

Nurturing students' love of learning through the use of comics, daily diaries and visual art journaling in the classroom

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Introduction and Rationale

“Comic books have the potential to ignite the interest of young readers, as materials to be both consumed and constructed.” Jason DeHart, article “Using Comic Books for Serious Learning” on the Edutopia website, August 27, 2019

In an elementary classroom many ideas and much information is learned by the students throughout the year. As an elementary teacher I must use strategies that will help my students understand what they are learning and be able then to show that they understand what they have learned. One article I read said, “the idea that there are different methods of ‘ingesting’ information and that differences between and across these methods can have a significant impact on a student’s learning is difficult to argue.”¹

It has been found that it is beneficial to use sketchnotes, graphic organizers, journals, and visual images to enable students to demonstrate complex concepts in a way that the wide variety of learners in the classroom access the information. “A 2016 study found that creating visual explanations improves learning.”² Everyone does not learn in the same way. Teachers are always looking for ways to help our students access all of the information in their classrooms.

Common Core State Standards are set up from Kindergarten where the concepts are introduced and scaffolded consistently through Third Grade. In our elementary classrooms students are learning at least 51 standards for English Language Arts broken down into Reading: Literature, Reading: Informational Text, Reading: Foundational Skills, Writing, Speaking/Listening, and Language. That is a lot of standards for my 7 and 8 year-olds to learn! However even with the introduction, scaffolding, and progression that has been set up, many students continue to struggle even into middle and high school.

As a teacher I began to ask myself why are so many of my students lacking in their academic skills. I think a lot of it comes back to the “rigor” required of the Common Core State Standards. Too often the students are moved through the expectations without reaching mastery. They are being introduced to the concepts and practice them briefly, but then are asked to move onto the next concept without working toward proficiency much less mastery.

In addition to the conceptual hurdles needed to be met within the standards, our current curriculum does not meet the needs of many of our district’s students. Currently we do not have a set curriculum for English/Language Arts. Teachers need to find supplemental materials on their own. This means that curricula vary from teacher to teacher and from school to school. This also means that not all students are receiving the same rigorous instruction.

I have also noticed through my teaching that my students have a definite lack of willingness to exercise their imaginations. Many students today cannot visualize or picture things in their head. They are imaginative however, they are not given the opportunity to use or exercise their imaginative sides. Unfortunately in today's classroom our time is structured down to the minute. Students being able to conform to the quota get a lot more attention than those that use their creativity to learn in the classroom. Everything is given to them by their parents. They do not even problem solve when they come across a problem with a friend at recess. They do what is expected and do not use their creative side to try and make meaning from the items they are working on and using in the classroom. Parents today have become such "helicopter" parents that many children don't know how to think for themselves, which in turn, makes my job that much harder. As noted on Skillcrush.com "Creativity is something unique to each of us, and it has a lot more to do with how we understand the world and solve problems than churning out paintings or novels."³

When talking with my seminar leader at our unit meeting we talked about the importance of boredom in children. In this day and age too many children have their days scheduled to the minute and they do not know what to do with themselves when someone isn't telling them what to do. What is this? When we are young it is important to be able to fall back on our own resources and figure out how to deal with boredom. Children need to know how to occupy their time without an adult having to tell them they need to do this or that. Growing up my siblings and I would leave the house after breakfast during the summertime and wouldn't return home until lunch or possibly when the streetlights came on at night. My parents knew we were out playing and organizing our own time with friends and didn't feel the need to hover or know where we were every second of the day. Many parents today feel that the children need to do something constructive or worthy of the time. Many researches have been done that state children need to learn to self satisfy some of their needs. Let them explore and learn from their environment. Give them the time to learn from others and not from something you, the parent have said they have to do. Kids need down time, just like many adults do. They need to find hobbies that they like and not ones their parents have said they have to do. What are some good ways to structure those unstructured times? Give them art supplies, show them the library and have them take out books of interest, ride bikes, read, learn from the world around them. It will be better for them in the long run!

It is my hope that this unit will be used whole group. I hope to provide more practice and strategies to help them become more visual learners.

Demographics

My school, Wilmington Manor Elementary School, is located in New Castle, Delaware. It is part of the Colonial School District which is composed of a variety of students in terms of race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, English language ability, and special education classification. This is a small school, with about 335 students in grades K-5. There are three classrooms of second grade with my classroom being a Single Approach to Mastery (SAM). This year I have 17 students in my classroom, three special education students who have behavior as well as academic IEPs. I have had a student teacher from the University of Delaware since the

beginning of school however, she finishes in mid-November which means at that time I will be the only adult in the classroom with my students. All subjects are taught within my classroom, specifically, ELA (Reading and Writing), Math, Social Studies, and Science. Our schedule includes two intervention periods, one for Reading and one for Math. As with other schools in the district, we use the Response to Intervention (RTI) model for both reading and math.

There is a very high population of English Language Learners (ELL). 31% of students at Wilmington Manor are classified as ELL. Many of our students are their family's only English speaker. Many parents cannot read my notes or information/instructions that are sent home in English, and they are unable to help their students with work that is sent home in English. Within my own classroom, 18% of students are labeled Special Education. They are serviced within my classroom by me. 82% are Regular Education students that are also in my classroom, although many of these "regular" education students, 53%, are reading way below grade level in their reading. With such a diverse group of students my unit will include activities for all different levels of learners. Those students that work above grade level, on grade level, and below grade level all have equal opportunities to work toward proficiency in this unit.

Learning Objectives

In my unit, students will use journaling and comics to help them access stories that are read and used in class. They will also understand and use common core standards that address asking and answering questions pertaining to the stories that they have read. Students will be able to integrate and evaluate content that has been presented to them in diverse media and formats.

Delaware has adopted the Common Core State Standards for ELA and Math and the Next Generation Science Standards. I will be addressing the following Common Core State Standards:

My first objective is that my second graders will ask and answer questions such as who, what, where, when, why, and how to demonstrate understanding of key details in a text. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.2.1, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.2.1

My second objective is for students to be able to recount stories, including fables and folktales from diverse cultures, and determine their central message, lesson, or moral. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.2.2, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.2.2

The third and last objective will have the students will be able to integrate and evaluate content that is presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.7

My fourth and last objective is for students to recount or describe key ideas or details from a text read aloud or information presented orally or through other media. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.2.2

In this unit, my goal is to help my students become proficient at using journaling to help them understand what they read and do in English/Language Arts.

Essential Questions:

- What is visual journaling [sketchnoting] and how can we use it to evaluate the stories we are reading?
- What does it mean to find key ideas in the stories and answer questions about them?
- What is understanding and evaluating content presented to us in diverse media and formats?

Research Behind the Unit

Starting my research for this unit I had to first take a hard look at what my students were struggling within my classroom. I had to look for how they see the world that they interact with on a daily basis. Plus, see how they come to an understanding of what it is they are doing with their reading and writing assignments.

What I found was that almost all of the students cannot write more than one or two run-on sentences. Many of the sentences that they write do not show an understanding of the information that they are trying to access. My goal then became to find a way to help my students have a way of accessing the information that they are reading. I signed up for the seminar **Comics: Cartoons & Graphic Novels from the Inside Out**. I felt that maybe I could find out about using comics, cartoons, and graphic novels in my classroom and how that could possibly help my students gain an understanding of literature or informational text. My next thought was that by then applying what we learn in seminar to journal writing could be the next step in my students gaining the understanding that they need.

Comics have been used throughout history as a sort of sequential art that has been around since at least 1519 in a pre-Columbian picture Manuscript discovered by Cortes (McCloud, 1993)⁴ Comics have gone through many changes since then to arrive at what we see now when artists use them to tell a story.

During seminar we discussed varying artist and how what they used may help others understand something that they are doing. Ivan Brunetti is a cartoonist and comics scholar from Chicago, Illinois. We looked at and discussed his way of cartooning and the philosophy behind it. His book Cartooning: Philosophy and Practice⁵ was shown to us and used to show how “cartoons can be a practical means for creative self discovery and the exploration of complex ideas through the iconic visual language of comics”. As our seminar leader explained Brunetti has you drawing characters built out of simple shapes such as circles, triangles, and rectangles. The features would be minimal, limbs would be basic, and the patterns on the clothing would simple and without elaboration. Lynda Barry in her book *Syllabus* then explained that “in a classroom of students with varying levels of drawing experience this way of drawing brings us to a common starting place”.⁶

So using the ideas taken from Brunetti and Barry I began to think about how using drawing, cartooning, and journaling could be a benefit for my students. These journals could be a way of writing that is simple and helps students understand the images (stories) and words that they

encounter within the classroom setting. Students need to practice drawing simple images while listening. Many times students don't listen critically to stories that are read to them. Hopefully, having them draw while the teacher reads and asks questions could have them thinking critically.

Using the idea of a daily diary that Lynda Barry suggests in her book *Syllabus* enables us "to hear, see, and remember the world around you".⁷ Many times people are not "present" in the moment. They don't notice what is going on around them. Doing this type of journal daily will help them see and notice the little things. This sort of daily diary can be found in the appendix to be used in a composition notebook daily within the classroom.

"The basic definition of visual literacy is the ability to read, write and create visual images."⁸ This is a concept that relates to art but also includes language, communication and interaction. It is a tool that we can use to navigate through our world. Students get a lot of their information through a mixture of written text and pictures. They need to be able to process this information in a way that brings meaning to them. "One of the most effective ways to encourage information to make that important jump from the limited short-term memory to the more powerful long-term memory is to pair text with images. Studies show that we retain approximately 10-20% of written or spoken information, but around 65% of information when it is presented visually."⁹ Is it any surprise that using visuals to enhance understanding should be something that we are doing within our classroom.

Putting pencil to paper helps people remember and comprehend information. Sketchnoting, then, becomes a valuable learning tool in the classroom. Students become better at processing what they have read and make connections to something they have already learned. It gives them a space to organize their thoughts and can give them the confidence they need to participate during the discussions in the classroom. "Many teachers find that students come to appreciate the benefits of journaling."¹⁰

Combining the idea of visual literacy and journals in a sort of art journal could be beneficial to students who don't learn in a typical visual and auditory way. It could stimulate the multiple intelligences in a typical classroom. "Effective use of art in the classroom can bridge learning across all of the multiple intelligences and benefit all types of learners."¹¹ Many times students who have trouble verbalizing their ideas can use art as a different way to express their ideas. There are many elements of a child's development that can be enhanced by art. For example, being able to make good judgements is an essential life skill. "Art has the ability to teach essential life lessons and so it too should be an essential subject at all levels of education."¹² What this means for students in the classroom is that children who are able to use art are able to communicate without having to be very proficient writers. Art then stimulates their minds and encourages them to try different forms to express themselves with. Students can't draw something "wrong" because sketchnoting is very accepting. It allows them to express themselves in a medium that is an additional possibility to use instead of a purely verbal or written response.

As teachers begin to use daily diaries, visual literacy journals, and cartoons in the classroom they may start to see students emerging with their own style. The more they draw the more their style becomes clear, it becomes a style that is unique to them and recognizable to others. Another exercise that Lynda Brady suggests is called "X-page exercises". When doing this you open your

journal to a blank two page spread. On one side you start with a dot and then spiral a line around it. You keep going, trying to get the lines as close together as possible without letting them touch. On the other page you number one through ten from top to bottom. This is an exercise in concentration relaxation. While they work the teacher can recite a poem or story. When the teacher finishes they tell the students to think back to an early time when they were younger and picture something from that time that is associated with the word they are going to say. The teacher is then going to name a noun. The teacher tells them they have two minutes to list as many things as they can remember on the numbered one through ten page. After the two minutes is up ask them to read over their list and circle the one that stand out most to them. They will then turn the page and write the circled memory at the top of the blank page. This will be the title of the story they are about to write. They now have to picture themselves in the image that stands out to them. This seems to be a good way to get them to find a way to come up with ideas for writing when they become stuck.

The use of crayons and colored pencils is important when using journals and daily diaries. This could be a way for the students to show their unique style within the journals. Also giving students different times to try and complete activities gives them practice in how to get to the important parts if they only have a set amount of minutes to complete something.

Writing things down are important to listening and remembering. Lynda Barry discussed using a four panel daily diary format. The idea for this is to draw four pictures or scenes from one day in your life. She states to do this for at least four minutes or at least one minute on each panel although you can use more time if you feel like you need it. The idea of this is to “show” what you experienced during the day. Can this help some students who struggle with getting their ideas down in sentence form? Why yes, I believe it can!

Another idea Lynda Barry discusses in her book Syllabus is the use of a final project at the end of the year to showcase what you have done for the year in the form of a fictional story, autobiography, or a mix-up of both.. This project would have a title page, then it moves into two pages per story item. On the left page is a visual element that should go with the story elements on the right side of the page. Her idea is to enforce the idea that they are building a book versus just writing a book. She says, “ get them to think of it as building something- letting it take accumulated shape of action- a record of sincere contact with the image world”.¹³

Classroom Strategies

This unit will be based on the struggles my second graders have encountered in their English/Language Arts curriculum. The strategies we will be using is the use of visual art journals or Daily Diaries in our reading and writing lessons.

Our class will be reading stories of fiction and nonfiction. I usually read the story to them, then we read it chorally as a class, finally they either whisper read it or read it with a partner. By doing my reading this way I ensure that my lower level reading students hear it once with me reading it, then with as many of their classmates for that second reading and finally they have the chance to “read” it on their own. I always tell my students that a good reader reads a story at least two times, if not more!

Incorporating the visual journals and daily diaries gives my students who may not be strong readers a chance to use their drawing skills to make meaning of the stories that we are reading and practice “writing”. Many struggle with getting ideas down on paper when it comes to writing. Incorporating these activities could be beneficial to those students.

Speaking and Listening is also part of Common Core Standards so using these journals and diaries as a springboard for discussions would help with this standard. Students would be able to “think, pair, share” with elbow partners, do group shares, and gallery walks around the classroom to look at other students’ journals.

Unit/Classroom Activities

These are activities designed to be used in a whole group setting but could be used in small groups during intervention time if reinforcement is needed. They could be used as a pre-teaching before starting a unit or as a re-teaching after lack of mastery on a formative or summative assessment.

Before beginning each of the activities there are journal pages that can be printed for each student created in the appendixes. These can be copied or done within composition books. This would be at the discretion of the teacher. By creating a journal for each student you will have a place for students to write and think during ELA instruction

Classroom Activities

Activity 1: Visual Art Journal

This multi-day lesson introduces sharing of the visual art journal. Students need to know the terms sketch noting and visual in order to be successful. Students will be able to (1) integrate and evaluate content that is presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words and (2) ask and answer questions such as who, what, where, when, why, and how to demonstrate understanding of key details in a text.

To begin, ask students if they have ever heard of sketch noting or a visual art journal. As explained on Sketchnoting.com sketch noting is “is a form of note-taking, hence the “noting” part of it, but as you might guess it involves bringing more visuals into the process compared to typical note-taking, hence the “sketch” part.”¹⁴ Have students turn to their elbow partners and tell one thing that would be good about drawing information. You can make a chart with the ideas they discussed.

Using the copied journal or a composition book. Have students open to a blank page. Pick one of the stories you are using in the classroom for the unit you are working on. For example my class was reading a nonfiction on bees which we have read together twice before. Tell the students as you read you want them to draw ideas that sound important to them as you read.

Once you are done reading, have the students turn to an elbow partner or have them do a gallery walk around the desks to look at what everyone else drew while you read to the class. Have them share out one interesting drawing they saw or noticed.

Activity 2: Daily Diary

Activity 2 features sharing of the daily diary format. In order for students to be successful, they should be familiar with the terms diary, daily, did, saw, heard, and drawing. Students will be able to (1) integrate and evaluate content that is presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words and (2) to recount or describe key ideas or details from a text read aloud or information presented orally or through other media. This activity could be done daily at the end of each lesson, or at the discretion/timeline of the teacher.

Ask students if they know what a diary is and how it is used. Create an anchor chart with the details found on Appendix C to show what will be required on their diary page. Tell the students you will set the timer for 10 minutes and during the time they need to complete each section of the diary.

Hand out the diary page or go to their composition book and set up the diary page. Set the timer. During that time you will want to write as well so that students see you think this an important activity to do.

When the timer goes off have the students who would like to share give one item they added to their daily page. You can also have them share with an elbow buddy, find a friend, or do a gallery walk around the desks.

Activity 3: Cartooning in the classroom/ Spontaneous drawing

In Activity 3, the doodle or foundation of cartoons is discovered. Students will learn the vocabulary doodling, cartoon, simplest, and convey. Students will be able to (1) ask and answer questions such as who, what, where, when, why, and how to demonstrate understanding of key details in a text (2) to recount or describe key ideas or details from a text read aloud or information presented orally or through other media. This activity can be done each day at the end of day or on days that you need them.

Ask students if they know what cartoons are and where you find them. Talk about doodling and how they are simple drawings that represent something or the meaning of something.

Hand out a blank sheet of paper or have the students take out their composition books that they use for visual art journals or daily diaries. First you will tell them they have three to four minutes to draw a car. When the timer goes off tell them they now have 2 minutes to draw another car. You will start over and draw the car for one minute, 30 seconds, 15 seconds and finally five seconds. They will need to draw faster each time which means they are drawing the entire car within the time allotted. You can repeat this for other items such as a house, a dog, or a self portrait. Have the students compare the drawings. How do they look when they had more time compared to the time that was short and quick?

Do the students grasp the idea that with the quickest doodle we get closer to the quality of the “idea” of the thing being drawn? We get to see what essentially becomes comics at times. Students should be surprised to see that the doodle actually can communicate the important information about something.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I found this unit very informative and helpful for my second-grade classroom. The seminar topic interested me and my seminar leader really showed me which direction I needed to go in my research and really helped me to understand mathematics at a deeper level. It helped to understand that many of my students misconceptions and misunderstandings can be helped with deeper discussions and breaking things down into parts.

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Ideas:

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Rhode, Mike. *The Sketchnote Handbook: the illustrated guide to visual note taking*, Peachpit Press; 1 edition (December 13, 2012)

Appendix A

Common Core: Second Grade English/Language Arts

Common Core: Reading: Literature Standards

Key Ideas and Details: CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.2.1

Ask and answer such questions as who, what, where, when, why, and how to demonstrate understanding of key details in a text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.2.2 Recount stories, including fables and folktales from diverse cultures, and determine their central message, lesson, or moral.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas: CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.2.7

Use information gained from the illustrations and words in a print or digital text to demonstrate understanding of its characters, setting, or plot.

Common Core: Speaking and Listening CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.2.2 Recount or describe key ideas or details from a text read aloud or information presented orally or through other media

Appendix B

Visual Journal for student use: one copy needed for each student or a composition book can be set up as a journal

_____ 's Journal

Blank primary writing paper template with ten sets of handwriting lines. Each set consists of a solid top line, a dashed middle line, and a solid bottom line.

Appendix C

This can be printed for each student on the days it is used or it can be given as a reference for a composition book.

Daily Diary: date _____

DID	SAW
1.	1.
2.	2.
3.	3.
4.	4.
5.	5.
6.	6.
7.	7.

HEARD

DRAWING

Appendix C

Blank page for Doodling

Student Name _____

Notes

¹ TeachThoughtStaff & Jackie Gerstein, <https://www.teachthought.com/pedagogy:https://www.teachthought.com/pedagogy/8-strategies-to-make-learning>, 2019

² TeachThoughtStaff & Jackie Gerstein, <https://www.teachthought.com/pedagogy:https://www.teachthought.com/pedagogy/8-strategies-to-make-learning>, 2019

³ Elevate Network, <https://skillcrush.com/2018/08/17/am-i-creative/>, 2019

⁴ McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, 1993

⁵ Brunetti, *Cartooning: Philosophy and Practice*, 2011

⁶ Barry, *Syllabus*, 2014

⁷ Barry, *Syllabus*, 2014

⁸ Donnchaidh, *Literacy Ideas for Teachers and Student*, 2019

⁹ Donnchaidh, *Literacy Ideas for Teachers and Student*, 2019

¹⁰ Schweighofer, *The Benefits of Journaling in the Classroom*, 2017

¹¹ Flory, *Exploring the Benefits of Art in Elementary Education*, 2007

¹² Flory, *Exploring the Benefits of Art in Elementary Education*, 2007

¹³ Barry, *Syllabus*, 2014

¹⁴ Elevate Network, <https://skillcrush.com/2018/08/17/am-i-creative/>, 2019