



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
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Using High-Interest Artwork to Make Observations, Inferences, and Connections

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Rationale

While reading the headline of a front-page news story, we already have some educated assumptions about what the article will say because we can infer. While watching an emotional movie, we can make connections to the main character without much effort. While watching a political debate, we can use the evidence we have gathered to make an educated decision on which candidate to vote for. But what if our high school students cannot perform these tasks, which seem rudimentary for us? Once our students have reached high school and have not mastered these literacy skills, how do we teach them in a way that makes sense?

I teach under-credited and overage "juniors" and "seniors" at New Horizons School for Higher Achievement in New Haven, Connecticut. My students have been placed in our alternative high school for reasons of truancy, criminal records (court-ordered students), childcare issues, and serious behavior issues. Many do not have parental involvement in their lives, so the state is their guardian, or they live on their own. Many of them live in poverty-ridden and violence induced neighborhoods and find school to be their only "safe-haven." Most all students fall way below their reading/writing grade levels, so schoolwork is difficult and frustrating. My job is to teach the New Haven junior and senior English curriculum at an appropriate level, so none of my students feel over- or under-challenged, which is quite difficult when I have a class of fifteen students and reading/writing levels vary from "grade 2" through "post-high school." Another huge challenge is their truancy issues. In my class of fifteen I may only see the same three students every other day, so the units and lessons I plan cannot span over a couple days because I will only be forced to play "catch-up" each day with the students who walk into the classroom after three days of being absent. It is vital I am mindful of these issues and plan accordingly, so my students can positively benefit from their education.

My students are in need of building upon their literacy skills. With poor reading and comprehension levels in my classroom, it is difficult to read short stories, poems, novels, or analyze a film. My students (juniors and seniors) are close to graduation. Most do not go on to earn a higher level of education, so I feel solely responsible for what my students absorb in their last couple of years of education. My job is to prepare my students the best I can for what their future holds: jobs, parenthood, and living as productive citizens. I believe if I am not able to teach my students these key literacy skills, I have failed. This unit will help me help them to feel more confident about being confronted with different media (i.e. novels, movies, commercials,

advertisements, newspapers, etc.).

What my students do not realize is how good they actually are at making inferences, drawing conclusions, and making connections. These are their daily survival skills. Most all of my students live in dangerous neighborhoods, so they are forced to analyze each situation they find themselves in and figure out what to do. For example, if a female student of mine is walking down the street and sees a group of men with dark clothing and hoods over their heads, that student will infer something dangerous is about to happen and draw the conclusion that she must quickly get out of the situation. My students also are good at making connections with their peers—it is how they figure out who they can befriend and who they have no desire to speak to. My job is to point out the skills my students already have and bring those skills into the classroom when dealing with different media.

My unit "Using High Interest Artwork to Make Observations, Inferences, and Connections" will consist of multiple lessons based on making inferences, using information, drawing conclusions, making connections, and using evidence. Each literacy skill will be incorporated into multiple lessons, and each lesson will focus on a piece of artwork.

What is "Making Observations?"

Making observations is a rudimentary skill, which students need to master in order to conduct deeper analysis of any piece of work. When you ask students to make observations, they need to simply list facts ("What do you see?") Many times, students like to give more than a factual observation, so teaching them to only list facts when viewing a piece of work is vital. For example, when asking students to make observations of the classroom, the following list is a prime example of making observations.

1. Blue door
2. Carpet flooring
3. 12 desks
4. Green chalk board
5. 2 windows

What is "Making Inferences?"

Making inferences is a vital skill for students to gain confidence in doing. Making inferences consists of making educated assumptions about a piece of work without having all of the information. For example, if a master of inferencing was to turn on the news and read the headline "One Dies in Car Crash," he would not need all the information to understand that there was an accident involving a car, which resulted in the death of one person. Students, who cannot infer, will not be able to make educated assumptions about the news story

unless given all the information.

What is "Making Connections?"

Making connections seems simple to many people, but can be difficult for students who do not feel any connection to the work they are reading/viewing. It is easy to show students an image of a dog and ask them to connect to the image. Many students will have a personal connection to the dog and will share a short story. However, when students are given a lengthy novel, which may include themes that may seem unrelated to their lives, students do not feel connected in any way. Asking students to find connections can be difficult, but is necessary. Students should master the art of learning how to relate to different situations, so they can become more open-minded and further educated about worldly issues.

Why Artwork?

In teaching "reading skills," one might ask why artwork? Artwork, like short stories or poems, allows us the opportunity to view/read a story much more quickly than a novel. A piece of artwork can be visually exciting and may interest my students more than a novel. Also, since this unit is being taught in conjunction with other units, the artwork breaks up the constant reading mode students become tired of in English class. Artwork requires the same elements of comprehension that a text requires, so artwork is just a different, sometimes more exciting mode for learning the skills necessary to read and comprehend text. Using artwork also allows me to create short activities, which only require one class period. Given the attendance issue I deal with, this unit greatly supports the way in which I need to plan to help my students be successful in my class.

Unit Objectives and Overview

By the end of this unit, all of my students should be able to make observations, inferences, and connections to pieces of artwork. They will not only be able to perform these tasks in isolation, but they will then be able to create a storyline for the images.

Also, my students should be able to understand theme within a piece of artwork and make text-to-text connections, text-to-self connections, and text-to-world connections. These connections also highlight the necessary skills my students need to have in March when they are taking CAPT. These skills are also necessary to accomplish in order to meet the goals of the Common Core State Standards. Students will be able to create parallels from artwork to short stories and novels. Their overall goal is to master these three skills and then apply them to all text they see, hear, and/or read.

As we become experienced viewers of artwork, I will ask my students to form literature circles and engage in whole class discussions. The purpose for this sequence is because in the past, my students feel more

comfortable working independently, whether it is due to fear of rejection or fear of being wrong, they historically do not discuss personal reactions well. I need to make sure my students have had practice with this material and have a chance to receive positive feedback from me before they can feel comfortable sharing as a class. So, in the beginning of the unit, I will ask students to independently fill out worksheets based on a piece of artwork we are viewing. Then, as time goes on, I will ask students to, in groups, discuss the artwork and write down their observations, inferences, and connections together. They can then share out to their peers in whole group discussions once they feel they have mastered the skills.

This unit will not be taught in isolation. These lessons will take up 15–20 minutes of each class period for four days a week, lasting two weeks. The rest of the class period will be devoted to other objectives students must meet for the year. However, this unit will aid other activities, such as reading novels. I will ask my students to apply what they are learning with the artwork to novels, poems, short stories, and films we read/view. While some may believe these skills can simply be embedded into a novel's unit, my students need to learn independent skills directly and concretely before being able to apply them abstractly.

Lesson Example

I will ask my students to view a piece of artwork, such as *The Electric Chair* by Andy Warhol (Silk-screen print, c1971). I will ask them to use the image in order to make observations. They will need to simply list facts. After they are able to make observations, they will need to make an inference. Their inference needs to be based in facts. Their inferences cannot be completely made up, but should be based off of the factual observations they made. Finally, they will find connections from their life to the artwork, real life to the artwork, and other artwork, movies, or literature to the artwork. This can be done in a variety of ways. One way I will use is asking students to put themselves into the artwork and telling a story. This will allow them to connect to the piece and pretend they are involved in the artwork instead of distanced from it.

Choosing the Artwork

In choosing the artwork to use for this unit, I realized I needed to make sure my students' interests were taken into consideration. No matter what class this unit is being used in, the teacher must think about what interests his/her students. Second, I chose artwork that has enough to discuss in terms of the unit's objectives. I chose evoking and interesting artwork with the focus of people instead of landscapes, since this will work best. However, depending on different classes and different students, different types of artwork may be more appropriate. It is vital to know your audience.

This is a list of the artwork, which is appropriate for my students' interests and needs:

These three pieces will open up the unit:

The Blacksmith's Shop —Joseph Wright, 1771

This piece was chosen due to its ability to tell a story. There is a lot to observe and it is rather easy to make an inference. It is important to begin the unit with a piece of artwork the students will not find intimidating.

Students should recognize each individual in the piece, what the characters are doing, the bright light, and the sparks flying. These few observations will help my students piece together a good inference. A worksheet to accompany this image will consist of the following:

Observations—Use the information to make factual observations (what do you see?)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.

Inferences—Use the information from above to help you make educated inferences.

1. Who is the most important character? Explain how you know
2. Why are the young boys present? Explain how you know
3. What kind of work is being done? Explain how you know.

The Jolly Flat Boat Men —Thomas Doney, 1847

This piece was chosen because of its humorous nature. The students will find this comical and feel connected to the piece. They can relate to pleasure and will easily observe the different items in this piece.

Students should notice each man, the setting (trees and water), the shirt, and the raft. These few observations

will help my students piece together a good inference. A worksheet to accompany this image will consist of the following:

Observations—Use the information to make factual observations (what do you see?)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.

Inferences—Use the information from above to help you make educated inferences.

4. What character is the center of attention? Explain how you know.
5. What are these men doing? Explain how you know.
6. Where is the man all the way to the right looking? Explain how you know.

Rail Shooting on the Delaware —Thomas Eakins, 1876

This piece was chosen because it becomes a little harder to observe. Gradually, the artwork becomes more difficult, so students' skills can build. The relationship between the two characters is interesting, so students' inferences should make way for fruitful discussion.

Students should recognize then men, their guns, the setting (on a boat), and the position of both men. These few observations will help my students piece together a good inference. A worksheet to accompany this image will consist of the following:

Observations—Use the information to make factual observations (what do you see?)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.

Inferences—Use the information from above to help you make educated inferences.

1. Who is the most important character? Explain how you know this.
2. What are the men doing? Explain how you know.
3. What time period might this be from? Explain how you know.

These five pieces will conclude the unit. They are of higher interest for my particular students. It is important to choose images that will feel relevant and exciting for your particular students. They are:

The Brothel Scene —The Brunswick Monogrammist, 1540

This piece was chosen due to its controversial message. It is important to keep my students interested in the topic if I want them to achieve the skill. This piece draws upon current issues in their own streets, so there will be good conversation around their inferences.

Students should notice the men and women, their interactions, the location, and the items lying around the piece. These few observations will help my students piece together a good inference. A worksheet to accompany this image will consist of the following:

Observations—Use the information to make factual observations (what do you see?)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.

Inferences—Use the information from above to help you make educated inferences.

1. Are the men and women equally happy to be in this room? Explain how you know this.
2. What is taking place? Explain how you know.
3. What is the young girl in the front, sitting in the chair, doing? Explain how you know.

A Midnight Modern Conversation —William Hogarth, 1732

This piece was chosen for similar reasons The Brothel Scene was chosen. It is an interesting scene, which calls for good discussion. The inferencing questions will keep my students on task.

Students should notice the men and women, their interactions, the setting and the items in the setting, and the man on the ground. These few observations will help my students piece together a good inference. A worksheet to accompany this image will consist of the following:

Observations—Use the information to make factual observations (what do you see?)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.

Inferences—Use the information from above to help you make educated inferences.

1. Are the men and women equally happy to be in this room? Explain how you know this.
2. What is taking place? Explain how you know.
3. How did the man on the ground get there? Explain how you know.

The Death of Chatterton —Henry Wallis, 1856

This piece was chosen because of its ambiguity. While my students will be able to make observations, they will have to look closely and think hard about their inferences. Gradually the unit gets more difficult, and this piece, I predict, will be challenging for my students.

Students should notice the man, his state of being, the location, and the bed. These few observations will help my students piece together a good inference. A worksheet to accompany this image will consist of the following:

Observations—Use the information to make factual observations (what do you see?)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.

Inferences—Use the information from above to help you make educated inferences.

1. Does this place belong to the man? Explain how you know this.
2. What was the last thing the man did before this image was taken? Explain how you know.
3. What is on the ground? Explain how you know.

For the last two pieces of the unit, the students should be comfortable with making inferences. Instead of prompting them with questions, I will ask them to write a two-paragraph story as they though they were to walk into the life of the artwork. These short stories, which ask my students to become a character in the artwork, forces them to connect to the artwork. Connections in literature are extremely important, so allowing them to practice with artwork will be beneficial. They are:

Electric Chair —Andy Warhol, 1971 (assessable through
<http://www.warhol.org/education/communityprograms/electricchair/>)

This piece was chosen because of its controversial message and its, on first sight, plain nature. There is not much to observe at first, but with enough attention paid, there is a lot to see. This piece also is ambiguous enough for my students to write creative and very different stories. There is not enough in the piece for all the

students to have the same story, which will illicit interesting discussion.

Students should notice the chair, the detail of the chair, the color, and the walls. These few observations will help my students piece together a good inference. A worksheet to accompany this image will consist of the following:

Observations—Use the information to make factual observations (what do you see?)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.

Inferences—Use the information from above to help you make educated inferences, which will become a short story.

Imagine you walked into this piece of artwork. Explain what you would see, what you would

1. find out about what just happened, and explain what would happen after this image. Give many details to explain what this piece captures.

When You the Invisible Cowboy —David Wojnarowicz, 1987

This piece was chosen due to its crazy and chaotic nature. There is a lot to observe, but many questions are left unanswered. It is for this reason I will ask my students to write a story about it. They will have to be creative and use all their observations to make sense of what is going on. This final piece sums up the unit nicely and will prove how well my students have grasped the skills of the unit.

Students should notice the many sections of the piece, which consist of the building, smoke, and devil; the outline of the bull, the cowboy, the buildings, Jesus, and the fly; the ruins, the mask, and the snake. These few observations will help my students piece together a good inference. A worksheet to accompany this image will consist of the following:

Observations—Use the information to make factual observations (what do you see?)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.

Inferences—Use the information from above to help you make educated inferences, which will become a short story.

Imagine you walked into this piece of artwork. Explain what you would see, how you would

1. feel, who else would be there, what is taking place, and what either just happened or what will happen. Give many details to explain what this piece captures.

Implementing Common Core State Standards

The following are the standards this unit targets:

RI.11-12.1. Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

This unit asks students to site textual evidence (making observations) in order to make inferences when they are not given all the information.

W.11-12.3. Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

Engage and orient the reader by setting out a problem, situation, or observation and its significance, establishing one or multiple point(s) of view, and introducing a narrator and/or characters; create a smooth progression of experiences or events.

Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.

Use a variety of techniques to sequence events so that they build on one another to create a coherent whole and build toward a particular tone and outcome (e.g., a sense of mystery, suspense, growth, or resolution).

Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.

Provide a conclusion that follows from and reflects on what is experienced, observed, or resolved over the course of the narrative.

This unit eventually asks students to demonstrate their use of making connections through short, creative story telling. They will need to use detail of characters, plot, conflict, and resolution for a clear story. They will also need to demonstrate good writing practices.

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Museums

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