

Gabriela Mora de Rubio - Using Literacy with Visual Arts to Teach New Concepts Transcript

- Hi, I'm Gaby, an art teacher from El Salvador. I am an illustrator and I have been teaching art at a high school level for the past 13 years. As an illustrator, books, mainly picture books, have been an important part of my life. And I am always looking for ways to incorporate books into my teaching. How to use picture books, popular stories, and/or chapter books, and combine them with the visual arts for teaching new concepts and ideas. In the next few minutes, I will show you three ways to use books for teaching through storytelling and the visual arts. First of all, let's talk about the visual arts, and what it means to be an artist. If you look at any publication or book that explains what it means to think and be an artist, you will most commonly find that the first thing anyone will mention is that artists observe. To draw, you have to draw from observation, and interpret what you see. So artists are constantly training to observe. You have to be very observant to translate what you see to paper, or sculpture, or whatever means of art you create with. Now, we can take it further and use this observation as a way to look for inspiration. So observing your surroundings and what is going on around you becomes a part of your every day routine. This makes you find, think like an artist, and you end up finding inspiration in the most unlikely places. One particular easy source of inspiration that is readily available to us are the books that we all know and love, combining storytelling and the visual arts to connect and communicate new ideas. Now, thinking like an artist also requires interpretation and constant analysis, critical thinking skills, and trial and error. Thinking like an artist requires resilience and adaptation. And most importantly, being curious all the time. If you notice, most artists are constantly exploring, characteristics that are also needed for writing, particularly in storytelling. So by combining these two disciplines, we can reinforce these skills in students so they can be successful in today's world. Okay, now let's jump into using books and the visual arts to make fun integrated lessons and experiment with storytelling. As I mentioned before, I find inspiration in everything and mostly love to use books in my lessons by adapting them to give them new intentions to be able to teach through the visual arts. Today I will go over three examples I have worked on that have really proven to be lots of fun and effective for teaching. So, we will explore, a critical thinking strategy to use art as a basis for telling stories, adapting picture books to teach new concepts and ideas, and using chapter books to enhance descriptive writing through the visual arts. Before we move on, let's do a quick exercise. Take a look at the following painting by Mary Cassatt. Now here is the same image with word bubbles. What are the girl and the dog saying to each other or thinking? What is the story behind what you see? Fill in the blanks. In this quick example, you have experienced a glimpse of the intentions behind this critical thinking strategy that uses art as a basis for storytelling. This is a simple and easy to use idea that can be applied to get students thinking creatively, and it requires little preparation. You can invest as much or as little time on it as you have available. All that is needed is a work of art, such as a painting, a sculpture, or a photograph that shows any sort of image that can be turned into a story like the

Mary Cassatt painting we just saw. I have done this with high school students as part of my online sessions, since we are still in quarantine. So the strategy can be easily done in person or online. The first step is to give students a painting, sculpture, or photograph to look at. I like to give students the choice of three different artworks, so they can choose which one they connect with the most to create their story. After observing the image intently, they are instructed to create a short story based on what they see. Keep in mind that I don't give them any extra information, just images, so they don't have any context or artist intentioned on the art piece. This way they can interpret according to their own personal experiences. Content and more information of the artwork can be shared with them after so that students learn about the artist and get more information on the piece. So once the students choose the image they want to write about, they can create their short story that must include a beginning, a climax, and an ending, all essential elements to storytelling. Finally, they can share their stories. Getting students to write about artwork and interpret the artwork from their particular point of view, helps them to develop their critical thinking skills. Now this can be as elaborate or as simple as you want to make it. For middle and lower school levels, maybe just using one image is enough so that everyone can see and experience all the different stories they come up with, or make it a collaborative story with the whole class participating in creating a single story. For lower school levels as well, it can also be adapted to comic book style by making students draw more images as part of their storytelling. The main idea is to get students using artwork to come up with creative stories of their own and thinking creatively. The possibilities are as limitless as there are artworks to use, and it will get students thinking like artists, observing and interpreting. As an observant artist myself, I noticed that you could modify certain stories, particularly picture books, to teach other concepts in the classroom. So I experimented with this idea. I was inspired by the book "If You Give a Mouse a Cookie" by Laura Numeroff, and decided to use it as a base to make a Cubist mouse. Using the same intentions of the book that features a sequence of events that happen if you give a mouse a cookie, I adapted the story to focus on the sequence of the means needed to create a Cubist mouse. Each step in the story describes the main characteristics of what Cubism is and the main vocabulary of the movement, so that students can learn these concepts with a familiar story. In the video, you can see how the mouse was built following the sequence. It is best if you use paper cutouts and build from there. So, if you turn your mouse into a Cubist art, he will be made of geometrical shapes, like circles and triangles. If he is made of circles and triangles, he will be stacked up and in one plane. If he is stacked up and in one plane, the eyes, ears, and nose will not be in the usual places. And so forth, and so on. As you can see, students will create an art piece following the steps of the adapted story, and learn the vocabulary and definitions of Cubism. This can also be done by drawing, but I found that using paper cutouts was better. It is a lot of fun to adapt these familiar stories to teach different concept, and this story in particular could work with other subjects as well. So not only are we using something familiar to teach students a new idea, we are also experimenting with materials and different ways to create art. You can even take it further and have students adapt the stories themselves, or use it as a multi-level activity where the older grades adapt the story to create and teach the younger kids. There are so many picture books that can be adapted, mainly those that rhyme, that can be used to

teach and illustrate different concepts. I particularly like to adapt classical stories, like "Mother Goose" or popular fairy tales. And I am sure that if we keep investigating and observing, we will be able to find inspiration in many other books that we are familiar with or that our students really connect. Now for older grades, you could adapt certain parts of chapter books, and make them come to life through images, sculptures, or anything visual, to get students thinking creatively and teach new concepts as well. For example, I wanted to teach my students point of view and the importance of descriptive language. So I had them create their own short story based on the first Harry Potter book by J.K. Rowling, "Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone." Here I just focused on the part of Harry getting his wand. Students had to describe what it was like to get their own wands just as Harry did. They were instructed to write a short story describing the exact moment they got their wand at the wand shop, and recreate that wand, being very explicit to describe what their wands looked like and how they felt at that precise moment. Here, I wanted to teach point of view, and the importance of description, not only in writing, but in visual arts, and how the artist process is also similar to the writing process, so that students can make that connection between these two disciplines. If there were students that had not read the book or seen the movie, I gave them the option to read that particular chapter in the book or that specific movie scene. Also in listening, with the help of other students, we would discuss, and those who are very familiar with the books and movies, would instruct and teach others about wands and the Wizarding World. Then the students had to investigate wands, their materials, and how to make them. I found many resources online to do this, and we had fun exploring all the possibilities. Later, the students had to do an outline of their story and a sketch of their wand, the idea part of the process. They had to imagine how it would look and describe it thoroughly. The sketches also helped them in describing because they had a visual reference of their wand. Now it was time to write their short story and get inventive on how they got their first wand. The possibilities were endless and very creative. That is one thing to keep in mind when adapting stories, that they need to have many possible solutions in order to foster creativity. Finally, after proofreading and writing the final draft of their stories, it was time to make their wands. They already had a vivid description of their wand, and now they had to replicate it as true to their description as possible. This proved to be a challenge since they had to make, come to life, and recreate their descriptive language to a real situation. They experimented and explored many solutions with different materials and techniques to get it to look just right. Finally, it was time to share their creations with others and reflect on the outcome of the project. If there is extra time, this can also be extended into an interactive activity where students can set up a wand shop and display their stories and wands. Using storytelling with visual arts opens up a whole new world for students, especially if you use these classical stories that they all already love and connect with. I can personally tell you that when I first did the wand project, one of my students that was not particularly interested in school and was struggling in almost all of his subjects, wrote one of the best stories I got. I told him and congratulated him, and he told me that it was the first project he had really enjoyed doing since he was a huge Harry Potter fan and knew a lot about the subject. So this lesson helped him connect and engage in a class like he hadn't done before. As a matter of fact, all my students really enjoyed this project and were really invested in it. And even though I had

them doing English in the art class, none of them complained. As an artist, I am constantly looking for inspiration to reach and connect with my students in different ways. I always strive to teach them that inspiration can be found in everything and anything that we do. We just have to keep an open mind and experiment with it as often as we can. So I invite you to observe and get inspired to create new lessons with storytelling and the visual arts. Also, if you would like to expand on any of the information given, or would like to share any other ideas, please contact me at gabymora29@gmail.com. My contact information is in the handouts as well. Thank you for your time. And let's go observe and get inspired to connect with the world by inventing new stories and arts.