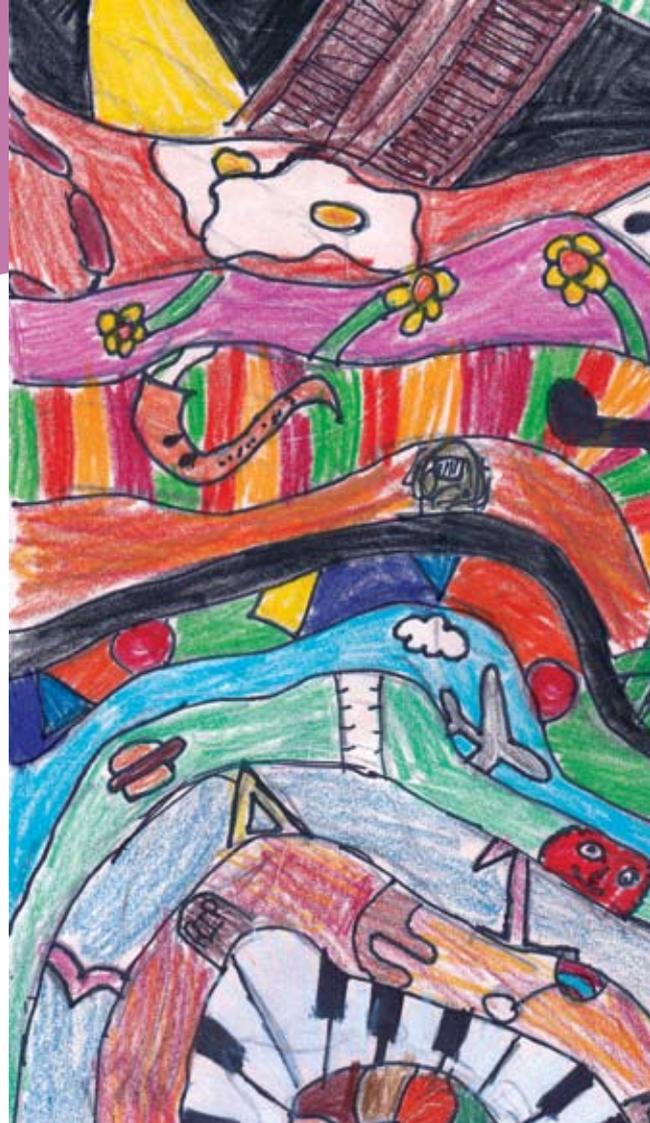


# The Present Is the Key to the Past



**Kari Giordano**

**E**ach year I struggle to come up with new and exciting projects for my eighth-grade students that incorporate personal identity and symbolism. Thirteen-year-olds can easily come up with adjectives and visual symbols of who they are as people, but these mostly include only aspects of their social and academic lives.

## **Dendrochronology**

My desire to have my students refer to their pasts to delve deeper into their individuality sparked an interest in trees and how we can tell so much about a tree's life from the rings found within. *Dendrochronology* is a method of dating past events through the study of tree ring growth. Scientists, arborists, botanists, and archaeologists began using this technique during the early part of the twentieth century, and are able to pinpoint climate and environmental changes that occurred during the life of a tree.

We commonly understand that tree rings can be used to decipher the age of a tree, but even more interesting to me is that we can tell what type of life a tree has lived just by looking at its physical characteristics—leaving me to wonder if humans are the same way. Can we tell what a person's life has been like just by looking at him or her? Sure, there are some clues, like body language or facial charac-

teristics, but people rarely reflect the climate changes that have occurred in their lives.

I asked my eighth graders to take a deep look at themselves and come up with a way to characterize their identities through the events of their lives. I encouraged students to make correlations between cracks in the wood shown in many tree-ring diagrams and the events in their own lives.

We discussed the study of tree ring growth and what each ring tells us about trees. Students were eager to talk about how certain changes in the environment may have impacted a tree during any given year of its life. We quickly transferred these concepts to the lives of the students and they understood that each person has been weathered in similar ways as trees.

## **Generating Vocabulary**

I asked students to create a list of adjectives, nouns, and verbs they could associate with each year of their lives so far. Understandably, students could remember things from the past few years, but very few

adjectives were being formulated for the very early years of their lives. To solve this problem, we discussed how our own assumptions of who we are play a large part in discovering our identities. I asked students to take

their lists home to their parents so time gaps could be filled. This was a great way to involve parents in their children's school

lives and draw a connection between home life and academics.

Each student used the resulting list to brainstorm visual cues and symbols for the years of their tree-ring diagrams. We discussed the elements and principles of design and how using these reminds artists to incorporate line, shape, and color into their work in meaningful ways.

**I encouraged students to make correlations between cracks in the wood shown in many tree-ring diagrams and the events in their own lives.**



*Jacob Kerzner, grade seven.*

### Tree-Ring Compositions

When brainstorming was complete and observable through evidence of sketches, students began working on their tree-ring compositions. The class discussed the choices to be made in laying out the diagrams on the page such as line direction, going off the page, and how much of the trees should be shown. Stations were set up around the room that included watercolor paint, tempera paint, oil pastels, colored pencils, and markers.

I reminded the class that the thickness of a tree ring tells how healthy the tree was during that year. Students decided which years of their lives would be thick and which would be thinner, depending on the circumstances.

When the diagrams were completed, students seemed eager to decipher their peers' symbols and try to



*Erica Sullivan, grade eight.*

uncode the events they experienced each year. One student decided to change the style of his drawing to reflect his changes in personality and growth from year to year. Another student aimed to thin the lines of each year at a certain time to represent flu season.

This lesson proved to go beyond the typical "draw a symbol for yourself" project I had tried in the past. I was very satisfied with the outcome, and I believe that students learned a little bit more about themselves than they had known before. 🐞

*Kari Giordano is an art teacher in the Southern Berkshire Regional School District in Sheffield, Massachusetts. kgiordan@tek2000.net*

### NATIONAL STANDARD

*Students make connections between visual arts and other disciplines.*

### WEB LINK

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