

Thinking Tools for Innovators: Part 8— Understanding Through Empathy

Recent research has shown that we can build innovative thinkers by reinforcing a set of thinking tools, including such skills as observing, abstracting, pattern recognition, modeling, and transforming (among others). As these skills can all be taught, it makes sense that we can help students become the creative thinkers that we will need in the twenty-first century. This lesson plan is the eighth in a series that is focused on using art to enrich instruction in these critical skills. The research on which this information is based can be found in many sources, perhaps best summarized in the book *Sparks of Genius: The Thirteen Thinking Tools of the World's Most Creative People* by Robert and Michele Root-Bernstein.

Curricular Areas

English Language Arts, Visual Arts – Aesthetic Response

Grade Level

For grades 7–9, adaptable for both younger and older classes

Common Core Academic Standards

- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.7.1](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.7.3](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.6.7](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-Speaking and Listening.CCRA.SL.4](#)

Art Images Required

Click on the titles below to view high-resolution photographs on the Philadelphia Museum of Art website. Images that are also available in the Artstor Digital Library are indicated by an ID number or search phrase.

- [Morning Light, Interior](#), 1923, by Daniel Garber
Artstor search: not available
- [At the Moulin Rouge: The Dance](#), 1890, by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec
Artstor search: 1986-26-32
- [Four Children in a Courtyard](#), 1795, by Jeremiah Paul
Not available on Artstor
- [Half-Past Three \(The Poet\)](#), 1911, by Marc Chagall
Artstor search: 1950-134-36



Four Children in a Courtyard
Jeremiah Paul, American
1795
Gift of the McNeil Americana Collection, 2007
2007-15-1

- *A Huntsman and Dogs*, 1891, by Winslow Homer
Artstor search: E1924-3-8
- *Scholar-Official in His Study*, 1750–1850 (Qing Dynasty, 1644–1911), artist unknown, China
Artstor search: 1929-40-188
- *A May Morning in the Park (The Fairman Rogers Four-in-Hand)*, 1879–80, by Thomas Eakins
Artstor search: 1930-105-1

Background

Dustin Hoffman once said that acting is not acting, it is becoming. He meant that, to portray a role effectively, an actor must do more than imitate another person. The actor must, in a sense, become that person. Similarly, the poet William Carlos Williams, who was also a working physician, noted that “I lost myself in my patients’ minds. For the moment, I became them.” This sort of empathic response is widely regarded as an essential trait of truly gifted doctors. Empathy is, in fact, much more than a social nicety. Empathy allows us to enter the mind of someone else and perceive the world through his or her eyes. In fact, the best professionals in every field of art and science see empathy as an essential tool, allowing a kind of deep understanding not attainable in any other way. Temple Grandin, a scientist and innovator who struggles daily with autism, states that she can even empathize with animals. She has worked to develop humane methods for treating animals, even those on their way to slaughter. “When I put myself in a cow’s place,” she notes, “I really have to be that cow. I place myself inside its body to imagine what it experiences.”

This lesson is designed to reinforce empathy in students, and should allow them to see its role in a successful and innovative outlook or career.

Lesson Process

1. Display the painting *Morning Light, Interior* by Daniel Garber. Have students look quietly for a minute, then ask them what they see. Look for a physical description of the girl and her surroundings. Then pose the question: What might this girl be thinking and feeling? What is she looking forward to? What has happened on this day, or the day before? Write down some of the class responses. Draw out the responses further with probing questions such as, “Why do you think she is thinking that?” or “What has happened to cause her to think those thoughts?” Is this girl happy or sad? What other emotions could describe her?
2. Now display the painting *At the Moulin Rouge: The Dance* by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. There are many people in this painting, so it would be best to focus on those we can see more clearly. Begin by moving from person to person. As you point to one person, have students respond with a one- or two-word emotional description (i.e., woman in pink: curious or aloof). Then each student should select one person in the painting and write a paragraph describing how that person feels as he/she watches or is part of this “dance rehearsal.” As you discuss student responses, point out words or phrases that show an emotional connection between the writer and the person in the painting.
3. Display the painting *Four Children in a Courtyard* by Jeremiah Paul. Discuss the setting and details of the surroundings in this painting. Have students select one of the four children, and allow some time to “get into the mind” of the child each has chosen. Each student writes from the point of view of his/her chosen child, telling what he or she is thinking and feeling. Call on a volunteer for each child in the painting to come to the front of the classroom and assume the poses of the children. Have each speak what they have written from the child’s viewpoint. If possible, have them interact with each

other while “in character.” Discuss: What did we learn about the children in the painting? What do we learn about ourselves as we try to empathize with others?

4. We can also practice empathy when the images are not as realistic, using other context clues to “get into the head” of someone in a painting. Display Marc Chagall’s *Half-Past Three (The Poet)*. Discuss: How can we approach the skill of empathy with someone portrayed so abstractly? Where do we begin? (Possible responses: The tilt of the head, the bottle, the notepad.) What can these things reveal about the emotional state of the person in the painting? If this is a poet, what might be the subject of the poem he is writing? Chagall has included a cat. What does the cat reveal about the poet? Do our pets ever reveal aspects of our emotional states?
5. Can we also use empathy to understand how other animals feel? Display the painting *Huntsman and Dogs* by Winslow Homer. Ask students to become the dogs. What are they feeling? Avoid the temptation to anthropomorphize the dogs—i.e. to respond as if they were people; that is not really empathy—it is more like projecting our feelings onto other animals. How does a dog feel excitement and heightened energy? How is a dog’s response to these emotions different from a person’s?

Assessment

1. Display the painting *Scholar–Official in His Study* (artist unknown). After studying the scholar’s surroundings and the objects he chooses to display in the painting, write from the point of view of the scholar. In your narrative, written in the first person, respond to the following: What is he thinking and feeling? What would he like to tell others about his view on life? What advice does he offer to us?
2. Select an image of your own choosing. Display this image for the class and enter the mind of someone (or something) in that image. Speak to the class from the point of view of that person (or thing).
3. For a more creative assessment, have students write their version of the poem being crafted by Chagall’s poet. Their poem should have an emotional tone, which the student should be able to connect to the emotional mood of the poet. (This is a good chance to see the subtle difference between tone and mood.)

Enrichment

1. Display the image *A May Morning in the Park (The Fairman Rogers Four-in-Hand)* by Thomas Eakins. Tell what is happening from the point of view of one of the horses. Again, avoid treating the horse as if he were a person. The purpose is to understand what it is to be a horse—and more specifically, one of these horses.
2. The Harvard Graduate School of Education has compiled a selection of “thinking routines” to help student examine diverse topics, including the visual arts. These are found at the [Artful Thinking](https://www.artfulthinking.com/) website. One of the routines, called “Perceive, Know, Care About,” offers another way to practice empathy in the visual arts. A small group of students may want to review this teaching idea and create a lesson for the class—reinforcing empathy using the Artful Thinking process.