Learning to Look:
How rigorous arts classrooms provide insight into teaching the Common Core State Standards

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*While the rowdy group of 7th graders finds their seats, the teacher projects Katsushika Hokusai's "**Great Wave** at Kanagawa," on the screen, from a Series of Thirty-Six **Views of Mount Fuji**. "What is going on in the image?" she asks. A silence sweeps over the room as the students begin to engage in the quiet process of careful observation.*

Now that the majority of states have adopted the Common Core Standards, K-12 teachers will be required to go deeper into content, rather than take the current "mile wide, inch deep" approach that has left many students with huge gaps in content mastery. Today's most rigorous art classrooms and studios show the potential of teaching in this way: the daily challenges, triumphs, careful observation, and obsession with craft provide a formula for achieving the core in practice. Let us look to the methodology of our high-functioning arts programs for compelling models for restructuring the way student learning occurs across the curriculum. Similar intellectual practices and habits of mind are shared between rigorous study of the arts and the scholarly study and application of all other disciplines.

While most recognize the arts are an essential part of a thriving culture, we do not understand exactly what is so valuable about quality arts education. Often arts education is defended as a haven for creativity, rather than a training that can enhance performance throughout the disciplines. The instructional priorities of the Common Core make clear that the habits of mind developed through the arts are transferable to all forms of learning, across all age and developmental levels, and across content areas.

The Fascination with What's Difficult

In the arts, to appreciate any masterpiece, to construct understanding from the complex, one must engage in deep analysis and a systematic search for meaning; one must develop the capacity to notice nuance, understand context, commit to a quest for understanding and find meaning in a work. This kind of deep study that occurs in the arts is a transferable skill— these habits of mind that can be applied across disciplines. To appreciate, understand, and successfully apply mathematics, language arts, history, and the sciences, a learner must engage in the same type of analysis, study of technique, and consideration of context. This deep study will result in deep, lasting and transferable understanding.

> *"The first demand any work of any art makes upon us is surrender. Look. Listen. Receive." – C.S. Lewis*

In an arts classroom, students are first asked to look (and listen) closely and then to construct meaning, meaning which may have initially seemed out of range of comprehension. The arts teach students to access work that, at first glance, is above their level of understanding. Learners may at first exposure brush off a work as "beyond them," yet with prompting and support find the ability to construct meaning from even the most difficult images (or, similarly, from passages of text, theorems, etc.)

In an art museum there is no "Third Grade Gallery" or "High School Wing," nor do we only show children theatre performances that are at their reading level. In everything from theatre costuming to dance, from graphic arts to music, students routinely confront images that are from time periods or cultures distant from their own, where images are rich in symbols or abstracted beyond recognition, or perhaps conveyed in colors, scenes, or materials not found in reality. But a curriculum that spends extended time with these great works allows students to practice excavating meaning from unfamiliar, challenging works. The arts train students to dig into work that is hard to comprehend, much as higher levels of text complexity challenge struggling readers. With the right scaffolding, such work becomes accessible. We do not deny a below-grade-level-reader entrance to a performance of *Hamlet* or a chance to look at Rivera's dense murals, so why would we deny a student access to a great (but challenging) work of literature or the study of a rich and beautiful math problem?

Note we began by *looking* at Hokusai's work. The investigation of something difficult begins by looking and looking again.

Looking and Evidence

At First Glance-The Inventory

"Let's begin with an inventory of all the things we see in the work, let's not assign meaning, or analyze this, let us simply look and take note of what we see."

"I see a giant wave with two boats!" "I see people on the boats!" "I see some sort of writing or characters on the left hand side of the image." "I see a mountain in the background" "I see various patterns in the work from the blues in the waves to the shape of the wave caps" "I see foam spraying from the water, and a layered range of colors in the sky."

Going Deeper: Analysis with Evidence

"What specific elements does the artist use? Provide examples from the work. Let's first look at the elements and get a good feel for them, then later look at how this is building the overall effect of the work."

"There is such a use of repetition in the work, the pattern of dark and light shades of blue in the work to the pattern of the humans in the boats, and in the repeated shapes in the white wave caps."

"The way the foam caps of the waves are curled, sharply pointed, and bright white makes them really become a focal point, also look how they are placed in the most prominent location in the frame. The proportion of the waves in comparison to the boats is significant"

"The artist used a muted complementary palette, perhaps to create dissonance, notice how the waves are done primarily in tones of blue and the sky is using a very muted orange, the complement of blue"

Analysis: Understanding Technique and Structure

"Up until this point, we have looked at this only for its formal qualities...now that we have really taken these into account, let us speculate on the choices the artist made"

"The proportion and shape of the central wave is acting as a giant toothy mouth that could effortlessly swallow the tiny boats. This use of color and line contributes to the sense of wrath, and the eternal strength of weather and rock over the fragile bodies of man."

"From the viewer's vantage point, the boats are a long way from shore, as the mountain is far in the distance. This use of perspective gives the suggestion that the journey is far from over, far from safety."

"The curl of the central wave moves your eye through the image, putting the mountain in a visual frame, which is interesting as it remains so static while the rest of the work has so much movement."

The way a careful observer draws on evidence to make sense of an image parallels the processes employed when a strong reader makes meaning from a text. In discussions involving the arts, one naturally justifies any response with a reference to the work. Teachers of the arts demand this, asking, "What in the [image, music, play, etc.] made you say that?" At this point students must

justify their response with a specific reference to the work under consideration. Similarly, an underlying tenet of the Common Core Standards focuses on students being able to read, write, and speak utilizing the evidence derived from the work at hand. So too in the frequent use of discussions centered around specific works of art are the viewers asked to justify their responses with evidence and observation.

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Only Focus Allows Depth

"This must be from Asia, because it has characters for writing. But I don't know where in Asia. We could look up the characters to see what language they are in, or try the native language of the artist also."

This form of rich discourse and close analytical dissecting of a work of art warrants and indeed occupies large segments of classroom time. The ritual of both systematically and spontaneously walking 'through the maze in pursuit of the center' via a focused study of a work of this magnitude is the essence of a curriculum structured for depth rather than breadth.

Rather than looking a wide range of images in slide show format, a good arts teacher carefully selects the most potent works for deep study and then spends a long time facilitating discovery as students first take inventory ("*I see a giant wave, with a mountain in the background*") and identify primary features ("*The boats are small in comparison to the large waves*." "*The mountain in the background is a focal point of the work even though it appears far off in the distance"*) Only as students begin to recognize nuance, the tools the artist has employed to create the work including metaphor and suggestion, can they move into the complexities of the work and begin interpretation and analysis.

This depth of focus, spending long periods of time on a single great work rather than trying to understand all of art through the ages, becomes a habit of mind that students can then independently apply to other works. This is found only in the most effective arts classrooms. Yet, cursory coverage is a commonplace practice in many non-arts classrooms where, for example, most high schools require a semester-long "World History" course that covers millions of years in forty minute, daily gulps. As is already practiced in the most rigorous examples of arts education, the Common Core Standards encourage instructors of such classes to consider approaching through deep study, several significant objects in the development of humans, rather than a smorgasbord of dates.

An invitation for all the content areas

A frequent misconception about the Common Core Standards for Literacy is that the humanities, sciences, and arts will no longer be valued in the school curriculum. Yet the CCSS call for a thorough examination of these academic areas, particularly through the study of each field's domain texts. In fact, it is an obligation extended by the CCSS to expose students carefully to the written record of each subject area. A focus on informational texts brings content area literacy across the curriculum as students examine scientific research, historical documents, and critiques in all instructional settings, with the same level of detailed focus and inquiry they bring to the arts.

All students deserve rich exposure to significant works across cultures and time periods, and opportunities for the application of that learning by creating similar, then new, original models that reflect the masterpiece's obsession with craft. This obsession with craftsmanship and quality, so ingrained in true arts practice, is all too often absent or hurried in many of our classrooms.

Conclusion

Any passionate advocate for the arts will lament what ensues when art is relegated to a "play place" in schools, and will testify to the weak adherence to carefully crafted standards that occurs when the arts receive only lip service within the school day. Sadly, in an era of budget cuts, the arts provide an early target, and students, especially those in low income communities, are routinely denied an opportunity to access this form of learning.

The habits of mind and standard practices used in high functioning art programs will produce rewards far exceeding those realized through traditional "coverage." These habits include a commitment to engage and persist through difficult works, an obsession with craftsmanship, the use of evidence to create strong understanding, and the valuing of the extended time allotted for delving into complex works as time worth spending.

Arts-based inquiry, when rigorous, provides students with the skills to pursue learning as an active, endless quest – a constant delving— and it offers a methodology for demanding meaning from works both at and above their current level of understanding. Understanding gained through deep inquiry is transferable, both in content knowledge and the development of a student's intellectual character. When rigorous, discipline-based arts education (including criticism, aesthetics, history, and studio practice) exists in our schools, the model can inform classroom practice across the developmental spectrum of Pre K to 12. While this paper focuses primarily on the beauty of art criticism in the classroom, please note this is a starting point for learning, and must be then followed by aesthetics, art history and rich studio practice, in art as in literature and any other discipline where mastery is valued, one must commit to studying master works before trying ones hand.

For the arts to gain a position as a truly valued player in every child's education, the level of rigor must be raised. The arts, in professional practice, are arguably most disciplined of all disciplines, where devoted practice, criticism, and a meticulous focus on detail and perfection reign. To elevate the role of the arts, teachers of the arts must adopt this level of intensity to the culture of the

classroom. Bluntly stated, we must accept that the way to elevate the arts in education to elevate the rigor in our classrooms, moving the arts to the rigorous reality that is representative of the true discipline of an artist.

Protected and nourished, the habits of mind that are developed through the arts hold a key to unlocking the challenges we face in reforming our education systems so that all learners can rise to their maximum potential. In fact, arts education at its best offers a model for all other forms of learning. As the nation commits to improving education for all learners through the Common Core Standards, it must commit to delve deeply, persistently, and thoughtfully to the daily practice of teaching and learning, across the curriculum. Where else to start but the arts?

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