

Seizing the Moment with Symmetry



Camran Gordon, grade twelve; Cristina Olmos, grade eleven; and Abigail Mancillas, grade ten.

Ranella Franklin

Sometimes art is about seizing the moment—a moment in any subject matter. This time the moment was in math during a lesson in symmetry. As a special education teacher with a background in art, I teach in a self-contained class for high-school students with significant cognitive disabilities.

Because I am responsible for all subjects, I am always looking for ways to build connections for my students in an effort to help them relate academics to their real-world interests. After all, isn't that the purpose of education? Art, I have found, is a perfect vehicle for accomplishing this for any age and any subject, and most certainly for students who learn differently.

Making Symmetry Simple

The students in my special education life skills class were working on the concept of symmetry and trying to understand that it means "the same on both sides." It was during the holiday season, and as I was searching for ways to bring the concept to life for them, so the idea of a holiday tree with ornaments and presents took shape.

Instead of practicing symmetry with random shapes in a random activity, the tree connected symmetry to the students' immediate world and current interests, which in turn made it something on which they were eager to focus. The activity was relatively simple:

Creating Trees

Using 12 x 18" (30 x 46 cm) green construction paper, students followed directions to fold it in half lengthwise. Next, they placed a dot by the fold at the top and a dot by the corner away from the fold at the bottom, after which they connected the top and bottom dots using an in-and-out motion to make the limbs of the tree. Holding onto the fold, students cut along the line they had drawn.

When students unfolded their cut paper, they were surprised and pleased to see a tree shape. After gluing their tree onto a sheet of white paper, they proceeded to make ornaments and gifts

by folding smaller pieces of colored paper, drawing lines, and cutting. In addition, they made a symmetrical trunk out of brown paper and placed it at the bottom of their tree. When finished, it was fun for students to see how different each tree was and to note the variety of decorations and packages—they also observed the way the trees were all alike in the concept of symmetry.

Spreading the Word

Throughout this activity, students practiced saying the word "symmetry" many times; they also observed symmetry, repeated the definition of symmetry, and created symmetry. As always, when I bring in a hands-on art activity related to the concept I'm teaching, students not only get excited to use the materials, but they later want to share what they have made with others!

Being able to explain the basic premise of symmetry to each person with whom they shared their picture and to answer questions about their word reinforced the concept. It also boosted their confidence and gave them a sense of accomplishment.

Without art connections, I don't see

the same sense of pride or desire when discussing what they have learned, and when students don't talk about a new concept,

they usually don't remember it.

For students with special needs, utilizing a hands-on art activity to teach or reinforce concepts in other subject areas provides an excellent way to experience abstract ideas in a more concrete manner, especially when they build on students' high interest in the holiday season—a true window of opportunity for learning! 🎨

Ranella Franklin is a special education life skills teacher at Everman Joe C. Bean High School, in Everman, Texas. rfranklin@eisd.org