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## An Artful Thinking Classroom

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I projected the image onto the screen and gave my eighth grade students several quiet minutes to take notes in their journals before I began asking questions.

“What do you *see*?” I asked. They answered in rapid fire: “Dark colors, tornadoes, guitar, casket, horse skeleton, dusty red skies, corner of holy people, skeleton pit, naked guy, angry mob, knights, mountain of fire...”

“So, what do you *think* this might be about?” This time, they took a minute to

look back at their journals before sharing responses.

“It’s scary. It’s Renaissance era. Genocide. Done in the Dark Ages. A metaphor for the apocalyptic march of death. Poisoning with food and drink. Christians being raptured. The armored man looks like Jesus.”

After I captured some of their responses on chart paper, I concluded with, “And what does this image make you *wonder*?” These answers came quickly and didn’t require aid of their journals, “I wonder why this was created, what was the motivation? What does triumph mean? I wonder if they are in a war. I wonder if this ties into what we are studying next. I wonder what the time period is.”

My students and I spent over thirty minutes that day analyzing *The Triumph of Death* by Pieter Bruegel the Elder. First they observed and described what they saw, and then they compared and connected their observations to previous knowledge. And finally, they questioned and explored viewpoints through their wonderings. We all looked at that image many times that day, going back to it whenever someone in the class noticed something that someone hadn’t seen before or made a new connection.

### The Triumph of Death

The students’ thoughts were captured and documented both individually (in their journals) and collectively (on chart paper). Once they started to share their thoughts out loud, I scribed new connections and extensions that were made as the discussion moved beyond the initial observations that were noted in journals.

The work of art, along with the *See/Think/Wonder* routine, and the documentation of their thinking was used to launch a unit about medieval history. For my eighth grade humanities class, I designed the unit based on both World History I and English Language Arts curriculum frameworks and then used the *Artful Thinking* approach to shape an arc of instruction with specific thinking goals in mind.

Shari Tishman, the *Artful Thinking* project’s Principal Investigator, has described the goals of the program as follows:

*Artful Thinking* was developed to explicitly bring out the connection between art and thinking. There are two reasons for this. The first has to do with how works of art make

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us think, and the second has to do with what works of art make us think about. By both design and default, art invites deep and extended thought.

The five components of the *Artful Thinking* program include:

Thinking Routines

Thinking Dispositions

Art & Curricular Connections

Visible Thinking/Documentation

Study Groups: reflective professional practice

### What Happens in an *Artful Thinking* Classroom?

#### *Thinking Routines*

It all starts with thinking routines. There is a wealth of these available, and many teachers already employ them in their classrooms. I decided to introduce the unit with the *See/Think/Wonder* routine, which first asks students to make careful observations and then interpretations based on those observations. These are accessible entry points even for a student who doesn't have specific background knowledge. Once observations are reported, students then begin to consider what the information reveals; finally, they are asked what they wonder—which opens the door for further inquiry.

#### *Thinking Dispositions*

As the students progressed through the unit and gained knowledge about Europe during the medieval period, I made choices about subsequent thinking routines based on the thinking dispositions I was aiming for. Thinking dispositions are an inclination towards certain modes of intellectual behavior. The six thinking dispositions that are instrumental in considering art and subject area content include:


- Reasoning
- Finding Complexity
- Exploring Viewpoints
- Questioning & Investigating
- Observing & Describing
- Comparing & Connecting

The introductory routine I used, *See/Think/Wonder*, is a means to get at the disposition of questioning and investigating. As the students began to learn about the Middle Ages, I used another routine, *Connect/Extend/Challenge* to have them synthesize information from their readings by *connecting* the new information to what they've learned before, to notice what information *extended* their thinking, and to make note of ideas that were *puzzling* or that *challenged* their thinking.

The *Connect/Extend/Challenge* routine does reinforce the disposition of questioning and investigating, but is more heavily grounded in the disposition of comparing and connecting, which is why I chose to use that routine once the students had a stronger foundation of content knowledge.

### Art (among other things) and Curricular Connections

Throughout the unit we examined text, images, and primary source documents using a variety of thinking routines in order to both learn about the time period and develop thinking dispositions. For example, as we added to our knowledge base, I pushed the notion of exploring viewpoints by having the students compare two paintings depicting women from different social classes.



**SEE:** A poor girl and a rich girl. A rich white woman, a poor black woman. Towers, crowns, book, leaves, a swan. I see mountains in the background.

**THINK:** The rich girl owns that kingdom behind her. The poor girl might be owned by the people behind her. Different social classes. St. Catherine's painting has more detail. I think they are two different seasons

**WONDER:** Who is the dude under the lady, is she a queen? Why is the poor lady raking? Is she a slave? How come there are not a lot of people in the picture? They look the same age, how old are they? What is St. Catherine reading? Does this have anything to do with the Bible?

### Visible Thinking/Documentation

The next step was to decide how to document the process of our learning by making our thinking visible at various stages. We did this through journals, wall charts, discussions, and presentations of learning. This documentation served as both formative and summative assessment during the unit. I had a wide range of data gathered from each learning experience to determine the levels of individual and group understanding about the content and about dispositional skill building. The student work also highlighted misconceptions, lack of historical perspective, and confusion on the part of students. For example, the students were more familiar with the class and social distinctions of early American history than with medieval European history, and while they could use their knowledge to make some connections to the plight of peasants and serfs during the Middle Ages, it was necessary to use a variety of sources for them to appreciate the women's sphere or the role of the church during that time period.

### **Study Groups: Reflective Professional Practice**

So that I could appropriately challenge all of my students, address their misconceptions, and get feedback on the next steps of my plan, I brought examples of student work to my study group. Reflective teacher practice is a vital component of the Artful Thinking approach. Study group members use the "Looking at Student Thinking," (L.A.S.T.) protocol devised to carefully examine student thinking in order to support teachers as they consider the next steps of the learning process (see Appendix). According to Tishman (2007), "This loop—from making student thinking visible, through thinking centered activities, to shaping instruction so that it further enhances student performance—is assessment in the most authentic sense."

When my colleagues and I looked at documentation, we noticed that some students struggled to consider the content using a historical perspective. With this insight, I returned to primary sources that the students had examined already, like the Hereford Mappa Mundi, the largest known medieval map. We took another look, using a different thinking routine, and revisited the concept of worldview from a medieval European perspective.

Finally, toward the end of the unit, we used the Headlines routine to capture some of the big ideas we had learned that could have been newspaper headlines from the time period. Students suggested: "Foreign Invaders Attack. While One Rules, the Rest Suffer. The Epidemic Continues. Death Fights Back. Serfs and Slaves Survive..." The Headlines routine also helps to develop the disposition of comparing and connecting. The students are asked to capture core ideas and sum things up. We used these headlines as a transition point to 'follow the stories' as we left the Middle Ages and moved towards the Renaissance.

### **Reflection**

Adopting Artful Thinking involves weaving together many of the successful practices that teachers already use: thinking routines, assessing with documentation, setting dispositional goals, making learning visible and engaging in reflective teacher practice through study groups. The most daunting and rewarding challenge for the teacher is a new view on the role of art in the classroom. It becomes a matter of trust, not in picking the perfect piece of art to illustrate a content standard, but rather trusting the ability of art to surface thought-provoking questions, connections, and areas of inquiry. It also requires trust to learn from the process with your colleagues and from your students.

I have been using thinking routines with art, objects, poems, nonfiction text, charts, graphs, cartoons, film, you name it, for the past seven years. Sometimes when I look at the student thinking that I collect, I realize I could have picked a different thinking routine to get at the disposition I was trying to develop and so I adjust the next time. I encourage teachers to just dive in and play; don't fret over picking the perfect art image, or text example, or thinking routine. Have fun, invite the students to share their thinking about a piece of work and you will be on your way towards creating an Artful Thinking classroom.

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*The Artful Thinking program was developed at Project Zero (PZ), a research group at*

*the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE). For more information, visit:*

Project Zero Website: <http://www.pz.harvard.edu>

or

Artful Thinking Website: <http://www.old-pz.gse.harvard.edu/tc>