Keeping Visual Artifact Journals: 
Finding Story and Art in Everyday 
Objects 
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ABSTRACT
Merging the visual arts with writing and visual artifact journals can provide students with both journaling opportunities as well as art experiences. These art experiences are especially valuable at a time when schools are seeing arts specialists eliminated from school staffing and their content from the overall curriculum. Three fifth grade classes in one elementary school in Arizona used visual artifact journals to write about artifacts that held personal meaning as well as to demonstrate an understanding of the visual arts. While visual artifact journals were originally developed by Sanders-Bustle (2008) for use with preservice teachers, fifth graders were able to utilize the journals, practicing writing skills while documenting their lives through artifacts and recognizing the artistic qualities within their artifacts.

INTRODUCTION
Remember when arts specialists used to be a part of an elementary education curriculum? No? Well neither will today’s students if national, state and local educational policy continues in the same trend. We have been hearing for decades now about the demise of the arts in schools, first due to budget cuts and now the presence of high stakes testing and accountability taking the place of additional arts education. Well, budget crisis struck again in a small district in southern Arizona where state budget cuts and a failed budget override during county elections led district administration to rid all elementary schools of their art, music, and PE specialists as well as to place considerable limitations on library specialists and school counselor services.

As an assistant professor in Elementary Teacher Education, I had an opportunity for the past several years to teach a course called Creative Arts in Context, which focuses on integrating the arts as a methodology for teaching and learning. It was through this course that I ran across an article by Sanders-Bustle (2008) on visual artifact journals for making meaning through both writing and art. Preservice teachers kept a sketchbook in which they collected artifacts, mounted them in the sketchbook, and then wrote a two-part journal entry that explained the artifact’s meaning and described the artifact using art terminology (Sanders-Bustle, 2008).

I wondered why something like this could not be done with elementary students, especially with students who were facing the loss of arts specialists. I approached a fifth grade teacher, and former colleague, at one of the elementary schools in the district with a copy of the article and my thoughts on how students might benefit from this kind of journaling experience. Not only was the teacher thrilled to have some help in teaching art to her students for the next school year but she also presented the idea to her grade level colleagues, who too were interested in the visual artifact journals. What follows are our experiences over roughly a six month period.

What are Visual Artifact Journals?

Sanders-Bustle (2008) developed the concept of visual artifact journals to “encourage her students to enter the world of art through the context of their everyday lives” (p. 9). Students accomplish this by
collecting artifacts that are important to them and then writing about the artifacts. First students choose an artifact, some small personal item that holds meaning. Next, students write a two-part journal entry, with the first part describing the artifact and its relevance, and the second describing the artifact from an art perspective using art language in the way of elements and principles of art. Artifacts were to be both man-made and natural.

Making the Journals Our Own

After collaborating with the three fifth grade teachers, we decided that visual artifact journals would serve two purposes in the fifth grade curriculum: (a) visual artifact journals would help fill a gap in arts instruction and (b) visual artifact journals would provide writing opportunities for students, since journal writing was already an activity in which students practiced daily to increase flexibility in writing, polish writing skills, and write for therapeutic benefits as well as for enjoyment.

Filling a Gap

Hatfield (2007) strongly argued the need for qualified arts specialists in schools stating that, “most general classroom teachers do not have a sufficient background to provide a quality art education for students” (p. 7). The expertise and knowledge of arts education teachers is certainly not disputed. Hatfield is uncomfortable with an anybody can teach it approach to the arts, as he explained that education administration and policy makers will readily accept enrichment in the arts, in the absence of arts specialists, but they would never merely accept enrichment in reading. The essence of Hatfield’s complaint is that reading would never be left as an exploratory subject without an expert teacher to instruct in the content and so neither should the arts.

The reality though is that arts specialists were cut from the district’s elementary schools (art specialists are still in place at the middle and high school level). While the classroom teacher may be no substitute for a trained arts specialist, a hopeful wait and see approach to a reinstatement of specialists would seem to leave students with nothing in the interim, not to mention that NCLB as well as Arizona academic standards call for students to have art instruction. Per Arizona academic standards, in the absence of a specialist, the responsibility falls to the classroom teacher. It is also important to note that teachers take some courses in the arts as a part of Arizona teacher preparation programs.

Providing Writing Opportunities

Wanket (2005) likened writing ability to strength training, explaining that muscles need exercise to grow stronger and students too can exercise (through practice) their writing muscle to grow stronger as writers. Buckner (2005), Ray & Laminack (2001), Fletcher (2001) Graves & Kittle (2005) and many other teachers of writing have touted the benefits of daily writing to give students a sense of comfort, confidence, and competence in writing. As an instructor of reading methods for preservice teachers, I preach to my students the importance of providing a myriad of reading experiences to make reading enjoyable and to foster a love of reading in children. I believe the same can be done for writing so that students see writing as a way to live not just as a means to an end, a tool for accomplishing work. Wanket (2005) suggested that journals can
be an opportunity to appreciate, problem solve, and explore ideas. Buckner (2005) further explained that keeping a notebook gives students the opportunity to use the world around them by “creating a place for students (and writers) to save their words—in the form of a memory, a reflection, a list, a rambling of thoughts, a sketch, or even a scrap of printed paper taped on the page” (p. 4).

It makes sense that students will have something to say if they write about something they choose and know well. Writing about their world may be especially helpful for students who struggle with writing fluency or generating text on a page easily and quickly. Being stumped by not knowing what to write can be a common obstacle for writers of any age; however, artifacts that students choose are likely to have a story behind them that students know well. The thinking process may already be setting in before students even get to the classroom as they choose the artifact about which they plan to write. It is a reality that teachers must teach students different kinds or modes of writing and that students must learn to write for a variety of purposes—to include testing; however, many opportunities to generate ideas and write can only help students when they must write for other purposes.

We knew that fifth grade students would be able to choose and write about artifacts with little difficulty but they would also need to write about their artifact from an art perspective using art language. To do this, students would need to know the vocabulary and also the understanding that comes from experiencing the vocabulary. In order to give this experience, I first introduced some visual arts lessons that focused on elements and principles of art. These art lessons gave students an opportunity to have art and they set students up for understanding the elements and being able to find them in their artifacts. Art lessons included simple line and hand drawings to emphasize line, illusion, and dimension; shape designs and tessellation drawings to emphasize geometric and organic shape, symmetry, and positive and negative space; color activities to emphasize the color wheel and value; and texture rubbing designs to emphasize different types of textures. Students also viewed visual artworks to critically discuss the works as well as to find elements and principles within. Students kept a separate art notebook, which included vocabulary, definitions, and examples of art terms learned. Once students began writing in their sketchbooks, art lessons were still introduced periodically to reinforce art language and explore techniques.

Our Journey

Students brought in artifacts and wrote in their sketchbooks weekly. I too kept a sketchbook, collecting artifacts and journaling so that I could experience the visual artifacts journals and be able to model the process for students. Students were intrigued with the stories behind my chosen artifacts and began to be thoughtful about their own stories. Each entry, based on the Sanders-Bustle (2008) format, was one page in length. This requirement meant that students had to be judicious about their artifact placement and their writing so that placement of items began to be artful as well as in Ivy’s trumpet entry, with its musical note border (see Figure 1).
I could also see the influence of other artists’ works viewed previously in class. I showed the students some pencil and charcoal drawings by contemporary artist J. D. Hillberry. Hillberry creates realistic drawings that result in a three-dimensional appearance. Hillberry’s Website has some excellent examples of illusionist drawings. Nikita imitated Hillberry by framing her artifact and drawing the tape so that it looks as if her work is taped to the page (see Figure 2).

After students had an opportunity to explore their sketchbook with a few of their artifacts and entries, we had a discussion about quality work and what elements should be a part of a good journal entry. We decided that an artifact must be present, either neatly taped or drawn in the sketchbook. If drawn, then students needed to work to capture the details and elements that would be discussed in the writing (see Figure 3).
While many students brought artifacts to class, some brought their artifacts in their minds and drew them in their sketchbooks, which allowed all students to participate. We decided that the contextual description must identify the artifact and answer questions (who, what, where, when, why) about how the artifact came to be included in our sketchbooks. In essence, students needed to capture the story behind the artifact. Alathea’s rock entry and Jorge’s scorpion are examples of capturing the story behind the artifact (see Figures 4 and 5). We discovered though that we also needed to make sure we stayed on topic. Although many journals may be used for free writing, our visual artifacts journals focused on our artifacts.

Part two of our writing involved writing about the artifact using art language. Through discussion first, students learned to see their artifacts as art, as they found art elements such as line, shape, color, value, texture, and space and principles of art such as balance, contrast, proportion, rhythm,
pattern, unity, emphasis, and variety within their artifacts. To practice, we first used some of the artifacts I included in my sketchbook, while referencing our art notes, with student examples and definitions of elements and principles of art. Then students began to look for elements and principles in their own artifacts. We decided that students could not merely list a string of elements present; rather they needed to choose three or more and explain where or how those elements were represented in their artifact (see Figure 6).

While we spent a short time with our visual artifact journals, just over four months with the actual sketchbooks; the students discovered they could find art in the simplest of objects. Students brought in leaves, bookmarks, trinkets, photographs, and we even had a snakeskin. Journal writing about their own artifacts also gave students an opportunity to find that all of their artifacts had stories to tell, stories that might not have otherwise been recognized even by the students themselves.

**Conclusion: A Methodology for Learning**

Visual artifact journals became a methodology for learning with, through, and about the arts (Goldberg, 2006). First, students learn with the arts when they use art to learn more about a subject and in this case they learn more about writing. Second, students learn through the arts as they use art to show understanding. In the case of visual artifact journals, student use art techniques and terms to sketch artifacts and to discuss them in writing. Lastly students learn about the arts, as exposure to different works of art may spark student interest in the visual arts and a desire to learn more about and/or engage in the visual arts themselves.

**AUTHOR BIO**

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References


