

Language Arts Application:

Relating Robert Hillestad's Art to the Written Word

This lesson plan, piloted in a Middle School English class, encourages students to connect to Robert Hillestad's textile work, exploring the themes of beauty, celebration, and joy through narrative writing and poetry. Through this experience, students will explore how words and a visual experience can be inter-related and enrich each other in a symbiotic relationship. Students will move from an abstract idea of "beauty" and "joy" to concrete examples in their own lives through narrative and poetry as they get ready for a classroom visit by Dr. Hillestad, noted textile artist.

Pre-visit Activities:

1. Preparation for the artist's visit will begin with an introduction to his work. (See Hillestad web sites).
2. Because beauty, celebration and joy are prevalent themes in Hillestad's work, students will explore these themes in writing.
3. Students will create a word wall for the classroom focusing on descriptive words that fit the five senses. They will use a thesaurus to expand their word choices. This can be used during both the narrative and poetry writes.
4. Students will explore how color is used to create a mood or feeling visually and in written text.

Description of Actual Classroom Visit:

Martha Graham said this of creativity: "There is vitality, a life-force, energy, a quickening that is translated through you into action. And because there is only one of you in all of time, this expression is unique. And if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and be lost."

We found ourselves in the presence of that creative spirit when textile artist Robert Hillestad visited our classroom. As a class we had been thinking about, identifying, and creating metaphors and examples of personification. As we wrote personal narratives as well as creative stories, we included both metaphor and personification in our stories to enrich and add a depth to our writing. The students were delighted and surprised to discover that the artist writes on an on-going basis and uses his writing as a means for discovery and making connections. We saw how Dr. Hillestad's expression of self and knowledge was also presented through his art. He shared how metaphor, especially, could be used to add depth to art pieces.

Dr. Hillestad brought several baskets of fibers and fiber pieces that were shown and then eagerly passed from one student to the next, until all pieces had gone around our circle of desks. "Ooh's" and "Ah's" and exclamations of delight met every piece coming out of the baskets, as the students vied for the honor of modeling a wearable piece created by the artist. As they strutted around the room in fiber pieces, their amazement and enjoyment of Dr. Hillestad's creative spirit was evident. The students recognized his unique gift and were transformed by their experience.

Post – Visit Activities:

1. Students will practice identifying similes and metaphors in prose and poetry. They will write examples of their own as review.
2. Students will write a personal narrative about a time in their life that was joyful or was a celebratory time. Students will use the word wall and similes or metaphors to enhance their writing.

3. Using The Book of Qualities, by J. Ruth Gendler, students will read poems aloud as examples of personification. They will choose joy, beauty, or celebration as a quality and personify that quality in a poem.

4. Students will choose a poetry form (haiku, diamonte, or free verse) and write a poem describing Robert Hillestad's work.

Presentation and Evaluation:

1. Students will share their writing with their classmates orally.

2. They will make a large tassel (36 inches in length) with fabric or paper strips. Students will record their poetry or lines from their poems on the strips. This construction will hang in a public area to welcome school visitors.

Marty Eischeid
Language Arts Teacher
Lefler Middle School
Lincoln, Nebraska