



Artist Studies

Knowledge Retention for Elementary Students

Kelly Campbell-Busby

I teach a lot of content, but I was concerned about whether students were retaining everything I thought they should. I wanted to see if I could develop a unit of study about an artist that would not only be fun and interesting, but be student-driven, meaningful, and differentiated enough to reach every child at his or her level. I started with a second-grade unit on Vincent van Gogh.

“Do kids remember anything I did last year?”

The KWL worksheet

I created special folders with sunflower fasteners that would hold each student's worksheets and notes, including a “KWL” page. KWL is a graphic organizer—a chart of columns to be filled in by students. **K** stands for what the students already *know*, or think they know, about the subject; **W** stands for what they *want* to know/learn about the subject; and **L** stands for what they *learned* from studying the subject. The KWL exercises (done periodically as a whole group throughout the unit) served as a tool for students to see what they knew, ask questions about things they wanted to find out about, and reflect on what they had learned at the end of the study. It also served as a great tool for me to determine which direction to take the lessons.

Sharing Resources

The worksheets included puzzles—word searches, texture finds, cross-words, etc.—and question and answer sheets based on Mike Venezia's book, *Getting to Know the World's Greatest Artists: Vincent van Gogh* (Children's Press, 1989). I purchased six copies of this book for students to share. Each second-grade class had one week to take the books home, read them with a parent, complete the questions, pass the book on to other classmates, and return them to me. I wrote a cover letter to the parents explaining our in-depth artist study and reasons I needed their help.

Reviewing

I took fifteen minutes of each weekly class to review what students had read or learned on their own over the past week. Many families really got into the study by painting together, reading other books, and searching



Impasto Landscape. *Tempera and salt painting, grade two.*

on the Internet for more information. The remainder of our fifty-minute class consisted of producing artworks in the style of Vincent van Gogh: still-life drawings of sunflowers, landscape paintings, a self-portrait, and a textured clay sunflower.

Knowledge-testing Games

Proof of retention came at the end of the year. We played a version of “To Tell the Truth” with three students serving as the expert panel holding masterpiece reproductions, while the remainder of the class had to ask “yes” or “no” questions to find the “real” Vincent van Gogh. Students asked questions about van Gogh's life (his brother, sisters, etc.), his artwork (time of day a work depicted, brushstrokes, etc.), and of course, “Did you cut off your ear?” Their knowledge and excitement seemed

as if they were still studying him. I did not have to question whether or not this group had retained anything.

Technique

Following this approach, I decided to offer concentrated themes taught sequentially over a sustained period of time, through a historical context, and offering a variety of art medias and experiences. By concentrating on one artist or related group of artists each year, students retain information, develop future art projects with greater skill, and make quality aesthetic judgments based on sound knowledge of a subject.

Some think there is no way to keep elementary kids focused on anything for more than a week or two, but I have seen the proof—they can! The payoff for artist studies is smarter kids who think outside the box, stick with something over a period of weeks, and retain information they can build on year after year. Wow! Kids who can produce art, read about it, write about it, talk about it, and stick with it for longer than the time it takes to play a video game! 🎮

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NATIONAL STANDARD

Students know that the visual arts have both a history and specific relationship to various cultures.

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