Homer to Hip-Hop: Teaching Writing through Painting, Performance, and Poetry

DEAR READER,

Imagine using art to teach children to read and write. For the last two years, I taught fourth-grade English language arts alongside two artists: Mark McKenna, theater artist, and William Christine, visual artist. Throughout this experience, I felt like shouting from a mountaintop, "Come, look and see what we are doing in my classroom!" Since I could not find a mountain high enough, I decided to write an article.

This is not a traditional academic research article. It is a patchwork quilt that combines a variety of literary styles: letter, story, poetry, dialogue, interview, recipe, photo essay, and journal. I have arranged the squares to tell the story of teaching writing through painting, performance, and play. It is a roadmap to guide you through my classroom, introduce you to students and artists, and show you their work. This "multigenre piece" (Romano, 2000), with its constantly shifting perspectives, mirrors the dynamic environment of our arts-integrated classroom.

Listen to students talk while they paint, and watch them play while they act. Hear their stories and see them emerge as artists—painters, poets, and performers. Witness: Art transforms the classroom environment, forges connections, and inspires learning.

Sincerely,
Jane Gilrain
Writer, Classroom Teacher, Artist

POEM OF WELCOME

A copycat of Billy Collins's "Dear Reader" (2005) and Robert Frost's "The Pasture" (1913)

You could be the teacher I met in the hallway
this morning before the bell or between classes
or the one who shared her frustration over too much testing.
You could be someone I sat with at lunch
or the face across the table in the faculty meeting.

The fluorescent lights buzz,
and when I look down the corridor of classrooms,
I watch you diminish—my echo, my twin—
and vanish around a corner of this maze
we can't help exploring together.

I invite you to join me,
on a journey of art making and poetry.
I welcome you into my classroom and
introduce you to two artists, an actor and a painter,
I take down a children's volume of Poetry to show you.

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Homer sings of the sea,
Williams lifts the latch to a farmyard of chickens,
with Yeats you can question a tiger,
and Frost insists that "you come too."

I'm going out to clear the path to learning;
I'll only stop to push the desks away
(And wait to watch the boredom clear, I may)
I sha'n't be gone long.—You come too.

THE TROUBLED KINGDOM, AN ALLEGORY

Once upon a time, there was a kingdom in which all the children were smart. In fact, they were brilliant, overflowing with ideas and questions. They loved to pretend, draw, and build things. They longed to run and play. Most of all, they yearned to tell their stories. However, the kingdom had fallen under an evil spell. All day, the children were trapped in rooms and forced to sit on hard plastic chairs, to hold small wooden sticks and to make scratch marks on blank white paper.

Often, the children rebelled by jumping, dancing, or shouting. But they were quickly punished and forced back into quiet stillness. The evil spell was so powerful that even the most generous and well-meaning adults were convinced that this was good for the children.

It soon became clear that the children were not thriving. The King hired experts to solve the problem. These scientists and research specialists found evidence to suggest that the children might blossom if they were allowed to move, dance, play, and make things. But the evil spell was too powerful. The adults were helpless to make such radical change. They were afraid. They did not dare. They had forgotten how.

One day, a strange and mysterious character approached the King carrying a large bag of tools. He called himself an artist and claimed to know how to break the evil spell and unlock the children's gifts. Though skeptical, the King was desperate and decided to allow the artist to work with a single group of children under one condition: The adult in charge of the children must remain in the room and partner with the artist.

The King consented and the artist began at once. Immediately upon entering the room filled with children, he cleared the desks and made space for the children to move. He read ancient stories with heroes and monsters and allowed the children to draw these adventures on paper and act them out in the open space. He described ancient architecture and allowed the children to build it with blocks. After one week, the children cheered when the artist entered the classroom. They were excited to learn.

The children spent hours drawing and acting, retelling, recreating, and reinventing the ancient stories. They began to identify with the heroes and understand the monsters. Finally, the artist asked the children to tell their own stories. They spoke of adventure and monsters. Then the most amazing thing happened. The scratch marks transformed into richly textured symbols bursting with color and rhythm, dancing with images. Eager to communicate their stories, the children began to write.

PROMPT

Complete this sentence (if you agree):
I like poetry because . . .
Yana*: I like poetry because it can be emotional or exciting.
Miguel: I like poetry because it comes from the heart.
Isaiah: . . . because it makes me laugh.
Daniel: . . . because it is interesting.
Jacob: I like poetry because I'm good at acting it out.
Luciana: . . . because when I'm feeling down, I write poetry and I feel better.
Terence: . . . because it lets me see the deeper meaning of myself.
Emmanuel: I like poetry because it relates to music.

*All student names are pseudonyms

MURAL PAINTING AND CONVERSATION WITH STUDENTS

(*Siren mural panel: Violent pink and lavender surround the screaming bird-women. The crew pulls the ropes tighter, as Odysseus begs his men to untie him. Bones and carcasses litter the island of flowers.*)

Ms Gilrain: What's happening with *him*? (Pointing to Odysseus tied to the mast in the mural panel of Odysseus and the Sirens.)

Kiara: So, he really wants to go to the Sirens.

Ms Gilrain: Tell me about the Sirens.

Kiara: They're these people who um . . . they sing really beautiful. They're really beautiful women who sing really good.

Ms Gilrain: How come they don't look so beautiful when I'm looking at them?

Kiara: Well, some of them are beautiful and some of them are ugly. Like this one is supposed to be like the evil one.

Ellen: Yeah.

Ms Gilrain: What are they trying to do?

Detail of a siren from six-panel student-designed mural, in progress.

Kiara: They are trying to lower [instead of *lure*] them into the ocean.

Ms Gilrain: Lower who into the ocean?

Kiara: Odysseus and his men.

Ms Gilrain: And how many of you worked on this painting?

Kiara and Ellen: (together) Four.

Ms Gilrain: And did you enjoy working on it?

Kiara, Ellen, and Ariana: Yeah!

Ms Gilrain: Do you wish you were a Siren?

Kiara: No!

Ms Gilrain: Why not? It'd be kinda fun. (Laughter.) Wouldn't it?

Kiara: No it wouldn't! They're evil!

Ellen: At least we would get to fly!

Ms Gilrain: Exactly! You have a mind like me, Ellen! I would love to fly.

Ms Gilrain: What do you think, Miguel?

Miguel: (Working on painting. Shaking his head back and forth, keeping his lips tightly sealed, as if to say, *No, I don't want to talk*.)

Ms Gilrain: Who do you relate to, Miguel, in this picture?

Miguel: (Walks deliberately and points decidedly with his marker to Odysseus in the painting.)

Ms Gilrain: Who is that?

Miguel: Odysseus.

Ms Gilrain: Why do you relate to Odysseus?

Miguel: (Pause.) Um, because . . .

Teacher: Because why?

Miguel: Because . . . it was like when I was trying to travel to Puerto Rico to see my Dad. It took a while on a plane, and we had to stop from places to places to get there, like Odysseus, when he wanted to go to Penelope.

Ms Gilrain: Who's Penelope?

Miguel: His wife.

Ms Gilrain: Okay. And who are *you* trying to get to?

Miguel: My Dad. And my other family.

Ms Gilrain: And how does Odysseus feel about Penelope?

Miguel: He feels like sad.

Ms Gilrain: Why is he sad?

Miguel: Because he's not with his son and his wife and his home.

Ms Gilrain: And how do you feel about your dad?

Miguel: Sad because he's all the way over there.

Ms Gilrain: So that's how come you relate to Odysseus?

Miguel: (Shakes his head yes.) Yep.

Ms Gilrain: You share his feelings? (Miguel shakes his head yes.) You empathize with him. (Miguel continues to shake his head yes.)

Ms Gilrain: All right, thank you, Miguel.

MY DAD

by Miguel

It was summer
in Puerto Rico
we would eat
ice cream
and ride
motorcycles
around
the park
In the yard
we had chickens
gallinas
and roosters
we told jokes
on the court
we played
basketball
And the best part
me and my dad
we went to the beach
la playa
to talk and
play games
he was so
funny
my Dad

Reprinted from "The Press 8th Annual Student Poetry Project," April 17, 2013, *The Bethlehem Press,* p. 1B. Used with permission.

Miguel pretends to be the son of Odysseus, Telemechus, *yearning* for his father from across the ocean. Vocabulary lesson: Acting out the verb *to yearn.*

TELEMACHUS AND ME

by Miguel

Thinking
waiting where are you
dad

worrying
I miss you
sad

longing
desperately waiting
worry

missing
I never give up
Patient

MURAL PAINTING AND CONVERSATION WITH STUDENTS CONTINUED

(*Scylla mural panel: Waves crash against the black ship. Seven serpent heads leap out of the gray mist, snatching the strongest men in their jaws, crushing their bones. As the screams of comrades pierce his ears, proud Odysseus tries in vain with his sword to kill the monster.*)

Ms. Gilrain: Can you tell me about your picture?

Luciana: Odysseus is trying to kill this monster.

Ms. Gilrain: What monster is it?

Luciana: Scylla.

Ms. Gilrain: And I see there are several heads. Tell me why there are so many heads? How many are there?

Luciana: There's seven, because I wanted one to have a crown, because Scylla's the Queen of Monsters. That's why. (smiling)

Ms. Gilrain: Okay. Scylla's the Queen of Monsters. Interesting. And why the bow? (Pointing to the bow on top of one of Scylla's heads.)

Luciana: To represent it's a girl.

Isaiah: 'Cause it's a girl.

Luciana and Isaiah work together to paint Scylla mural panel.

Teacher: Wait, what's a girl?

Luciana: The monster's a girl.

Isaiah: Scylla, the Scylla! Nya, nya, nya! (Making snake-like movements with his hands.)

Luciana: Most people think monsters have to be boys, but they don't.

Ms. Gilrain: You seem to feel strongly about that, Luciana. Tell me about that. You mean girls can be monsters too?

Luciana: Yes. (smiling)

SCYLLA RAP

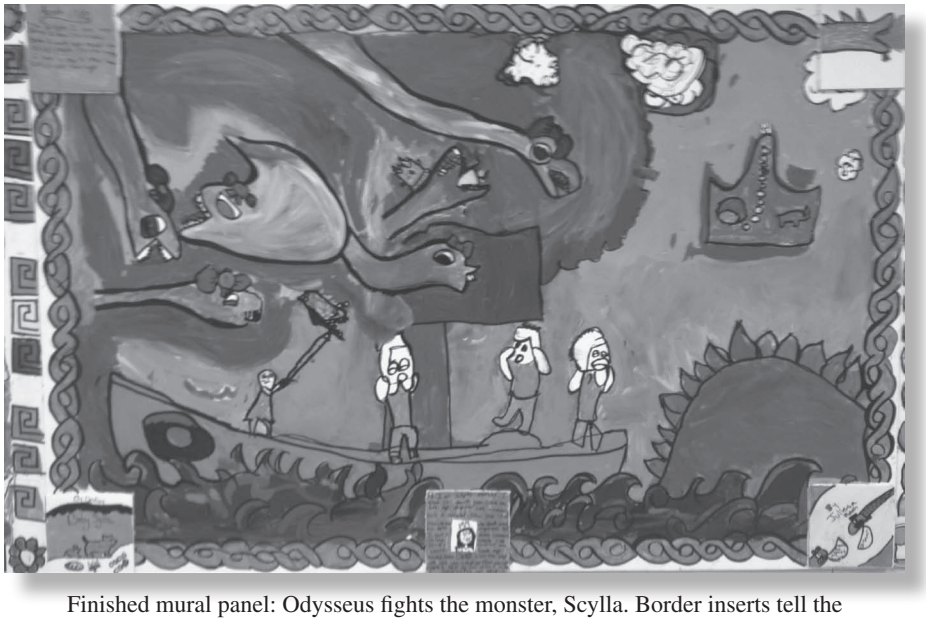
by Terence

(*Written and recited by Terence, performed with beat box accompaniment by Pablo in poetry assembly*)

Sitting on a crag
All day long
Eat more
Than King Kong
Heads strike
At the same time
You're about to hear
A Scylla rhyme
When you pass my cliff
You know I'm gonna get ya
But Odysseus said
You won't get me Scylla
Eat six victims
Without a bill
Yo I'm out of blood
Could I get
A refill?

HOMER:

Sing to me
of the man,
muse,
the man of
twists and turns,
driven time and again
off course,
once he had plundered
the hallowed heights
of Troy.
Many cities of men
he saw
and learned their minds,
many pains he suffered,
heartsick
on the open sea,
fighting
to save his life
and bring his
comrades home
(1997, p. 77).



Finished mural panel: Odysseus fights the monster, Scylla. Border inserts tell the monster's back story, her transformation from beautiful maiden to hideous monster.

TEACHER JOURNAL, EXCERPT 1

March 21. *night.* ART SAVES LIVES! I am absolutely convinced. Art—poetry, music, theater, dance, painting, all forms—saves children's lives. I have a student who is mainstreamed from the Emotional Support (ES) class. Her mother told me that she has never spoken about her father's sudden death one year ago on Christmas Eve. When her mom read the two poems below, she was stunned to see her daughter's grief expressed so clearly on the page.

My Dad

I remember playing with my Dad brown
hair in a room laughing He was loving
caring brave He passed away on
Christmas eve crying sad I left I miss
My Dad so much

In the second poem below, the same student speaks in the voice of Penelope, Odysseus's wife. The writing prompt was as follows: *Choose a character from the Odyssey with whom you empathize. Write a haiku sequence from that character's point of view. The poem can be your secret way of expressing your own feelings. No one needs to know which feelings are yours and which feelings belong to the character.* The poem below reveals the student's feelings through the voice of the character.

Journey

sitting sad waiting
I long for you eating slow
in the dining room

why did you go
I heard you were dead
where are you

But the suitors
they want to take me
save me

crying
You've been on a long journey
Telemachus needs you

You are lost
I can see it
but come home

grief fills me
embrace me tight
I miss you

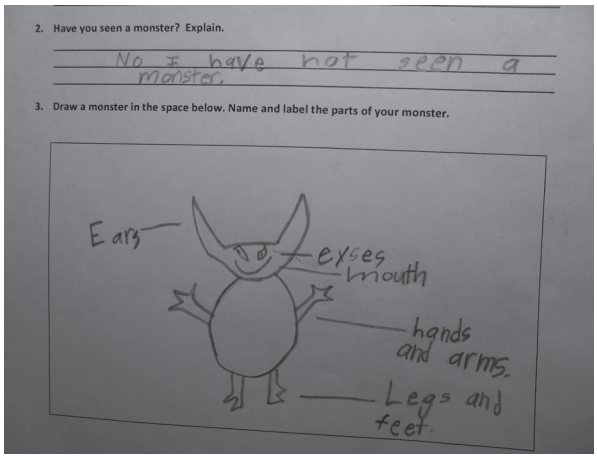
You went away
One long sunny day
left my sight

have you been cursed
do you weep for me
I understand

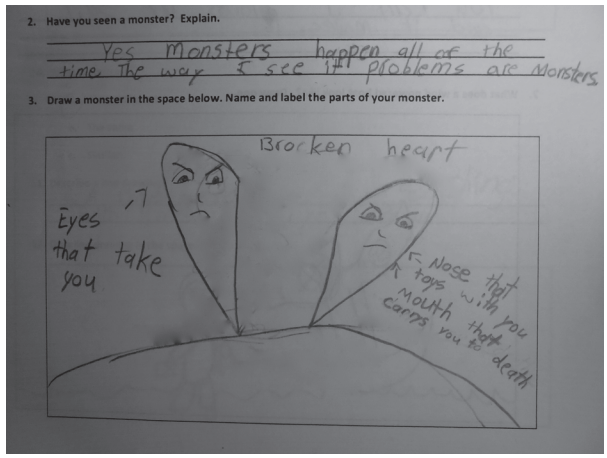
TEACHER JOURNAL, EXCERPT 2

June 7. *afternoon.* ART TRANSFORMS. The mundane into metaphor. Everyday experiences into expressions of beauty. Pain into profound poetry. In leafing through the Teacher Artist Partnership pre- and post-tests, I am struck by these drawings done by the same student who wrote the poems "My Dad" and "Journey."

In the beginning of the year when asked, "Have you seen a monster?" this student answers, "No, I have not seen a monster." Of course not. Literal thinking. At the end of the year, she is thinking in metaphors: "Yes, monsters happen all of the time. The way I see it, problems are monsters."



TAP Visual Arts Pre-Test, September



TAP Visual Arts Post-Test, June

Students responded to the following prompt: *Have you seen a monster? Explain. Draw a monster. Name and label the parts of your monster.*

Through the work with the artists, this student has made a connection with the hero, Odysseus. She relates her own battles against loneliness, despair, and anger to Odysseus's battles against the monsters. Polyphemus, the one-eyed giant. Scylla, the six-headed beast. Charybdis, the ocean whirlpool. Poetry, painting, and performance employ metaphor to make sense of the senseless. The intangible assumes form and color and can be manipulated, described, even improvised. The combination of art making and classic literature has allowed this child to dare to look into her own sadness.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Go tell it on the mountain
Over the hills and everywhere
Go tell it on the mountain
That (Work, 1907) . . .

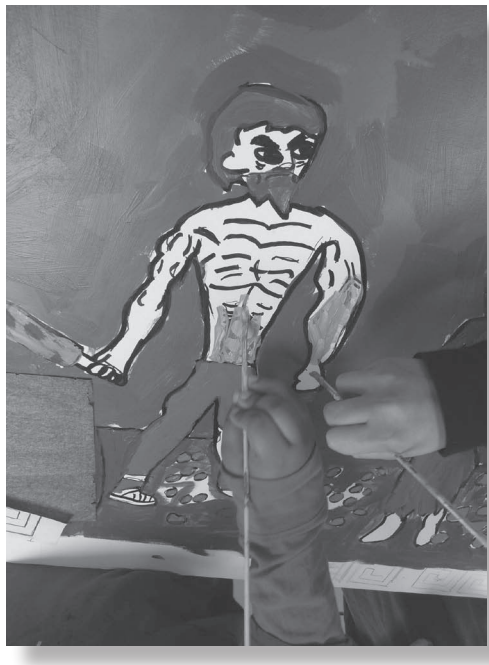
Children are built to play.
Play exercises the mind
(Jensen, 2000, p. 8).
Children like to run
and jump and dance.
Running and jumping and dancing
stimulate the brain.

Students learn to focus by playing a theater game with Mark McKenna, theater artist.

Children love to pretend.
Pretending is acting.
Acting is moving and thinking
(and sometimes reading) at the same time.
Moving and thinking
(and sometimes speaking)
at the same time
Require the ultimate brainwork.

Words take on new meaning
When acted
Deeper meaning.
The body feels the word.
The word is embodied.
(Lecoq, 2006, p. 49)
The body remembers.
The body helps the brain remember
"Movement increases cognitive learning"
(Sousa, 2011, p. 238).

Children love to make stuff.
Drawing and painting
and building take time
Hours and hours of time
Turning the idea
the character
the story
upside down and inside out.
Time spent drawing and thinking
And composing and designing
And planning and envisioning
And cooperating and discussing
Time spent painting and thinking
Mixing globs of colors
Brushing colors
Smooth and wet, one on top of another
Wandering in and out of thoughts
Wondering
Wandering from this world into that
From past to present
Living the life of the character
Recreating the character



Students paint mural panel of Odysseus in Hades.

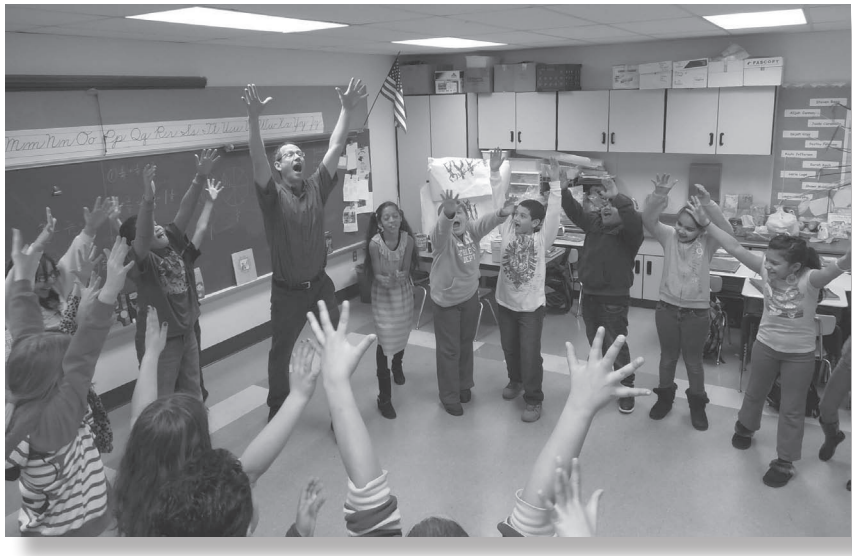
William Christine, visual artist, hands out paint.

Retelling the story
Reinventing the story
Becoming the character
Entering into the story
Claiming the story
Sousa (2011) says:
"Students are much more likely to remember curriculum content in which they have made an emotional investment" (p. 90).

When children identify with
heroes and monsters
in classic literature
their own stories
take on new meaning.
They see themselves
Braving the adventures
Battling the monsters
Surviving the journey.
The hero's story
provides structure
and language
for their own story
The monster
becomes a metaphor.

Poetry jumps
the hurdles
of conventions—
sentence structure
punctuation
capitalization
Form—
haiku
haiku sequence—
provides constraints
and freedom
as in a playground
surrounded by a fence.
Writing pours out
like a puzzle of words
that fit together.
Classrooms are separate cubicles

Student works on Greek border design for mural panel.



Mark McKenna leads students in a movement acting exercise.

filled with desks and chairs.
Classrooms are isolated.
Teachers become isolated.
Teachers get stuck.
Artists are radical.
Artists take time to push the desks aside.
Teachers need artists to push the desks aside.
So students can run and jump and play
and pretend and make stuff
and remember
and connect
and speak
and write.

Students work on mural panel of Circe turning Odysseus' men into pigs.

RECIPE FOR ARTS INTEGRATION IN THE CLASSROOM

from *The Joy of Teaching: Recipes for Delicious Learning*

This is one way to make arts integration in the classroom. Do not skimp on the artists, for they are important ingredients.

Combine in classroom:

1 visual artist (music, dance, or literary artist)
1 theater artist
1 classroom teacher
A bundle of students
Multiple copies of a literary classic for children
(We used *Tales from the Odyssey* by Mary Pope Osborne.)

Cook, stirring occasionally, over low heat until the students are engaged. Do not rush it. Increase the heat to medium high. Add:

Open space for movement and theater games
Paint, brushes, large foam core mural panels, pencils, and paper
1 poetry-writing workshop for the teacher (Hazelton, 2014)

Cook until the students take ownership and initiative. Sprinkle with:

Collaboration
Reflection

Beware! This recipe may appear simple at first, but the process is complex and subtle. Excellent chefs, artists, and teachers share key ingredients: creativity and passion.

INTERVIEW WITH TEACHER

Interviewer: How can teachers justify this type of integration to administrators and parents?

Ms. Gilrain: Arts-integrative instruction is easy to justify because the methods are research-based. Current brain research supports the use of art, movement, and play in the classroom. Learning can be defined as the process of storing new information into long-term memory. Movement, emotion, and connections to prior knowledge enhance the brain's ability to store new long-term memories. Visual art and theater utilize movement, emotions, and connections to prior knowledge. Therefore, arts-integrated teaching enhances learning. For further understanding, I recommend these three books:

- ***Arts with the Brain in Mind,* by Eric Jensen** (2001) provides a thorough and understandable defense for using the arts in the classroom to enhance core curriculum instruction.
- ***Learning with the Body in Mind,* by Eric Jensen** (2000), clearly outlines the scientific basis for the idea that movement enhances learning.
- ***How the Brain Learns,* by David A. Sousa** (2011), offers a clear picture of how the brain works. Chapter six, "The Brain and the Arts" (p. 216) explains "the impact of the arts on student learning and behavior" (p. 222).

In addition to being research-based, arts-integrative instruction meets current teacher evaluation criteria. Many school districts have adopted "Charlotte Danielson's Framework for Teaching" (2013) as a system for evaluating teachers. Student engagement is at the heart of this framework (Griffin, 2013). According to Danielson (2013), in the "distinguished" teacher's classroom, "virtually all students are intellectually engaged in the lesson, and lesson activities require high-level student thinking and explanations of their thinking." Arts integration that combines visual and theater arts in the classroom takes student engagement to new levels because it requires physical and emotional as well as intellectual engagement.

Mark McKenna, theater artist, leads students in a movement exercise for actors.

Interviewer: What were the instructors' learning outcomes and were they achieved?

Ms. Gilrain: This Teacher Artist Partnership (TAP) was made possible by a grant funded by the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts (PCA, 2013), in cooperation with the Allentown Art Museum and the Bethlehem Area School District. Our TAP team attended a one-week training institute in Harrisburg run by the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts prior to beginning in the classroom. We collaborated to come up with learning outcomes for each discipline: visual arts, theater arts, and English language arts (see table). At first, we were not asking the essential questions: Why bring the arts into the classroom? Why read *The Odyssey*? Why have the classics endured over time? In considering these questions, we came up with the primary learning outcome for students: *Develop a personal connection to and love of literature, especially poetry.*

OUTCOMES (Gilrain, Christine, & McKenna, 2012)

Language Arts	Visual Arts	Theater Arts
Develop a personal connection to and a love of literature, poetry.	Explore visual ideas using a variety of artistic materials.	Generate actions and responses in improvisation without judgment.
Read, understand, analyze and respond to various genres of literature.	Discover multiple solutions to artistic problems, i.e. composition, space, color, brush strokes, subject.	Interpret and apply the guidelines and boundaries of improvisational games.
Make inferences and draw conclusions based on the text.	Develop competency in technical processes, i.e. painting and drawing	Recognize and identify one's own internal emotional state.
Interpret the meaning of vocabulary in literature.	Compare and contrast visual depictions of *The Odyssey* through history.	Analyze one's own body position and movement in space.
Analyze literature for themes that apply to life.	Evaluate and select pertinent images for mural.	Create scripts based on improvisation and research.
Write poems. Include details and literary elements. Begin to use literary devices.	Design, arrange, and compose a wall mural.	Evaluate art (performance, written work) and offer constructive criticism.

Students surpassed learning outcomes. Student-written poems won 1st, 2nd, and 3rd place in "The 8th Annual Lehigh Valley Press Student Poetry Project" (Willistein, 2013) and were published in the April 2013 "Focus" section of "The Lehigh Valley Press" (Willistein). Four student poems and four student performances were recorded on the Bach Choir of Bethlehem CD, "A Child's Christmas in Bethlehem" (2013), which has been internationally distributed.

Students clearly developed a love of poetry through the work with the artists. In the beginning, most students stated that they did not like poetry, had never read a poem, and could not name any poems or poets. At the end of the year, students had several favorite poems memorized and were thrilled to receive their favorite poetry anthologies as gifts.

The act of art-making forges understanding. The strength of the students' emotional connection to *The Odyssey* and other poems surprised me. Odysseus's story had a cathartic and healing effect on the children as they retold it in the forms of painting, acting, and poetry. The students grew in self-respect as they connected their own trials and tribulations to those of the hero, Odysseus. Empathizing with the tragic hero greatly empowered these children. They fell in love with poetry. Poetry became a lifeline.

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INTO THE CLASSROOM WITH READWRITETHINK

Paint a vivid picture in your reader's mind with good descriptive writing! Artwork provides the perfect starting point for practicing descriptive writing that conveys color, shape, line, and mood in this lesson plan from ReadWriteThink.org (http://bit.ly/1v1Cmiw).

In this lesson from ReadWriteThink.org (http://bit.ly/1z4uJKP), students explore ekphrasis—writing inspired by art. Students begin by reading and discussing several poems inspired by works of art. Through the discussion, students learn ways in which poets can approach a piece of artwork. Students then search online for pieces of art that inspire them and, in turn, compose a booklet of poems about the pieces they have chosen.

This ReadWriteThink.org unit (http://bit.ly/1r91GrB) engages high school students in a study of the relationship between masks and cultures. Students research mask-making from various cultures, draw sketches of the masks, and take notes that highlight the connections between the masks and the cultural practices of the people who created them. Using this information, students recreate the cultural masks and compose poetry to reveal their understanding and appreciation of these cultural artifacts. Students then analyze aspects of their own culture and create personal masks and poetry to reflect their culture and themselves.

—Lisa Storm Fink
www.readwritethink.org