



Art in the Park

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One of the great joys I get from teaching is in collaborating with the Science and Humanities teachers at my school. I don't pretend to be an expert in many things, including Junior High Science and Humanities Curriculums, but I have noticed through the years that students learn



better when they make cross-curricular connections. These multi-disciplinary lessons teach them that art is in the world all around them.

One of our favorite lessons to do with the kids was inspired by a project I did in graduate school. We had to paint a bird on foam core and then take it around the city and photograph it in unusual situations. I made a pack of 4 tourist penguins and found it to be extremely engaging both for me and for everyone I met while carting around four large foam core penguins.

This project could be done with any age group, any animal, but birds are especially magical in this project- I have two variations.

The fourth graders work with their classroom teacher on a basic North American animal, studying the specifics of their lives. They research

size, texture, color, reproduction, diet, habitat, predators, prey, etc. They also find as many photo references as possible. If they cannot find them, the teacher provides me with a list of the animals and I get pictures from the internet.

In art class, students begin by doing small, observational drawings of their animal. They are then each given a large piece of cardboard (about 36"x24") and recreate their animal on a large scale. This is complemented by a basic gridding lesson, where students make a four box grid over their small drawing and a large four box grid on their cardboard and enlarge their drawing in this fashion if they are so inclined. Many students prefer to do a large free drawing of their animal, which of course is fine. Gridding works well for kids who have a hard time going larger with their drawing.



I cut the animals out with a box cutter, which is less time consuming than you may think and you can often get the classroom or science teacher to help with this. We then take a field trip to Central Park, to an area that has a variety of natural habitats where we can 'install' our animals for photography. Near the entrance of 5th Ave and 59th Street is especially good for us because there is a lake, large rock formations, a variety of tree life, and some rolling, grassy hills. During the field trip, the classroom teacher *always* has some kind of science-based activity that he/she does with the parent chaperones and the majority of the kids. This way, I can take about four kids at a

time, kids whose animals live in similar habitats, and set them up properly without worrying about the rest of the class.

When the students get their photos back, they become part of a report and sometime creative writing piece about their animal. Painting the animals reinforces the facts of the animals' physicality, and finding and installing each animal's natural habitats does the same for making the environment of each animal much more memorable. The 8th grade version of this project is similar but surrounds a lesson on the Westward Expansion. Again, students choose a North American animal, but this time the final collaborative product is a journal the students build surrounding the life of a pioneer moving west.



With the 8th grade, more attention is paid to formal painting techniques. Painting one large-scale animal is a great way for kids to practice scale, texture, volume, highlight, shadow, color, and form. All of this is very simple because students are mostly working with a limited palette and not worrying about composition. They are able to focus just on painting one subject well, while paying careful attention to detail.

The field trip is basically run the same way as it is with the fourth grade, obviously with a different complementary science activity. This project is equal parts Art, Humanities, and Science. When the 8th graders get their photos back, they get two copies: one black and white print to be put in their journal (printed on cheap paper), and another nicer color

print for display. The journals include a detailed observation of the animal, as if the pioneer is seeing it for the first time, drawings of the lunar phases, drawings of constellations appropriate to the time of year and location, personal entries about life and hardships the pioneers endured, etc. Students create the journals to look old- coffee stained paper, burned edges, weathered covers, etc. Finally, they present their projects, animals and journal entries on display to the 4th and 5th grade classes in the school. All of the presenting and displaying that goes on with this project helps to get upcoming students excited about what they will create when it is their turn.



Overall it is a really fun project. We get our kids out into the park, exploring the natural habitats that surround them. It is also wonderful to read their creative writing entries in the pioneer journals about their animals, the relationships they've formed with them, worries they have about their predators and environment, etc. They are challenged across the curriculum, and their evaluation depends on a strong performance in each of the three subjects. But the connection to the subject matter



(especially their animal) becomes so special to them that everyone enjoys this project and finds it extremely memorable, from the younger students waiting for their turn to the subway riders who delight in watching our kids proudly take their animals to the park during the morning rush hour.