

Case Study: Museum in the Classroom

Physical Setting

Our observation took place in the gifted 3rd grade class at PS 166 on West 89th Street in Manhattan. After signing in with a guard at the entrance, we also announced ourselves in the main office and received guest passes to then continue unescorted on our way to the third floor classroom. This was spacious and the class size manageable with only 19 students. The student population was primarily Caucasian, as were the teachers.



Inside the class, the walls were a clean light green and the ceiling high. One was positively impressed by the organization of classroom tools, books and supplies in bins and baskets which children helped themselves to as needed. On the walls were references to ongoing class teachings about sensory images, poetry, science, social studies and math work. The seating was arranged by tables constructed by pushing combinations of desks together in groups of three and four. There was a separate rug area for sitting on the floor for closer group discussions in a circle or to look at work on the overhead projector.

Project Context

This class had been working on the accordion book project for the past 15 weeks. (See Methodology, Selection of Residencies for overall project description.) Students had just gotten their partner's contribution to their books back last week. That project revealed many details about each student. It provided opportunity for interaction, inspiration, exchanges and surprises within its loose format. In response, the students shared insightful comments about self and partner. The project afforded flexibility in that a practice book that included printmaking with symbols and sewing could be incorporated into the finished product. Free use of materials allowed the discovery of personal taste in use of materials and style within use, as students investigated preferences of layering and other innovative methods of revealing details of self.



Although the books were not finished, the class moved on to a new project for some distance and perspective. The teaching artist planned to return to the accordion book project at the completion of the self portrait work to add the finishing touches to their collaborations and possibly include a joint portrait of the authors. This project set the tone for continued investigation into identity. The work they will do today extends the concept to self portraits.

Setting a Tone for a New Project

When students came into the class, they sat down quietly in their seats and got out their sketchbooks. The classroom teacher receded into the background as the teaching artist and her assistant took control of the LTA class with warm dexterity. The class was very peaceful and relaxed. The students were well behaved but engaged. The mood at this first session of the self portrait project was in direct contrast to the super charged energy filled session last week where deliberate and organized chaos was the word of the day. This start to a more introspective project was very sedate with more pensive consideration of the materials and goals. The teaching artist's method consisted of modeling, demonstration, introspection and discussion. She slowed down the pace and asked one question at a time. She waited for a response before she asked another question. The questions were clear and direct. The answers, although open ended, were brief, and also clear and direct. Each task was brief and simple. The teaching artist waited for one task to be completed before she introduced another. Her assistant observed and handed out questions and materials

The teaching artist described the project as a self portrait and asked what characteristics a self portrait has. They reviewed what methods they used in the accordion book project to reveal parts of themselves. The teaching artist continued. "Please write in your sketchbooks how you would define a self portrait." One student says, "It explains us." The teaching artist continues the review. "Using pictures that explain you. There were many parts to that project. There are different parts to your self. The books are a self portrait with many layers. Think about what you want to reveal. "

Project Illustrated by Examples

Examples of beautiful, rich and varied portraits and self portraits mounted on stiff colored backing are handed out and children are instructed to work in pairs or groups of 3 to compare and contrast the images they have been assigned. The works were:

- Self-Portrait in a Shaving Mirror by M.C. Escher
- Self-Portrait, 1889, by Vincent VanGogh
- The Revenant, 1949, by Andrew Wyeth
- Self-Portrait with Plumed Beret, 1629, by Rembrandt
- Self-Portrait with Cloak, 1901, by Pablo Picasso
- Self-Portrait, 1547, by Ludger Tom Ring The Younger
- Self-Portrait c. 1888, by Odilon Redon
- Evil is Banal, 1984, by Marlene Dumas
- Self-Portrait with Halo, 1889, by Paul Gauguin
- Self-Portrait c. 1938, by Frida Kahlo

“Look at a work of art with your fellow artist,” the teaching artist explained. “Below the image on the bottom left is certain information that tells you about the artist and the artwork. Name, date, materials used; oils, or canvas, etc. Where it hangs, what museum, dimensions.” This encouraged art appreciation. The students were addressed as “Ms. Hughes’ third grade artists,” and they respond as such. “I am encouraging you to look deep into an image.” the teaching artist implored. Questions are disseminated. Each child got a different question such as “What would you ask this person? How are you different from this person? How would you describe this person? What are you curious about? What surprises you about this portrait?” They were given time to reflect and write down their thoughts and questions in their sketchbooks. There was no right or wrong answer. “I would love to hear some of the observations you have made about self portraits.” The teaching artist reinforced, “I like the conversation that is happening here.”

Contextual Summary

This first printmaking class for this 3rd grade was a nice example of how the museum collection can be brought to the classroom and personalized to illustrate lesson plans and artistic and curricular goals. Multiple examples of self portraits compared with other portraits provided a forum for discussions about art, art history and seeing. The teaching artist encouraged the use of emotional vocabulary to describe technique and mood as evidence of student vision and understanding of a deeper message or concept conveyed by the visual style in the work of art. This made as strong a contribution to the achievement of the project as did the participatory component which produced a visual end product.

Selected works represented visual as well as historical and technical diversity which easily lent them selves to comparison. Simple questions provided by the teaching artist to the students on post-its directed the focus of the verbal comparison of museum examples. Students elaborated on their insights, fluidly describing details of method, subject matter, color and painterly quality. The conversation remained mature, and sophisticated but animated and energized by the wide range of examples from different time periods and geographic locations. Body posture, facial expression and cropping were considered for discussion.

Details

As one example, a head and shoulders view was discussed first. The female depicted had full blonde shoulder length hair and glanced off to the side. The question asked was “How would you describe this person’s expression?” Students responded, “It looks like this person almost lost their friend. They compared this image with one that is a more distant perspective. It is monochromatic with stark contrasts. The person is dressed all in black with black hair. The face is pale by comparison. A student comment: “Wo-totally different!” The teaching artist asked, “How does the black impact the image?” Students answer, “It makes you look at their face.” Another image was described, still a closer view than the first. It was cross hatched with soft diffuse light. Bright highlights and soft

shadows. The student with the question described, “It is of darkness and blonde.” Another question about this same portrait: “What did you notice about this person?” The class contributed multiple observations, “He looks serious,” “He looks like someone I have seen before,” “He looks old.”

The group moved on to yet another portrait. The teaching artist asked, “What interests does he have. What does he use?” The students observed, “Paints and brushes.” The teaching artist modeled, “You can infer that he is a painter. He might be painting a self portrait.” Another portrait has a line of text running behind the subjects head. The teaching artist modeled, “You can consider putting text into your portrait.” One student asked what it said and the teaching artist explained that it was in Latin. Discussion about art history and context ensued.

Method of Choice for Self Portrait Work

Contour line drawing as a particular method was singled out for experimentation. The students changed location as they changed activity. They moved from their desks to the rug area. This set a new tone for a new aspect of the lesson in self portraiture. Again, the pace was slow and deliberate. Goals were distinct and definite. “Seeing” was emphasized. Time for “seeing” was segregated from “talking about what is seen”. In this way, individual ways of seeing were encouraged before they were shared and blended with those of classmates, thus fostering unique personal opinions. After they had looked at many examples of portraits, the students spent 15 straight minutes looking at one self-portrait (Self-Portrait II, 1966, by Jean Dubuffet, Marker pen on paper). Five minutes just looking and writing comments in their sketchbooks. Then 10 minutes commenting in the group. They sat with it for a long time. They had time to consider and think and ask deeper questions to get inspired.

Looking at the Dubuffet example, students contributed thoughts and insights about the work. They commented about the red, white and blue colors and the teaching artist mentioned that he was French and that those were not only the colors of the American flag, but the French flag as well. One student commented that the lines look like they show muscles and bones. One student said, “I wonder what is under the mask?” The

teaching artist said, “Interesting, so the self portrait can both reveal things and hide things.” She reiterated, “Yes this is one line, snaky, totally connected.” She traced the line on the Dubuffet on the wall. “What happens is that we get shapes.”

Teaching the Technique

The teaching artist explained that the artist put his pencil down in one place and traced his entire outline without picking up his pencil once. “A contour line drawing is one continuous line-let your mind wander and make anything you want. Making art can be physical.” Observation extended to a demonstration by the teaching artist of the skills needed to attempt a contour line drawing. One student asked, “Does the picture have to make sense?” “No, first trace your face with your finger. Art is physical.” She modeled what she meant and traced her own face. “You will be able to make several drawings and choose the one you like best.” First discussion of the contours of a face are reviewed and then felt, using index fingers to glide continuously, tracing first necks, ears, hair and then slipping over mouths and eyes and then repeating the symmetry on the other side. Then the teaching artist made a contour line drawing of herself. The process is simple but there was opportunity for variation, retracing lines, connecting sections and features. The result was not terribly accurate and resulted in a stiff, surreal effect. The students watched with interest. Ten minutes was spent on this.

Small details on post-its were handed out to each student served as prompts to initiate the line drawing method. The teaching artist instructed the students to elaborate on the squiggle they had been given to see what shape they came up with. She modeled one herself. The lines on the post-it looked like two bumps connected like an ‘m’ and she extended the line and connected it back to the other end in the shape of a heart. This practice step not only provided encouragement and ensured success in the endeavor but also provided guidance and direction in concentrating on the quality of the line as a visual tool. Lines can be thick or thin, strong and bold or weak and faint. The students responded well to the teaching technique. All were engaged in the process.

From here, students were instructed to return to their desks and work on their own continuous line drawing self portraits. The teaching artist asked “How should the

classroom be?” and the students responded, “Like a library.” The room was silent as they drew. Students executed this step with expertise and purpose, having a sense of the visual process if not yet the inherent identity message of the assignment. With few exceptions, students followed the procedure as modeled by the teaching artist skillfully. One student rotated paper instead of moving pencil in a unique methodological variation. Several were quite skillfully executed. Some of the students’ work resembled them and others did not. They were all drawn with precision and control. A few actually looked a lot like the student artist. The room was silent as the students focused on the technique masterfully. Two got another piece of paper.

Interestingly, when the students tried this technique, they all took the stance and angle of the Dubuffet. None of the students utilized any of the examples of cropping or viewpoint from the first set of descriptive portraits. They were going to have 4 more chances to make line drawings so perhaps after the first few times they would start to experiment more courageously and refer back to those images and try a varied approach.

Support for Museum in the Classroom Concept

It seems doubtful that the simple exercise of the contour line drawing in itself would have held the attention of the students for this amount of time without the introduction of multiple ways to execute portraits using interesting and varied examples as a broader context. When asked if they thought this was interesting only 4 said yes. One said no. Rounding out the concept of the self portrait with examples of portraiture from the museum collection seemed to increase the professionalism of their art appreciation. The teaching artist emphasized that artists learn from each other. She reminded them that today was only practice and she asked them to write down in their sketchbooks, one thing that surprised them. Comments included, “It is difficult to let go, but when I did I was happy,” “I drew mine looking up,” “I didn’t think I could do it,” “I thought it was easy but it was very hard,” “I am actually surprised it looks like me.” The teaching artist responded, “It is hard to let go, so I gave you a challenge. You take the leap into the unknown and success happens. Next time we will start off looking at these, practicing some more and then we will transfer them to Styrofoam. The following week we will

start printing.” In conclusion, having experienced a visual and informational overview of self portraits from the museum collection, to mentally draw inspiration from, seemed to broaden the scope of emotional experimentation in a simple contour line drawing exercise, encouraging the students to reach toward a higher aesthetic goal in the manner of true art.



