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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative

2018 Volume II: Poems about Works of Art, Featuring Women and Other Marginalized Writers

Ekphrastic Poetry: Connecting with the Original Language and Culture Through Poetry

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by Ella Earl

This unit is about introducing the type of poetry called ekphrastic to ninth grade students who are reluctant readers and writers of the English language. To interest these students, who are predominately Native Americans at a rural public school, I felt that “bells and whistles” would be needed. So, as an introduction to the unit, I found an excellent short video created by PBS about Vincent Van Gogh’s life and art work. The introductory art is Van Gogh’s “The Starry Night”, and Anne Sexton’s poem of the same title. Once the criteria for performing analysis and interpretation of art pieces and poems have been established, using well-known art and poems, the unit is designed to introduce the students to Navajo art objects that have had practical uses in the past and write ekphrastic poems about these objects. The intent is to establish identity and a sense of pride in Navajo culture and language. Most Navajo teens are mainly influenced by main-stream pop culture and have lost connection with their native traditional teachings and customs. The unit will bring awareness of the Navajo culture and language and appreciation of being bilingual.

(Developed for English I, grade 9; recommended for ELA, grades 8-9)

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