



Robert Gwathmey, *From Out of the South*. 1941. Smart Museum of Art

Newspaper Theater: Engaging Art in the Classroom

A lesson plan developed by John Harness for the Smart Museum of Art



Overview

This lesson plan draws upon Augusto Boal's "Theatre of the Oppressed," particularly the practice of "newspaper theater." Students will create their own newspaper theater in the classroom and explore themes of social justice and art as activism.

This lesson plan may be easily adapted to many age groups, especially fifth grade and older. The activities are of variable length.

This lesson features two artworks from the Smart Museum's collection: Robert Arneson's sculpture *Hawk* and Robert Gwathmey's painting *From Out of the South*.

Objectives

Students will be able to identify major themes in a work of art. Based on those themes, students will create their own theatrical performance that demonstrates self-guided inquiry and discovery.

The two art pieces used in this lesson plan have been chosen with the intent that they will prompt the students to explore issues of social justice. Likewise, the use of newspaper theater is intended to model one way that students will be able to use art to provoke change in society.

Materials Needed

- Artworks or images of artworks for discussion
- Newspaper articles, diary entries, etc., associated with a particular topic
- Pencils or colored pencils for sketching
- Optional: Projector, microphone, speakers

Vocabulary

Compare and contrast, juxtaposition, irony, main idea or subject, Augusto Boal, Theatre of the Oppressed, newspaper theater, performance, audience, war, struggle, the Vietnam War, anti-war, protest, the South, reconstruction, segregation, race, violence, etc.

Objects from the Smart's collection used in this lesson



Robert Arneson

American, 1930-1992

Hawk

Created in 1985

Glazed hand-built stoneware, 86 x 26 x 22 in.

Gift of the Joel and Carole Bernstein Family Collection
in honor of Jay Roshal

Accession Number: 1996.56a-b

Robert Arneson (1930 – 1992) crafted sculptures that emphasized absurdity. As one of the founders of “Funk Art,” Arneson abandoned the functional forms most admired by ceramicists and instead began using everyday objects to create his art. Arneson was known for his sculpted portraits, which often featured political figures or silly self-portraits.



Robert Gwathmey

American, 1903-1988

From Out of the South

Created in 1941

Oil on canvas, Unframed: 39 1/2 x 60 in.

Framed: 47 x 67 x 4-1/4 in.

The Mary and Earle Ludgin Collection

Accession Number: 1985.107

Robert Gwathmey (1903 – 1988) painted scenes of the American South that highlighted oppressive social stratification between wealthy whites and poor Black workers. Instead of creating entirely abstract paintings like most other painters were doing at the time, Gwathmey created “social realist” images of people and places that he saw in the South and hoped that his art would foster racial justice in society.

Prepare in Advance

If possible, make a visit to the Smart Museum of Art with your students. A docent-guided tour at the Smart will prepare students to engage deeply with works of art through inquiry-based learning.

The Smart Museum actively collects works by artists who use socially engaged art to address the pressing issues of their time. There are a number of works in the Museum's collection in addition to *Hawk* and *From Out of the South* that could be used as a basis for this lesson. To explore the works in the Smart Museum's collection, visit the Museum's Collections page at <http://smartcollection.uchicago.edu/>.

Teachers may decide to collect images and texts related to the lesson's topic in advance, or to have students find relevant images and texts as homework. If the teacher selects texts in advance, the students should be given the chance to pick particular texts of interest to them from that larger selection.

Depending on class size, students may be split into groups to create several newspaper theater productions. Each of these groups might choose a different topic for their performance.

Day 1

Warm-up Activities

Have students look at *Hawk* or *From Out of the South* for just one minute, then remove the image from view. Discuss what students noticed about the artwork. Ask what they think the "main idea" or "subject" of the artwork is. Have students sketch what they remember of the artwork, giving no more than a couple of minutes for sketching. Now reveal the image again and have students compare their sketch to the original. What did they remember? What did they forget? What details do they see now that they have more time to look? Do these details change anything about their interpretation of the artwork?

(This activity is meant to introduce students to the artwork as well as to encourage close looking and reflection.)

Main Activity (Introduction, Discussion)

Briefly introduce students to the work of Augusto Boal (bow-AHL) and the Theatre of the Oppressed. Boal, a Brazilian theater director and writer, developed Theatre of the Oppressed as a form of radical education that emphasizes the active participation of the

“audience” in the creation of a theater performance. Newspaper theater is a style of Theatre of the Oppressed where different pieces of writing or images are read aloud in interesting combinations (as if they were assorted clippings from a newspaper).

Explain to the students that they will be performing their own newspaper theater. Their first task will be to choose images and texts relating to a particular topic. As a group, discuss the artwork and choose a topic related to it. For *Hawk*, a relevant topic might be war, struggle, soldiers, the Vietnam War, anti-war protests, etc. For *From Out of the South*, a relevant topic might be the South, Reconstruction, segregation, race, violence, etc.

Using the artwork and the chosen topic as a guide, students will collect (either from a pre-prepared selection or as a homework assignment) texts and images that will become the text of the newspaper theatre performance. It is important to let the students choose the particular texts and images that will be used for the performance because this encourages student agency and ownership of the project.

Day 2

Warm-up Activities

Remind the students of Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed and newspaper theatre. Look again at the artwork from Day 1 and review the earlier discussion. Ask the students if they have anything new to say about the artwork now that they are looking at it a second time.

Have the students stand and pose as a person depicted in the artwork. How does standing in this way make them feel? Repeat this exercise posing as a different person from the artwork. How does this new pose make them feel? Do the poses remind them of anyone from their own lives or from a story they know? Encourage students to create small scenes (tableaus or vignettes) with poses from the artwork. Discuss.

For artworks like *Hawk* that depict only one person, experiment with the students by focusing on facial features. What emotions do they think those features represent? Can they recreate those emotions with their entire bodies, or with a movement?

Discuss how “acting out” the artwork changes their interpretation of it.

(This activity is meant to activate students’ kinesthetic learning abilities as well as to get them more comfortable with performance.)

Main Activity (Preparation)

Have students read through their selected texts several times.

Prompt students to discuss how they will use the texts and images that they have collected in their newspaper theater performance. Explain that they might read each piece in sequence, or read pieces in alternating sections, or read pieces so that they overlap one another. Have students decide how they will incorporate the images they have collected into their performance: they might project the images on the wall as a background, for example, or decide to hold up posters of the images while they read. It is up to them!

Let the students use this time to develop and plan their performance. Allow them to experiment, but establish the expectation that they should have a plan for their final performance before the time set aside for this activity is over.

Day 3

Warm-up Activities

Instruct the students in how to warm up their vocal chords by repeating nonsense syllables, over-pronouncing the alphabet, or saying tongue twisters. Have students practice sharing their selected texts and images with partners. Emphasize performance skills like enunciation, projection, and pacing. Have the class (or each group) review their plan for the performance. Arrange the classroom as needed for the performance. A circle of chairs is recommended.

Main Activity (Performance)

Students present their newspaper theater performance. By this point, the students are in charge. Allow for improvisation and mishaps!

Wrap Up / Cool Down

After the performance, encourage students to reflect quietly for a moment, perhaps by journaling. Then, prompt the class to discuss their experience of being both an audience member and an actor in their performance. What did they expect before the performance? What differed from their expectations?

Discuss with the class what they gained from this experience of newspaper theater. Have they learned anything new about the chosen topic? What did they learn as they prepared for the performance? How is acting out a performance different than or similar to learning by reading and writing?

Lastly, look again at *Hawk* or *From Out of the South*. What do students think about this artwork after their newspaper theater performance?