rudimentary artwork with their shoulder partner and their explanations for choosing to create a visual for one incident over another.

After they have shared with their shoulder partners, as a class, we will have a brief discussion of the poem and what makes the narrative a “coming of age” story. Now, once we are confident in our interpretation of the sequence of events and the overall significance of the work, I will distribute the art paper and markers; direct my students to fold the paper so they create eight panels of equal size; and allow them to “retell” the poem in pictures. Of course, I will remind them their visual narration must have a beginning, middle, and end, and they must, in some way, capture the speaker’s growth or newfound confidence.

These three lessons, all directly tied to the one unit on the personal narrative, will lay the groundwork for all future formative and summative assessments involving the visual arts. When we transition from the personal narrative to the short story, we will continue to “sketch” what we see. In fact, my students will move from sketching to creating when I will ask them to create a poster or three-dimensional product that captures how a writer can use two settings to convey a young person’s transitional from childhood to adulthood. By this point, as a class, we will have had meaningful conversations about important works of art and examined the artists’ choices when creating those works. Hopefully, when they create their posters or three-dimensional products, we will continue to have meaningful conversations about their choices and how they impact our interpretation of their work.

To continue our exploration of the visual arts, as recommended by Springboard, I will introduce my students to the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* by sharing with them a variety of photographs depicting slices of life from the 1930s, focusing specifically on areas in the South. This lesson, an informal one, requires only about six or seven photographs, gathered together in a power point or collected individually from various Internet sources, as well as a graphic organizer where students can record the images they note in each photograph and the inferences they make about the situation or people depicted.

This lesson will open with a simple question that asks the students to tell me what they know about life in the United States during the 1930s. Most students will remember studying The Great Depression and The Dust Bowl in social studies so it will be easy to establish that most people living during that era struggled to provide for themselves and their families. Some students will be able to recall details about the Jim Crow laws. Others may note that women also had few rights at this time. At this point I will distribute the graphic organizers and tell the students we will be looking at several photographs from this time period and they are to record, for each photograph, specific visual details they note and the inferences they make about the people, place, or situation depicted. As we look at the pictures and the

student record their notes, I will initially ask them questions about what they are seeing in each picture and some of the inferences they are making. This will give us the opportunity to build the background students will need to understand the historical, geographical, and social context of the novel and generate some interest in learning even more about it.

The lesson will end with students reviewing the information from their graphic organizer and making predictions about the setting, characters, and conflict of the novel. The students will record their predictions on the space provided on the graphic organizer and they will share them with their shoulder partners. Again, students will use the visual arts to deepen their understanding of the opening chapters of the novel.

I will use a similar lesson to introduce the play *Romeo and Juliet*. Springboard recommends that teachers find photographs of individuals and/or couples and share them with their students so that they can make inferences about their attitudes or feelings based only on their facial expressions. This careful examination of the facial features of the individuals in the photographs is followed by a performing arts activity. In this activity the students are asked to write a monologue of at least eight lines expressing the feelings of one of the individuals depicted in a photograph and deliver it to the class. To enrich this activity and to have them make stronger connections between the words that will be spoken and the facial features of that convey them, I have students create a quick mask for their “person” and have them deliver the monologue while they cover their face with the mask. I learned that if the students write their monologues on back of their mask, it makes it easier for them “speak” as that person.

At this point in the semester, my students have grown comfortable with examining visual images and making inferences about setting, character, and conflict. They understand that good filmmakers, like good writers, make very specific choices when they transfer a story or script from the page to the screen. The costumes actors wear, the choreography, the use of lighting and the direction and placement of the camera, and the musical selections all work together to help viewers better understand the attitudes or emotions of the characters and their point of view. My students are now ready to stage a performance of a selected scene from *Romeo and Juliet*, as directed by the Springboard curriculum. Working in small groups, students will prepare and stage their selected Scene from Acts III, IV, or V of *Romeo and Juliet*.

Of course, all these classroom activities can be used as both formative and summative assessments, providing students the opportunity to practice and refine their critical thinking skills. Students will have to consider not only what they have seen or read, but also how this information will impact what a reader/viewer understands about a character and his or her situation. Through the performance activities, students will have to work cooperatively with their classmates to determine what details they must convey to their audience and how best to communicate that information. In many ways, for some students, this may be the first time they must consider just how much information can be communicated through non-verbal

cues, an awareness that may prove invaluable as they slowly begin the transition from school-to-work or high school-to-college.

## Conclusion

As always, since classroom time is short, I will have to be extremely selective in using the visual and performing arts as tools to improve student reading and writing comprehension. However, making time for the arts is never time wasted. I know from experience that these tools not only engage my students but also enhance their learning and provide opportunities for discussion and collaboration. Through my research, I am now convinced that giving my students markers and art paper is never busy work and asking them to stage a dramatic performance is more than a mere classroom activity. Using many of the standards for both the visual and performing arts will enhance the reading comprehension of my students by requiring them to apply their visualization skills as well as their verbal ones. In fact, integrating the arts into my ELA curriculum will guarantee a more multimodal approach to student learning.

## Endnotes

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**Curriculum Unit Title**

Using the Arts to Improve Student Reading Comprehension

**Author**

Anne Marie Esposito

**KEY LEARNING, ENDURING UNDERSTANDING, ETC.**

Good writers use specific literary techniques to help readers better understand character, conflict, and theme. Filmmakers use specific cinematic techniques to help viewers better understand character, point of view, conflict, and theme. Good readers use text to help them create their own pictures of characters, setting, and plot complication so they can better understand or interpret character motivation, conflict, and theme.

**ESSENTIAL QUESTION(S) for the UNIT**

How does a good writer use specific literary techniques to help readers better understand character, conflict, and theme? How does a good filmmaker use specific cinematic techniques to help viewers better understand character, point of view, conflict, and theme? How do good readers use their visualization skills and dramatization skills to help them better understand and interpret character motivation, conflict, and theme?

**CONCEPT A**

Visualization Techniques

**CONCEPT B**

Interpreting Cinematic Techniques

**CONCEPT C**

Theatrical Elements

**ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS A**

How does a good writer use specific literary techniques to help readers better understand character, conflict, and theme?

**ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS B**

How does a good filmmaker use specific cinematic techniques to help viewers better understand character, point of view, conflict, and theme?

**ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS C**

How do good readers use their visualization and dramatization skills to help them better understand and interpret character motivation, conflict, and theme?

**VOCABULARY A**

Diction, syntax, imagery

**VOCABULARY A**

Diegetic and non-diegetic sounds, camera angle, long shot, close up, choreography, cinematography

**VOCABULARY A**

Tableau, monologue, soliloquy, pantomime, dramaturge, chorus

**ADDITIONAL INFORMATION/MATERIAL/TEXT/FILM/RESOURCES**

Franco Zeffirelli's *Romeo & Juliet* and Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo & Juliet*

*To Kill a Mockingbird*, starring Gregory Peck