

NEH Project Proposal 2014

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7th Grade Language Arts

Street Art, Symbolism, and the Search for Identity

Oaxaca is full of street art. Everywhere I look I am drawn to the graffiti. There are wheat pastes of Zapata, political slogans urging people to never forget the teacher's protest of 2006, and gigantic colorful murals with fantastical figures, some of which incorporate indigenous symbols. It is very evident that the past informs the present in Oaxaca and that young street artists are trying to make sense of their place in the world. In the same way, middle school students are trying to figure out who they are and what their identity is.

The lessons in this project are going to start with some huge, abstract essential questions before addressing the concrete and examining specific examples. To start, I will ask the students to reflect upon how they see the universe and where they think they fit into it. I will do this with a free write and then a whole class discussion. There are no right or wrong answers here since it is really just an opportunity to explore the notion of symbolism and identity.

Next, I will ask them to think about the idea of symbolism. I will have a collection of easily recognizable symbols such as the American flag, a white dove, and a peace sign and ask them if they can identify each one. We will discuss how it is possible that a symbol can be so easily identifiable to us and how we invest so much meaning into icons so that we are able to understand them immediately. I will then show them the Star of David, the swastika, and the Confederate flag in order to see if these symbols are equally as identifiable. We will discuss how these symbols and more can mean different things to different people.

Many symbols are meant to evoke a response or move us, the audience, to act. They are meant to promote change. The street art in Oaxaca shows great evidence of this. I will display two figures, Abraham Lincoln and Zapata, and see if they are identifiable. I expect that my students will not know who Zapata is, so I will explain a little bit about him and why he is so famous, so recognizable in Mexico. Next, I will show two dates, September 11, 2001 and June 14, 2006 and see if they can identify the dates too. Again, I expect that they will be unable to recognize the second date, the day in which the teachers' protest in Oaxaca became a bloody street battle and occupation. So I will provide the students with some background knowledge of the teachers' protest. This will include some readings, some street art from the time period, and possibly a short video. Much of the street art in Oaxaca shows evidence of a struggle for freedom and a certain level of resilience through personal expression.

I will put up a huge piece of bulletin board paper that will become a graffiti wall. Each student will have an opportunity to write or draw on this special wall. Afterwards, we will examine what ideas or symbols emerged. We will consider whether or not everyone in the room understood everything that was on the graffiti wall or if the ideas were too specific to a certain individual. It may turn out that I, as the teacher, may fail to understand some of the ideas or sayings that the students may understand readily. Then either I or several students (but not everyone) will go to the graffiti wall and change some of the images or text. We may cover over

someone else's work with new paper if we want to. This will serve as an entrance into a discussion about how symbols can be changed or repurposed. I will show two examples of this from Oaxaca. One will be the blue girls before and after their eyes were covered up with red spray paint and the other will be of a Zapata wheat paste before and after his eyes were gouged out. I will show the image of the Virgin de Guadeloupe in a traditional way and then a subversive one. I will also show a traditional image of Frida Kahlo and street artist Yescka's punk version. I will ask students to reflect on these couplings and what they mean.

It will be critical for the students to think about their own identity in more depth and how they may identify with a certain symbol. They will design their own symbol to represent themselves. Alternatively, they may choose to create a symbol that represents a big issue or a topic such as happiness or war. After designing this on paper, they will get the opportunity to create either a stencil or a rubber stamp of their symbol. Since I learned how to create rubber stamps from Cesar Chavez, I want to incorporate this authentic technique into the classroom. We will display these around the classroom.

Since this is a seventh grade Language Arts class, I see this project about symbolism, self-identification, resistance, and change as just a small part of the curriculum. My students read three novels about children who must carve out their own identity in a tough environment and learn to survive and this lesson on symbolism would be a nice start to the school year.

Unit Description:

This unit uses photographs of street art in Oaxaca as a catalyst for discussing symbolism and the search for personal identity. It will examine the notion of what a symbol is, how it can be used and subverted, and how it can represent a person's identity.

Subject and Grade Level:

Seventh grade Language Arts and Reading

Essential Questions:

What is a symbol?

What symbols are easily identifiable to you? Why?

Do symbols mean different things to different people?

How are symbols used to unite or divide us?

How can symbols be transformed or subverted? Why?

Who are you and where do you fit into the universe? What symbol will you create to represent yourself?

Street Art, Symbolism, and the Search for Identity Prezi Lesson Plans:

Lesson 1: Symbols and I Am Poem

Use the Prezi entitled Street Art, Symbolism, and the Search for Identity through the part in which colors, animals, seasons, and natural elements are displayed. At this point, it would be a perfect opportunity to create some autobiographical poetry. This will incorporate similes. Use the I Am poem template or have the students create an original poem about themselves using colors, seasons, natural elements, and/or animals.

Lesson 2: Different Meanings of Symbols and Subversion

Use the Prezi entitled Street Art, Symbolism, and the Search for Identity to discuss how symbols can mean different things to different people. Stop after you have displayed all of the subversive imagery. At this point, the students can create some subversive art of their own. Have the students pick a famous advertisement or slogan from a popular brand and create a new slogan or advertisement. Alternatively, they could take a famous piece of art or a famous image of a well-known person and change it or subvert it.

Lesson 3: Graffiti Wall Walk

Cover a bulletin board with a large piece of paper that will function as a graffiti wall. If you use this lesson in a Language Arts class, the students can write or draw on the “wall” from their own perspective or point of view. If you use the lesson in a Reading class, the students could pretend to be one of the characters from a class novel or short story and write or draw on the “wall” from that person’s perspective. Give the students plenty of time to artfully and thoughtfully cover this wall with words and images. This may take several class periods. Then examine what is on the “wall” and discuss any identifiable symbols. Additionally, you may want to let the students return to the wall in order to add to it or change it. They will intentionally subvert the symbols. Have a discussion about the imagery now. For use with the Prezi entitled Street Art, Symbolism, and the Search for Identity.

Lesson 4: Self-Identity and Symbol Stamps

It is important for middle school students to figure out who they are and how they fit into the universe, in both a big, abstract, conceptual manner and in a much smaller way in their daily relations. Conduct a free write about who they are and where they see themselves. For example, is a student a middle child who often gets overlooked by his parents or is he the captain of the soccer team and wildly popular? They should write about their place in their family, in their school, in their community, and beyond. After discussing this, the students will design a symbol to represent themselves. Purchase some small rectangular rubber erasers and print-making carving tools so that the students can carve their symbol into the rubber eraser. Buy some stamp ink pads and card stock and allow the students to make trading cards with their symbols. For use with the Prezi entitled Street Art, Symbolism, and the Search for Identity.

Lesson 5: Symbolism in Literature

If you are a Reading teacher, you can use this time to locate symbols in your current class novel. For example, if your students are reading Hatchet by Gary Paulsen, the hatchet is a symbol of survival. Look for as many examples as possible from your class text and see if the students can identify any symbols in their independent reading books too. For use with the Prezi entitled Street Art, Symbolism, and the Search for Identity.

Lesson 6: Personal Narratives with Symbolism

Have the students create a personal narrative that incorporates symbolism. For example, I could tell the story of how my family celebrates Greek Orthodox Easter with the special tradition of the red eggs. The red eggs symbolize my family’s cultural heritage, but as a child I always felt different from my classmates who did not do this tradition so it also symbolized my feelings of isolation from my peers. For use with the Prezi entitled Street Art, Symbolism, and the Search for Identity.

Oaxaca's Street Art Power Point Lessons:

Lesson 1: Street Art vs. Graffiti

Open the Power Point entitled Oaxaca's Street Art. Use slide #2 to conduct a quick free write about the difference between the terms street art and graffiti. Make sure that your students incorporate as many of the key words as possible. Let the students share their ideas and then give them some formal definitions of the two terms.

Lesson 2: Historical Figures

Use slides #3-7 to display images of historical figures who were represented in Oaxaca's street art. Elaborate on the lesson by reading about the Mexican Revolution, Emiliano Zapata, Lazaro Cardenas, the teacher's movement of 2006, and Governor Ulises Ruiz.

Lesson 3: Social Protest

Use slides #8-23 to display images of social protest and writing on Oaxaca's streets. Have the students research the teacher's movement of 2006, if they did not already do so, as well as PRI, FPR, and anarchy. This lesson could be quite long, depending on the level of research and discussion you want to have. Other possible topics to discuss would be immigration, the recent World Cup and the social effects it had on Brazil, political prisoners, the ability to think for yourself, and the notion of a collective memory.

Lesson 4: Mixing Old and New Imagery

Use slides #24-59 to display images of other street art in Oaxaca that incorporate old and new elements of Mexican culture. Students can try to identify as many symbols as possible. For example, slide #29 shows a classic design from Mitla that has been carved into both a water fountain by Francisco Toledo, Oaxaca's pre-eminent artist and art patron, and a blue wall. There are agave plants, corn, animals, traditionally dressed people, sombreros, skulls, geometric designs, guitars and maracas, drums, serpents, Frida Kahlo, grasshoppers, the devil, and clay pots. Discuss the importance of preserving traditional elements of culture in modern times.

Symbolism in Songs, Quilts, and More Power Point Lessons:

Lesson 1: The Hobo Code

Have the students examine the Hobo Code and discuss why such a code needs to exist. In small groups, students should create their own school code. Each group should produce ten images in their code to represent different areas of the school (such as the gym, the bathroom, the principal's office, the guidance counselor's office, etc.) Additionally, they could create codes for the classroom itself, their house, or their neighborhood. If possible, the students could actually leave their code marks at the locations, possibly in chalk or stickers.

Lesson 2: Slave Codes

There is a lot of information available to suggest that American slaves used secret codes in quilt patterns during the time of the Underground Railroad. Examine some of these sources to learn about the most popular quilt patterns that guided runaway slaves to safety. There are also many picture books that address this topic. [The Patchwork Path: A Quilt Map to Freedom](#) and [Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt](#) are particularly good choices. In the classroom, students can use paper templates of the quilt blocks to create their own freedom quilt or map quilt to chart their route from home to school or two other locations. If the students have a FACS class or access to a sewing machine and fabric, they could create individual quilt blocks that get put together into one large class quilt. Alternatively, students could create their own picture book or a narrative told through the eyes of a runaway slave. It would be interesting to listen to the song Follow the Drinking Gourd and hear how the lyrics are also symbols for runaway slaves. If the music teacher wanted to collaborate here, it would be a wonderful way to incorporate another discipline.

Lesson 3: Gang Codes

Symbols and codes are also used by gangs. This is a complex subject, but it might appeal to your students or be something that they are already familiar with. It might be interesting to compare and contrast the street art in Oaxaca with the street art or graffiti in your hometown and look for similar concepts such as art as social commentary, resistance, and self-expression.

Assessments:

- 1) I Am poem
- 2) Subversive art
- 3) Graffiti wall participation
- 4) Self-representation stamp
- 5) Personal narrative with symbolism
- 6) School code
- 7) Coded quilt or narrative