

Session 12 Transcript: Katie Ruzin

- Hello my name is Katie Ruzin. I'm a former music educator with 15 years of experience in elementary, general music and fifth through 12th grade band. I became devoted to arts integration in my most recent elementary position, which was an international baccalaureate school. For those of you who don't know much about IB, it's an inquiry based trans disciplinary framework that uses arts integration to help develop knowledgeable caring students who are active leaders and lifelong learners. Now, educators are always searching for teaching methods and assessments that address all learning styles and promote individualized learning. According to the partnership for 21st century skills and the national education associations for dance, music, theater, and the visual arts, the arts create engaging learning experiences that promote 21st century knowledge and skill acquisition. They also provide students with personal creative opportunities to respond to instruction. Today, i am going to share strategies that help poetry become more meaningful and enjoyable as students both connect it to their life experiences and communicate their own feelings through art, drama, movement or music. I created the sights and sounds of poetry as an integrated lesson for ELA and the fine arts classes. It incorporates the common core ELA standards in reading as well as all four strands of the national core art standards, creating, producing, performing, responding and connecting. Maya Angelou once said, poetry is music written for the human voice. Unfortunately, in my experience, when students get past elementary rhyming skills and into expressive poetry, most of them would prefer to study almost anything else. When presented with a written poem, students tend to read it rhythmically, focusing on the rhymes, if there are any, and also in a monotone, with no attempt to understand it's meaning. They may have no interest in the subject matter. Maybe they can't relate to it. Sometimes the figurative language gets in the way, or maybe they see no relevance in analyzing the elements and dissecting the meaning unless performed expressively by a teacher, many students never get past this literal interpretation. We're going to help them experience poetry as self-expression, by allowing them to interpret it with visual art or perform it through drama movement or music. The expressive goals of this project will be most effective when students have previously studied poetry and have at least a basic knowledge of figurative language, although they can certainly be adapted for any situation. Students should know that the main goal is for them to make connections between the poem and their own life experiences. Elementary teachers should probably choose an expressive poem that they think their class will be able to interpret. Middle school teachers may be able to give their students several poems to choose from and high school teachers may even be able to let their individuals find their own poem. The poem and project are both introduced in the ELA class. After explaining the reason for studying a poem this way, tell them in which arts class they will be creating the project. If you're going to allow older students to choose their own medium, it might be a good idea for all the arts teachers to be present. This lesson starts with the students silently reading the poem at least three times, during their first read through, they will simply be focusing on the words, not really trying to understand them. The second reading is for comprehension. They should highlight words or phrases that stand out as particularly expressive or meaningful. While reading the third time,

Session 12 Transcript: Katie Ruzin

they should take notes in the margins. They may identify significant things within the poem itself, or maybe how it's personally relevant to their own experiences. Take a moment now, to read the gift to sing by James Weldon Johnson. Once students have finished reading and taking notes, introduce the poetry brainstorm worksheet, they will use to organize their thoughts. In the first column, they'll write down a word or phrase that they highlighted. Then reflect on and write down their own personal associations between the language and what it makes them see, hear and feel as well as actions they might imagine doing. Since these are their connections, they don't have to fill in every column. If you wanna keep it simpler, they could even just fill in the column they'll be using for their own project. When I was co-teaching this lesson to seventh graders, the ELA, a teacher, and I realized that many students were having trouble with the figurative language. Therefore with both the middle and the elementary students, the ELA teacher and I each read the poem aloud. So the students could see how we interpret it differently. Then we gave them a few more minutes to brainstorm. The introduction for all the fine arts classes is the same, though It can be presented in whichever order the teacher wants. The class will review the artistic elements they have studied. Each student will read through the poem while referring to and reflecting on his or her original brainstorm worksheet. And the teacher will explain both the elements specific brainstorm page and the project. When introducing the project, challenge them with the essential question. How will you communicate your interpretation of the poem's meaning? Here's an example of each of the elements specific prompts. Students will use elements such as these to focus their ideas and organize them into a plan. As seen in this video of fifth grade music class, younger students will benefit from discussing how to make connections to figurative language before working on it individually. Right? So action is just anything we're gonna be moving. Yeah.

- No, I can only move one in a row. So this is perfect, Cause this is the kind of outside the box things, i want you to think about when we're talking about actions. So movements you would do, to show no night is dark.

- So if it said no night is dark, i would feel a little more confidence in my walking.

- So then energy, could be confidence. What else? I had middle school students express the poem through art. The art teacher reviewed the elements they had been saying. Then we discussed their specific brainstorm page. The class shared examples of what they could use for shapes or images, colors, value, and texture. I had planned for them to create a triptych choosing from a variety of materials and mediums. Unfortunately, our middle school students only have class once every six days. So the art teacher and I decided that they would be more successful with set limits. Since she had been introducing shading to the class, we had them use oil pastels and we assigned each student a specific stands up. Limiting choices like this would probably be the most effective strategy for younger students while freedom of artistic expression would be more appropriate for older ones because the goal of this project is

Session 12 Transcript: Katie Ruzin

communication of self expression. It must end with self-reflection. Whether written or verbal, this allows our students to fully internalize and articulate what the poem meant to them.

- [Narrator] How was it trying to get the image in your brain onto the paper, how'd you do with that?

- I had a hard time.

- [Narrator] Why?

- Figuring out like how I would put it in the way that I wanted, because I thought of a few ways and they didn't really fit to me.

- [Narrator] Well, so tell me about what you drew.

- So in the poem he said if my broken past, so I thought, hey, maybe I can make a mirror and it was like shattered because mirrors reflects views or it's a kid's broken past. And I tried.

- So I drew what it wasn't, like.

- [Narrator] why did you choose to do it that way?

- Because I thought that I could express myself better if I did what it wasn't, cause I didn't really know how to draw what it was not, if it told me what it wasn't.

- Expressing the meaning of a poem through music and dance is a terrific creative opportunity for older students in a dance, electronic music or composition course, or even just for singing or playing their instrument. Elementary students, however, will be more successful working in small groups to create sound poems. The music elements we used include pitch, tempo or speed, depending on the age level of your students, dynamics or volume, instruments you might use or sounds you could create and mood. When talking with them about the elements of dance, i specifically pointed out that we're just talking about movement. I'm sure you can imagine the groans when they thought they would have to dance. When the fifth grade class and i finished our discussion on how to use the elements of music and movement to make connections to figurative language, i gave each fifth grader, both the music and the movement specific brainstorm worksheets. I told them to start on whichever one, they felt more of a connection to. I decided not to let them choose their own ahead of time because friends would just end up doing the same ones so they could work together. And I want them to use their own imagination. At the beginning of the next class, i separated them into groups based on whether they had filled out the music or the movement brainstorm. One person was chosen to

Session 12 Transcript: Katie Ruzin

take notes and to keep the group focused. The students shared their ideas and why they chose them. Then they discussed, which were the most appropriate for the performance. During this collaboration, even more so than in typical group work. My students realize the importance of critical thinking, clear communication and respectful collaboration. I learned a difficult lesson as my students develop their own expressive ideas with a poem called the gift to sing, I naturally expected them to sing nicely, every time the poem said I can sing, but they actually weren't planning on singing at all. When I finally suggested it, they rejected it unanimously. As they practiced, a few of them started singing a note and it did catch on, but no one ever suggested that they sing the same note or even that they try to sing it nicely. As you'll see in their final performance, I let them do their own thing. But boy was it hard.

- [Narrator] The Gift To Sing by James Weldon Johnson. "Sometimes the mist overhangs my path, "And blackening clouds about me cling; "But oh, I have a magic way "To turn the gloom to cheerful day-- "I softly sing. "And if the way grows darker still, "Shadowed by sorrow's somber wing, "With glad defiance in my throat, "I pierce the darkness with a note, "And sing and sing. "I brood not over the broken past, "Nor dread whatever time may bring; "No nights are dark, no days are long, "While in my heart, there swells a song, "And I can sing."

- After we finished the performance, the fifth graders had a lot of trouble putting their reflections into words. It turned into an excellent discussion about how we respond to and connect to the arts. The words, teenager and drama are as inseparable as Broadway and musical. But I discovered that most teenagers will refuse to show their vulnerability by acting who knew, since I don't work in a high school, I asked a few students I know for help, we're perfectly willing to do the poetry brainstorm. And in fact, they made some very personal connections, but they were so uncomfortable expressing those emotions that they refused. And I finally had to work with some students that were actually in a drama class. Here's a perfect example of why we need to allow our students to choose their own means of expression.

- Sometimes the mist overhangs my path, and blackening clouds about me cling, but Oh. I have a magic way to turn the gloom to cheerful day i softly sing. And if the way grows darker still shadowed by sorrow somber wing with glad defiance in my throat. I pierced the darkness with a note and sing, and sing. I brought not over the broken past nor dread whatever time may bring. No nights are dark, no days are long. All in my heart, there swells a song that i can sing.

- The dramatic interpretation, can be either expressive speech or acting. When organizing their thoughts, students will be considering four things, their tone or voice, actions they may use, the type of energy with which they'll speak and how each word or phrase relates to their own experiences. In the 21st century, our culture and methods of education have changed

Session 12 Transcript: Katie Ruzin

drastically. And an era defined by high stakes testing and short attention spans, it's essential to add arts integration to our curriculum. With it, we engage and motivate our students, show them how content and concepts are related. Help them develop higher order thinking skills. Grow socially and emotionally and demonstrate school's relevance by connecting their studies to their personal experiences. I hope you now have a deeper appreciation for the value of encouraging students to personalize their understanding of content as well as for the importance of allowing them to communicate meaning through self expression. Thank you.