Paint a Poem

The project is effective because it allows middle school students to consider what it means to be diverse, brainstorm, discuss different forms of diversity, and then write and illustrate a book to teach elementary students these lessons.

Curriculum/State Standards
Interpret a text for multiple meanings.
Compare and contrast text and non-print media.
Use symbolism to express meaning and tone.
Recognize tone.
Analyze and use the conventions of poetry.
Reflect on a text to create personal connections.
Write interpretive literary essays.

Overview
Project Paint a Poem turns painting into a process of inquiry. Students gradually shape understanding of difficult poetry as they pick poems to interpret and represent on a canvas painting. After painting the poems, students then write mini-essays to hang beneath their paintings which explain their artistic interpretation. Finally, students present and explain their paintings, then reassemble in their groups to compare and contrast their painted interpretations.

Objectives
The students will work in a group to read many poems to discover ones that speak to the groups.
The students will discuss the meaning of the poems and present their chosen poems to the class.
The students will reflect on the meaning of their poems, questions they have about their poems, and the tone of their poems, and discuss these issues in written conversations with the teacher (through emails or journals).
The students will paint the poems using color, concrete objects, and lines to represent their interpretations of tone, theme, and narrative in the poems.
The students will write interpretive essays explaining how their paintings interpret their chosen poems.
The students will present their works aloud and compare and contrast their paintings with other students who painted the same poems.

Materials
old newspaper (table covering)
1 canvas per student
pencils
water cups
A bucket for dirty water
clean water
paint trays (egg cartons work well)
red, yellow, blue, white, and black acrylic paint
paint brushes of varying sizes
a selection of challenging poetry of high interest
empty Venn diagram handout
reflection journals

Readiness Activity
See how other artists have been inspired by poetry:
1. View “Constantinople,” a graphic design piece by Chris Turnham (www.christurnham.com)
Have students guess the story told by the art.
2. Ask students to share their interpretations. Ask students to expound on what they see in the paintings that inspired their stories. (Students may notice the hand in the waves in the corner, the ghostly figure, the words written in the sky). Discuss how the paintings make the students feel (the

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GRADE LEVEL
6-8

PERIODS
8-10

TOTAL BUDGET
$163
Paint a Poem

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tones) and why? You may want to point out the use of color to connote sadness and the use of sharp lines to show tension.

3. Finally, share the poem that inspired the artwork: “Constantinople” a song by the Decemberists. Ask students to explain the stories the songs tell. How were they different/the same as their own stories? Ask students to point out what aspects of the poems they see in the art work. What is in the art that isn’t blatant in the poems? Why did the painter choose to include these elements?

*Other suggested pairs of paintings and poems to use to repeat the activity: “Lady of Shallot” poem by Lord Alfred Tennyson and “Lady of Shallot” painting by Waterhouse, Book of Louise Armstrong’s “Wonderful World,” What a Wonderful World by George David

To further scaffold, you may want to paint your own interpretation of a favorite poem to share, paint a class mural based on a song, or interpret more paintings for color symbolism, tone, and theme.

Strategies/Activities

Activity 1: Divide students into groups of 4 with the task of reading poems (20 minutes) and then choosing the group’s favorite to share with the class with the explanation of what the group likes about the poem (7 minutes). You can find a convenient list of diverse poetry on poetryoutloud.org.

Activity 2: Share a mini lesson on color symbolism with your students. Show students a color (of paper or projected on the LCD screen) and ask students to free associate what the color reminds them of. Have students keep a list of ideas. Discuss the color symbolism in poems such as “Colors” by Rini. Students can try writing their own poems modeled after hers. Ask each student to write you a letter that will explain their plan for painting. Ask students to include an explanation of what colors he plans on using to symbolize the meaning of his poem or to show the tone and what concrete objects he/she will pull from the poem and why these are important. Encourage students to interpret the poems, ask questions about the poems, and make personal connections to the texts in the letters. You can write students back, pushing them deeper through questioning. Continue this written conversation until students have a better understanding of their poems.

Activity 3: (approximately 3 class days) Show students the color wheel and explain how to mix colors to create the secondary colors. Explain how to create shades and tints with black and white. Students paint the background of their canvases to represent the tones of their poems. Explain to students that a mistake in paint can be fixed after it dries. Also explain the necessary procedures for orderly painting. Before students begin, cover the tables and give each table brushes, paint, and water. Stress that there is no one right way to paint the poem. Also explain that every painting does not intend to be beautiful or perfect.

Activity 4: (3 days) Show students an example essay that interprets a poem. Ask students to write a brief explanation to hang beneath their paintings that explains what the poem means to them, using textual evidence to support their ideas, how they used symbolism, lines, and concrete objects to represent this meaning, and, finally, to make personal connections to the poems and how this is shown in the paintings. Edit and revise these for viewing.

Culminating Activity

Create an Art Gallery! Hang students work in categories based on the poems represented. Students will present paintings aloud, explaining their representations. Then, ask each student to compare and contrast his painting with other students’ paintings of the same poem as he views the gallery of paintings. Ask students to complete a Venn diagram outlining their findings. This is a great time to invite parents to participate and view your students’ hard work!

Evaluation Method

Students’ letters, journals, paintings, essays, presentations, and Venn diagrams can all be evaluated with predetermined rubrics.