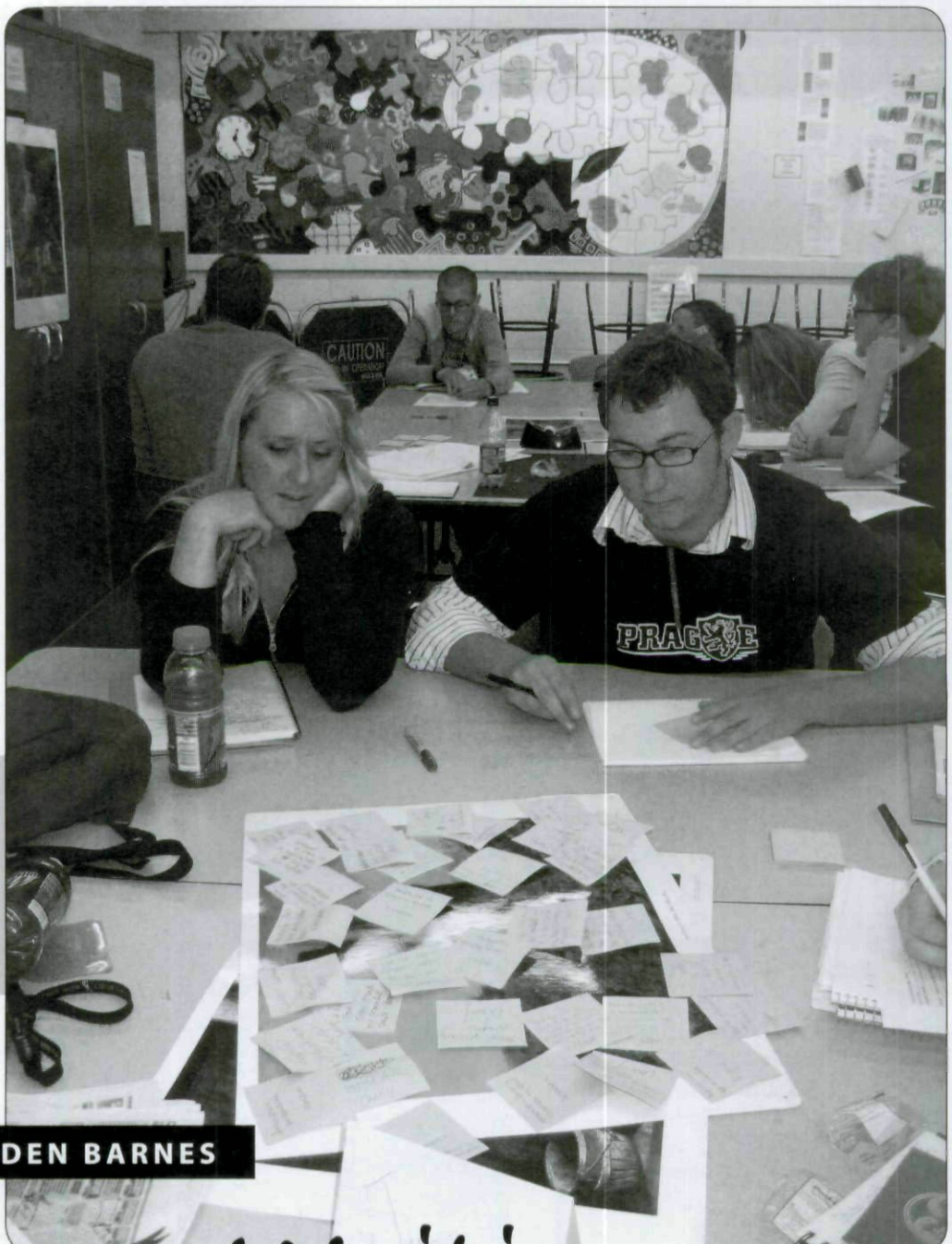


With small revision, standard activities such as looking at and talking about art prints can become rich interpretive activities.

BY NATALIE SELDEN BARNES



# *Hands-on Writing:* An Alternative Approach to Understanding Art

**W**riting across the curriculum: words that strike fear in the hearts of many teachers.

Like their counterparts in public schools my art education preservice students balk at the idea of writing in the art room. You can almost hear the retort as their open, inquiring minds snap closed. After all, isn't 'writing in the art room' an oxymoron? Art is visual literacy, some would say more basic than writing and speaking, because it is not hampered by the barrier of language. The process of creating a visual narrative and understanding visual literacy is multi-faceted. "Many aspects of cognition are called upon, such as personal association, questioning, speculating, analyzing, fact-finding, and categorizing" (Yenawine, 1997, p. 1). Because similar cognitive strategies are used in the practice of both visual and written literacy, incorporation of authentic writing activities not only strengthens students' writing abilities, but reinforces the basic art curriculum as well.

What is the place for writing in an art classroom where students build fluency through visual language? In educational environments with increasing emphasis on traditional "academics," writing across the curriculum is valid, relevant and here to stay (Brewster & Klump, 2004). As contemporary art expands further into multi-media applications, the demand becomes even greater for fluency in expressing and translating ideas into a variety of communication genres. With ever increasing emphasis on high-stakes testing, writing across the curriculum is the 800 pound gorilla sitting in the middle of the classroom, and it must be addressed.

Many art teachers do not give themselves credit for the diverse and rich ways that they already embrace writing in their classroom. Journals, altered books, text-infused images, visual puns and sketchbooks are all avenues of expression and commonly used activities

that encourage students to embellish visual ideas with literary references. These written reflections often help students understand other concepts introduced in the art room. (Sanders-Bustle, 2008).

### Literacy Connections and Self-Reflection

There are a number of routine activities that help students explore the "why" in art. Sketching initial ideas, formative critiques, peer evaluation, guided critiques, artist statements, and sketchbooks are all strategies that help the student artist reflect on his/her ideas and create meaning through their own works. Activities associated with literacy require students to organize their thoughts for further communication. Numerous other instructional activities such as art history reports, skits, historical timelines, exhibition notes, storyboarding, exit cards, journal entries, writing directions, and critique questions are all examples of literacy-based activities that should be included when identifying behaviors that provide literacy accountability in the art classroom.

"But it's art, so why do we have to write?" is a common student lament when a writing assignment is introduced in an art room. Preparing students to think as artists involves wider learning than just the artmaking process. Developing artistic behaviors requires study beyond the studio. Artists examine the work of their peers not only for inspiration, but as a way to develop new insights about visual expression. "Learning about art includes not only an understanding

of masterpieces or drawing skills; it also includes focused engagement with and the representation of multiple worldviews" (Sanders-Bustle, 2008, p. 14). Art as communication requires engagement from both the artmaker and the art viewer. Educating students in their role as a consumer of art, as someone who looks at art, is moved by art, and who understands the communicative power of art, is as integral to the role of an art teacher as teaching students to mix color or work with clay if we expect these students to mature as well-rounded artists.

### Outlining the Process

Many post-secondary students, like students in P-12 classrooms, struggle with writing. In an effort to explore strategies that could improve student writing, preservice art teachers in the Art Education program at Colorado State University completed a series of activities to write an organized and detailed critical analysis essay of an art print. Pre- and post-assessment essays were scored by a research cohort that included a college English professor, middle school and high school English teachers, and an adjunct professor of art. Immediately following the pre-assessment writing, students were introduced to the concept of organizing an essay and looking for details with a hands-on activity. Data analysis showed significant improvement in writing scores related to organization and articulation of specific details.



A simple writing activity provides students with structure to guide insightful discussion.

The pre-writing activity described here is a variation of a process that takes place in many K-12 art rooms on a regular basis. Although the procedure was originally designed as a way to gather information necessary to triangulate the final data, the resulting conversations and interactions between students helped me realize that while this process involved both writing and pre-writing activities, it was more about art viewing than writing.

Art teachers use fine art prints in their classroom for a variety of reasons, so they are a familiar sight for most students. These fine art prints serve as a valuable visual aid in helping students understand new concepts and get comfortable talking about art. Because the reference is visual there are nuances that will be visible to all students, providing an important knowledge base for discussions. Not all teachers, however, understand that these discussions can serve as an invaluable pre-writing activity.

The best way for my preservice art students to understand the value of this pre-writing activity was to model the process in the university classroom. A fine art print was placed on the table in front of groups of five or six students, and rather than just talk about the print, students were asked to record their comments on sticky notes. Each

student was required to write six individual comments. This number worked well, as the first three comments often came easily, but the final three required closer inspection of the art prints.

Groups were able to discuss their comments as they wrote, which was a pivotal component in defining this 'writing' activity as a true art experience. Once each small group's 'comment discussions' finished, the whole group brainstormed the necessary components to a critical analysis essay. They identified five specific areas: (a) introduction to the image; (b) factual information about the image; (c) identification of how the visual elements were used in the image; (d) interpretation of both the content and visual elements of the image; and (e) a conclusion summing up information about the image. Each area could become a separate paragraph in a written essay and directly reflected the content of the written comments. A standard five-paragraph essay format was used because it mimics what is required of public school students on the Colorado state standardized writing assessment.

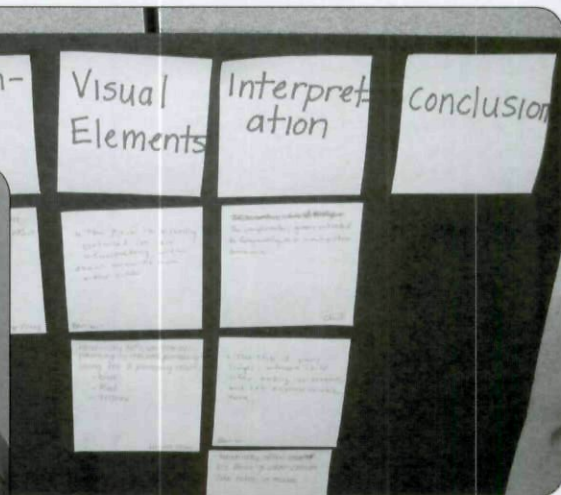
Categorizing comments was the final step. Each group received a large sheet of black paper and five additional sticky notes. Notes were labeled with the essay areas previously identified (intro-

duction, information, visual elements, interpretation, conclusion). Sticky-note comments from earlier viewing were analyzed and placed under the heading that seemed most appropriate. Although the original intent for this activity was to help students understand how to organize their details to make writing a critical analysis easier, the activity sparked a larger discussion as students struggled to explain the intent of their comments to their peers.

### Sticky-Note Discussion

Students were initially hesitant about the sticky-note activity because it had been introduced as a writing activity. One student, however, was excited to discover we would use sticky notes to document ideas because she "loved anything that you got to do with a sticky note." Using the sticky note activity seemed less intimidating to students than a full sheet of blank paper—taking some of the sting out of the writing. The little colored squares transformed a routine activity into a game.

Requiring that the information on each sticky note be a different idea helped guide the activity "because critical thinking requires the reflective consideration of various solutions and perspectives before



Left: Students explore written information to help with individual comments.

Above: Categorizing comments into the essay format helps students understand the purpose of the initial discussion.

deciding on one resolution, it is important for teachers to guide students in resisting early closure when they work to resolve complex, open-ended problems" (Lampert, 2006, p. 47). A brief discussion ensued that helped students understand how two similar comments could be differentiated. The sticky note exercise replaced teacher-guided questions. Students engaged in "careful, sound, evidence-based discussions" as they explored the nuances of thought that differentiated their ideas from those of their peers (Lampert, 2006).

Because duplicate comments were not allowed, each group was required to record a hefty total of 24 to 30 comments. So, two students who had both identified the dark palette evident in their print, had to revise their individual comments so they were more specific. This step helped students understand how simple ideas are expanded through subtle differences. In this instance the dark color palette fed into both the idea of creating a focal point and establishing mood. Students worked together to ensure they each had six unique comments. The 2"x2" size of the sticky notes helped disguise the "writing" part of the process.

One lively discussion grew from the subject matter in Ben Shahn's *Miners' Wives*. Students identified the "simple geometric form of [the] figures," and the "mispropor-

tion of figures" that were "isolated and [didn't] interact." The conversation took a deeper turn as each of the distinct visual elements were identified and documented.

### Discussion Leads to Interpretation

Group discussion was an essential element as students progressed from direct observation to interpretation. Facing the remaining pile of blank notes, the room grew noisier as students delved into deeper discussion of their images, searching for new comments with which to complete their sticky note quota. Shared insights sparked new ideas and deeper reflections. "Strong evidence of learning in aesthetics, for example, is found in class discussions, debates, or group dialogues" (Beattie, 1997, p. 7). Conversations lead to richer reflection as participants moved from the "personal space" of their own perception into the "community space" of wider insights. Grouping students for the print-viewing activity set the arena for insightful conversations, and a richer viewing experience.

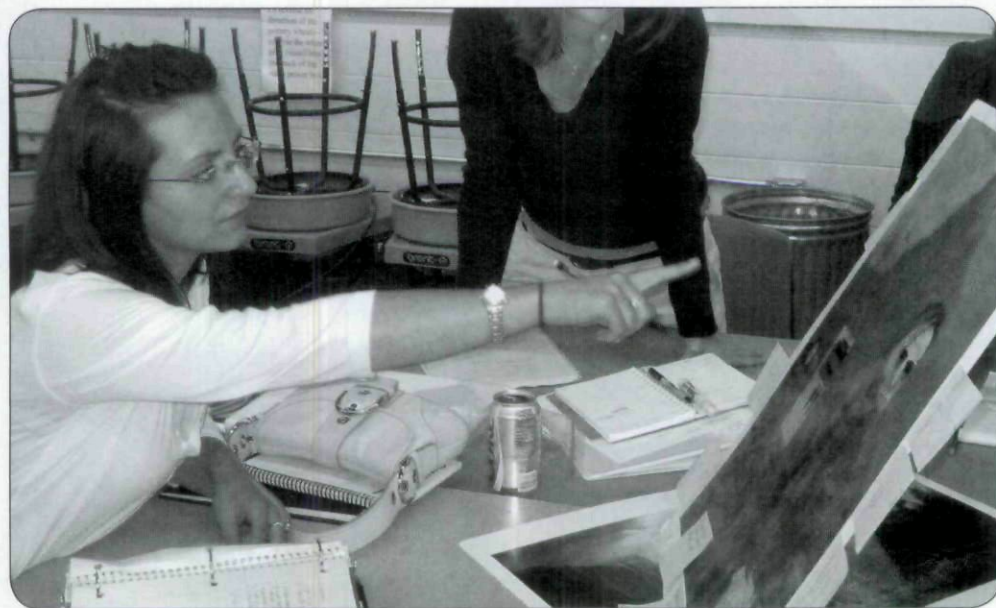
Many of the comments listed under the interpretation heading on the organizational sheet were either vague or ambiguous. Yet, both responses are appropriate in the context of the activity.

Diverse and contradictory meanings of works of art are part of what makes them art. Like political actions and public officials,

they have no single "correct" meaning, though there is always an impulse toward finding clarity. Meanings are multi-vocal and subject to change, depending on their context, their content, and the situation of the observer; and they depend as well on comparisons and contrasts with other works of art and with the images they evoke (Edelman, 1995, p. 28).

In this passage, Edelman reminds us that the power of art is not only in the making, but also in the experience of viewing—and perhaps more importantly as a vehicle for wider communication. Strategies for exploring what art is 'about' are as important in the development of an artist, as creative studio activities resulting in works of art.

Knees on chairs, leaning both arms on the tabletop, students peered closer at the Shahn print *Miners' Wives*, a somber painting featuring several figures staggered through the picture plane. As simple more direct insights were exhausted, such as notation of the simple geometric shapes and warm tones evident in the print, students began to examine the visual elements for deeper meanings: "tension in the hands," "overall sense of a cold environment," and identifying that the "hands are exaggerated to exemplify hardship or labor" set the scene for a vibrant visual narrative. "In the arts, where interpretation is a central preoccupation, the use of

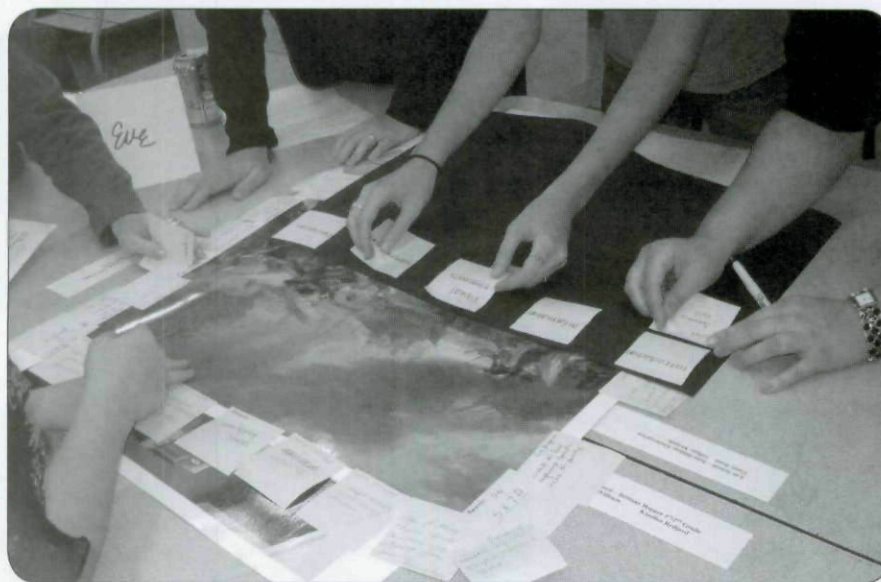


Distinctions between similar comments encouraged students to look more closely at the artworks.



In-depth discussions helped students see how subtle differences in their comments lead to new insights.

Students work as a group to categorize their comments.



analogies and metaphors permits individuals to establish connections among objects and ideas.” (Efland, 2002, p 116). Donna’s reflection that the “paint application is thin and washed is a metaphor for [the] meager quality of life” ties the narrative directly to the visual elements and suggests the artist’s purpose.

Opportunities for guided group conversations allowed students to identify details they might have overlooked viewing the artworks alone. At another table Jason pointed to the classic triangular composition of Jean François Millet’s *Man With a Hoe*. Kali acknowledged the compositional element

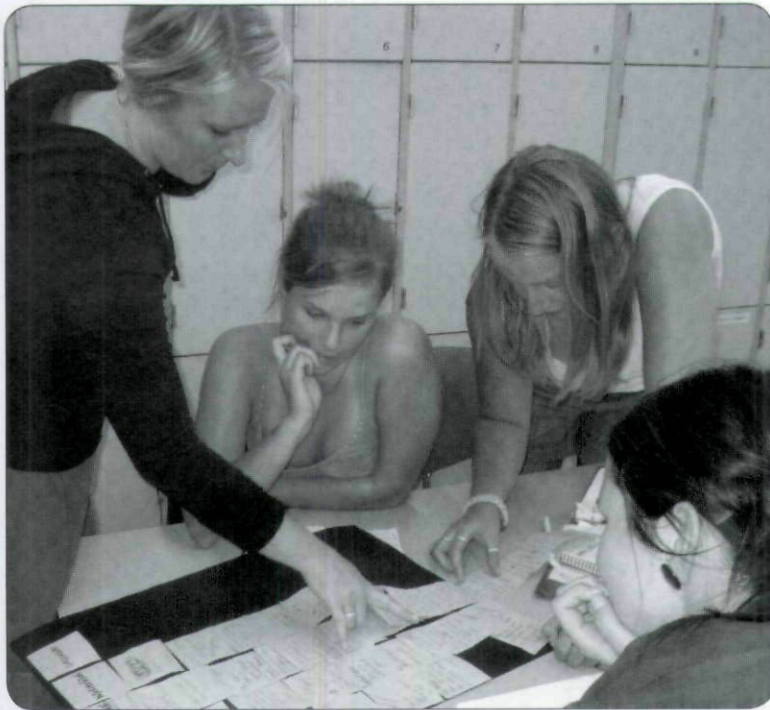
and expanded on the idea as she noted “The diagonal lines of his arms show movement.” A comment by Megan expanded the idea further, she wrote on a sticky note “The hoe brings your eye to the face of the man which shows the emotion of the painting.” Enthusiastic conversation flooded the room, and the activity of documenting insights via sticky notes enabled students to regain their focus when they veered off track.

This group activity also worked as an important introduction for students who had little or no experience interpreting artworks. Sometimes students get stymied because the process is too straightforward, and they mistakenly think what they are doing must be wrong because it seems too easy. “In people’s encounters with art, dialogue exists on several levels. There is dialogue between a viewer and a work. There is dialogue between two or more spectators who share responses” (Hubard, 2007, p. 22). Simple comments came easily, and more complex ideas and interpretations grew out of the give and take of the group conversations.

Reflective activities such as these are invaluable components in an inquiry-based learning process. The complex analysis required to develop personal interpretations helps students understand the important role of the viewer in the art-making process (Daniel, Stuhr & Ballengee-Morris, 2006). Committing their ideas to paper forced students to reflect on their thoughts and words. Written comments became an important step of metacognition, allowing students to follow their insights from an initial spark of understanding, to a fully executed idea.

### Organizing Details for Critical Analysis

For the next part of the activity, each group talked about how these disparate ideas captured on sticky notes could be organized into a formal written document, the prints were set aside. I distributed large sheets of paper with the five essay paragraph headings (introduction, information, visual elements, interpretation and conclusion) labeled across the top to organize ideas. As a group, students categorized their sticky notes under the appropriate heading, reproducing the sequence of information in paragraphs creating a written critical analysis of artworks.



More information about the art prints is shared as students discuss whether a comment is factual or interpretive.

*Committing their ideas to paper forced students to reflect on their thoughts and words. Written comments became an important step of metacognition, allowing students to follow their insights from an initial spark of understanding, to a fully executed idea.*

At the beginning of the semester this same group of students wrote a critical analysis paper as pre-assessment. This activity showed that while most students could adequately identify basic visual details, many lacked the ability or incentive to delve further into interpretation. In addition, writing organization including an introduction, thesis and supporting details, and conclusion was sorely lacking in many students' writing samples. Whether students' writing problems came from real deficiencies in writing ability or negative attitudes about writing in an art class, as future teachers of art it was an issue that needed to be addressed if art is to be viewed on an equal plane as other academic subjects.

The five-paragraph essay is similar to a guided critique, with simpler ideas building to more complex interpretations. Writing shares many of the same components of visual literacy. "It involves a set of skills ranging from simple identification—naming what one sees—to complex interpretation on contextual, metaphoric and philosophical levels" (Yenawine, 1997, p. 1). By the time students had written, revised, and organized their sticky-note comments, the hard work was done; they demonstrated their ability to

find meaning in imagery. Putting the words to paper, organized as an essay, confirms their mastery of visual literacy.

An interesting phenomenon developed during the organizational steps. Rather than be a servant to the writing—because this organizational element of the activity had the deepest literacy connection—the activity solidified as a rich art-viewing experience as students engaged in new discussions. Picking up the sticky note, reading it, and placing it appropriately provided a concrete example of metacognition as students used this physical action to reinforce their organizational decision.

Students analyzed their own comments, distinguishing between those that were simply observational, and those that involved interpretation. "Facts are what people know to be true... Interpretations are born when people make connections between what they see and what they know about art and life" (Hubard, 2007, p. 21). Moving the sticky note from the 'visual element' category to the 'interpretation' category was allowed only after the student had analyzed the comment and justified its nature as interpretation.

At the back table Chuck noted that Kandinsky's work, *The Blue Mountain*,

featured "Heavy brushstrokes, short jagged and multidirectional, [that] create movement." Katherine observed that "Colors/brushstrokes feel 'explosive,' like fast moving music," further noting that "Kandinsky believed in this relationship" [between color and music]. Although both these comments highlighted Kandinsky's expressive brushwork, students recognized that Chuck's comment addressed the visual elements, while Katherine's required knowledge about the artist, leading to a personal interpretation.

Documenting the ideas on sticky notes provided students with visual cues. Rather than sit with paper and pencil, or in front of a computer keyboard to organize, students worked directly with the comments, categorizing comments and organizing ideas. Outlining the analysis this way also provided visual tools. Students could look at a physical compilation of ideas on the sticky notes and actually see which areas they needed to flesh out. Somehow, picking up the idea and being able to hold it in their hands seemed less intimidating than the idea of revising an essay, although moving ideas from one place to another is exactly what a author does when revising a piece of writing.



Revisiting written comments required students to justify their initial reactions.

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## Conclusion

Although this activity was designed with the writing component as the major focus, it quickly became evident that the structure reinforced art connections. Students spent more time looking at the artworks because they had to document what they saw. In addition, they had to establish reasons that their observations were unique from those of other students—a step requiring metacognition. Not only were students expected to articulate their ideas, but they also had to explain the logic behind them. They had to support their thesis and identify details that often led to new interpretations.

On one note Tiffany stated that *The Battle of La Hogue* by Benjamin West captured a “17th century event yet [was] painted during the 18th century.” An interesting comment that begs for elaboration. Since the note was placed under the interpretation column it seems evident she had more information about this painting than was shared in her notes. But since the ultimate intent of the note was to capture details for later literary organization, it undoubtedly served its purpose as just such a notation. While not thoroughly articulated in writing, the intent of the viewer is present and can be fully addressed in discussion or a later writing activity. The sticky note itself serves as an invaluable reminder of a fleeting thought—an idea worth remembering.

This project was exciting because it developed from a simple writing activity into a rich art experience. Modeling this pre-writing process allowed my preservice art teachers to better understand how writing can be relevant to the art curriculum. Recording ideas began as a straightforward literacy strategy for students to capture details, and a vehicle to ease the move into essay organization. But the structure of the activity was key to moving students from internal reflection to an external discussion in which they exercised their ability to evaluate and judge art, analyze ideas put forth by another artist, and justify conclusions drawn from visual clues. In this instance, literacy led to complex discussions, deeper insights, and a much richer art experience.

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