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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2026 Volume I: The Kids are not the Threat

Be a Leader, Not a Boss: Making Big Differences Through Sustained Small Actions

Curriculum Unit 26.01.10, published September 2026
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Introduction

"This was the night that drag queens, transgendered folks, lesbians, and gay said No!

No more to gay oppression, police brutality, societal contempt.

The homophobia that had oppressed so many for so many years would no longer be tolerated.

Did they say "No" to racism because they were Black and Puerto Rican?

Or "No" because of their gender or sexual orientation?

Was it "No" because they were poor and working class?

It was all of those things." - Merle Woo, *August 2008, To my dear friend Anh*[1]

You see, sometimes it all starts with a riot. But truthfully, a lot of the time, it starts with a spark or something that seems miniscule. You also might ask what is the 'it' that I am referring to? It could represent a variety of concepts, but in this case, it stands for that moment of spark or epiphany or even the moment when something changed into something new. It could be a small but noticeable change, or it could be a huge shift in perspective or momentum. This could be a movement (like in the case of Stonewall), a feeling, or even the lens that you are looking through. In my case, it stands for the moment that I realized my place in making the world a more welcoming place in every way I could. However, whether with a riot or a spark (or even with a poem or a movie or a painting or a song), every event and every movement starts with the individual. It could start with a single human or a city full of humans, but it all starts with individuals and their existential ideas, fears, and expectations. And on a personal note, and especially with my path to activism, sometimes it doesn't start with a riot. I am only one person, and as long as I can remember, I have always had what I considered a strong desire to be part of the continuous battle and crusade for social justice. I was aware that my desire for positive change and equality was highly influenced by my artistic tastes and manifested through my creation of music, art, and writing. It might not have had the usual germination, and it definitely has taken many paths and has gone through many forms. But yes, my journey most definitely did not start as a riot. It started quietly with a kid, in his room, with records and books and movies, and, as with any living philosophy,

it has evolved tremendously and continues to evolve.

How did I get here? Understanding and accepting the societal privilege that comes from my demographic and the gender I was assigned at birth, I am just one person, and there were still many factors that led to the current me. So…

Was it because of the targeting and bullies, especially in elementary and middle school?

Was it my never wanting or caring to fit into that 'straight white male' box as neatly as many of my peers could?

Was it the kindness and support bestowed upon me by certain adults who were looking out for me?

Was it seeing some influential movies as a youth (maybe too young)?

Was it listening to all those revolutionary records in my dad's collection?

Was it the comic books and graphic novels that I was reading?

Was it the political cartoonists that I was drawn to in high school?

Being completely honest, it was probably, in some form or another, all those things. I was not exactly the biggest kid at school and had also decided at a very young age that I didn't care to put very much of my energy into fitting into what were rather restrictive gender norms, especially in my area. I was lucky enough to have a handful of supportive adults in elementary school and even more significantly, I had supportive and influential role models in high school. As far as movies go, there was that time around the age of nine or ten that I saw The Color Purple and Platoon in the same weekend. The cynicism of Country Joe and the Fish's *I-Feel-Like-I'm-Fixin'-To-Die-Rag[2]*reinforced my feelings even more about the atrocities of our involvement in Vietnam. I was reading *The Dark Knight Returns[3]*and *Watchmen[4]* along with the lesser-known *Transmetropolitan[5]*and *The Invisibles,[6]*as well as many other graphic novels and comics that were pushing that medium in ways that they hadn't been pushed before. I also was ingesting every political cartoon that I could through the weekly and monthly news magazine publications and the local newspapers. In particular, I was drawn to the work of Rob Rogers.[7] Later on I found out that Rob was from Pittsburgh, and a short time after that, I was able to hear Rob speak and meet and talk to him in person. In this case, it took something meaningful to me and gave it more depth and context. Meeting and hearing him speak and realizing that he, like me, was just one person making a difference, only added to my inspiration to enact change.

Of all of these moments and influences, saying that it was any of those singularly would be nothing short of a lie. How did I, being born and raised in an openly conservative rural environment, with little to no diversity, end up here? I guess that we can see a clear path even though it was an unlikely path. Either way, spiritually and philosophically, I am glad to be where I am, and I wouldn't feel comfortable anywhere else. I feel that these influences led me into teaching, and as an educator, I know that many of my students feel drawn to being on the 'right side' of history as well. I want to enable and encourage them as certain educators and influential adults did for me and so many of my friends. I also am well aware and accepting that most of their experiences differ from the my experiences as a child and young adult.

To paraphrase the quote that is often attributed to Maya Angelou, I did what I could with what I knew and once I knew better, I did better. And just like the example above where Woo asked her friend those questions, there were many reasons for my transformation into the adult advocate and educator that I am and continue

to become.

“I’m a self-righteous prick, with a great big mouth

But I’m sick to death of mediocracy and lies.

And I’m preaching to the choir,

And I’m yelling down a hole,

I used to sing between the lines but then I got wise”

-Hamell on Trial, “Halfway”[8]

As an artistic activist, navigating my journey as an advocate for social change, I have slipped back and forth between the messages I want to deliver to the world and in what manner I feel best that they are delivered. As stated in the Hamell quote above, I am in constant reflection of whether the artist message should be delivered bluntly and or covertly snuck into the art. Artistic choice, preference, what the song or piece calls for, along with what seems most impactful have all been valid and constructive paths to take when creating a piece with a message. As a visual artist, I appreciate the bluntness of Barbara Krueger[9] or Kara Walker’s[10] art. Barbara Krueger’s blunt and in-your-face approach and iconic red, black, and white color scheme drives home points that would not be easily disguised with subtly. Kara Walker’s silhouette pieces are graphic and intentional in their approach as well. Kara Walker delving deep into the African American experience especially from the point of view of an African American Woman. Although both Walker and Krueger are great examples, depending on the specific work, it might not always be an age-appropriate fit for the grades that I am introducing it to. However, the sometimes more subtle advocacy work of Romare Bearden and Jacob Lawrence have facilitated great classroom discussions while remaining mostly age and grade appropriate. I also get great joy from the subtlety of a good hidden message (what we now refer to as ‘Easter Eggs’) showing up in every genre of art.

Personally, and artistically, I have been fascinated by (and heavily influenced by) the graffiti artists of the 1980’s. I have probably been most heavily influenced by Keith Haring and Jean-Michell Basquiat, who were witty and creative with their seemingly simplistic, easily recognizable, and repeatable images. I appreciate the subversiveness of their messages mixed with their healthy disregard for authority. The subversive act of their graffiti tactics itself being a large part of their acts of revolution. And although never the basis for a full-scale project, we have had many deep and philosophical conversations around the works of Haring and Basquiat as well as the complications and problematic nature of graffiti art and graffiti artists.[11]

It does truly take a village to form a movement, and visual artists are only one medium that has influenced me as an artist and activist. As a songwriter and lyricist, I was heavily influenced by the in-your-face heavy metal and punk rock messaging of well-known bands like Rage Against the Machine and The Dead Kennedys, who spoke directly to the angry teenager in me. From this and the crossover and collaboration of groups from these genres also lead me to activist minded hip-hop groups such as Public Enemy and Tribe Called Quest. More recently, these groups led me to newer groups such as Run the Jewels and the folk-punk/anti-folk artists of the past couple of decades (including artists such as Hamell on Trial and Ani Difranco), who in turn led me back to listening to the early activist folk music of Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger. Much like my getting to meet cartoonist Rob Rogers, my getting to meet and share stages with Ed Hamell (Hamell on Trial) further solidified the idea that one person can make a difference while still being part of a greater movement. My

listening and the messages that I was hearing were becoming more and more diverse and also more and more activist oriented. Because of the outreach and messages of many of these artists and musicians that I was listening to, absorbing, and inspired by, I was finding myself wanting to be a person that enabled and encouraged and participated in that movement for social justice. So many of the artists, musicians, and writers that I was being drawn to tended to be approachable and down to earth and further proved to me how accessible a path to activism could be.

In my art room, we often find ourselves discussing the importance of the process over the product. Sometimes it wasn't even the art or the music as much as what the artists went through in the process of making the art or the music. The first example that comes to mind is Paul Simon's collaboration with Ladysmith Black Mambazo. Even though some aspects have come under criticism, the initial goal of this was to lift marginalized groups of indigenous South African artists impacted by apartheid.[12] Another musical example would be the work that David Byrne and the Talking Heads were doing by including a wider and wider world influence with their music and live performances which included the music influences as well as dance performances. *Stop Making Sense,* both in musical performance and visual performance, were connecting American and European audiences to aspects that had not been put onto as large of a stage. David Byrne continued and deepened the experiment even after leaving the Talking Heads.[13] We see cross-discipline engagement with Romare Bearden and Faith Ringgold uplifting and celebrating the musicians of their eras through their artwork. Bearden even being an accomplished musician and athlete as well as a visual artist. We look at pieces like Romare Bearden's 'The Piano Lesson (Homage to Mary Lou)'[14], which was inspired by Matisse[15] and not only celebrated a young musician's journey to learn the instrument, but it also was the inspiration for Pittsburgh's native August Wilson's 1987 play of the same name.[16]

In almost every genre of visual art, music, and writing that influenced my youth and young adulthood, I could find artists of all types using their craft as a vehicle for change and for positivity. Although there are a few examples of larger contributions, most of the impact was in the form of small acts of activism which were intentional and constant. Activism was always at least 'in-the-mix' when these artists were creating their works. And just like those before me, art (and all its forms) has always been more than just pretty songs or picturesque paintings to me.

"Coming of age during the plague of Reagan and Bush

watching capitalism gun down democracy.

It had this funny effect on me,

I guess"

-Ani Difranco, "*Your Next Bold Move"[17]*

Unlike growing up through the 1980's and 1990's, the youth of today have instant access to an endless influx of information. The adults around them have that instant access and influx as well. And every day we see and read about the seemingly infinite injustices in this world. It feels futile and hopeless at times, and making any difference feels like an insurmountable task. I am just one human. My students are just individual humans. We are all just individual artists and musicians and writers and creators. How can we, as singular people, push back against the sometimes-suffocating oppression that we see? How can I, as an art teacher, make a difference? How can my fourth and fifth graders make a difference? How can our kindergarten students make a difference? How can we make a difference when we work together? How can we make a difference

working alone but all working towards a collective goal?

For my students, I cannot answer many of these questions, which I have wrestled with and pondered along my own journey, and continue to do so. Instead, I can only model what it looks like to wrestle with them, ponder them, and look for ways to move forward. I look to my own influences, none of whom individually solved the woes of the world. Instead, they showed me the dignity of the fight itself. My most powerful radical influences did not teach me the answers to these impossible questions, but the honor of fighting the good fight, even in the face of challenging odds. There are so many ways that artists and performers can make sustained efforts to bring more equality, hope, and joy to the world.

Advocacy groups, civil rights groups, and even corporate groups have been using ideas in this vein for many years. As with any artistic or creative endeavor, it seems that groups like the Young Lords[18] and the Black Panthers were using intentional and sustained efforts with their organizations to achieve huge and positive impacts. The impacts of both of these groups are still felt today and live on through the neighborhood outreach and food distribution programs pioneered by them. These groups were using many of the techniques (although on a much larger scale) as an artist or project manager might use. These techniques tactics do not sit too far away from the skills and strategies that I teach and model for my students. Through sustained effort and practice, artists, musicians, along with athletes and other disciplines, can make noticeable and significant gains in their respective fields.

We all can make a plan. We can all make an impact. We all can make positive steps toward our goals. We can do so much when we work together and lead by example, even if we are working separately toward the same goal. No one really likes to be 'bossed' around, but we can all be leaders. We can all do something. The world doesn't need more rooms filled with bosses and managers. But the world can use more community building, more solidarity to make change, more grassroots organizing, and above all, more positivity and joy.

"True revolutionaries never bomb buildings

True revolutionaries never bomb buildings

It attracts too much attention

They never bomb buildings"

-Dan Bern, "*True Revolutionaries*"[19]

Unit Overview

In this unit, my students and I will be looking into both small and large ways that we can be activists and advocates for change. Our unit will focus first on how we can use the disciplines of the creative arts (visual art in particular) to make positive impacts on the immediate world around us. We will delve into this through an examination of various artists, our school community, our neighborhood and city. Grounded in a people-first perspective, we will inspect the ways artist-activists around the world use creativity and their work to enact positive and lasting differences. We will be asking ourselves how we can use our creativity to make our communities more welcoming, inclusive, and equitable places. We will consider the different of different

localities of impact – from our neighborhood all the way up to the globe. How can we advocate, through art, for the acceptance and dignity of all humans? How can artmaking and creation make us all feel safer physically, emotionally, and spiritually as well as making us feel more connected to our world, nation, communities, and families? Most importantly, how can we use art and artmaking to find joy in an often-hurtful world?

The target group for my unit will be fourth and fifth graders (ages 9 to 11).

The targeted time frame will be within the first two months of the 2026/2027 school year and will include our initial discussions of artists who have used their work to make positive changes. From this we will lead into research, which will then lead to students picking a topic that is important to them that they feel can be impacted by the art we are making. Every student will have a chance to create their own project based on the topic that they would like to bring more attention to and/or impact in some positive way. Most of our students are curious, compassionate, and intellectually curious and I feel that they would really latch on to ways of creating change through small actions. In this case, the culminating project will be a work of art that showcases the topic/topics that they find important and would like to advocate for.

Through examining the past, present, and future of how children and young adults have made a huge impact as activists, we can look at ways that we can make and implement small actions within our school and community that could add up to bigger changes in the world around us. As the title says to be a leader and not a boss, we all possess the ability to make meaningful impact on the world through the small gestures that we can show those around us through our daily actions and the art that we make.

“The opposite of war isn’t peace,

It’s creation”

-Jonathan Larson, “*La Vie Bohem”*[20]

No matter their age, our students have important things to say. Just like adults, they deserve to be heard. Some might even say that our younger people have a better outlook on the world than the hardened and numb adults. Students receive messaging from every aspect of our society to sit down, conform, and not make waves. In the art room, we have the sometimes-unique freedom to explore self-expression on its own merits. Critical thinking and the questioning of authority are powerful skills for young people, and require intentional cultivation within a standardized

education setting. We have seen that students who do not feel like they are able to speak up and voice their opinions tend to lean more toward ideals that don’t support diversity and inclusion.[21] This unit will emphasize different ways that students can get those thoughts and push their voices out into the world. We will be looking into how the arts have played a role in advocating for positive change. Whether via popular music, visual art, literature, or any other artistic discipline, we find a vast number of examples that range from the subversively sneaking a message “under-the-radar”, to shouting their message loudly, demanding to be heard, not asking the audience to “read-between-the-lines”. As my class is a visual arts class, we will be focusing primarily on the creative world of visual disciplines and asking ourselves about the deeper meaning of pieces and subtle messages along with what the artists might be blatantly showing us. However, as a strong advocate of cross-disciplinary instruction, we will make sure to delve into other art forms as well.

As a baseline, we will start with artists that have already been covered or discussed in our art program or in

other disciplines. These might be artists that I have discussed in class or that we have been the inspiration for projects and units that produced physical artwork. Artists such as Romare Bearden and Jacob Lawrence should already be, at the very least, familiar to my students. With these artists, we have talked about their roles as activists but may not have gone into depth about their activism or the methods that they employed to advocate for their causes. Once again, although many were part of artistic groups or movements, they were all individuals, single humans, creating and advocating for change … being leaders but not bosses.

Adding onto the artists that we already know, we can move on to the adding on and discussing of the artists that we may not have been introduced yet or want to go more in depth with. Part of the unit will be dedicated to students being able to research their own artists of inspiration as well as researching the specific artists and specific methods that they will choose for their final project. The unit will culminate with a student directed art project focused on conveying a message of advocacy through their piece. Throughout the introduction discussions and student research, we will be keeping notes in the form of a sketchbook or journal. Students will have the choice of sketchbook or journal, and we will follow the journaling habits that have been introduced and practiced in numerous other activities and projects. Students will be able to use their notes to inform the direction and details of their final project. Students will also have some teacher lead guidance in the form of my predetermined planning questions (another technique that we use regularly for planning and project execution purposes). We will close out the project with a written reflection of the art, the artist of inspiration, the topic or topics that are being advocated for, and the medium/method of delivery.

The goal is to make this as personable and individualized as possible for each student. Educators are always looking for ways to maximize their student potential as well as teaching their content in a meaningful and interesting way and, when possible, I do like to have my students in control but with a framework and some guardrails to make sure that my learning goals are met. I have seemed to have a great deal of success when I am able to find ways for students to connect themselves to their surroundings and give students the power and ability to uniquely tell their own stories. I am sure that this unit/project will take some turns and need some adjustments, but I am super excited to see where my students take these ideas of advocacy and activism.

Philosophy of Art Instruction and Demographics

As a practicing visual artist, musician, and writer, my personal philosophy is that everyone is an artist in some shape or form. Everyone starts out with the built-in ability, want, and maybe even, need, to create. With visual art, I use Betty Edwards's philosophy as an example. We are creative beings, and if we are able to learn how to write, we are able to learn how to draw.[22] If we are able to learn how to draw, we can learn how to paint, etc… We can apply this to any form of discipline that requires repetition and practice to master. If you have the dexterity to write legibly, there is nothing holding you back from creating visually. Drawing, writing, playing music, dancing, and any form of creation is honestly, at its base level, a teachable skill.

With the arts, we want to make sure that students are exposed to them just as we would want students exposed to any other subject that we deemed important. We can, usually very easily, connect visual art to most any other subject. Of course, in the same way that not every student will grow up to be a professional athlete, astrophysicist, or mathematician, we don't expect every student to grow up to be a professional artist, musician, writer, or even an educator of any of these art forms. However, being exposed to any or all of

the aspects and disciplines of the arts provide a way for people of every age to grow and develop creative thinking and problem solving skills which have proven to transfer to other disciplines and professions. We, as a world, want and need creative thinkers. Every line of work, at its core, needs problem solvers. The arts help nurture creative thinking skills, which lead to creative problem-solving children who grow into creative problem-solving adults. The arts, at their core, promote divergent thinking, empathy, curiosity, and an understanding that there is a world beyond what we see in front of us every day. Everyone benefits from exposure and immersion in the arts.

I teach at Pittsburgh Dilworth PreK-5. Dilworth is an arts and humanities magnet within the Pittsburgh Public Schools. Because we are a full-minute school, we are privileged to have full-time music and full-time art faculty. Currently our district is contemplating doing away with magnet schools, so we, unfortunately, cannot predict what the future holds for arts exposure in our learning community. But currently, I understand the privilege of existing as a full magnet and have always advocated that each and every school in our district should have equal access to the arts. I am hoping that this will be the case if they are to abolish the magnet program within our district.

Our student demographics this past school year were about 60% African American, 30% White, and about 10% who identify as Mixed Race. Our individualized education program (IEP) students and gifted individualized education program (GIEP) students represent about 17% of our student population along with an economically disadvantaged population of a little over 50%.[23]

Background and Cross Curricular Approach

My school (within the Pittsburgh Public School System) is an urban school with some key aspects of privilege and advantage. Although we are part of the larger Pittsburgh Public School system, due to our current magnet school status, we have a much higher access to visual art, writing, dance, theatre, and music, along with other amenities that many of the other schools in the district might not have as much direct access to.

Along with access to the arts, we have, as part of our school campus, access to a well-maintained urban garden and are located within short walking distance to not only one of the largest public parks in the city. We are also within walking distance of the Pittsburgh Zoo and Aquarium. Our garden is home to numerous edible plants and a variety of different flowers and other plants. This garden has been very useful when it comes to still life drawing and observational drawing as well as being a great location to practice our journaling skills. I do not take access to these amenities for granted as they are great resources.

Even with our privileges and advantages as a school, we still have many of the same issues and challenges as other schools in the district. We still have difficulties with student concentration, academic focus, and other issues that can plague students of all ages. With the constant distance and use of screens, these issues, unfortunately, have seemed to become compounded since the pandemic. To be completely forthright, many of the behavioral issues that arise in my class seem to stem from the combination of digital devices and their impacts on habits and behaviors. For this reason, as part of the unit, we will be taking time to have a discussion regarding computers as tools for the research part of the unit. The rest of the project will be as technology free as possible. However, with the technology here to stay, this is an opportune time to discuss responsible technology use in an art classroom setting.

Content and Learning Objectives: We All Can be a Leader

The main objective of this unit is to look deeply at how artists have used their craft to convey messages of social justice and advocacy for a cause and how we, as humans of diverse backgrounds and different ages, use our art as a vehicle for societal change and the spread of positivity.

As with all my projects and units, we will also be focusing on the importance of sustained effort, intentionality, and routine. As an adult who has struggled with task planning and attention, I have seen the benefits (both for my students and myself) of strategies that incorporate routine and perseverance. And even though this is a common thread across all my units and projects, it does take a more prominent role for this unit since so many of the writings from this seminar discuss the importance of perseverance and sustained effort. Building a movement takes calculated, intentional, and routine planning to be effective. From the Young Lords,[24] to the Fort Hood Three,[25] to the Black Panthers,[26] all these movements were the result of planning, intentionality, perseverance, and routine.

Historian Robin D. G. Kelley even discusses this in his writing about the right's constant battle against black and minority studies on all levels.[27] If we are to take our place as artist activists, we need to play the long game just as social justice and civil rights activists play the long game. Whether it is with our activism, honing our craft, or a combination of both, we should always be thinking about and working towards our goals, knowing that we will be lifelong learners and will be forever honing those skills.

"Don't talk about it,

It's not a show.

Be about it,

It's 'bout to blow"

-The Coup, "The Guillotine"[28]

Teaching Strategies

Reminders of procedures, routines, and safety habits can never be over-emphasized. Everything that is to be done well and eventually expected of students needs to be taught, modeled, and repeated. All those procedures were once new to everyone.[29] We might forget it sometimes, but everything that we do was new to even the most accomplished teachers at one point.

As with so many things in education, my first words of advice are not to get discouraged. I cannot emphasize this enough. Although my classes are used to some level of discussion at the beginning of every project and the beginning of most classes, I will be aiming to go a bit deeper into these discussions. Even though every project has some element of other disciplines, I will be making an intentional effort to go more in-depth with making cross-curricular connections with social studies and literature elements during this unit.

We all, at some level, resist changes to our routines and ways of thinking and adding another task, routine, or procedure to any practice can feel like a cumbersome uphill battle. Coordinating and distributing the physical supplies of art making can alone become a major task and now we are adding yet another layer to the process. I implore you not to get too stressed or entangled with the specifics and to let the class discussions steer your instruction within the framework of the unit. Leaning into what my students are enthusiastic about has rarely ever led to anything other than greater 'buy in' and excitement around the project. I encourage experimentation but also suggest keeping to a schedule and working within the predetermined frame.

For this unit and its discussions, I will be trying a new framework and technique for our discussions based around Edward De Bono's *Six Thinking Hats* method that Professor Ferguson introduced to us during seminar. Developed in 1985, De Bono's method has a parallel thinking framework which separates our thinking into six distinct categories. It was implemented as a way for groups (usually corporate) to work through a thinking process more effectively and efficiently by putting on a different hat when moving onto each different mode of thinking. De Bono represents each hat by a different color; however, I plan on adapting the method based on the way that Professor Ferguson adapted it for class. Due to the weight and connotation of certain colors, it might be easier, even for elementary students, to break down the method to the actual words that are associated with every hat. The white hat becomes the information hat. The red hat will be thought of as the feelings hat. The yellow hat will be represented as the positive thoughts hat. The black hat will become the cautious hat. The green hat becomes the creativity hat. While the blue hat will now be the overview hat, the hat that sums up everything. I am excited and a little nervous to try this new technique, but I will take my own advice, not resist change and try to not get discouraged.

If I can procure sketchbooks and journals again, we will be using those for our daily documentation of our progress. This will include notes from discussions and research, drawings, and any other pertinent information and planning exercises. The sketchbook/journals will be our reference tool and will guide us during our culminating project. These should not be thought of as finished project but as a document of our ideas and artistic process. The sketchbook/journal is a living and evolving artifact of the process.

During regular warmups, I will remind students that our journaling and sketching is similar to a musician warming up with scales or an athlete warming up before going into play. What we do as a warmup or during discussion is not to be viewed, in any way, as a polished product for display, but rather as reference and practice material for the bigger project.

Classroom Activities

This unit is currently planned for the fall of 2026. It could take place any time of the year, however, I have found it best to try a new project and/or unit at the start of the year to keep excitement high and before we run into too many distractions from other school activities.

The planned time frame is 10 to 14 classes over a six to eight-week span. The unit should take up the better part of our first nine-week grading period and will focus mainly on our fourth and/or fifth graders.

Phase One: Discussion of artist as activist

As always with a new unit, we will do a brief discussion of expectations, pass out sketchbook/journals, and do

a brief overview of what the unit will entail. After the overview, we can start into our discussion of what it means to be both an artist and an activist.

Our guiding questions will include:

In relationship to the Artist

- Why might an artist want people to think differently about specific issues?
- What experiences in the artist's life may have inspired their activism?
- How can creating art be a way of speaking out and speaking up for others?
- Why might an artist choose certain media/mediums for their work?
- Are there any artists that we have discussed that you might consider an activist?

Connecting Art and Activism

- What problem or injustice do you think artists could/should emphasize?
- How can one artwork/artist inspire people?
- How can art/artists change someone’s mind?
- How can artmaking help create a larger sense of community?
- What makes an artist a leader instead of a boss?

After our initial discussion of artists as activists, we will move on to discussing a few of the newer artists that I want to introduce to them. We will discuss the art of activist printmaker Amos Paul Kennedy Jr. along with reviewing artists that we have discussed previously such as Jacob Lawrence, Faith Ringold, Romare Bearden, Keith Haring, and Jean-Michel Basquiat. We will also delve into how artists from other mediums such as music and writing artists can be activists in their own disciplines.

The discussion part of the unit should only take one or two class periods as we can touch on these concepts throughout the entirety of the unit.

Phase Two: Planning and research

As stated in my strategies, the goal is to have students keep a sketchbook style journal throughout the entire process of the unit. This not only builds transferable habits and routines, but it provides a concrete way to look back on our process. Students will be using sketches and notes from their research as inspiration for their final project.

Students will have time to do research on an artist or artists of their choice to use as inspiration for their project. Students will also be able to use this time to do any research on what techniques, artforms, and methods they might like to use to convey their specific cause or issues. This is where the guiding and planning questions will come into play. Every student will research and record the artist or artists that they are using for inspiration along with the medium that artist is most well known for, the causes and/or issues that they want to shed light on or advocate for, and how they will use the artist or artists and their work as inspiration for their final project.

Since Amos Paul Kennedy Jr. will be our new and main artist of reference and inspiration, I will lean a little heavier on printmaking as a medium and example, but students will, within reason, have artistic license to choose their preferred medium and method of creation. For example, if a student chooses Romare Bearden as their artistic inspiration, they might choose to lean more toward a collage type project or simply use his

color palette or compositional style as reference. As with all artistic endeavors, I understand that these projects can and will take different twists and turns and as long as students are able to justify and explain their reasoning, I am happy to enable and encourage them to take artistic risks and take the path that their journey puts them on.

Planning questions might include:

- Who is your artist or artists of reference that you are using for inspiration?
- What medium or mediums will you be using for the final assignment?
- What is the message that you want to convey and/or what cause do you want to bring attention to or advocate for?

Phase Three: Creation and Reflection

If students took visual and written notes during the introduction process, the research process, and during the planning process, they should already have a well-documented account of information and inspiration to look back upon and should have adequate planning and ideas to influence their final project. As visual artists we can use our sketches and notes in much the same way that a scientist would use their well-documented research, or a musician can listen back through recordings of their past performances, or even how an author or poet would look back on their notes and writing sketches. As always, certain accommodations will be made for students who missed classes along with any individual learning plans that students may have.

This framework will be laid out in the planning sheet and the checklist. Along with the rubric, these will act as the basis for grading the assignments.

Depending on the choices that the class makes, we will either choose individual methods/mediums or choose a method/medium that the entire class will use for the project. Although I am flexible, I am aiming for every student to have at the very least, a modicum of autonomy as to the direction of their work and how their project comes to fruition.

When each student finishes their project, they will be asked to complete a set of reflection questions and prompts. I encourage students to title their piece along with answering a variety of questions about their project and their artistic choices.

Some questions I use for reflection might include the following:

- Who did you choose as your artistic inspiration and why did you choose this artist or these artists for inspiration?
- What artistic medium or mediums did you use for your work?
- What was the message that you wanted to convey and/or what was it that you wanted the world to look at more closely?
- What was your favorite part of the project and what was your least favorite part of the project? Please do not answer with ‘nothing’, ‘everything’, or ‘I don’t know’.
- What would you change if you were to do the project again?
- How would you describe the color scheme of your final project? Please do not just list the colors that you used.

Throughout the process of the unit, we will continue to reinforce artistic and creative principles and concepts that we have been introducing, discussing, and implementing in some form since kindergarten. We will

reinforce concepts such as color theory, design theory, the elements of art, intentionality, the principles of design, etc…

Phase Four: Collaborative Project if time

If time permits, I will enjoy having the students work in groups on a persuasive project. This could take many forms, but it would bring the project full circle if the students as individuals with a message needed to then unify for a group message. This gives them a chance to take those thoughts and feelings of one person and work through the processes of group dynamics and how we might need to compromise or at least rethink our ideas and thoughts when working with that larger group.

We have also been looking into and planning an interactive 'mini' art gallery that would be visible to the public and that students would be able to help maintain and decide on the themes and pieces. Much like a 'free' community library that you see in some neighborhoods, the art gallery would be a small structure where student art could be displayed and visible to those outside of our direct school community.

Suggested Warm Up Activities:

Sketching is a regular warm up activity in my class. If used as a warmup, the sketches should have a very specific time limit to not cut too much into the time of the actual activity for the day. I like to use prompts specific to the project or artist that we are discussing and I usually set my timer for three to five minutes for the entirety of the warmup. My rules for most warmup activities are that it is to remain completely silent and that students are to work for the duration of the time set. If a pencil breaks, use a crayon. If you don't have the right color, use a different color. If you're not sure what to draw at the moment, write something. If you don't know how to draw something, think of something else to draw. But please stay in your area and I will answer all your questions when we finish the warmup.

The purpose of an intentionally silent warmup is to not only give students a brain break but to also me a chance to circulate, for me to double check and make sure everything is set out and that the room is set up for the needs of that particular class, and as a tool to help students with their focus and ability to stay on task. The reason that I ask students to keep working throughout the entire time is to also help with focus and ability to stay on task, but to also encourage them to take that extra step and to add that extra detail or details. It gives them the chance to ask themselves what else they can add to the assignment.

I have used quick collaging as a warmup as well as using that time for students to openly experiment with a new or unfamiliar medium.

Sometimes my warmups simply consist of reinforcing a concept or artistic aspect that I feel we didn't get to touch on or one that just needs a little reinforcement. As long as it thematically or pedagogically supports the current project, any warmup is an effective way to help support the routine of using small actions to create noticeable and sustainable improvement as well as supporting student abilities for concentration and intentionality.

Appendix on Implementing Pennsylvania Arts Standards

Standard 9.2.5.C – Relate art to various styles

We will be discussing landscape and still life art along with observational and technical drawing. Examples of historical and relevant landscape art will be used in correlation with certain discussion and drawing prompts. Writing examples of varying styles will also be used to illustrate the different concepts that we will touch upon. We will also be discussing how various artworks fit into the history of our neighborhoods, city, state, and nation.

Standard 9.2.5.F – Application of appropriate vocabulary

All elements of visual art (line, shape, form, color, value, texture, and space) will be discussed along with the vocabulary that goes along with them. Concepts that we will specifically be touching upon other than the elements will include landscape, still life, shading, collage, symbolism, realism, depth, color theory, etc…

Standard 9.3.5.B – Describe work by comparison of similar and contrasting characteristics

Students will be able to chat about their work, what elements they used in the creation of their work. They will be able to compare their work with other students and also compare their work (writing and drawing) with their notes and planning documentation.

Standard 9.3.5.D – Compare similarities and contrasts using vocabulary of 'critical response'

We will have regular discussion on how the work was created, what art elements were used, and how those specific elements were used in each piece. We will also be able to chat about the similarities and differences of the students' responses to the various writing and drawing prompts.

Notes

[1] Tommi Avicolli Mecca, 283

[2] McDonald, *I-Feel-Like-I'm-Fixin'-to-Die-Rag*

[3] Miller, 1986

[4] Moore, 1986-1987

[5] Ellis, 1997-2002

[6] Morrison, 1994-2000

[7] Rogers 2009

[8] Hamell, *Halfway*

[9] Linker

[10] Dubois Shaw

[11] Emmerling, 7

[12] Kahn

[13] Byrne, 22

[14] Bearden. *The Piano Lesson (Homage to Mary Lou)*

[15] PAFA, 2014

[16] PAFA, 2026

[17] Difranco, *Your Next Bold Move*

[18] Enck-Wanzer, Darrel. *The Young Lords: A Reader* (11)

[19] Bern, *True Revolutionaries*

[20] Larson, *La Vie Bohem B*

[21] Sitman, 2025

[22] Betty Edwards. *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*, 3

[23] "Pittsburgh Dilworth," Pittsburgh Public Schools

[24] Enck-Wanzer, 11-15

[25] Johnson, Mora, Samas, 6

[26] Williams, 1968

[27] Kelley, *On Racial Justice, Black History, Critical Race Theory, and Other Felonious Ideas*, 5

[28] The Coup, *The Guillotine*

[29] Ron Ritchhart. *Creating Cultures of Thinking*, 9

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