Don't Judge A Book By its Cover: Using Self Reflection To Understand Eighth Grade Identities

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Cutting, dipping, crunching, and gluing are only a few of the activities that are happening as I create in my studio. As I watch the materials drip and squeeze their way through my hands, I think about the connection that I have to my artwork. Memories, events, and emotions swirl through my mind, as I anticipate how my peers and family will perceive my work. I ask myself will they understand me better, perceive me differently, or see the power that I have as an artist to transform everyday recyclable materials into personal abstract pieces of art? In my art practice, I use abstraction to draw my audience close to my heart without revealing all of my feelings or thoughts. As the development of my studio practice grows, I start to reflect about my identity and what parts of my identity am I conveying to the viewer.

Do I Know My Students?

As a middle school art teacher, I have become very accustomed to the flow of the middle school day. The yelling, laughing, hitting, and gossip are the sounds that fill my art room when the eighth graders rush in. As students crowd into my spacious art room that is deliciously covered in paint, cardboard, and pieces of foot printed papers, one quickly feels the fullness of the room. As soon as I have everyone piled inside, the childish smell of crayons gets pushed to the back, as Axe body spray and sweet smelling body lotion clash together with the hot bodies of the students.

I begin the class by giving out zodiac sign information so that students can research their signs and begin to develop personal connections to their signs. Reading horoscopes to discover the qualities of one’s sign is fun for the students. The next step is for the students to create their
own symbols about themselves and create a painted collage of these symbols. This step of the unit quickly became the hardest part. As the students researched their signs, I assumed that they were connecting to their identities and creating an understanding of who they are; however, the students did not know or learn who they were during this activity and they soon lost interest in the assignment after the research segment. I initially expected the students to be engaged throughout the entire project, and to create a meaningful piece of art that they would want to take home, unfortunately this was not the case. The conclusion of the zodiac assignment alerted me to the fact that the students did not understand their identities and neither did I. The students ended up creating artwork that was artificial, and even though the project was about who they are, the students did not feel connected to the work. Many students made something pretty or painted a muddy mess and did not want to take the work home with them.

I have always prided myself on having an excellent rapport with students, but I did not realize until this moment that I did not know much about my students’ identities. If I only knew more about my students, I would have the possibility of creating assignments to help them learn more about themselves and hopefully keep them engaged throughout the art making process. As an artist, I stay engaged because I have a personal connection to what I am creating. Through my art, I attempt to learn or relearn aspects of my identity and who I am. My new task was to create a unit where my students will start to reflect about themselves and question who they are.

The Self-Portrait Unit

Techniques and activities that increase personal connection consist of scaffolding assignments, making personal connections to the art through self-expression, material choice, material exploration, and reflection (Amorino, 2001; Graham, 2003; Hafeli, 2005; Levine, 2009;
Pennisi, 2013; Roth, 2017; Stokrocki et al., 2010). So I created the unit, Portrait Art: A Journey into Your Reflection, to help students explore their identity and learn to reflect as they create artwork.

I decided to revamp my original portrait unit because self portraits can often initiate a conversation that leads into the topic of identity. In my original unit, the students did not reflect on their identity or how they want their peers and family to perceive them when they look at their portraits. I simply focused on having the students’ draw their face. I wanted to change this element for my new unit, so I created a self portrait unit that focused on self reflection while building drawing skills and introducing students to material exploration. In my personal art practice, I have discovered that self reflection is a big part of my personal art making process and it makes my work more meaningful. I wanted my students to explore self reflection throughout the art making process, so that they could possibly experience the same outcomes as I do in my own practice. The self reflection prompts I created were a way for my students to start thinking about their identity without formally speaking aloud to their peers about how they perceive themselves. I want my students to learn more about themselves and to start to develop a sense of how they want others to perceive them and how they view themselves.

The students began the unit with a half face drawing. During the half face drawings, students practiced prior drawing skills such as shading and hatching while figuring out the right proportions of the face. This first assignment alarmed my students with worry, but not as much as the reflection questions that followed! In the first survey of my research assignment, students answered questions about how they perceive themselves as well as how their peers and family perceive them. As annoyance settled in about having to write in art class, one student yells across
the room “why do I care what my friends and family think of me?” In return I took a deep breath and responded, “Think deep about what people think about you even if you don't care about what they think.” Outbursts similar to this often occurred as the students grew accustomed to answering the self reflection prompts in class. For the first time in my class, I was asking my students to write and reflect. After the half face drawings were finished, the students answered a reflective prompt that asked them to list five things they liked about their drawing and five things that they did not like. From this activity I started to realize how confident Student C was about himself. He wrote about how great the drawing was, making comments like, “The eyes, because I am just good at making eyes.” He did not mention anything bad, whereas the girls, Student B and Student A, listed good and bad details about their drawings. Both of the girls felt that drawing their eyes was difficult, but their shading came out well. From this reflective exercise, I began to learn where my students have difficulties, what they are confident about, and I perceived a small insight into how they feel as an artist.

Not many students were accustomed to this type of writing, so as the unit progressed, they forced themselves to respond to the self reflective prompts. Student A and Student B were solid writers, but they were frustrated when thinking about the reflective prompts. Responses to the first photo reflection exercise asked the students to take a photo and then reflect on how they are feeling. The girls described what they were wearing and where they were, but they did not describe any of their feelings. Student C described his clothes, why he was wearing them, what it meant to wear them, and his personal interests. These responses were very surprising to me because I thought they would talk about how they felt, but they were only focused on their outer appearances. During the next self reflection prompt response we did in
class, I asked the students to think about how their peers and family perceive them. I made it a point to encourage the students to dig deep and discuss their feelings. At the end of the half face drawing activity and after a couple of similar reflective prompts, the students moved on to materials exploration and brainstorming for their final self portraits. During the materials exploration activity, the students mixed different materials to see how they interacted. They recorded their responses on a worksheet and they labeled the materials they would use again and those that they would not use. In doing this material exploration worksheet, the students identified the materials that they would use for future projects.

**Breaking Out of the Comfort Zone**

The final self portrait in the unit, was a multi-media self portrait. In this final stage, the students created a self portrait of themselves using a mixture of supplies and optional photos taken during the photo reflection “Do Now.” The students were given the option to use multiple materials instead of a black and white pencil drawing, which they are used to creating. The goal of this final self portrait is to create a self portrait that expresses who they are.

Allowing students access to all the materials in class was a first time experience for me. I have always restricted the students to certain materials. In this lesson, in order for students to explore and create an expressive self portrait, I had to open up my whole room to the students. Before the materials exploration worksheet, I never gave my classes a lot of materials to work with because they often misuse supplies and waste too much. I was afraid to give them too many options because I did not trust them with everything in my art room. I realized during the materials exploration worksheet, that if I was firm about the rules of the supplies that I could let my students explore the materials and trust that they would follow the rules. Before the material
exploration exercise, I showed students where all the supplies are located, how to use them, and my expectations for clean up. With these foundations in place, I gave my students more than materials; I gave them my trust!

Amorino (2009) explains that “students who have been taught art using a more hands-on approach to artmaking are more expressive in their art – possibly because they have had practice with the materials and are more confident to explore in their work” (p. 228). Breaking out of one’s comfort zone can cause anxiety as a teacher and an artist, but from doing so, I saw my teaching and artist practice excel. My students’ work excelled as well! The students’ work went from simple drawings to a collage of pictures, colors, and shapes. In the beginning stages of the final expressive self portraits, I saw my students respond more openly to reflective prompts and interview questions. From constant reflective thinking and responding throughout the unit, as well as being able to explore, my students became more comfortable talking to me about their personal thoughts and feelings. My students also started making conscious decisions about how their peers and family perceive them compared to how they see themselves. This was a major accomplishment because everyone started to realize or understand what parts of their identity that people see of them in and outside of school. I also realized that identity is more than skin deep. For middle school students, identity was their outer appearance, their personal interests, and what they chose to share with peers compared to family.

The Results of the Self Portrait Unit and My Research

The final self portrait project came out very different from what I expected! For the last two years, I have been teaching my students to draw realistically. My students always strived to create realistic work and draw from observation. The instructions for this final self portrait were
very different from my normal instructions. I gave the students the freedom to create the portrait using any materials in the classroom, including their photographs. I was unsure of what the students would create, but I trusted them with the materials because of the previous materials exploration exercise. Ultimately, I was excited to see what the students would create.

The projects in class turned out to be very expressive, abstract, and cartoonish. With all the choices that my students had in creating their portraits, I assumed that they would be more realistic in nature because I teach realism in every grade. However, there was a shift in the design that was the result of the choices I gave the students. Using different types of materials did not restrict them and the self reflective prompts started to effect the way that the students wanted themselves to be viewed by their peers. Each student in my research came up with a distinct visions of themselves, that I feel was a side of them that they wanted others to see.

**Student A**

“My hair is different from everybody’s,” Student A said as she starts to notice her physical features in a response to the photo reflection, “Do-Now.” From observation, Student A is a quiet and bright student in class. She does not talk to many people in class, but she is quite an observer of her peers. Student A has taken notice to the fact that she has many physical attributes that are different from her peers. These attributes go from her long dreadlocks to her beautiful brown eyes. In response to the reflective prompts, she favors her hair, eyes, and her smile.

In Student A’s final self portrait, she draws herself on bright orange construction paper. Using chalk and oil pastels she adds details to her face and draws her hair. Getting her hair right was crucial because it was a staple in her looks and something that automatically draws her out
from the crowd. In a visualization exercise, students were asked to write down a shape, line, and color that comes first to their minds. These details were the only elements that I asked the students to add to their final pieces. Student A added triangles because they were her favorite shape. She also added pink lines and photographs of her eyes that she incorporated into her background. Besides her hair, she expressed her love for her eyes and she wanted to show that in her self portrait. Adding the floating eye was Student A’s attempt of creating an abstract design. One aspect that Student A wanted her peers and family to perceive about her is how creative she is. Through her quiet demeanor she wants people to see her as very creative person and not just as a smart, respectful student.

**Student B**

“I am not as shy and introverted as I think!” Is what Student B told me at the end of our self portrait unit during her interview. Student B knows that her peers see her as shy and introverted because of her quiet behavior in class. She always strives to work hard, be respectful, and get good grades. Her peers that do not know her very well, only see her as shy and introverted because she does not talk or try to communicate often with others during the school day. Student B’s family and very close friends see a different side of her. They see her as an extroverted and explorative type of person because of how lively she is around them. On her social media, Student B avoids taking photos of herself and likes to photograph places she has traveled or wants to go.

In Student B’s final self portrait she uses muted colors and charcoal to draw herself black and white. While still using some drawing techniques such as shading, she creates an expressive realistic photo of herself. Since she had trouble drawing her glasses and eyes, she opted to cut
out her glasses and eyes from a photograph of herself and glue them to her portrait. After finishing her photo and examining the two portraits she made in the class, she realized that she is capable of so much more. She has realized that she wants more of her peers to see her as more than a “book worm.” She has started this transition from being shy and introverted by taking more selfies of herself to post on social media. She has many interests and hobbies and I know that she will start to show her peers more of who she is.

Student C

“Only my family knows me best” was the response that Student C gave when asked if his peers know him well. Student C was very confident about himself when he started this self portrait unit. His family, especially his mother, is a strong influence in his life. Since knowing this student since he was in elementary school, I can see a change in his confidence, style, and actions. Through self-reflections and his interview with me, Student C was surprised how much better his artwork is now. He marveled at how realistic it is and how it expresses exactly how he looks and feels in terms of self and fashion. At the end of the unit, he thanked me for helping him to realize how much he has changed in the past year and he looks forward to pursuing fashion.

Student C wanted his portrait to look exactly like him. He drew his portrait using pencil and then filled it in using markers and oil pastels. His portrait features his upper body in his favorite hoodie. By displaying his fashion sense and favorite sunglasses, Student C explained that the jagged blue lines represent his hair color at the time. His hair is a crucial part of his style. His colored hair is a statement that makes him unique from others.

Student C’s artwork did not just show his confidence, it showed physical evidence of who he is and what he wants to be. His confidence was enhanced by this unit, but it also was a
humbling experience for him. He has never saw himself as an artist, but due to his new found confidence from his family, he was ready to take on the challenge of drawing a self portrait. He wanted this artwork to make a statement about who he has become and how much his fashion sense has changed since elementary school. From this project, Student C left feeling excited about who he is and ready to take on high school in the upcoming year. Student C’s confidence stole my heart as an art teacher. His story and determination to become a better person for himself was inspiring. He has changed so much and has even become more active in and outside of school. His lack of initiative, doubt, and low self-esteem has been replaced with confidence, self worth, and determination.

Conclusion

The students in my class created an expressive self portrait through self reflection and exploration. The self reflection prompts were the catalysts that kept the students engaged throughout the art making process. In introducing self reflection prompts, my students thought more about how they wanted their self portraits to be perceived by their peers because the project was so personal. The College Board (2012) suggests that connecting students with their culture and personal lives are ways to help students create meaning out of their artwork. Middle school students want to connect their personal world with what they are doing in and outside of the school (p. 51).

As a teacher, I learned that giving my students trust was a way to increase their engagement. The trust I demonstrated, instilled more determination in them to explore and do more with their work. As an artist, self reflection has been a way for me to learn more about myself as well as my students. This unit and research helped me to learn about my students more
personally. I learned about my students’ families, how they really are around their friends, and even their future interests. Students that I assumed were one way, are completely different when they are at home. The phrase, don’t judge a book by it’s cover constantly comes to mind when I think of all the lessons I learned about my eighth graders. This unit has brought me closer to my students, increased my teaching practice, and helped me to overcome some of my fears as a teacher. Giving my students choices, trust, and getting to understand them more has taught me to grow, adapt, and not be afraid to change or try new strategies in my art room.

References


