

Art as a Way of Learning

Art-based learning strategies bring new curriculum standards to life.



Seven Oaks Elementary, Odenton, Maryland

While art is an incredibly engaging discipline with content, skills, and standards, it also encompasses so much more. Creating and responding to art requires deep thinking—observational strategies and creative-reflective processes—that develops a set of success tools. Principals across the country

have embraced art-infused education as a successful strategy for increasing relevance and rigor across the curriculum. What started in many schools as a tool to enrich student writing has grown into art-based learning strategies of observing, questioning, creating, and reflecting that connect with every subject and bring new curriculum standards to life.

Not a New Burden

Many teachers feel overwhelmed with so many new mandates, including new standards and high-stakes testing required by states and districts. Their initial reaction to anything new is often “Please, not more ...” Yet Tara Minter and Dwayne Little, principal and resident principal of Rosa Parks Elementary School in Hyattsville, Maryland, found that using artful thinking strategies helped their teachers implement the new Common Core standards.

Inspired by the commitment to arts integration made by Prince George’s County Schools Superintendent Kevin Maxwell, the school developed a three-year plan to help every classroom teacher feel comfortable using artful thinking strategies. “Our creative leadership team, led by our art teacher, Eileen Cave, is providing professional development and coaching so classroom teachers can see how art integration brings Common Core to life,” Little explains. “It is true art integration when both the Common Core standards and the new Core Art Standards are being met.”

Todd Fraley, principal of Horace Mann Elementary in Sedalia, Missouri, agrees that asking teachers to use art as



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Redwood Heights Elementary, Oakland, California; Seven Oaks Elementary, Odenton, Maryland; Country Oaks Elementary, LaBelle, Florida; Redwood Heights Elementary, Oakland, California

a cross-curricular teaching strategy can't be perceived as a new burden.

"When I first heard about art-infused teaching, I thought 'Art is a vehicle I don't know how to drive,' which I'm sure many other principals feel too," Fraley says. "Then I saw the impact art integration had on student motivation and literacy achievement. I was a quick convert." Fraley continues, "I have seen incredible impact on ELL and Title I students who needed high-risk reading intervention. These art-based thinking strategies are really accomplishing our objectives."

Keep It Simple

Artful thinking, visual thinking strategies, or art-infused education—whatever your professional learning community chooses to call it—simplifies the demands on teachers because academic rigor and building 21st century skills are embedded in these art-integrated, cross-curricular projects. "We decided to use art not only as a rich subject area on its own,

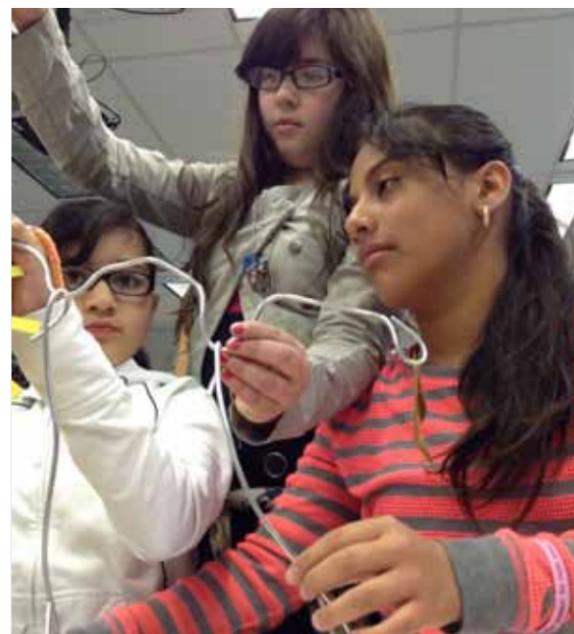


but as a fundamental tool that brings new perspectives to students across all subjects," says Sara Stone, principal of Redwood Heights Elementary School in Oakland, California.

When Stone's students look at art, teachers ask them three questions that deepen student thinking:

- What do you see?
- Why do you say that?
- What else does the art tell you?

This simple protocol of asking three consistent questions helps teachers



understand what students are thinking and helps students articulate how their observations become the basis for more inquiry. The result is deeper learning that students help shape.

"In the 21st century, we have moved to an evidence-based culture. Our Redwood students are now much more intentional about their comments because they know they will be asked for evidence," Stone reports. "And this simple three-question process makes sure teachers extract insights from students, building stronger student-inquiry skills."

Literacy and Beyond

The three-question inquiry process works across many academic subjects, making it easy for teachers to adopt. For example, Redwood Heights Elementary teachers found it natural to weave social studies into the art-based inquiry by asking students to examine the cultural and historic context of each painting to answer the three questions.

Science and math are other classes where you can observe teachers and students using the inquiry process. After all, science is based on observation and evidence-based deductions, which aligns with the questioning technique. And "in math, the Common Core tells us not just to seek one right answer, but help students consider multiple ways of solving problems," Stone says. "The series of questions is useful in considering other perspectives. ... It is the same three questions that work in every subject."

Stone's entire faculty now uses art-infused teaching strategies. The school's creative leadership team, comprised of teacher-leaders immersed in using visual thinking strategies, coach colleagues in this art-infused technique. "It has now become part of our daily practice for every teacher in our school," Stone says. "When teachers saw that reluctant learners were leaning forward

New National Arts Standards

The new National Arts Standards are now ready. Replacing the 1994 art standards, these new standards were designed to inspire and inform. Urge your art teacher to share a summary of the new standards at an upcoming faculty meeting, and use them to spark discussions about why and how art deepens student learning.

The new standards provide practical insights that validate and build on what effective teachers are already doing—and stretch them to think of arts' contributions to learning in deeper ways. A faculty-wide discussion of arts standards will lead to authentic arts integration and enrich the use of art as a way of learning. Here's what's new:

"BIG IDEAS" FRAMEWORK. In keeping with the broader educational context today, the standards' framework includes Philosophical Foundations, Lifelong Goals, Enduring Understandings, Essential Questions, Anchor Standards, and Model Cornerstone Assessments.

ARTISTIC PROCESS. The standards are organized around the four artistic processes of Creating; Presenting/Performing/Producing; Responding; and Connecting. The parallels to learning processes in the Common Core are intentional.

UNIFORMITY ACROSS ALL ART DISCIPLINES. The standards were written by the National Coalition for Core Arts Standards, an alliance of arts education organizations that include the State Education Agency Directors of Arts Education, National Art Education Association, National Association for Music Education, National Dance Education Organization, National Media Arts Representatives, American Alliance for Theatre and Education, the College Board, and Young Audiences. The standards' conceptual framework and anchor standards are uniform across all the arts disciplines, while reflecting specific qualities and characteristics for each art form: visual art, music, dance, theater, and media arts.

ANCHOR STANDARDS. Eleven anchor standards are consistent for all five arts disciplines, with the performance standards being unique to each art form. For example, an anchor standard within presenting is "Select, analyze, and interpret artistic work for presentation" and within connecting is "Relate artistic ideas and words with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding."

MODEL CORNERSTONE ASSESSMENTS. Examples of how the arts standards can be assessed are included to help educators construct authentic assessments of students' work.

For more information, visit www.arteducators.org.

and contributing strong insights based on their observations, they realized that classic lecture techniques were not as effective as asking students to think and create like artists do."

Less Prep, More Relevance

Stone proudly reports that during a recent instructional rounds tour, where she and other principals visited each other's schools, Redwood Heights Elementary was recognized for the ease with which teachers responded to student ideas and made the content relevant. Stone credits the three-question protocol with how fluent her teachers are in changing gears and responding

to children's insights and inquiries.

In the schools the principals observed, many of the teachers spent prep hours crafting the perfect questions to help students reach higher in Bloom's Taxonomy. "My teachers have learned that no amount of prep time will prepare them for the robust insights children bring to lessons," Stone observed.

Redwood Heights Elementary's "secret sauce" is finding that authentic deeper questions flow organically from student-led, art-based discourse and that keeping to the consistent three-question protocol means less prep time and more relevance. □