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Literacy is a skill that is needed in all content areas. It encompasses more than just reading and writing. Students equipped with literacy tools can better communicate their ideas and feelings while developing critical thinking and problem-solving skills. In the context of the visual arts classroom, literacy skills are vital for learning art processes, vocabulary, art criticism, and interpretation. According to Elizabeth Whitehead, artwork can be viewed as texts, and students should learn to analyze them using visual thinking and literacy strategies. Whitehead further states that “[u]sing art in a ‘text-free’ environment helps early readers develop decoding and comprehension skills while also enhancing their reading abilities.”¹

Literacy can be broken down into five key components: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.² Each of these pillars are interrelated. A student who has reading fluency and can decode may not necessarily comprehend what he or she is reading. A child with speech difficulties may struggle to sound out words. Phonemic awareness in early literacy is crucial, as it helps children match sounds in words. Vocabulary is essential for understanding processes, meanings, and connections to other subjects. Comprehension is integral to developing a child’s critical thinking skills, analyzing a text, and making meaning from it. One key factor in comprehension is prior knowledge; teachers can assist by providing basic content knowledge based on the student's current understanding. These components serve as bridges in our educational system, where cross-curricular learning is essential.

As visual arts teachers, we can employ various strategies and tools to help students navigate the world of literacy. Students arrive in our classrooms with different abilities, levels of reading, content knowledge, and comprehension skills. They also experience a range of emotions and reactions to reading specific content-based materials. Teachers can utilize various methods to measure students’ reading abilities and evaluate the readability of texts. A student’s reading level and comprehension are impacted by factors such as prior knowledge and the text’s difficulty. Teachers can administer tests and formulas to assess each student, both in and out of the classroom. In the art classroom, teachers can tailor content-specific materials to fit the art project. For instance, one way to integrate literacy into the visual arts classroom is to ask students to respond to artwork. We can show an image of a work of art and ask students to describe, analyze, and interpret it, a process sometimes referred to as “reading an artwork.” The teacher can provide a written guide, such as fill-in-the-blank questions, which can range from simple to complex, depending on the grade level. For example: “This work by artist Lee Smith depicts _____, _____, and _____. Colors that appear in the painting include _____.” Since language also facilitates the transmission of ideas and feelings, students can write subjective responses to the work. Advanced students might conduct additional research about the artist, write an essay, and share their findings with the

¹ Whitehead, E. S. (2022, March 16). *Literacy in visual art education: Art as text*. Arts Education Partnership. <https://www.aep-arts.org/literacy-in-visual-art-education-art-as-text/>

² National Reading Panel. (n.d.). 5 pillars infographic poster.

class. The key to any guide we create in the classroom is to keep it intentional, organized, and clear.

Art vocabulary can be introduced early on to support students' understanding of the artwork and the processes and techniques used. For example, a student might progress from saying, "I like the black lines in the drawing" to "I like how the artist used contour lines in his drawing." As students develop in the five pillars of literacy, their communication becomes more precise and refined, directly impacting their understanding of the schemata of a concept. In art, this encompasses their comprehension of painting, drawing, printmaking, photography, sculpture, and other disciplines. Tools to encourage vocabulary development in the art classroom include Word Walls, Feature Analysis, timelines, technology-based vocabulary games, Venn diagrams, semantic maps, and more. These tools enhance observation skills and help students connect meanings to words, compare definitions, and explore art movements.

Making reading purposeful is also important in the relationship between visual arts and literacy. As students transition from one reading level to another, content can become denser and more complex. Teachers must be aware of where their students are—from previous exposure to the content they are reading to the art processes they have engaged in. It can be frustrating for students to read lengthy texts without understanding their purpose. This challenge can occur for readers of any age. If students are unclear about the purpose of their reading, they may become frustrated and confused. It's crucial for us as teachers to help our students understand WHY they are reading the assigned materials. "Teachers who are not forthcoming about what they expect their students to derive from reading are inviting poor comprehension" (McKenna, M./Robinson, R., *Teaching Through Text*, p.102). Once a teacher establishes the "right" purpose for reading, students can approach the text strategically and meet curricular goals.

While it is essential for teachers to set reading standards and goals, it is equally important for students to participate in purpose-setting. Teachers can collaborate with their students to suggest alternative ways of establishing reading purposes, guiding them in the right direction. Several methods exist to help students understand and achieve their reading purposes and identify the most important information.

Thinking strategies that help students navigate their reading material includes pre, during, and post reading activities. Pre-reading activities include reading aloud to the students or in the art room the teacher can frontload images, ask questions about those images, and assess their prior knowledge. During reading activities include having students do simple sketches of the text or providing a reading guide. Post reading activities can help students test their knowledge of the text as well as helping teachers assess the students. For example, teachers can test the students' knowledge by having them create a timeline of the art history movements from a certain time period.

Another important literacy tool is the Daily 5. "Daily 5 is a literacy framework that instills behaviors of independence, creates a classroom of highly engaged readers, writers, and learners, and provides teachers with the time and structure to meet diverse student needs. Because it holds no curricular content, it can be used to meet any school, district, state, or

national standards.”³ One of the ways to adapt the Daily 5 framework in the visual arts classroom is by creating different art-making stations. Students can go from station to station and try different materials or work progressively on one project. To incorporate literacy, a teacher might have students in the art room start by reading a prompt then move on to talking about the prompt, then move on to making a piece in response to the prompt.

Teachers play crucial roles in the classroom, serving as models for the strategies they wish to impart and providing a framework for learning. Inquiry is no different. There are four types of inquiry projects that can engage students: Mini-inquiries are brief in-class investigations; curricular inquiries are more extended and can be used year-round; book club inquiries occur after reading, allowing groups to further investigate lingering questions; and open inquiries are conducted toward the end of the year by small groups identifying “hot topics.” Art projects can follow similar stages as the four inquiry types: 1) Students can immerse themselves in their material of choice; 2) they can investigate past techniques and manipulate the material; 3) they can coalesce by selecting one technique and exploring it in depth; 4) finally, students can present their work and explain their process.

Teachers can model investigations and inquiry about content-based material in the art classroom, including investigations about artists, materials, techniques, and art history. Authentic and extended investigations into curricular topics keep students active rather than passive as they research. Providing students with choices allows them to ask questions and generate ideas about a text or topic. Working in groups fosters conversation, enabling students of varying levels to support each other during their investigations. Reports are an effective way to assess what students have learned.

Another method for integrating literacy in the art classroom is through Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS). Developed by Philip Yenawine and Abigail Houson, VTS is a critical thinking tool designed to facilitate meaningful dialogue when viewing art. Most individuals spend an average of just three seconds looking at a work of art! For art lovers and experts, this might seem unbelievable. However, Houston and Yenawine realized that if we want children to engage with art, we must develop methods for them to process what they see without “grown-ups” providing all the facts. We also need to give children “permission to wonder,” freeing them from the pressure of always having the “right” factual answer and allowing them to explore and ask questions about art or any topic.

Some VTS strategies include: 1) **See-think-wonder**—where you project an art piece on a wall or place a poster on tables and ask students to share what they see, think, and wonder about the piece; 2) **Compare and contrast**—when you take two works of art (from the same movement/era or different ones) and create a Venn diagram; 3) **Think-pair-share**—when you pair students and have them discuss a piece of art using guided questions (you can also use see-think-wonder for sharing); 4) **Colors, shapes, lines**—when you show a work of art and ask questions like, “What colors do you see? What shapes? What lines?” Connect this to lessons on the elements of art; 5) **Beginning, middle, end**—when you show a work of art and have

³ *Daily 5*. Daily 5 | TheDailyCAFE.com. (n.d.). <https://www.thedailycafe.com/daily-5>

students speculate about the sequence of events in the image, asking questions like what happened before, what will happen next, or what might be happening.

All the tools and strategies related to literacy and the integration of literacy in the visual arts classroom aim to help teachers create meaningful, effective, and relevant lesson plans. One effective method for lesson planning is called Backward Design. In this approach, the teacher identifies the desired outcome they want from students, including the big ideas and skills they aim to achieve by the end of the lesson or unit. They begin by identifying a clear goal. Next, they determine the acceptable evidence of engagement, which includes various assessments and evaluation tools to gauge students' understanding of the project or goal. These tools can include rubrics, formative assessments, and summative assessments. Finally, the teacher designs learning activities that support the goal. This student-centered approach to teaching fosters engagement and understanding.