

Make Thinking Visible

Art helps learners see multiple perspectives

How can visualizing a situation from another's perspective change the story? How does illustrating historical events increase relevance and engagement? What moves students from memorizing facts to connecting big ideas that enable them to see how historical patterns pertain to current civics issues? Educators should challenge traditional approaches and reimagine the role of art in helping students see other perspectives.

Breaking the Master Narrative

"Historical facts can be perceived very differently depending on whose lens is used," said Jennifer Bond, principal of Ocean Knoll Elementary in Encinitas, California. Art-infused social studies projects help the school's fifth-graders visualize the American Revolution from the perspective of soldiers starving at Valley Forge. This adds a depth of understanding students do not have when they focus on the commander, sitting tall upon a horse. "We want to go beyond conventional approaches and ask students to re-explore history by looking at how others might see the story," Bond explained.

Art educator Lissa Corona noted that "sketching a different picture

than is normally seen helps students (many of whom had not previously been engaged in history lessons) lean forward and imagine what it would have been like to be soldier—just a few years older than they are—trying to survive on soup made from boiled boot leather." Previously, teachers at each grade level would focus on the scope and sequence of textbook-driven history lessons, often integrating writing into social studies. "But when we infuse art, students visualize the role of government and citizen participation in new ways. They see the less-visible people who are affected by decisions," Bond shared.

Helping students make their

thinking visible is an effective teaching strategy used across all grade levels at Ocean Knoll Elementary. Sixth-graders read *Among the Hidden* and consider the fate of underrepresented communities. Teachers pose questions about how policies affect the story's characters and what lessons are applicable today. Fourth-graders study the Spanish Exploration Age by visualizing multiple perspectives of land ownership—not just the settlers' or missionaries', but also that of the indigenous people. When students study battles, they look at objectives from various perspectives and consider what long-term impact might have occurred if the battles had ended differently.



Perry Drew Elementary School, East Windsor, New Jersey



Ocean Knoll School, Encinitas, California

This shift from studying only the “master narrative”—the story that is traditionally taught from the dominant society perspective—to looking at many narratives, including those individuals who historically have been less visible, is intentional and impactful. Many students feel as if they don’t have a voice when they don’t see their ancestors’ stories in classic history texts. The multiliteracies approach, using art and writing to give voice to historical figures who aren’t typically seen, deepens understanding of the era and reveals patterns of social injustice.

“Our students compose handwritten letters that are illustrated with the scenes they would have experienced as a slave, servant, or soldier,

which explores history from alternative perspectives,” Corona explained. She reminds principals that “art teachers are experts at teaching perspective and helping students realize that visuals look very different when a new perspective is taken. A birds-eye view of a battlefield is very different from how it looks from the trenches. History isn’t only about those who triumph.”

Visually juxtaposing images helps students see history in new ways and helps them connect the past with current events. Ideas around power, racism, exploitation, and unintended consequences flow from students as they research those who have been forgotten. Students draw upon—and literally draw—their newfound

insights. Corona said that when students present their work from these projects, “the depth of thought and honesty is stirring. They realize that art is not about passive beauty, but is an exchange of ideas between the artist and viewer that is only successful when it moves them both to see in new ways.”

Visual Journaling

Visual journaling is another teaching strategy that effectively helps learners—both adults and students—see in new ways. The act of close observation while engaging with source material is intellectually rigorous. Teachers at Chabot Elementary in Castro Valley, California, have been building their own creative capacity and then applying the insights to instructional practices.

“Educators talk and read about authentic assessment all the time, but when teachers create visuals that demonstrate their deeper understanding, they have the epiphany that visualizing science or social studies brings content to life,” said principal Vivienne Paratore. During professional learning sessions, Chabot teachers sketch, often stretching beyond their comfort zone. “Then they realize that the drawings enable them to see what each other is thinking. They reflect

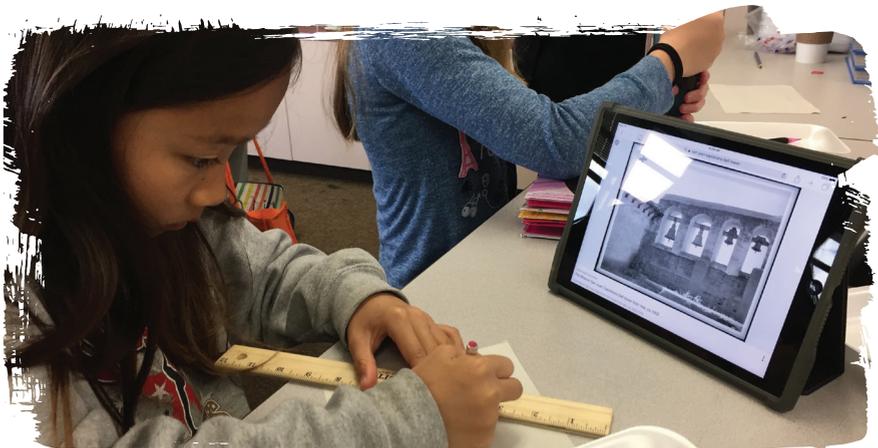


Brooklyn Park Elementary School, Baltimore, Maryland

on how artistic studio habits of mind build understanding and provide formative assessment opportunities,” Paratore added.

Providing art experiences in teacher workshops has moved teachers away from doing “cotton ball crafts” to rigorous art-infused projects in which the visuals convey original thought. Teachers apply their firsthand experience to instructional practices. For example, fourth-graders are creating “unconventional portraits” of historical leaders, in which the images convey historical context and show the person’s personality.

According to Jason Engelund, who leads the school’s art-infused professional development, the mantra for both teachers and students is “Don’t copy the standard stereotypical image. Visually show us what you think.” The key message he tells teachers and hears them repeat in classrooms is “build upon the context you know, and create something new that shows us your original thoughts.” Paratore reported that this approach has added more than arts integration to their school: “We now have alternative forms of assessment and a culture of risk-taking that enables teachers and students to discuss whether or not their art meets their objectives and how they can learn from mishaps.”



Ocean Knoll School, Encinitas, California

Visible Thinking

Making thinking visible makes learning interactive and adventurous. During a professional development session in 2016, teachers from Perry L. Drew Elementary in East Windsor, New Jersey, participated in a gallery walk to examine each other’s artwork. They realized that creating visuals, then exploring each other’s images and the thoughts behind the art, were ways to differentiate instruction for learners. Remembering the gallery walk so vividly, teachers decided to bring this deeper sense of ownership to students’ learning experiences. So they challenged the tradition of teacher-designed bulletin boards and transformed the school’s hallways into student-designed interactive displays.

Students use the design-thinking process to collaboratively create and

modify learning games that fill these active learning galleries. They design problem-solving challenges that other students explore as they navigate the hallways. Layers of learning unfold as this schoolwide project comes to life.

According to principal Robert Dias, many of his students have never been to a museum, but now they’re taking on the roles of exhibit curator, designer, and problem-solver. “The level of responsibility they have embraced is inspiring,” reported Dias. “They are not just passive consumers of content. They’re thoughtfully planning how to convey the main ideas to other students in ways that are interactive and memorable. The topics of these visually rich learning games range from explorers’ sailing ships to graffiti word walls. The consistent thread is that students plan how to convey meaning visually and engage others in an interactive learning experience. “It’s refreshing to see how students assess their own work and self-correct to adjust to their peers’ ideas,” Dias explained. “I have the opportunity to see what they are thinking. This lens provides much more information than any test or textbook quiz ever could.”



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