Using art in the classroom
by Jamie Keddie

Part 5: Personal perspectives and interpretation

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INTEGRATED SKILLS ARTICLE

This fifth part of the series looks into the meaning of an artwork and how the recipient interprets art. The article includes three activities that encourage students to think critically and to talk and write about art.

1. Who owns the meaning?

Situation 1

Susie is in the kitchen cooking mushroom risotto. Just as she is adding the parmesan cheese, her flatmate Alastair gets home. He walks into the kitchen and says hello to Susie and they tell each other how their day has been. Then Alastair looks at Susie's risotto and says, "Mmm, that smells good!"

Susie doesn't reply. In fact she feels a little bit annoyed by this comment. Alastair thinks that Susie was a bit rude because she ignored his compliment.

Why does Susie feel annoyed and is she right to be annoyed?

Situation 2

It is 1957. A British tobacco company is developing a new advertising campaign for Strand – one of their cigarette brands. They decide to use an advert in which a man dressed in a raincoat walks around the wet, deserted streets of London with a cigarette in his hand. The slogan says, *You're never alone with a Strand.* Smokers start to associate Strand with loneliness. They think that if you smoke these cigarettes, it will mean that you have no friends. The advertising campaign is a disaster and sales of the cigarette fall.

The Marlboro Man is another solitary figure (a cowboy) and he is behind one of the most successful advertising campaigns in history. Why do you think the Marlboro Man was a success but Strand was a failure?

Situation 3

Two friends go to an art gallery. One of the pieces of work that they see is an installation of dozens of knitted hand guns.

The first friend says that he really likes the installation. He likes the fact that the guns look like harmless woolly gloves. He imagines a situation in which the whole world wakes up to find that every gun on the planet is made of wool. As a result, no one gets shot and the world is a better place. His companion is not so sure. She decides not to form an opinion because she isn't sure if this is the artist's intended message.

If the artist has one idea but we see another, have we misunderstood the artwork?

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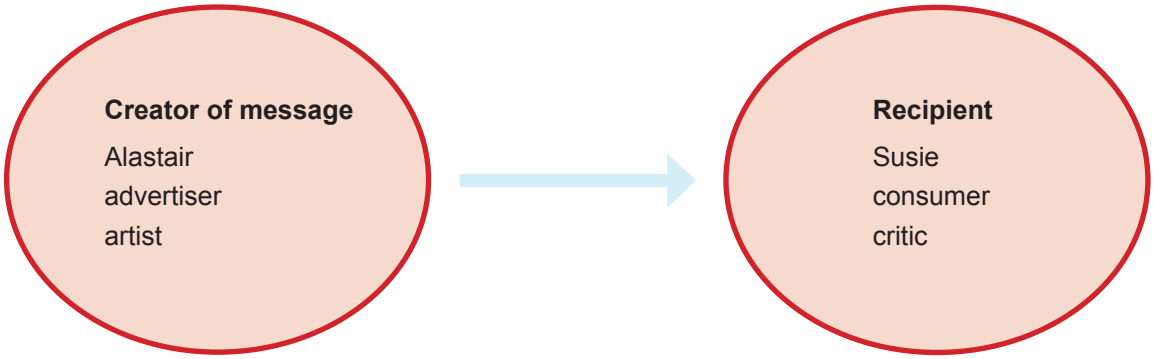
2. Negotiated meaning

We have just looked at three transactions of meaning:



For a long time, linguists considered that meaning resided objectively in the words coming from the mouth of the speaker or the pen of the writer. But, as these examples illustrate, communication is more complicated than that.

Alastair may be sure that he was genuinely complimenting Susie's cooking. But was he really? The fact is that he was going to have a baked potato for dinner and he would have preferred some of Susie's mushroom risotto. In this situation, his utterance was not likely to be interpreted as a compliment.

Similarly, the agency behind the cigarette advert made a terrible mistake. They probably thought that their solitary character would look cool and appealing to the consumer. Could you imagine a situation in which the executive behind the campaign tried to explain to the board that the fault was not his – that it was the public that had misunderstood the meaning of the message?

In these cases, meaning is located closer to the recipient's end of the transaction and it can help to see art in the same way. After all, art is communication. And if the actual meaning or message is a negotiation between the creator and the critic, then how could the visitor to the art gallery be wrong about his appreciation for the woolly guns?

Images speak to us all. But what a piece of art says to one person may be completely different to what it says to another. This subjectivity is part of being human and it is with us all the time. For example, there is a man in my street who I think looks exactly like Sylvester Stallone. Frustratingly for me, all of my friends completely disagree. They say he looks nothing like him.

With my scientific background, it took me a long time to come to terms with this idea of subjectivity and that is why I think it can be worthwhile discussing it with students before asking them to engage with art.

3. Lesson ideas

Talking or writing about art can be a very rewarding experience.

> "You might not know what you think until you've written about it [a piece of art]. Writing is a voyage of discovery."
>
> Adrian Searle, *Guardian* art critic

The following activities are designed to be followed in order and have the following aims:

- to convince students that their artistic opinions, interpretations and evaluations are valid
- to equip students with the language that is necessary for talking and writing about art
- for students to choose a piece of art that they like and prepare a personal evaluation of it

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Activity 1: Who owns the meaning?

Level: Elementary upwards
Aims: A critical thinking activity which aims to get students thinking and talking about art
Time: 30 minutes

Put students into pairs or small groups and give out copies of the three situations mentioned at the beginning of this article. Ask everyone to read the first situation. Draw attention to any problematic words or structures and write these on the board. Ask your students to consider the question at the end of the text (Why does Susie feel annoyed and is she right to be annoyed?) and discuss ideas in their pairs or groups before sharing thoughts with the rest of the class. Repeat this process for situations 2 and 3 and attempt to use them to bring up the issues that have already been discussed.

Activity 2: Mental picture dictation

Level: Elementary upwards
Aims: To equip students with language for talking about art
Time: 30 minutes

In Part 1 of *Using art in the classroom*, we looked at picture dictations. This is when the teacher describes an image and the students draw what they hear. However, rather than asking students to recreate the description physically, we can encourage them to leave the drawing process behind and recreate the picture mentally. When using art, this approach allows us to focus on elements of the picture that can be verbalized but not drawn (emotion, mood, style, etc).

Preparation

Choose a piece of art that you like – perhaps something that you have a personal connection with. You are going to tell your students about it, so decide beforehand what you are going to say. You could do any of the following:

- describe the composition
- say why it is personal to you (perhaps it is a piece of art that your parents used to have in their house)
- say what you like about it or what it means to you
- talk about anything that it reminds you of (people, places, dreams, experiences, etc.)
- talk about any imaginary narrative (a story, for example) behind the piece
- mention any questions that the artwork raises
- consider other senses that are brought into the picture (smell and sound, for example)
- look for symbolism in the work (this can also be personal)
- speculate about the artist or his/her intentions

Procedure

1. Tell your students that you are going to show them a piece of art that you like. Perhaps you could ask them to speculate on your tastes.
2. Now tell your students that before you show them the piece of art, you are going to tell them about it.
3. Tell your students about your chosen piece. You should have it in your hand while you do this (an art postcard, book, etc.) but students should not be able to see it.
4. Speak slowly and stop for any problematic language which can be written on the board. Repeat the

description two or three times if necessary.

5. Put students into pairs and ask them to remember and write down as much of what you said as possible. Help them by writing key structures on the board. This might include any of the following:
   - It looks like …
   - It looks as if …
   - There is / are …
   - It reminds me of …
   - It makes me think of …
   - In the foreground / background …
6. Let students compare what they have written and finally show them the piece of art.

Variations

1. Take the time to write out the descriptions that you prepare. Students will appreciate a record of the language, especially when they come to writing their own evaluations (see Activity 3, below).
2. Rather than preparing your own text, use one from an art book. Children's art books are generally written in a very accessible way and can be particularly useful.

Activity 3: Writing an evaluation of a piece of art

Level: Elementary upwards

Aims: For students to choose a piece of art that they like and prepare a personal evaluation of it

Time: Varies (The task can also be given as homework.)

Start this activity by dictating the following quotations to your students:

> **Four pieces of advice for art critics:**
>
> The only rule: look, look again, and keep on looking.
> **Adrian Searle**
>
> Don't trust your prejudices but believe in your instincts.
> **Adrian Searle**
>
> You might not know what you think until you've written about it. Writing is a voyage of discovery.
> **Adrian Searle**
>
> There are many reasons for which it is wrong to dislike art but none for which it is wrong to like it.
> **E. H. Gombrich, *The Story of Art***

Your students should now be ready to write an evaluation of a piece of art of their choice. There are now three possibilities:

1. Bring in a varied selection of artwork and ask each person to choose one that they like. You could bring in photographs of public art that is local to you and your students, for example.
2. Ask students to bring in a piece of art that they like and have a personal attachment to.
3. Set the evaluation task as a homework. For example, tell students that they have a week to find a piece of art and write 150 words about it.

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4. Other ideas

From a language teaching point of view, it can be more productive to talk about the art that you hate rather than that which you like. The Museum of Bad Art is a great source of images. Go to www.museumofbadart.org. for some examples of 'bad art'. One example of 'bad' art is given at the end of this lesson plan.

References

The quotations from Adrian Searle are taken from the Guardian article *Our Critics' advice* at http://arts.guardian.co.uk/youngcritics/story/0,,2289650,00.html

The E. H. Gombrich quotation is taken from *The Story of Art* (Phaidon Press Ltd).

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INTEGRATED SKILLS IMAGE

Knit4peace project © Jess Stephens

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INTEGRATED SKILLS IMAGE

Lucy in the Field with Flowers © The Museum of Bad Art