

## **Obstacles and Freedom**

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### **Abstract**

The unit I have developed as a result of this course is an introduction to the Culturally Responsive Arts Education being implemented in the Pittsburgh Public Schools in an effort to affirm students' identities as a way of decreasing the racial achievement gap. The unit will build upon students' prior knowledge of mixed media artwork and the art criticism process, used in tandem with the art criticism process.

It is my belief that students need to be able to look outside of themselves, to analyze and articulate their own experiences while also learning to reach beyond those experiences through imagination. Education in the visual arts gives students a freedom of thought, an opportunity to use personal experience as a springboard for artistic expression.

Student's artwork will answer the following question: **How can you use imagery and symbolism in art to articulate obstacles, victory, self-worth and freedom?** In selecting a focus for my unit I will provide students with an opportunity to analyze and interpret the experiences of certain African Americans in terms of obstacles, victory, self-worth and freedom. I will pull these written narratives from a number of sources including the film *Wylie Avenue Days*. They also will engage in analysis of relevant artworks that articulate certain obstacles, victories, self-reflections and/or freedoms. They will further analyze these artworks in terms of the mechanics of visual arts: the elements

of art and principles of design. Students will then identify their own obstacles, context, and creative solutions. They will use their obstacles, their context, their own lens, and their personal understanding of freedom as a basis for their artwork. The artwork will be created and assessed in alignment with the state standards for visual art. Students will be relating their use of symbols, theme, and techniques to their historical and cultural context, engaging in the art criticism process, and also writing reflective artists' statements that correspond with their artwork. Such a comprehensive unit will meet the visual arts standards in all our domains: production and exhibition, historical and cultural context, critical response, and aesthetic response.

This unit is intended to be implemented over a nine-week period (assuming a visual arts teacher sees students once a week). This unit incorporates narrative writing as a means of producing Critical Response (Standard 9.3) and Aesthetic Response(9.4) in art.

### **Rationale**

In my work as an art educator, I have witnessed the value in students' opportunities to observe, analyze, interpret and create works of art. Arts-infused learning allows students to engage in deeply creative and meaningful learning experiences. Greene quotes (1988) Marcuse, who describes the arts as possessing:

...an emancipatory possibility of relevance for an education in and for freedom. Encounter with the arts alone will not realize it; but the arts will open the situations that require interpretation, will help disrupt the walls that obscure the spaces, the spheres of freedom to which educators might someday attend. (p.133)

*The Dialect of Freedom* (Greene, 1988) defines freedom in a myriad of spheres and concepts. Greene explains that in order to achieve freedom and autonomy, students need to conceptualize abstract concepts such as human rights and justice through higher order thinking. Consequently, autonomous persons are "free" persons (p.118).

Because traditional and contemporary education have been structured in terms of cognition, the goal of teaching students to achieve autonomy through “rational passion”, imagination and the exploration of alternative possibilities has often been overlooked. What if our primary goal as educators was to teach these students to experience freedom by becoming self-determined individuals? “Rational passion” enables students to engage in logical thinking to address moral dilemmas. Students would use their experience and reasoning to master interpersonal skills, subsequently becoming autonomous individuals (Greene, 1988, p.118)

Greene explains that the concept of freedom is meant to “signify whether liberation from domination or the provision of spaces where choices can be made” (p.120). She goes on to explain that the opening of such “spaces” depends on the support and connectedness of the educator. Greene (198, p.120) describes connected teaching as a way of approaching students:

The caring teacher tries to look through students’ eyes, to struggle *with* them as subjects in search of their own projects, their own ways of making sense of the world. Reflectiveness, even logical thinking remain important; but the *point* of cognitive development is not to gain an increasingly complete grasp of concrete principles. It is to interpret from as many vantage points as possible lived experience, the ways there are of being in the world.

We spend so much time dealing with discipline, trying to guide students through rigid structure to encourage their conformity, in order to ensure that they become productive citizens. Does this contribute to the passivity and disinterest that prevent discoveries in the classroom (Greene, 1988)? Do we stop to listen to their stories and acknowledge their perspectives? Not only would the approach of “connected teaching” allow for a new approach in educating the whole child, but the educator’s commitment to understand a student’s lived experience could be the first step in helping students to begin to understand and achieve autonomy. Garrison feels that “one particularly important way to open ourselves to other persons is to listen carefully to the text of their lives” (Garrison, 1996).

These barricades to experiencing freedom and teacher understanding can be addressed if students are to experience “connected teaching” as a way of equipping them with the skills and thinking necessary to articulate their own “rational passion.” Often students’ individual experiences are not considered in teaching them the rationale for becoming educated citizens. The teacher must first listen and perceive a student’s context and understanding, process, and guide the student through new patterns of reasoning. Greene cites Oliver and Bane (p.119) who explain that, “Young people need the opportunity to project themselves in rich hypothetical worlds created by their own imagination on those dramatic artists.” It is only through an awareness of their own reality and strengthened imagination that these students can explore alternative possibilities or “ways of being.” It is incumbent upon arts educators, advocates, and administrators to identify the connections between arts, history, and students’ personal experiences. Students can learn to see the arts as a means for imagination and the exploration of alternative possibilities. As an educator, I can use both arts and imagination as a vehicle for “connected teaching,” to better understand my students (Greene, 1988).

In order to experience freedom, students must first learn to name the obstacles that impede them (Greene, 1988). It is my hope that through this unit, students will not only gain an understanding of the different perspectives of various African Americans in Pittsburgh, but that they will also understand the commonalities of the human experience. They will demonstrate their understanding of the human experience, each on their own unique levels, through visual and symbolic representation.

## **Learning Goals/Objectives**

This unit focuses around several overarching learning goals, each of which contains specific objectives:

1. Provide students with subject matter grounded in historical and contemporary African American art and literature as a primary source for analyzing artists' use of symbolism and imagery.
2. Engage students in an opportunity for art-making that allows them to both consider and express their own interpretation of personal obstacles and corresponding freedoms, or to interpret the oral history or written narrative of a local African American figure.
3. Develop students' familiarity with mixed media work created by contemporary artists and consequently develop students' abilities to incorporate mixed media into their own original artwork.
4. Enable students to express themselves through written narrative, while simultaneously creating a visual articulation of their thoughts and ideas.

## **Strategies**

### **Materials:**

Large scale prints of the various artworks will be useful for the introductory components of the lesson. Chart paper will be necessary as the teacher facilitates class discussion and charts students' responses while viewing the artwork. Charted students' responses are an integral part of constructivist teaching and implementation of the workshop model.

When students view the documentary, a dvd player and television or screen will be necessary. Additionally, if a computer lab is available, this might be useful for students as they engage in research of an individual to use as inspiration for their artwork.

### **Classroom/School Resources:**

The teacher should also consider collaborating with the school librarian to create a temporary classroom library of books in the school collection that focus on Pittsburgh's history, Pennsylvania history, or African American history. If available, a school computer lab will also be helpful for students if they choose to complete more extensive research.

When students begin creating their own original artwork, a variety of mixed media should be accessible for students' use. Ideas for materials include: magazines, tempera paint, watercolor paint, fabric, tissue paper, gloss medium, paintbrushes, adhesives, wood pieces, found objects. The teacher should also construct a teacher exemplar that demonstrates proper step-by-step creation of a mixed media work that satisfies the criteria of this project.

## Unit Exercises

### Day 1:

#### Standards:

**9.2.8 Historical and Cultural Context**

**9.3.8 Art Criticism**

**Objectives:** Students will engage in analysis and interpretation of selected artists.

Introduction to the styles and artworks of 3 contemporary African American artists featured in the publication from the 2003 Urban Art League of Pittsburgh Exhibit: National Urban League Conference held at the David Lawrence Convention Center. The three artists that they may choose from are:

1. Emory Biko- found objects; assemblage



2. Mary Martin- collages; reminiscent of Romare Bearden



3. Carlos F. Peterson- “Freedom Corner” (abstract pen and ink landscape of 1<sup>st</sup> African American Catholic Church in the Hill District).



**Activities:** *Art Criticism* (Mittler & Ragans, 2005) class discussion; students will engage in the art criticism process through class discussion as they view the work of these three artists. The instructor will chart their responses to each stage of the art criticism process.

**Strategies:** Teacher will chart class responses as while facilitating the different domains of the art criticism process. Art criticism is “the process of gathering facts and information from artworks in order to make intelligent judgments about them” (Mittler & Ragans, 2005).

1. Describing: In this stage, the student will articulate detailed observations about what the artwork depicts or how it was made.
2. Analyzing: The students will discuss, determine, and chart how the artwork was designed or assembled in terms of the *elements and principles of art*.
3. Interpreting: Interpreting is assigning a meaning or finding a message in an artwork.

4. Judging: Judging states whether, how and why an artwork is a success. The students should refer to evidence gained from the first three steps of the art criticism process as a basis for this judgment.

## **Day 2:**

### **Standards:**

#### **9.2.8 Historical and Cultural Context**

#### **9.4.8 Aesthetic Response**

**Objective:** Students will identify trends and symbolism as a basis for their artwork after viewing the documentary.

Students will view the documentary “Wylie Avenue Days”. They may choose a person in the film to base their artwork upon, or they can research an African American featured in the book *America’s Black History* (Blockson, 1975).

**Strategies:** Below is a list of Pittsburgh African Americans; many who have overcome specific obstacles and whose experience and contributions were profoundly significant to both our region and our nation. These are examples of people the teacher can use as a prompt for class discussion. For instance, when discussing Robert L. Vann and his experience as a pickle factory worker and poet, the teacher may start by asking students what imagery comes to mind when one discusses Robert L. Vann. Similarly, the teacher might lead students in a discussion about the life of composer Harry T. Burleigh, encouraging students to imagine imagery of music notes and musical instruments. Students may choose to further research these and other historical African American figures (Blockson, 1975) to further develop into completed artworks using mixed media.

## **Prominent African Americans: Allegheny County**

Dr. Selma Burke- Art major at Sarah Lawrence college; well-known artist who peaked during the W.P.A period of the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration.

Harry T. Burleigh –Prominent composer from Erie, PA.

Martin R. Delaney-Dynamic advocate of black nationalism

Henry Ossawa Tanner- First black artist to win coveted prizes at the Paris Salon

Robert L. Vann- Pittsburgh pickle factory worker and poet

### **Day 3:**

**Standards:** 9.2.8 Historical and Cultural Context

9.4.8 Aesthetic Response

**Objective:** Students will complete writing prompt to analyze their ideas. This analysis will become the basis for their artwork.

**Strategies:** Students will visit the computer lab (if available) and conduct research in order to identify an African American from Pennsylvania whose story they find compelling. In response to the previous (Day 2) class discussion, students will complete writing prompt (**Appendix A1**). Student will analyze the experience and obstacles of any of the aforementioned figures or a person featured in the documentary. As an alternate assignment, students may choose to analyze their own experience/obstacles. The teacher can meet with students during this class period to provide feedback on their work.

**Day 4:****Standards:**

9.1.8 Art Production

9.2.8 Historical and Cultural Context

9.4.8 Aesthetic Response

**Objective:** Students will sketch three possible thumbnail sketches (**Appendix A3**) that must:

1. Elaborate on the experience analyzed in the writing prompt
2. Incorporate at least 3 elements/principles of art
3. Explore the style of one of the three featured contemporary African American artists.

**Strategies:**

The teacher will demonstrate a successfully developed composition by showing students how a thumbnail sketch can be created. The teacher will also review the elements and principles of art using art classroom resources, and formally demonstrating for students how the elements and principles, and styles of the master contemporary artists can be incorporated into artwork.

**Days 5-9:****Standards:**

9.1.8 Art Production

9.2.8 Historical and Cultural Context

9.4.8 Aesthetic Response

**Objective:** Students will choose their best composition which they will enlarge and begin to develop using mixed media. Possible materials may include: found objects, papier mache, fabric, paint, pastel, or collaged items.

**Strategies:** The teacher will want to develop classroom routines and rituals for managing the diverse array of materials that students have access to for application into their

original artwork. Students will need to be aware of the proper procedures for using, cleaning, and storing paintbrushes and other art supplies.

**Day 10:**

**Standards:**

9.3.8 Art Criticism

9.4.8 Aesthetic Response

**Objectives:** Students will write an artist statement (**Appendix A4**) describing the obstacle/experience/point of view they chose to depict and describe how they specifically incorporated a master artist's style and the minimum of three elements of art into their composition.

Students will also complete a self-assessment at this time using a criteria list and rubric.

**Strategies:** Upon completion of the assignment, or at the end of this class period, the teacher may choose to feature several students' accomplishments in a formal or informal class critique. Students may present their artwork and corresponding artist statement for the class.

## **Visual Art Standards**

### **9.1.8**

A. Know and use the elements and principles of each art form to create works in the arts and humanities.

- Elements
- Principles

B. Recognize, know, use and demonstrate a variety of appropriate arts elements and principles to produce, review and revise original works in the arts.

C. Recognize and use fundamental vocabulary within each of the arts forms.

### **9.2.8**

A. Explain the historical, cultural and social context of an individual work in the arts.

B. Relate works in the arts chronologically to historical events

C. Relate works in the arts to varying styles and genre and to the periods in which they were created

D. Analyze a work of art from its historical and cultural perspective.

E. Analyze how historical events and culture impact forms, techniques and purposes of works in the arts

F. Know and apply appropriate vocabulary used between social studies and the arts and humanities.

G. Relate works in the arts to geographic regions:

H. Identify, describe and analyze the work of Pennsylvania Artists in dance, music, theatre and visual arts.

I. Identify, explain and

### **9.3.8**

A. Know and use the critical process of the examination of works in the arts and humanities.

- Compare and contrast
- Analyze

- Interpret
- Form and test hypotheses
- Evaluate/form judgments

B. Analyze and interpret specific characteristics of works in the arts within each art form.

C. Identify and classify styles, forms, types and genre within art forms

D. Evaluate works in the arts and humanities using a complex vocabulary of critical response.

#### **9.4.8**

A. Compare and contrast examples of group and individual philosophical meanings of works in the arts and humanities

B. Compare and contrast informed individual opinions about the meaning of works in the arts to others.

C. Describe how the attributes of the audience's environment influence aesthetic responses

D. Describe to what purpose philosophical ideas generated by artists can be conveyed through works in the arts and humanities.

## Annotated Bibliography

Blockson, Charles L. (1976). *Pennsylvania's black history*. Philadelphia: Portfolio Associates.

The author highlights the life and accomplishments of Pennsylvania's most prominent African Americans, organized by the county from which they matriculate. The narratives and contributions to African American culture and Pennsylvania's history are summarized.

Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. New York: Touchstone.

For John Dewey, education and democracy are intimately connected. According to Dewey good education should have both a societal purpose and purpose for the individual student. Educators are responsible for providing students with experiences which better enable the students to contribute to society. Dewey compares two educational paradigms, traditional and progressive education.

Garrison, J.W. (1996). A Deweyan theory of democratic listening. *Educational Theory*, 46(4), 429-451.

Garrison builds upon Dewey's 1938 publication to describe a democratic, Deweyan classroom where each student is encouraged to take risks and is afforded a safe environment where their voice is equally heard. Garrison's explanation of such a classroom allows all students' identities to be affirmed.

Greene, M. (1988). *The dialectic of freedom*. New York: Teachers College Press.

The author argues that freedom is not assumed nor easily given. The author feels that freedom must be constantly sought, argued and defined for individuals.

Hinshaw, J. (2002). *Steel and steelworkers: Race and struggle in twentieth-century Pittsburgh*. State University of New York Press: Albany.

The author provides a historical overview of the rise of the coal and steel industry in Pennsylvania, and how the steel moguls built up their businesses. Comparisons and descriptions of the converse experiences of the wealthy tycoons and mill workers are drawn.

Mittler, G. & Ragans, R. (2005). *Exploring Art*. McGraw Hill: New York. (p.93-94)

Provides a concrete art criticism process which will be implemented as part of the Pittsburgh Public Schools Visual Arts curriculum and Day One of the unit.

Schumacher, J. (2001). *The harlem renaissance*. Logan: Perfection Learning Corp.

The author overviews various aspects of the Harlem Renaissance and paints vivid pictures of the ways of life that were prevalent in Harlem from 1940-1960.

Bolin, D. & Moore C. (1991) *Wylie Avenue Days*. WQED:Pittsburgh.

A documentary that captures the vibrant cultural essence of African American life in Pittsburgh's Hill district during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Oral histories and accounts presented in this documentary will be analyzed by students, who will then create original artwork that corresponds with their analyses.

## Appendices

### **Appendix A1**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

### Obstacles and Freedom Writing Prompt

Choose one African American narrative we have studied or viewed in the film *Wylie Avenue Days* to analyze in terms of their obstacles and freedoms/accomplishments. You will expand upon this analysis to create your artwork.

What individual have you chosen to focus on as subject matter for your artwork?

\_\_\_\_\_

List obstacles this individual had to overcome:

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

What accomplishments of specific freedoms did this individual achieve?

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

### Appendix A2

Name \_\_\_\_\_

## Thumbnail Sketch/Composition Planning Worksheet

Directions: In this assignment you will elaborate on the experience of the life narrative you analyzed in the writing assignment. Consider how you use your space overall to create a well developed composition. Incorporate at least three of the Elements/Principles of Art and emulate the style of one of the three contemporary African American artists we studied. In the space below, create three thumbnail compositions to sketch your ideas in three different ways.

### **Appendix A3**

Final Sketch

Directions: Choose your best sketch from the Thumbnail Sketch Assignment you completed. Enlarge the sketch using the quadrant enlargement method. Draw two lines to divide your thumbnail and enlarge each quadrant. Explain what media (materials) and Art Elements/Principles you intend to incorporate.

Media:

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Elements/Principles of Art

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

Final Sketch Below:

Appendix A4

Name \_\_\_\_\_

**Artist Statement**

