

The Swirling Mix: How One Teacher Helps His Students See Poetry through Collage

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While looking at Dan Eldon's works, it occurred to me that collages seem to represent meaningful experiences in a way that is very similar to poetry. Both mediums use a swirling mix of images and colors and text in order to convey a unique emotional experience. As a high school Special Education and English teacher, this idea set me to thinking about the potential behind combining these two art forms in such a way so as to improve my students' capacities for understanding and enjoying poetry.

Students often complain to me that they just don't "get" poetry, that it is utterly unintelligible to them. Recent research studies have suggested that students feel this way about reading in general because they do not interact with their texts on a visually meaningful plain. These students have a hard time seeing, in their mind's eye, the world the words are supposed to create. Students with poor comprehension often view the activity of reading as something that is passively receptive--something you get or don't get depending on how "smart" you are. Dan's journals made me realize that I could show my students that the enjoyment of poetry has nothing to do with smarts and everything to do with making the act of reading into something that is visual and dramatic and constructive. The lesson that evolved from this insight is one of the most powerful and effective reading lessons I now teach. The centerpiece of this lesson involves Dan Eldon and his art.

On the first day of the poetry unit I teach my ninth graders, my students enter the room and find an odd yet intriguing object laying in the middle of the floor. The desks will be lining the walls facing the center of the room as they always do, but at the center of the room now lies a huge satchel made out of a king size sheet. Despite their persistent pleas, I refuse to tell them what is in the satchel. "Get settled and take out your notebooks," I tell them, "then we'll talk about what's in the bag."

When they all take their seats, I ask them to turn to the informal journal section of their binders and respond to the prompt I have placed on the left hand side of the board which reads: Why do people keep journals or diaries? As they begin, I can already see the inquisitiveness developing as their eyes dart over to the long passage I have inscribed on the other side of the chalkboard. It is a copy of Dan's Mission Statement for Safari as a Way of Life.

After ten or so minutes of writing, we discuss and develop the reasons that are behind the keeping of a journal. Most of their answers revolve around the importance of recording the significant moments of one's life or clarifying one's thoughts and feelings. I then tell them I have an example of a very creative journal I want to show them and I

invite them to gather around me at the front of the room where I show them just the cover of **The Journey is the Destination**. I explain to them that the book is a compilation of your son's journal entries and that they are all made up of collage and multimedia artwork. "If covers usually try to give us the overall impression or theme of a book," I ask them, "then what do you think you can tell me about Dan given that this was the cover art chosen for the collection of his journals?"

"He's very creative," someone will say, but I want them to talk about the details they see and how they make them feel.

"How old do you think he is in this picture?" I will ask, but it's a trick question. They'll begin by looking at Dan's face, but their eyes inevitably begin to absorb more and more of the collage's overall meaning as they search for clues to his age. They usually come to the conclusion that he is their age or just a little bit older.

"And he's hot!" one of the girls will usually exclaim--although this kind of enthusiasm cools the minute one of boys in the class points out that Dan appears to be holding two severed animal heads. Oddly enough, these humorous comments are often the ones that spark the more serious tone of the discussion.

"He is, he's obsessed with death," someone will suddenly interject, some student at the fringe of the crowd, someone who wears black too often.

"How do you know that?" I'll ask. "What images give you that feeling?"

And now a number of them will begin to respond. They see death and danger all over the page. They point to the skull and crossbones, the picture of the scorpion, the skin of the snake stretched across the page, the holes that have been purposefully burned through the paper.

"I know these are snake skins," a boy will say, "but the way they run parallel to each other I thought maybe they were supposed to be like tire tracks. The road map is underneath everything else so I thought he really likes to travel, and people that like to travel usually aren't all about gloom and doom. They like to live. They like an adventure."

"And look at the prayer book" another will say, "that could mean he's a person of faith. Maybe he travels to help people like a missionary or something. I mean, aren't those African names on the map, Mr. Luhman?"

I affirm that they have made some very interesting observations and that much of what they noticed in Dan's artwork seems to accurately reflect the course of his life. I

then tell them about his life, the way he lived, what he did, and the way it so tragically ended at such a young age. I tell them about Dan's mom, Kathy Eldon, and how she created this book so that people could share his marvelous life with others. We then proceed to take a look at some of the other journals inside the book. We talk about the Mission Statement page on the inside cover and then we look carefully at a number of other journal entries. My students are absolutely captivated by what I show them: the early colorful collages he made from his days spent among the Massai, the one about the history of his face, the starkly simplistic one that makes use of Plato's quotation about war.

All the while I continue to ask questions about the emotions the pictures seem to create. I ask them to point out the details in the pictures that create these moods. I want them to take note of all the different kinds of media he uses. When I ask them why they think Dan uses objects in his collages, they invariably tell me they make the message of the art more "real." I offer no criticism on the thoughts my students put forward, I only ask what particular color or image makes them feel or think a certain way. I do not want them to think that there is some kind of right or wrong answer. I encourage them to offer me whatever evidence they can find to back up what they believe the art is trying to say.

After we have looked through the book, I ask the students to take their seats and that I will now explain the purpose of the giant satchel at the center of the room. I announce that we are about to start our unit on poetry. I allow them their moment of groaning and eye-rolling and then, in my best betting man's voice, I tell them I think I can get them to like the poetry just as much as Dan's journal entries. This does little to quell the incredulous looks and noises, but I forge ahead nonetheless. "I'm going to show you how to imagine a poem the same way you see a collage," I tell them, and then I present them with the idea that a collage is actually very similar to a poem in that they both use vivid images to show emotions and create meaning. The only major difference, of course, is that in order to understand poetry they have to make the words into images in their own minds.

In order to teach them how to do this, I hand out a copy of Pablo Neruda's "Poet's Obligation" and I ask them to read it over and write down what they think its theme is on a sheet of paper. I then ask them to read it to themselves again, only this time I instruct them to underline or hi-lite at least eight images from throughout the poem. Ask yourselves, I prompt them, What images stand out the most? Are there any particular images that I like or that I can clearly see in my head. Are any images repeated in the poem? Once they all seem to have a basic list of images from the poem, I give them their assignment: using their list as a guide, I want them to create a collage that represents "Poet's Obligation". "For homework?" someone will moan. No, I tell them, and then I do what they've been waiting for all morning--I open the bag.

Inside the huge sheet I have a copy of almost every kind of magazine under the sun: Cosmopolitan, Mademoiselle, Esquire, Sports Illustrated, Vibe, Rolling Stone, People, Time, Newsweek, National Geographic, Architectural Digest, Muscle Magazine, Horse and Rider, whatever I can lay my hands on. There's also glue sticks, scissors, paperclips, boxes, of staples, markers, crayons, rolls of cellophane and tin foil, glitter pens, a water color set or two, colorful wrapping paper and ribbons, pennies, dimes shoelaces, or whatever other bric-a-brac I might have thought to stuff into the bag on my way out in the morning. I have them spend the rest of that class period and all of the next working on their collages. During those two days many of them will regularly ask to see Dan's works again to help them develop their own ideas. By the time the second day rolls around, students are asking me if it's okay if their collage is bigger than the usual 8" x 11" sheet of paper. Some of them are even bringing in objects from home: contact lenses, light bulbs, lengths of chain, you name it. Most of the class is lost in this frenzy of creativity.

On the third and final day of the project, I ask them to take a look at their finished product and write a paragraph that explains how their collage represents the themes they found in the poem. I also ask for volunteers to share their interpretations with the class. I cannot tell you how amazing it is to see the difference between their original and their post-collage making interpretations. Where before so many had a hard time generating any response at all to Neruda's poem, they now offered ample and even elaborate interpretations of what they thought the poem meant. We will hang the collages all over the walls of the classroom, and then I assign them their last written journal entry: How did visualizing the images in the poem help you to understand it?

Poem on next page.

Poet's Obligation

by Pablo Neruda (1904 - 1973), translated from the Spanish by Alastair Reid

To whoever is not listening to the sea
this Friday morning, to whoever is cooped up
in house or office, factory or woman
or street or mine or harsh prison cell:
to him I come, and, without speaking or looking,
I arrive and open the door of his prison,
and a vibration starts up, vague and insistent,
a great fragment of thunder sets in motion
the rumble of the planet and the foam,
the raucous rivers of the ocean flood,
the star vibrates swiftly in its corona,
and the sea is beating, dying and continuing.

So, drawn on by my destiny,
I ceaselessly must listen to and keep
the sea's lamenting in my awareness,
I must feel the crash of the hard water
and gather it up in a perpetual cup
so that, wherever those in prison may be,
wherever they suffer the autumn's castigation,
I may be there with an errant wave,
I may move, passing through windows,
and hearing me, eyes will glance upward
saying, "How can I reach the sea?"
And I shall broadcast, saying nothing,
the starry echoes of the wave,
a breaking up of foam and of quicksand,
a rustling of salt withdrawing,
the grey cry of sea-birds on the coast.

So, through me, freedom and the sea
will make their answer to the shuttered heart.