



Teaching For Success®

Quick Answers

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Q: My Students Seem Bored; What Can I Do?

A: How Art in English Class Sparked Learning

by Muriel Ryan

Enthusiastic chatter fills the room as materials are distributed. Students hunt for favorite colors and lay their tools before them. This picture seems very atypical for a classroom of freshman English students.

These students taking English 031 and 032 have fallen under the reading comprehension standard set for incoming freshmen. These are my students. Their academic histories vary. Some did reasonably well in school, but it required many hours of studying to overcome a difficulty in remembering what they read. Some can read and pronounce each word, but find it a challenge to glean the meaning from the text. A few found high school a never ending frustration with few occasions to ever feel successful.

My job is to increase their skill and confidence when reading new material, increase their comprehension by developing their study habits and challenge them to become more analytical readers.

Probably the most formidable part of this teaching is helping them to integrate all the skills taught in this class. Much of the time is spent learning new vocabulary, practicing study skills related to annotation and completing rather dull comprehension drills.

Therefore, I find visualization learning activities lifts their spirits and confidence as they do something creative and fun. So I bring on the markers and the construction paper and put a bit of color and punch into the classroom.

In this learning mode, students are expected to demonstrate their learning by completing a visual project to demonstrate their level of understanding. When they express abstract concepts in concrete terms, their creations are a good indicator of their comprehension level. Art allows them to process the information given in lecture and practice in a new mode. By the use of color and their imagination, they can express learned English concepts in their own constructs.

Using this method, the products will be as varied as the individual students. Employing visual methods the students are instructed to communicate concepts to each other using the skills used by good readers.

For example, one drew a car engine and labeled the parts that drive the reader. The spark plugs were labeled vocabulary indicating the importance of knowing words and their meaning.

The pistons represented the author's organizational methods that generate the power behind the way the author selects words and places them in a specific order to logically present ideas. Another student organized reading skills on neat book shelves. Each shelf had a different resource for the student to use in understanding challenging texts. Another student took the same information and placed each resource on the pedals of a daisy with the center labeled "Critical Reader."

Another advantage to this method is that it requires students to review previously presented material. This allows practice to be stimulating and not as rote. It also sets a stage for the natural transference to a more sophisticated method of imagining facts and concepts in alternative forms.

For example, this can naturally lead to the use of Venn diagrams that show the relationships of characters in a narrative or the supporting details of a main idea. Flow charts become a logical outgrowth of this technique. Lastly, this method clarifies and increases the visual images used in learning thereby aiding students who are visual learners to be successful. This activity is a sensible complement to the often used lecture which favors students who are strong auditory learners.

By encouraging students to see, create, select and organize images, it places information in a familiar and comfortable context. As an instructional method, it's amazing how colored markers and paper can combine to create a successful alternative learning mode.

When seeking student feedback on my courses as a whole, the markers and construction paper activities is often cited. These sessions are perceived as memorable, fun and interesting. Each student looks forward to doing it again and again.