Teaching Tips

The Open Mind Portrait: An Innovative Method to Promote Reading Comprehension and Critical Thinking

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ABSTRACT

This teaching tip article highlights the "Open Mind Portrait" as a visual art strategy to assess middle and secondary students' complex expressions of texts backed by research, the steps involved for implementation, and a student example to highlight the power of visual art projects. Employing visual art projects to promote reading comprehension and critical thinking offers classroom teachers an innovative reading response method to the standard constructed response. Through the combination of reading and art, teachers can assess students' comprehension of literary characters as students analyze the role of a character in a story, as well as the larger social, historical, and cultural world occupied by the character when responding to texts.

M rs. Sloane passes out a worksheet and instructs her 10th-grade students to respond to comprehension questions one through five for Like Water for Chocolate (Esquivel, 1989). Some students quietly groan while other students verbally protest their lack of enthusiasm. Questions one through five require simple recall; responses that can be found in the text. Mrs. Sloane chooses not to respond. Rather, she ponders, "I think I need to change my mindset and move beyond simple paper and pencil quizzes. I've been teaching to the state-mandated test for so long that I've forgotten to teach my students to think."

Background

Recognizing that much has been written about the No Child Left Behind Act (No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2002), reauthorized in 2015 as Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015), we cannot ignore the numerous unintended consequences that occurred due to the enactment of the two federal laws. One such unintended consequence was a narrowed curriculum that was influenced by state-mandated tests that in turn, impacted the teaching and learning process (Veselak, 2018). Instruction shifted from teaching students important content knowledge in all disciplines to teaching students enough to pass the highly tested subjects of reading and math (Smith & Smith, 2020). Simpson (2015) noted that higher-order thinking assignments and activities were minimalized due to the heavy emphasis on state-mandated tests which resulted in a pedagogy of "drill and kill" (p. 49).

In the above scenario, Mrs. Sloane illustrates an example of the "drill and kill" pedagogy. Unfortunately, she has matched her instruction and assessment to find a single correct answer.

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Instead, she would be wise to ask students how and why questions; questions that require her students to think critically. As a professor in reading education, I believe I have an obligation to teach my middle and secondary master-level students in reading education that the students they teach must be given opportunities to engage in higher-order thinking processes to develop critical thinking skills; skills that can be applied in a wide range of contexts and different fields (Heard et al., 2020). I believe it is necessary to allow my students to think, question, reason, and even argue as they read to model critical thinking skills for their classroom students. Coupled with the need to prepare my students to develop critical thinking pedagogy, I further want my students to be innovative and pursue creative approaches to teach their students to be critical thinkers. Creativity can foster critical thinking (Sukardi et al., 2021).

Context

Young Adolescent and Adult Literacy is a course I teach, and throughout this course, my students engage in multiple learning activities to enhance comprehension and critical thinking skills. First, I choose reading selections to speak strictly to the needs of the young adolescents and adolescents with whom my students interact in their classrooms by incorporating different genres of young adolescent and adult literature. In addition, I teach multiple reader response strategies (Rosenblatt, 1978) to enhance comprehension and critical thinking, including print, performance, visual, and digital forms of knowledge. Further, I integrate critical literacy with young adult literature to teach my students that literature is a space for conducting critical discourse. My stance has been adopted by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE, 2019) as a basis for the organization's resolution statement on critical literacy that offers, "critical literacy describes a pedagogical approach to reading that focuses on the political, sociocultural, historical, and economic forces that shape young students' lives" (Soares & Wood, 2010, p. 487).

At the beginning of each semester, I have found it beneficial for my students to develop a working knowledge of critical thinking that will be operationalized during the semester through assignments and assessments. My students come to know that the concept of critical thinking can be traced from the early writings of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. In other words, the concept of critical thinking is not a novel idea, and there are many schools of modern-day thought. However, my stance on critical thinking aligns with the educational school of thought. From this stance, I always begin by providing my students with materials to tap into their prior knowledge of Bloom's (1956) Cognitive Taxonomy they received in their undergraduate teacher education programs before I introduce the revised Bloom Cognitive Taxonomy (Anderson et al., 2001) that serves as the framework for critical thinking in the course (see Table 1). Through direct instruction, I focus their attention on Levels 4, 5, and 6 of the revised taxonomy, which includes analyzing, evaluating, and creating and the associated learning objectives for each stage. I have found many of my students are unfamiliar with the reorganization of the stages of cognition in the revised taxonomy and the learning objectives in each stage changed from nouns to verbs. According to Anderson and colleagues (2001), the rationale for this change is that cognition is a dynamic process; the thinking process requires action (Table 1).

Table 1: Bloom's Original and Revised Cognitive Taxonomy

Cognition Level	Original Cognitive Taxonomy	Revised Cognitive Taxonomy
Level 1 Cognition	Knowledge	Remember
Level 2 Cognition	Comprehension	Understand
Level 3 Cognition	Application	Apply
Level 4 Cognition	Analysis	*Analyze
Level 5 Cognition	Synthesis	*Evaluate
Level 6 Cognition	Evaluation	*Create

Note. *Denotes the stages of critical thinking applied in the course.

Open Mind Portrait

One of the units I teach in the course focuses on making meaning through art and graphic representations. Specifically, my students create visual representations to fully understand the various dimensions of responding to literature visually. While there is a paucity of research that has been conducted on this line of inquiry, I draw upon the few evidenced-based practices when designing my teaching and learning instruction. For example, the use of visual art projects has been shown to aid in the construction of meaning (Constantino, 2007; Gullat, 2008) and increase critical thinking (Appel, 2006; Yenawine, 2013). Additionally, research has found that incorporating visual art projects increases creative problem-solving (Diaz-Lefebvre, 2006; Marshall, 2008). Vacca et al. (2016) explicated that art-making activities can be used in content area reading to promote critical thinking. Critical thinking is promoted as students reflect on their art projects through small group discussions or short writing activities to delineate their analytical reasoning when creating visual art projects in response to their reading.

To begin, I introduce my students to the "Open Mind Portrait" (Tompkins & Hoskisson, 1991) to build the foundation for the assignment objective, and I further introduce the rubric by which their portraits will be assessed (Figure 1). It is important for my students to understand that the response strategy is a method that allows them to visually analyze characters in a story and reflect on their interpretation of the character. This method allows my students to apply their analytical reasoning and critical thinking skills by taking a critical stance as they must consider multiple viewpoints and re-symbolize the unfamiliar worlds in texts into understandable worlds through their own lived experiences. As a result, emphasis is placed on the rubric's criteria: colors, symbols, quotes, and the critical thinking skills applied to represent the character and less on artistic ability. Additionally, I share portrait examples from my former students to reinforce their understanding of the assignment (Figure 2).

Figure 1: Directions, Materials, and Procedure

Directions

You will produce a visual representation of a character from Persepolis: A story of childhood (Satrapi, 2004) using the "Open Mind Portrait" strategy we have studied and provide a written explanation on your interpretation for the character in the graphic novel. The visual representation must demonstrate the cognitive thinking skills of analyzing, evaluating, and creating from Bloom's Revised Taxonomy (2001). You will post your visual representation on the character you choose to the discussion board.

Materials Needed

1. The Portrait template is provided.
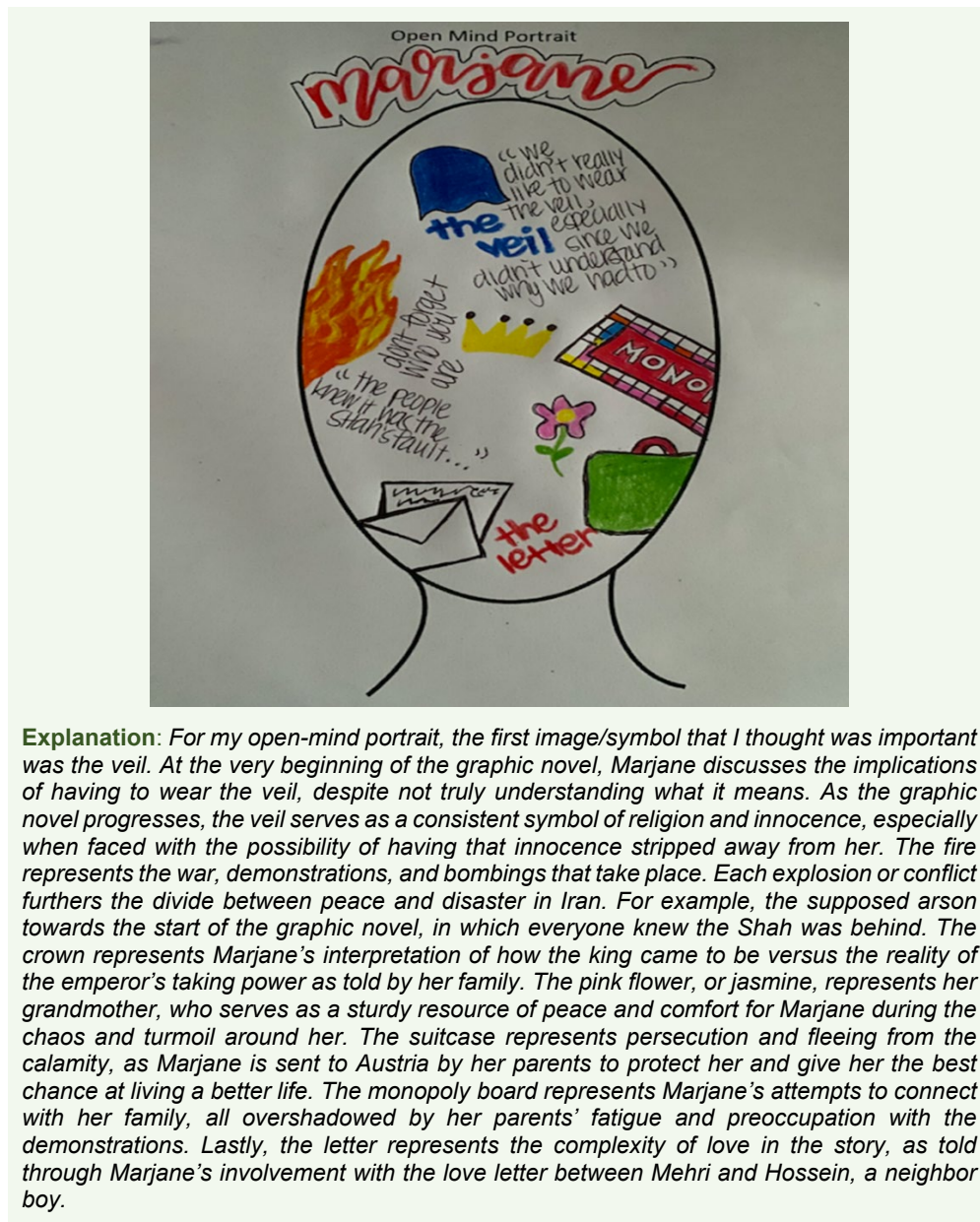2. Markers, crayons, or various art supplies
3. Digital tools

Procedure

1. Utilize the template and rubric provided for the character's head and neck.
2. Draw significant scenes or images from the story that relate to the character portrayed and the character's role in society.
3. Include significant colors, symbols, and quotes that represent the character, and/or thoughts that are from the character's perspective.
4. Include a short paragraph explaining the details of what was represented and why.

Table 2: Rubric for Open Mind Portrait

	Unacceptable 1	Developing 2	Acceptable 3	Target 4	Points
Overall Design: Use of Colors and Symbols to Present a Comprehensive Visual Product; Use of Quotes to Demonstrate Conceptual Understanding of Role and Impact of Character	Overall design is missing more than two required elements: colors and symbols, and quotes do not relate to the role of the character in the story or context.	Overall design is missing one of the required elements: colors, symbols, and quotes demonstrate a literal understanding of role of character in the story or context.	Design demonstrates an acceptable understanding of the character's importance. Acceptable use of color, symbol, and quotes reveal an acceptable understanding of the impact of the character on the story.	Design demonstrates a strong understanding of the importance of the character. Effective use of color, symbols, and quotes reveal a critical understanding of character's impact on the story.	
Cognitive Processes of Analyzing, Evaluating, and Creating	No evidence of higher levels of thinking in portrait or discussion	Less than two required higher levels of thinking are demonstrated in visual character representation and discussion.	Two of the three required higher levels of thinking are evident in visual character representation and discussion.	All three required higher levels of thinking are evident in visual character representation and discussion.	
Score					/ 8

Figure 2: Student Example

Explanation: *For my open-mind portrait, the first image/symbol that I thought was important was the veil. At the very beginning of the graphic novel, Marjane discusses the implications of having to wear the veil, despite not truly understanding what it means. As the graphic novel progresses, the veil serves as a consistent symbol of religion and innocence, especially when faced with the possibility of having that innocence stripped away from her. The fire represents the war, demonstrations, and bombings that take place. Each explosion or conflict furthers the divide between peace and disaster in Iran. For example, the supposed arson towards the start of the graphic novel, in which everyone knew the Shah was behind. The crown represents Marjane's interpretation of how the king came to be versus the reality of the emperor's taking power as told by her family. The pink flower, or jasmine, represents her grandmother, who serves as a sturdy resource of peace and comfort for Marjane during the chaos and turmoil around her. The suitcase represents persecution and fleeing from the calamity, as Marjane is sent to Austria by her parents to protect her and give her the best chance at living a better life. The monopoly board represents Marjane's attempts to connect with her family, all overshadowed by her parents' fatigue and preoccupation with the demonstrations. Lastly, the letter represents the complexity of love in the story, as told through Marjane's involvement with the love letter between Mehri and Hossein, a neighbor boy.*

Final Thoughts

When middle and secondary reading teachers permit their students to substantiate their interpretations of characters in a text and the impact of the characters' roles using visual art projects, they engage their students in an innovative and creative response strategy to literature. Moreover, they afford their students the opportunity to enhance their critical thinking skills; skills that are needed in all disciplines and for future careers. Strategies such as the "Open Mind Portrait" featured in this Teaching Tip allow students the opportunity to participate in critical discourse and examine their own implicit beliefs regarding the historical, political, sociocultural, and economic forces that have shaped their own lives. Comments from students support the usefulness of the strategy:

- I implemented the Open Mind Portrait for the first time with my 7th graders when we completed our reading of Monster. This was the first time my students were actively engaged in their ability to analyze the characters of their choice and had fun to doing it.

- The Open Mind Portrait was a new response strategy to me, but I will use the strategy again and I have shared the strategy with my teammates. It was[a] great strategy to enhance my students' critical thinking and creativity.

On a final note, the "Open Mind Portrait" is but one example for students to create visual representations when responding to literature visually. I have found that photography offers an additional medium that can used to assess higher levels of reading comprehension and critical thinking. Not only does photography offer an alternative for a visual art project, but I have also found photography aligns with my students' comfort zone due to the prevalence of today's cell phones with high-powered digital cameras.

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