

Joshua Korenblat

Writing, Art, and Critical Thinking: An Interdisciplinary Curriculum

INTRODUCTION AND ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

In his lecture *Development and Learning*, the Swiss educational psychologist Jean Piaget states that “to know an object is not simply to look at it and make a mental copy, or image, of it. To know an object is to act on it...to modify, to transform the object and to understand the process of this transformation, and as a consequence, understand the way the object is constructed.”

(Piaget, *Development and Learning*, 26) Piaget believes that by interacting with a real object—be it a book, a photograph, or a work of art—the learner will have an increased intrinsic motivation, and the learning process activates when boundaries imposed between disciplines disappear.

Notably, Piaget claims that learning does not entail making a literal *mental copy*. This seems to reference creative realms, such as creative writing and visual art. Though Plato believes that all art is an act of *mimesis*, or a direct reflection of reality, today most people see art as experience filtered through a more subjective lens. A professor of literature writes, “In non-poetic vision you only see what’s literal, but poetic vision connects particular sensory experience to higher experience.” (Barricelli, 120)

Piaget worked with very young children at the developmental stage of *animism*. In their eyes, inanimate objects seem alive. Think of the animated broomsticks in Disney’s *Fantasia*. Jaded adults might view a toddler babbling to a doll with some skepticism, while those charmed might wish for some of that whimsical magic again. Pablo Picasso, child prodigy and prolific artist, offers a fitting fortune cookie aphorism. To paraphrase: we are all born artists, and to be an artist

is to be a child. In a similar vein, Freud argued that artists have a better recall of early childhood memory than the general population: “An artist, Freud thought, was a person less bound by the repressive nature of culture, a person who could tap through memory into the lost images and feelings of childhood.” (Steinhart, 194) Whimsical manifestations of an inner-world seem so common to elementary school art classes. Yet they are soon subsumed by well-rendered, inert pieces of high school art, motivated by an extrinsic need to show-off mimetic skills. An art class remains the most creative oasis in many schools, yet the art in high schools often seems imaginatively barren. Sadly, by high school, many students have already lost their playful, childlike creativity.

However, I believe Piaget’s theory can be adapted into a curriculum unit for a high school English classroom, or a creative writing extracurricular program. I will use visual art as the spark for a cycle of playful, interdisciplinary transformation that will result in an inter-arts portfolio, a thought-log, a final creative writing project, and enhanced critical thinking skills. I structured my inquiry into Piaget’s idea of transformation around essential questions, and then responded to them by proposing a curriculum unit: *Writing, Art, and Critical Thinking*.

Essential questions for myself

- Is it true that to know a work of art, one must be able to transform it, and then understand the process of that transformation?
- What would a transformation cycle actually look like, and how would it be taught?
- What would students learn by writing creatively from visual art, then creating visual art from this text, and then beginning this cycle anew?

EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY THEORY OF ART

A work of art usually takes the form of an inanimate object: a book, painting, photograph, or a sculpture. What causes a high school student, a reader, or a museumgoer to see life in that object, and engage in something akin to *animism*—a developmental stage reserved for very young children? In constructivist theory, one understands a picture by what he or she knows from real life about the depicted objects. (Winner, 89) A painting filled with golden hues gives visual cues of warmth and light to its beholder because of real life experience and associations with that imagery. Another example: a drawing with two figures, one in the foreground and one in the distance. Intuitively, one understands that the smaller figure is simply more distant to the viewer, rather than being a midget.

The psychologist Nelson Goodman posited another view: not unlike written language, pictures relate in an arbitrary way to what they represent. (95) A culture's system of representation determines what a beholder of art considers realistic. Psychologists have shown that some African cultures disregard spatial perspective, and instead uphold the flatness of a drawn image. (Goodnow, 177) In the prior example, the smaller figure might be seen as a midget or simply as less important. Another example: to Western eyes, Tibetan Sand Mandalas appear two-dimensional. But Buddhist monks see the mandala as "a three dimensional palace, representing the mind of the Buddha. The person contemplating the mandala enters into it, as they would a building or an enclosure." (Brown Haffenreffer Museum, 1)

On the other hand, gestalt theory, developed by German psychologists in the early 20th century, posits that no matter the idiosyncrasies of a culture, there remains an inherent, universal *simplicity principle* in the human mind. (96) Every person is born with this principle; it is not learned by a particular culture. The human mind seeks out simple patterns: order, regularity,

balance, and clearly defined structures. Such patterns create the perception of art, which brings order to a chaotic universe. Order defines art from accident. Rudolf Arnheim, a prominent gestalt psychologist, believes that color, form, and line have timeless, universal, and intrinsic properties that convey mood and expression. He cites the columns of a Greek temple, which express striving, pushing up against the heavy roof, “just as a strong person must struggle forward against obstacles.” Arnheim also determines how the weeping willow tree found its name: “both the structure of the tree and the mood (sadness) are passive and lacking in energy.” (104) Such expressive qualities can be found all over nature. Boulders convey strength, a skeletal tree conveys death, and springtime flowers convey fertility. No wonder romantic poets sought to animate and give figurative expression to inanimate objects, such as William Wordsworth and his daffodils— a practice decried by modernist poets as a “pathetic fallacy.”

Expression becomes the defining and memorable feature of any given object. Arnheim argues that, “We are more likely to recall that a twisted blanket thrown in a heap over a chair looked tired than to recall its color.” (105) The mood of a painting, novel, or film lingers in a person’s memory long after he or she has forgotten the subject or the plot. Most works of art have metaphoric emotions and moods that transcend literal perception. In fact, mood and expression define art from other visual forms, such as charts or graphs. The abstract artist Mark Rothko painted washy, glowing rectangular color fields, but once said that he was not interested in the relationship of color and form. Rather, he was interested in expressing human emotions: “tragedy, ecstasy, and doom.” (105)

Between constructivism and gestalt, which view is correct? Perhaps compromise exists between the views: Gestalt universal principles are ingrained in the human mind at birth, but

what one learns in a given culture accounts for constructivism and perceptual differences between cultures.

Be it visual art or literature, one must understand art's communicative form and find its inherent expressive resonance: "Adopting a pictorial attitude is not unlike adopting a metalinguistic attitude when reading literature: one must attend to the sound properties of words, not merely what they denote." (248) Sound properties, metaphors, and the structure of a literary text all guide the reader to new realms of understanding. Just like brushstrokes can be feathery and pleasant or thick and impulsive, words have sounds of inherent expressive quality. Linguists term sounds as large, bright, sharp, penetrating, glittering, but also small, drab, dull, and soft. Bright vowels form in the front of the mouth—sounds that can be found in words such as *spring*, *Celtic*, *alloy*, *elm*, and *ale*. These sounds abound in playful poems; it is the prosody of the sympathetic elves in *Lord of the Rings*. Dark vowels form in the back of the mouth, and lurk in words such as *murder*, *pool*, *mollusk*, and *mule*. Dark vowels rule in somber poems; in *Lord of the Rings*, it is the prosody of the ghoulish orcs. This inherent expressive quality seems embedded in language, and it parallels gestalt theory in the visual arts.

DEVELOPMENT OF PROPOSED CURRICULUM: THEORY AND PRACTICE

To create my proposed curriculum, I first decided to integrate my research in constructivist and gestalt theory with models of interdisciplinary curricula from the elementary, secondary, and post-secondary levels. Above all else, I kept Piaget's theory of transformation in mind. In scholarly literature, I discovered an intriguing congruence to Piaget's theory of transformation. One professor claims that, "By going back and forth between art forms, the student is better able to understand the important elements of each, considering their absence from, or presence in, the

one but not the other. An element present in both may yet be different in each...then we can understand literature's capacity for infinite variety." (Barricelli, 63)

I also consulted with Professor Thalia Field of Brown University's Literary Arts Program. She has extensive experience with creative interdisciplinary work at the pre-college level. Before beginning my independent inquiry, Professor Field advised me that, "Learning happens in the experience of it, you don't have to be an expert from the start...When engaging in this interdisciplinary process, do not use a pre-finished piece. Write something new and use that as a stimulus, then trade-off with other people. The creative process is not the work of a solitary genius, but rather a social process." (Interview, 10.19.06)

This conversation seemed particularly valuable when I considered the shyness and trepidation of many learners in the creative realm, especially those who see themselves as inexpert. It also reflects Piaget's theory of constructivism, prevalent in museum education today and progressive classrooms. In his theory of constructivism, Piaget advocates learning by invention. A student inhabits the learning process only through repeated failure, transformation, and the relatively muted guidance of a mentor. By interacting with objects—be they the colored pegs of children's play, crayons, or musical instruments—students can develop abstract thought. The ability to apply this abstract thought can only come after concrete, active experience. Students exist at the center of the learning process. Received knowledge remains at the pressure-free periphery until students arrive at their own conclusions. Experience is everything.

I believe in Piaget's constructivist theory, which advocates learning through transformation and failure. Piaget defines failure as a potential positive, whereas most secondary schools define failure as a decided negative. Students begin to see failure as an irredeemable scarlet letter, and those labeled as failures often exile themselves from school and its harsh arbiters. I believe many

secondary schools discourage accident, play, and failure not because these events are incongruent with learning in its most pure form; rather, such events make it more difficult to track, sift, assess, and label students in a crucible of time. The experienced educator Herbert Kohl carefully defines failure from *a will not to learn*. If a student chooses not to study or engage with the material, then it is impossible for him or her to fail. Implicit in failure is the idea that the student has tried. (Kohl, 10-15) Piaget claims that students learn by failure because reality and outcomes do not match their expectations; then they have to make accommodations and change their mental model to succeed at their next task. This process of constructing an experience must necessarily entail accident and play. In other words, students should see failure as fun. Piaget offers this Gnostic glimpse into a successful classroom: “Intrinsic motivation of thinking creates excitement; if that can be kept alive in any particular learning process, success is practically insured.” (Piaget, *Piaget for Teachers*, 125)

As an ardent believer in “learning by doing,” I engaged in this transformative process over the course of this semester. Though my collaboration partner and I have formal training in the creative realms of writing and art, we created an interpersonal protocol that would mirror how students with no creative inclinations might approach a transformation cycle: We would only swap unfinished material; we would not be self-conscious or think critically about our work; we would also not comment about each other’s work in a written, critical way. All responses would be in the creative sphere, as either a work of art or creative writing. We would respond immediately to the work, seeking out an expressive quality in it that might have resonance for us. If a piece of art or writing lacked an immediate or intuitive resonance, we would choose not to respond to it. We would release our work in flow, as if we were children with no formal schooling in the creative arts.

I think self-consciousness hampers creativity. But egoism is a developmental stage in high school students, as deeply felt as hormones. Self-consciousness is also embedded in those in their dissonant late twenties (such as myself). I worked through moments of hesitation and mental noise, like so much television snow, to find that space where everything smoothes out and I felt flow. Those were my transcendent and most expressive creative moments. Flow is not a hippie concept; it has deep roots in somber psychology. Ironically, the tortuously named psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi coined the psychological term “flow,” a meditative place where “one’s skills are adequate to cope with the challenges at hand... There is no other attention left over to think about anything irrelevant or to worry about problems... Self-consciousness disappears and the sense of time becomes distorted.” (Steinhart, 154) I envision my students working on creative projects well after the bell has rung, forgetting time and experiencing a meditative flow, so crucial to connecting literal experience to higher experience. Daily worries submerge, and however briefly, students find the imaginative, animistic realm of childhood rising before them.

While flow is important within the creative process, shocks must also be introduced through small group collaboration. One cannot anticipate the associations another person might draw from a creative piece. The artist loses possession of his or her work in the best possible way. In a college interdisciplinary literature and art course, one professor claims that, “We bring about intensity of vision by the positive confrontation of diverse points of view. I call this interference or stressed reading...” (Barricelli, 28)

This transformative process—so focused on concrete forms of art at each step, and less focused on abstract interpretation—conforms to an experiential model of learning and understanding art. Piaget asserts that, “Involved operative knowing is its own reward and is a precondition for any creative discipline.” (Piaget, *Piaget for Teachers*, 124) *Involved operative*

knowing means that a student must participate in the discovery of knowledge; for instance, instead of writing an expository essay about a book, perhaps the student should assume the role of the author and write a story using elements of that author's world view, literary voice, and technique. This is the only way to truly experience a text: its characters, conflicts, emotions, mood, and theme. Leo Tolstoy was once asked what his novel *Anna Karenina* meant. The only way he could answer that question, he replied, was to write the novel again, from its first word to its last. (Winner, 283) The eminent philosopher Stanley Fish also advocates the actual experience of reading over trying to dissect and reveal meaning from an embalmed text. He writes, "Don't ask 'what does this mean.' Do ask 'what does this do to me when I read it?'" (275) In *Writing, Art, and Critical Thinking*, students would follow the exemplar of Leo Tolstoy, Stanley Fish, and finally, Professor Field: "Do a piece where there's a feeling of the scene. It must move you past what the language can do." (Interview, 10.19.06) In a written scene, this inexpressible feeling might translate well into an image or visualization during the transformation cycle. Conversely, fictional scenes that seem too abstract and emotionally distant may fail to yield visualizations. Students may learn from either of these scenarios.

However experiential the process, after each step of the creative cycle, we recorded our thoughts. Students will record their thoughts as well, as a form of self-reflection so that they understand the creative process and the peculiarities of how they think. This thought-log might reveal an otherwise unappreciated pattern in decision-making processes. For instance, while reading my collaboration partner's poetry, I doodled on the page. I noticed that these absent doodles were usually inspired by lines in the poems that paired intimate images with vast images, such as the line "Break open the day like a painted egg." Contrast leapt off the page.

Other lines or images may have had accidental emotional resonances with our separate life experiences. For instance, in one of my drawings, I included an image of a beetle. My collaboration partner then wrote a poem where this beetle vivifies into a mechanized creature:

We crouched in the narrow shadows
 humans with tender skins watching
 that great armored beetle march
 as if mechanized a toy armored
 tank up the walkway high walls.

I was surprised that the beetle assumed such a significant presence in her poem. I was making a collage of creatures one might find in a forest, based off an unfinished short story I had composed. I happened to find a drawing of a beetle by Albrecht Dürer, and in my flow of thought, I absently rendered that beetle in my lyrical collage of imagery. As it turns out, a similar beetle had lingered in her memories; in India, she marveled at one scampering across a stony wall. Through memory and association, my work of art took my collaborative partner to an entirely unexpected place. The rest of the poem is rich with images from her travels in India: sleeping brahma bulls, monkeys, and yucca plants.

This suggests that while reading or looking at a work of visual art, a person constantly refers to moments in his or her life as a frame of reference. This process is as natural as the blink of an eye. Scholars and psychologists agree: “Artistic form is always the form of felt life.” (Barricelli, 5) Piaget states that “Observation can be linked to intelligence—children use their own experience for the intelligent solving of a given problem.” (Piaget, *Piaget for Teachers*, 121) A novel, story, or painting is actually a conversation between the creator and the beholder, with personal memories informing the depth of how one responds to a work of art. As a teacher, I noted that I should encourage students to engage with their own and others’ work in this way. Even a novel written a long time ago could have a resonance if certain evoked images or scenes

remind a reader of a significant life moment. We tend to recall moments that have had an emotional impact on us, and these memories rise to meet evocations on the written page.

The psychologist Ellen Winner outlines this reading process: readers bring certain assumptions to the text, which are then discarded or changed, they absorb sound properties and metaphors woven into the text, and then begin to delineate the structure of text. Readers then begin to find a rhythm within the structure of their own experience reading the text. Winner writes that during this non-linear process, “Emotional responses may stimulate students to understand the text, just as a growing understanding shapes their affective reaction. A reader’s emotional response constitutes information about the work.” (Winner, 283) Emotion is the lasting effect of the elliptical conversation between author and reader. This process has an almost exact mirror in the thought-log of my collaborative partner, who writes of how she composed a poem based off one of my collages:

I wrote this in one barely conscious blur sitting in front of my computer, looking at the ivory-billed woodpecker image and the imagery in it. I wrote it with pen in my notepad. The first stanza started out with a subconscious play with sounds, and also of the prominence of the bird's beak in your painting... The second stanza is a memory of being in the new pilgrim retreat at Meherabad at night, where Prem's new gates are. I was with Prem and a couple of kids and we saw a huge beetle honestly half a foot long. This memory must have come in direct response to your image of the beetle. (10.12.06)

In a high school English classroom, teachers pressured by rubrics and other assessment standards may often regard emotion and spontaneity as precarious terrain, favoring analysis or thematic understanding. Yet in *Writing, Art, and Critical Thinking*, students will be encouraged to work with their emotions and spontaneous affect, rather than subduing them to learn a formal practice. For high school students, perhaps the English romantic writers best exemplify what I mean. The romantic writers privileged immediate, subjective experience over objective truth. Rudolf Arnheim writes that, “The will was seen as always inhibiting or distorting the free play of

the imagination, and this free play was identified with the real self.” (Arnheim, 176) In his *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*, William Wordsworth writes, “I have said that poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility.” (Wordsworth, *Romantic Poets*, 779) In part, Wordsworth succinctly describes the creative process I hope to activate through transformation: unmediated reaction to sensory experience. Then, collaborative shocks stimulate creative thinking, and self-reflection enhances critical thinking skills.

Finally, what are the lasting critical thinking skills I hope to stimulate and cultivate through the transformation cycle? I took my cue from a study sponsored by the Guggenheim Museum in New York City, which sought a correlation between visual art and critical thinking. By analyzing paintings, the study hypothesized that students would learn skills that translate well into other subject areas, including English. Educators from museums entered urban high school classrooms twenty times over the course of the study, and showed pictures alongside related or mirroring text—such as (hypothetically) Van Gogh’s *Starry Night* and Anne Sexton’s *Starry Night*, a poem inspired by the painting. I have included Sexton’s poem as an exemplar of the transformation cycle, changing a work of visual art into written art:

The town does not exist
 except where one black-haired tree slips
 up like a drowned woman into the hot sky.
 The town is silent. The night boils with eleven stars.
 Oh starry starry night! This is how
 I want to die.

It moves. They are all alive.
 Even the moon bulges in its orange irons
 to push children, like a god, from its eye.
 The old unseen serpent swallows up the stars.
 Oh starry starry night! This is how
 I want to die:

into that rushing beast of the night,
 sucked up by that great dragon, to split
 from my life with no flag,
 no belly,
 no cry

Students were asked what they felt while looking at the painting or reading the poem, and then had to give evidence for their reaction. For instance, the Van Gogh painting might seem tempestuous, which is the *mood* of the painting; thick and rough brushstrokes and the swirling galaxies would be the *evidence* for this conveyed mood. In this way, students formally and vicariously engage in the experience of making art. The act of drawing, painting, or writing a story has an emotional connection at its core, and in this process, students connect with the paintings. They become like Picasso or Georgia O’Keefe in their studios. Take this interview with the French artist Henri Matisse: “I do not literally paint that table, but the emotion it produces upon me.” The interviewer then asked, “But, if one hasn’t always emotion, what then?” Matisse replies: “Don’t paint.” (Steinhart, 66) Students engaged with these paintings were compared to students in a control group, who had no such experience with art educators.

Although the Guggenheim did not conduct any pre-testing—a major flaw in their method—researchers believed they found statistical evidence for improved critical thinking skills in the group that worked with art educators. Such skills included: *extended focus* (concentration), *thorough description*, *hypothesizing* (What can you guess about this landscape?), *giving evidence* (Those brush strokes are thick and tortured!), *schema building*, and an awareness of *multiple interpretations*. (Guggenheim lecture at Brown, 9.22.06) In *Writing, Art, and Critical Thinking*, the thought-log should serve as the medium for these critical thinking skills, which are transferable to an array of educational endeavors.

INTERDISCIPLINARY DESIGN THEORY

After researching general principles of constructivist theory, gestalt theory, and inter-art educational psychology, I researched past interdisciplinary curricula, and then the explanations behind their development. Art educator Susan Fried has written extensively about her proposed interdisciplinary curriculum design, which tethers art class to history class through the Italian Renaissance. In her thesis, she writes, “*Interdisciplinary Programs* investigate a theme, stimulate an awareness of issues related to theme, but also encourage a consciousness of interdisciplinary studies.” (Fried, 29)

Fried continues, “Teachers need to recognize the connection between making art, perceiving it, and appreciating it.” Then she asserts, “Knowledge is dead unless we can use it in a particular context.” (19) By making students creative participants in re-imagining the Italian Renaissance—its clothing, cities, and illuminated books—Fried hopes to engage the students in a topic that might otherwise seem distant and inert to them. At the same time, she hopes that students embody the philosophy of Renaissance figures such as Leonardo and Michelangelo, who made boundaries between subject matter almost invisible. To design interdisciplinary curricula, Fried notes that one should create courses along themes rather than subject matter, and change class periods from forty minutes to eighty minutes. In this way, an art class could work within a lesson plan titled, “What does the world look like through Leonardo’s eyes?” or an English class could be structured around an essential question, such as, “What does the world look like through other people’s eyes?”

Fried cites a well-practiced course of action in designing curricula. First, lessons should be thematic, developmental, and cumulative. Specialists, such as a history teacher and an art teacher, should collaborate and develop short-term behavior objectives and long-term goals for their students. They should pre-determine how students will present their work and how that

work will be evaluated. Students could create exhibits of their work as if they were in a museum, or in Fried's case, they would create a newspaper that combines text and image, a Renaissance Daily, and artist books. Teachers should use individualized and small group instruction so that students work at their own pacing. In this way, students become active in the process of learning and evaluating their work and others' work. Students use cognitive skills and analysis on various levels to interpret their work, and relate their prior knowledge to what is being observed and interpreted. (145)

These critical thinking skills can be transferable, as the Guggenheim study suggests. Fried writes, "A focus on the visual arts, for example, might place specific emphasis on the development of reading or other language art skills." (145) One educator advocates that students create their own projects and connect this interest with the class subject matter, and write on-going thought-logs. I adapted this advice in my own inquiry into *Writing, Art, and Critical Thinking*, and I believe the thought-log is a critical self-evaluative artifact for all students.

Thematic, interdisciplinary approaches could also be explored by studying a specific place and time. By seeing how a time and place influence its cultural artifacts and how we view them today, students can also see how memory and imagination are at once personal and communal. (22) Such communal memories surface vividly in the lyrical art of Marc Chagall, the Russian Jewish artist. Notably, Chagall called one of his most famous self-portraits *I and the Village*. In an interdisciplinary course, students could view Chagall's art and relate its stylistic characteristics to the autobiography of his wife, Bella (illustrated by Marc Chagall):

I felt lost in the china shop. All the glass seemed to tinkle; I was reflected in every mirror. One showed only half my face; in another I had a long nose, in another a flat one. The owner of the shop, a tall stout man, walked around with me, his black coat obliterating his wares.
(Bella Chagall, 164)

Who cannot think of Marc Chagall’s shattered planes of color, influenced by Cubism, when Bella writes of such lyrical moments in the *shtetl*? One agrees with Marc Chagall’s evocation of his wife’s writing, “Her words and phrases were a wash of color over a canvas.” (345) Students could also read other works from the *shtetl* to see how recurring motifs emerge from writers and artists of a particular community or culture, such as *Gimpel the Fool*, by Isaac Bashevis Singer. Then they could learn more of the objective history of these vanished Eastern European Jewish settlements.

Once immersed in the subjective realms of art and literature, students become more emotionally engaged and intimate with their subject matter. They also use critical thinking skills to draw inferences between diverse works, and then divine patterns in them even when the pieces of art seem highly personal. Fried quotes one art educator: “Interrelating arts and ideas through stylistic characteristics is one way to understand the temper of one time and the spirit of our times.” (Fried, 27)

WRITING, ART, AND CRITICAL THINKING

Before beginning instruction in *Writing, Art, and Critical Thinking*, the teacher should tack an eye-catching poster to the wall. This poster should also list and re-enforce the essential questions of this curriculum unit. At the end of each class, students should gather in a circle to review and attempt to answer some of these questions:

- *What is art, anyway?*
- *Does an artist need to be an expert in his or her subject? Why?*
- *What creative skills can we learn by blending Art, English, and other classes?*
- *What seems the same and what changes during this cycle?*

Playful Prelude

Sense vs. Nonsense in Art (part I) Students should find this part of the prelude very engaging. At the same time, without realizing it, they may engage in high-level critical thinking skills as defined by the Guggenheim project: extended focus, thorough description, hypothesizing, giving evidence, schema building, and an awareness of multiple interpretations. They will be asked to understand the impalpable essence of art (finding order in a chaotic world). The teacher will ask the students to read aloud passages from Edward Lear's nonsense limericks, and then Shakespeare sonnets. The teacher will then play audio clips of the Dada poet Hugo Ball and his sound poems, and will contrast this aural babble with a rhetorical art form, such as Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. Why is one form considered nonsensical and the other form considered art? Who makes that decision?

Because this is an inter-arts curriculum, the teacher will then show contrasting visual art forms: intricate Tibetan Sand Mandala paintings versus Jackson Pollock splatter-paintings. Again, is one art form logical, in that it communicates an intricate, agreed-upon cosmology, and the other form nonsensical, in that no pattern or form takes shape? Is there a way to view the splatter painting as logical, or at least as expressing something in the mind of the artist? Students write their responses in thought-logs, and then defend them to their peers in small groups.

Teachers will then ask students to compose their own nonsensical art, and transform their artworks so that they convey both sense and artfulness. Here, the teacher establishes an arbitrary control over the process of making choices—a process normally associated with a participant's inductive or deductive logic. Then, students will move away from arbitrary controls and assert their unique decision-making processes. Students could tell a group story, where one character-driven event is conjured by a student and then passed off to the next student, until an assuredly

wild final story is recorded. This group activity could be modeled after the novelist E.M Forster's famous exemplar of story versus plot. E.M Forster claimed that a story could be embodied in a vignette: "The king died and then the queen died." Linear events remain clear here, but what's missing is a sense of causality. A plot, on the other hand, contains within it an element of causality and artful mystery: "The king died and then the queen died; no one knew why, until it was discovered that she died of grief."

For visual art, Jean Piaget advocates that students look at blurred pictures, or ones taken from an airplane and other unusual angles. Students can also look at an image from a faraway, potentially unfamiliar place, such as a bustling street corner in Calcutta. The teacher should prompt the students to carefully observe and then draw inferences about the content and potential narratives in the unclear images. An unfocused image could gradually be sharpened as students draw closer or farther away from figuring out the picture's true content. (Piaget, *Piaget for Teachers*, 112-113) Students will record their thoughts in a thought-log. What have students learned from the process of transforming something considered unclear, or nonsense, into something more communicative, even artful?

Play and Accidents in Art (prelude, part II) First, the teacher will demonstrate surrealist writing, music, and art techniques cited by Rudolf Arnheim. A composer drops a handful of pennies on the floor, then uses this accidental arrangement of notes as a musical composition; a group of people write a poem or draw a human figure collectively without seeing each other's contributions, a technique called the *exquisite corpse*. Other techniques include automatic writing, better known today as stream-of-consciousness writing. (Arnheim, 162) After modeling these techniques, the students might be encouraged to try one of these "accidental" art-making techniques themselves. During this process, students are uncritical and completely expressive;

the teacher should encourage unmediated spontaneity. Again, in a thought-log, the students will be asked to write about their creative experience, how accidents and collaborative shocks define or alter their creative course. Did they find the process stimulating or frustrating? The students will then be asked to respond to a prompt: *If art helps us to discover order in a messy world, are accidents the opposite of art? Why would artists bring accidents into the actual art-making process?* The teacher fills the blackboard with student responses.

Then, the teacher distributes an essay by William Gass. He laments the role of computers in mass-producing published works:

Books that were once copied in rooms full of scribes, who listened intently to a reader in order to write down what was recited, could not fail to possess, like birthmarks, errors of understanding, idiosyncrasies of execution, and in their scarcity, they are to be prized as persons.” (Gass, 32)

Indeed, what have we lost in this industrial age, when even our cheese is processed? And more to the point, does our industrial society inform school, implicitly discouraging students from the delight of accidental discovery and invention?

Is serendipity dead?

To illustrate the munificence of accident, the teacher hands out *Man-Moth*, by the poet Elizabeth Bishop. The poet begins this odd poem by revealing the serendipitous birth of *Man-Moth* on the page of a local newspaper: a headline misprinted the word *Mammoth*. One of the great, mysterious poems of the 20th century took flight from an anonymous newspaper copy-editor’s oversight—unwittingly fortuitous for the rest of us.

Modeling the Portfolio

Before engaging in the core of the curriculum, the teacher can show a portfolio model and evidence that the students can follow. The portfolio model that I have developed will be available online to download, with an accompanying thought-log. In this way, students can anticipate the course of action, and the teacher should assure the students that this process encourages nonsense, accident, and play; this should further ease hesitant students who consider themselves non-experts in the creative realm. As Rudolf Arnheim states, “Accident is a shrewd helper, and the unconscious is a powerful one.” (Arnheim, 178)

First, the students will select photographs as a springboard for creative writing. The teacher cuts-up a book of photographed portraits. Students draw these portraits at random from a box. Then, we mirror this process by drawing leaves from a box. Students describe their leaves in writing—as if the leaf had committed a crime and they would have to identify it from a “leaf line-up.” The leaves are mixed-up into separate, small line-ups; in small groups, students trade descriptions and identify the leaves. This gives students better insight into extended observation and thorough description, two key critical thinking skills as identified by the Guggenheim project. The students then describe the images in their photographs with the same intensity, so that they do not take the shapes, colors, and details for granted. Of course, all of this imagery contributes to the “single powerful effect” of each portrait, a mood that translates well into the next step: writing a first-person story in the voice of the portrait depicted in the photograph.

Students then create visualizations from their creative writing, and teachers encourage them to discover anything that seems missing from the written piece. Because I have culled some of this process from a curriculum I helped create at Brown Summer High School 2006, I offer a moment that illustrates the merits of visualization. One student highlighted sugar cane in her

drawing, and then realized that setting needed to become a more important element in her story. During this time, students keep thought-logs to describe their experience working within this transformative cycle.

In small groups, students then trade these works of creative writing. In one sentence, they write down the overall mood of the piece. What does the experience of reading make them feel? In this way, they are moving past the terrain of words. Then the students make drawings, rich with suggestive color and emotion, or take pictures that better express this feeling. Again, the teacher must stress that the students do not have to be experts in visual art; learning happens in the experience of transforming and creating. Students swap this work again, and begin new pieces of creative writing, poetry or prose based off the visual cues in the images.

Metaphorically, the transformative cycle takes on the graphic form of a recycle symbol. At the end of each class, students devote fifteen minutes to writing down their thoughts and feelings about this creative process. Over the course of three weeks, they should begin to divine patterns in their thought process, as recorded in the thought-logs. These patterns will give them insight into how they think through creative projects, and the teacher should highlight for the student critical thinking skills at play and in evidence during this process. At the end of the curriculum unit, students will have inter-arts portfolios to take with them, and these portfolios can also be posted online. The teacher should also gather as many pieces of art and writing together as possible, and create a literary journal for all of the students to keep. The teacher should offer written assessments of student work, with the development of critical thinking skills the paramount area of inquiry.

Professor Field also advocates other shocks to stimulate creativity. Students could read out lines from the text that they like regardless of where those lines come from, so that a

narrative loses its linear tethers. How does the work change, and how will students respond with more creative work? Students could also make a collage from cut-up text, and then create images or new stories from that collage. Or a gallery can be created, with text and image side-by-side, in the manner of Van Gogh's *Starry Night* and Anne Sexton's poem of the same name. What can we learn by discussing the similarities and differences between these two creative forms?

CONCLUSION

Accident, play, and fun transformative failure reign in elementary school. Yet by high school, students begin to disassociate these activities from the realm of learning. I believe these activities are crucial to discovery, invention, and transformation. Secondary students lose the intrinsic motivation requisite in the creation and re-creation of art. In this way, they may miss the true function of literary and visual art—to express mood through experience. In reading and viewing art, such experience occurs by the tethering of personal emotions and memory to the object of art. The very act of spontaneous creation also gives students insight into the experience of art, an organic and dynamic conversation between the creator and the beholder. High school students carry with them both constructivist and gestalt principles; combined, these two principles partially account for why students seek themselves in works of art, and why certain works of art have universal, lasting expressive forms.

I structured *Writing, Art, and Critical Thinking* so that it fulfills the mandate of Jean Piaget. *To know* is to transform an object, a work of art. This interdisciplinary curriculum unit empowers students to become artists, engaged in a social discourse. A transformative cycle illumines a constellation of learning skills, which may have dimmed by high school: intrinsic motivation, experiential and associational creativity, and finally, transferable critical thought.

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