

Arts in the Literature Classroom: Students Finding Their Way in the World

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An unnatural hierarchy and dichotomy of the mind/body and cognitive/creative has been firmly in place in school literature programs for generations (Bogdan,1992). While arts educators argue that the arts require both critical and creative thinking, this claim is commonly overlooked in teaching literature. Arnheim (1969) states, “the arts are the most powerful means of strengthening the perceptual component without which productive thinking is impossible in any field of endeavor” (p. 3). He asks, “To what extent do our schools and universities serve to weed out and retard the most imaginative minds? Intelligence test scores and creativity correlate poorly, and the mentally more lively children tend to be a nuisance to their teachers and peers and a liability in class work” (1969, p. 207). Paradoxically, Arnheim speaks both realistically and sarcastically here to denote the “problems” of children’s creativity which schools often stifle. Greene (1995) defends both the critical and creative thinking involved in experiencing and producing works of art. Our two studies suggest that the arts offer alternatives for literature instruction and assessment, and contribute to students’ serious thinking as they find their way in the world.

Angela’s research in a mass media class of 11th and 12th graders incorporated different artistic forms (literature, advertising art, picture book illustrations, film, and visual art) as heuristics to help students interpret both visual and verbal texts beyond literal meanings. The data suggest that students improved their interpretation of figurative meanings in print and non-print media through learning discourse conventions, applying schema, and rehearsing interpretation in various artistic modes.

In her research, Carmen shared three award-winning pieces of literature with her 4th grade students, The 100 Dresses by Eleanor Estes, Shiloh by Phyllis Naylor, and Number the Stars by Lois Lowry. All three books have the common theme of a bystander, someone who witnesses a wrongdoing, but is neither victim nor perpetrator of the abuse. As they read the books, the students responded to the literature with many artistic forms, including, drama, drawings, and poetry. The art was used as data that was interpreted as a full class research project. The research resulted in seven theories on the relationships among the bystander, victim, perpetrator, and hero, someone who takes action in defense of the victim.

References

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