Tributes Beyond Words: Art Educators' Use of Textiles

to Memorialize the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire.

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> I remember on that day there was a lot of singing and happiness in the shop because it was the end of the week and we got paid. We were soon all going to go home. When the fire started I was sitting at my machine. I looked up and saw the fire near the cutting tables but I did not think it was so terrible. What was terrible was that the fire spread in a split second. The one thing that I thought was that I have to run to the door...all the others were screaming around me. I could not say a word. When I got into the street I kept crying for my sister. Even then I could not understand everything that was happening but on the 8th floor I saw death staring me in the face.
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> *Celia Saltz Pollack, Survivor, The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire.*

Introduction

Celia's experience in March of 1911 is haunting. She seems to know that describing the experience is necessary, as is public testimony as a witness to the harsh labor conditions that faced too many newly arrived individuals in this country—at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, largely young women from Russia and Italy—who were seeking a better life and greater equity on the shores of America. Yet, in the end, words may be a limited commodity.

It may be surprising that we, as reading professors in a School of Education at a state university that graduates more teachers than any other school in our state, questioned the impact of a narrative available only through print. What does it mean to "see death" and yet not "understand"? We also wondered who might hear Celia's story, and the countless other stories like hers, immortalized in Walt Whitman's poem, "I Hear America Singing" (1867). Would all the mechanics, carpenters, masons and seamstresses who helped build America be written off as one of the "plenty of lives less valuable"? (as cited in Boltz, 2014).

To preserve their history, and our own as a nation, we looked to the arts. Our students seeking K-12 teaching teacher certification in art helped us realize that the world *shown* is very different, and often more compelling, than the world *told* (Kress, 2003). We are not alone in our beliefs; in fact the National Coalition for Core Arts Standards notes in their Theoretical Framework that: "The arts have always served as the distinctive vehicle for discovering who we are. Providing ways of thinking as disciplined as science or math, and as disparate as philosophy or literature, the arts are used by, and have shaped every culture on earth" (p.2). This article

explores the journey of our art education students in using their skills and passions to develop a deeper, more nuanced story through art, than could be accomplished by words alone.

Art Educators: Infusing the Common Core & National Core Art Standards

Pre-Service Art Education majors are an eclectic group. We should know, since they are among the teacher candidates required to take a state mandated course in content area literacy. Many students do not look forward to this mandatory class and perceive it to be a waste of their time and money, as they are convinced upon entering our classroom that there is no intersection between art and reading. We have spent our academic careers (Mercurio, 1999, 2006, 2009; Randall & Mercurio, 2015) helping to convince future teachers that all subjects, including art, are well-served by broader definitions of literacy that encompass discipline-specific ways of knowing and the connections fostered by use of diverse media.

In fact, the Common Core Standards for English Language Arts advises that: "Literacy standards for grades 6 and above are predicated on teachers of ELA, history/social studies, science, and technical subjects using their content area expertise to help students meet particular challenges of reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language in their respective fields" (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010a). The term "technical subjects" includes the arts, and it is defined by the standards as: "[a] course devoted to practical study; a technical aspect of a wider field of study, such as art or music" (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010b).

In *Guiding Principles for the Arts: Grades K-12*, one of the Common Core authors applied ELA goals and themes to arts-based learning. One recommendation was for art teachers and students to engage in deep, sustained study of a limited number of works of art (paralleling the ELA Standards of studying fewer texts in greater depth) and to utilize the arts as powerful tools to develop and refine skills of observation and interpretation as a cornerstone of the Common Core (Coleman, 2011). Art advocates agreed with this recommendation and emphasized the idea that visual literacy is a component of overall literacy. Responding thoughtfully and critically to a painting, film, or performance hones the same skills of analysis and interpretation that are strengthened by the close reading of a text (Zuckerman, 2012; Munson, 2012). Additionally, the National Core Arts Anchor Standards recognized this as noted in *Standard 10: Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art,* and *Standard 11: Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural and historical context to deepen understanding* (NCAS, 2014). These are just some of the reasons why we have long recognized that art classrooms, art-inspired lessons in other content area classrooms, and making art in and out of school (called the "act of arting" by Eisner, 1972) continue to engage learners as well as combat the possibility that students view their education with "disgust…aversion…and [as] an apprenticeship to dullness" (Mann, 1844, p.198).

The Intersection of Art, Content Area Literacy, and Interdisciplinary Instruction

Content area literacy is defined as the ability to decode and comprehend expository texts in math, science, history, art, foreign language, music, or physical education (Bean, Readence, and Baldwin, 2008; Swafford & Kallus, 2002; Vacca & Vacca, 2007). *Interdisciplinary* is defined as "a knowledge view and curriculum approach that consciously applies methodology and language from more than one discipline to examine a central theme, issue, problem, topic or experience" (Jacobs, 1991, pp. 22-23). *Interdisciplinary instruction* is an important element of

modern educational reform. Its many advocates attest to greater student involvement and interest, improved teacher morale, and increased achievement when put into practice (Fitzharris, 2005; Kerekes, 1987; Martinello & Cook, 1992; Scrubbe, 1990; Willis, 1994). In addition to the growing popularity of interdisciplinary instruction, proponents of constructivism, which is inherent to the arts, strongly advocate for student activities that address real-world issues and problems (Cawelti, 1989; Perkins & Blythe, 1994; Prawat, 1992). Interdisciplinary instruction is most likely to be effective when the following conditions are met (Barab & Landa, 1997; Black, 1997; Brophy & Alleman, 1991; Gatewood, 1998; Vars, 1991; Willis, 1994; Zygouris-Coe, 2015):

- Units are carefully planned around relevant issues or problems that pique student interest;
- Units are anchored by a common theme that crosses all participating disciplines;
- Units allow for the investigation of original "texts" (or genres), products, and artifacts across multiple areas to demonstrate context and relationships;
- Themes are broad enough to encompass each participating discipline without forcing any one discipline away from its curriculum;
- Day-to-day activities and culminating events accommodate a variety of learning styles and ability levels;
- Units involve critical thinking and critical making that facilitate deep learning, exploration, and problem-solving.

Only *Art Education* Pre-Service Teacher Candidates?

In the spring of 2015 we began planning for our summer courses. In previous semesters we always had students from all content area disciplines register for the course. This summer session would be unique in that only art education teacher candidates had registered for the class due to scheduling constraints. To maximize the specialization of this one group while also giving them the experience of interdisciplinary design, we tried to find an event rich in history and memorialized though art that could be used to teach this class, as well as cover the relevant content area material that is usually taught. When designing this course, we always keep the following objectives in mind.

First, we strive to create a learning environment that allows teacher candidates to use their content area expertise and personal talents to design lessons around a common theme. Second, we foster an atmosphere where teacher candidates can be challenged to design lessons in their content area using the reading strategies they learn from the class and implement them in a way that will develop critical thinking skills and promote artistic creativity among their own students. Third, for this homogeneous group of teacher-candidates, we tried to embed a perspective that art classrooms offer a unique contribution to students' total learning, since materials and media "make vivid the fact" (Eisner, 1985, p. 69).

We have a passion for history. Since the creation of the course, we have used historical

events involving some level of mystery as a backdrop in an attempt to peak student interest and to create shared knowledge of something most students would be unfamiliar with. After exploring mysteries such as the sinking of the Titanic, the wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald, and the Hartford Connecticut Circus fire, to name a few, we found our next inspiration while presenting at a conference in New York City.

The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire: What Happened to Whom and Why

On March 25, 1911, in New York City, the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory caused the deaths of 146 garment workers, 123 women and 23 men, many of whom died from the flames, smoke inhalation, or jumping or falling to their deaths, making it the deadliest industrial disaster in the city's history, and one of the deadliest in the history of the United States. Most of the victims were Italian and Jewish immigrants new to the country (Boccella, 2013; Brill, 2011; Markel, 2013; Schaefer, 2004).

The factory, located in the Asch Building at 23-29 Washington Place in Greenwich Village, occupied the eighth, ninth, and tenth floors of the 10-story building. Owned by Max Blanck and Issac Harris, the factory produced popularly styled women's blouses known as "shirtwaists." At the time of the fire, the factory employed about 500 employees, most young immigrant women, who worked nine hours shifts on weekdays and seven hour shifts on Saturdays, earning between $7-$12 dollars for a 52 hour work week (Boccella, 2013; Brill, 2011; Markel, 2013; Schaefer, 2004).

As the close of the workday neared on Saturday March 25, 1911, a fire broke out around 4:00 pm in a scrap bin under one of the cutter's tables on the eighth floor. It was determined later that the likely cause of the fire was the disposal of an unextinguished match or cigarette into the scrap bin, which at the time held over two months worth of accumulated cuttings. Beneath the table in the wooden bin were hundreds of pounds of scraps that were left over from the several thousand shirtwaists that had been cut at that table alone (Boccella, 2013; Brill, 2011; Markel, 2013; Schaefer, 2004).

Employees on the ninth and tenth floors had warning of the fire, but there was no way to contact the staff on the eighth floor. Although there were a number of exits, including two freight elevators, a fire escape, and stairways down to street level, the flames quickly prevented the workers from descending one of the stairways, and the door to another stairway had been locked to prevent theft by the workers, as the managers would check the employees' purses before they left each day. Some employees were able to use one of the stairways or to leave by elevator while they were still operational. After the only open stairway became engulfed in flames, many employees rushed to the fire escape. The fire escape was a flimsy iron structure that was poorly anchored to the building. It soon twisted and collapsed from the strain, causing 20 people to fall 100 feet to their deaths on the concrete pavement below (Boccella, 2013; Brill, 2011; Markel, 2013; Schaefer, 2004).

Once firefighters arrived, they realized that their ladders could only extend as high as the sixth or seventh floor. With all evacuation routes sealed, 62 workers jumped or fell to their deaths. The remaining perished from the smoke and flames within the building. The bodies of the victims were taken to Charities Pier for identification. Six victims remained unidentified until 2011. They were buried together beneath a monument to the tragedy featuring a woman kneeling. In February 2011, the six unknown victims were finally identified using modern DNA analysis and forensic science. The aftermath of the fire, the investigation and trial of the factory

owners led to reform legislation requiring improved factory safety standards, and helped create the ILGWU (Ladies' Garment Workers' Union), which fought for better working conditions for sweatshop workers (Boccella, 2013; Brill, 2011; Markel, 2013; Schaefer, 2004).

Shirtwaists, Strategies and Students

As we poured through volumes of material on The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire, the photos, primary documents and news clips began to flood us with ideas. One website in particular intrigued us. The website, http://rememberthetrianglefire.org/ was created by the Remember the Triangle Fire Coalition, an alliance of more than 200 organizations and individuals was formed in 2008 to coordinate nationwide activities to commemorate the centennial of the fire in 2011 and to organize a permanent art memorial to honor the victims of the fire.

In 2012 the Coalition announced a national design competition for the memorial with the following goals: to honor the memory of those who died from the fire; to affirm the dignity of all the workers; to value women's work; to remember the movement for worker safety and social justice stirred by the tragedy; and to inspire future generations of activists. We wondered if we could use the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire as our historical event, teach content area reading strategies, and challenge the art students to create their own understanding of both the event and the literacy strategies through lesson plans that would allow their students to create memorials such as the ones submitted for the contest.

The Factory Doors Open: Class Begins

For most art education students at our university, this is the last class they must take before student teaching. Once the students have taken this course, they have seen the world from a vantage point that is far wider than their subject area. The students who entered the class that first evening had been well trained in their content area by a variety of outstanding art and art education professors at our university, However, we are from a different department, Special Education and Reading, and for many it was the first time they will be in this new world of literacy education.

The art students come to us with a strong understanding of the national standards, benchmarks and theoretical underpinnings of art education. They have also taken art methods courses that have helped them bridge the theories, methods and materials in art, with the strategies for designing and implementing instruction in the classroom. However comprehensive their instruction has been thus far, it has one element missing, which raises a question: What do teachers do for students who may grasp the concepts of art and may be able to express themselves artistically, yet struggle to learn new content area vocabulary and to read grade level material with this vocabulary embedded within it? In other words, how do you teach for literacy while keeping art at the forefront? To address this, we considered what broad art objectives might be especially pertinent to our pre-service art teachers. For example, we believed that art teachers support literacy achievement when they ask students to:

- describe/demonstrate how art simultaneously shapes and represents culture;

- chronicle artistic movements to show how they can define both era and place;
- evaluate perspective, bias, and crafts that signal judgments on tone in a work of art;
- determine the efficacy of form, style, materials, symbols and production in conveying intent, ideas, meaning, or concept;
- articulate how art can build from past traditions while also being characterized as avant-garde.

Such objectives are aligned with traditional reading skills in that they require students to monitor their understanding, use relevant support or evidence for their ideas and interpretation, determine purpose, activate prior knowledge, infer, and synthesize (Zwiers, 2004; Newell & Van Ryzin, 2008; Au, 1998; Cazdin, 2001).

We were particularly sensitive to not privilege a particular approach or strategy as more important than the work itself. Strategic instruction does help students because it is a conduit to bring them into and through any text, no matter how broadly defined that text is (print, image, performance, film, etc.). Yet, our art educators needed to gain experience in determining what interactive class elements were a *best fit* for their own teaching style as well as the materials or texts they were teaching from.

For decades the art department was a haven for many reluctant readers. Within the art classrooms, students could retreat to a world where they worked with their hands and their minds, where they could find a variety of artistic materials, but no words. Safely tucked away from novels, grammar, spelling and poetry, these students could express themselves beyond the confines of the written word. All was safe until the world of standardized testing and accountability came knocking. At first, only the subject area teachers were targeted, leaving the freedom of expression and curriculum to the "special" teachers of art, music, physical education, woodworking, metal shop and home economics. Now, all subjects, no matter how specialized, were tasked with bringing literacy into their classrooms.

A Quick Write to the Garment District: Circa 1911

On the first night of class, we could see by the expressions on the students' faces that they would be a tough crowd to win over, but we were up to the challenge. As they took their seats, an enlarged photograph on the smart board captured their attention and ushered them into the world of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory and their first literacy strategy. Known as a pre-reading, *Quick Write* or *Fast Write* (Readance, Moore & Rickelman, 2001), the premise of the lesson was to use an old photograph as a way to introduce new material or a new unit of study. Using Google images, a teacher finds an image that could begin a unit of study. Students take their seats in the classroom and are instructed by the teacher to view the old photograph.

The particular photograph we used was taken from the inside of the Triangle Shirtwaist factory. It shows the horrendous working conditions of the time period. The image is of men and women seated in high wooden chairs huddled over sewing machines at long tables. We asked the students to complete the Quick Write for two minutes. They were instructed to write everything they could about this unknown picture, looking for details, explaining who they thought was in

the photo, what those people could be doing, where the photo could have been taken, and how old the they thought the photo might be. Spelling and punctuation did not count. The only requirement was to JUST KEEP WRITING (Randall & Mercurio, 2015).

After the two minutes ended, we had the students choose partners and share the information from their Quick-Writes. Once the pair sharing was complete, we began a class discussion around the photo. Using chart paper, we acted as facilitators, noting all of the comments the class generated. Responses such as these were recorded:

"Wow, they look like they are chained there."
"The photo looks really old, maybe the Industrial Revolution."
"There are men at sewing machines."
"They look really miserable."
"I bet they got paid like crap"
"Look what they are wearing—the dresses are to the floor and huge."
"The chairs look really uncomfortable and the tables seem gigantic."
"The sewing machines look like they are coming down from the ceiling."
"The room looks so small and it looks like they are on top of each other."

With the photo in the background, we introduced the students to the course, the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire, the unsafe working conditions of the building, the history behind the event, and the pivotal role the tragedy played in the creation of labor unions and labor laws (Randall & Mercurio, 2015).

Much More than Cotton: Materials to Make Meaning

Students would learn additional information about the fire from the book, *The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire*, by Adam Schaefer. This text, from the Landmark Events in American History series, has a readability level of 7th or 8th grade and provides an excellent overview of the tragedy with primary documents, archival photos, and an extensive bibliography for additional research. Two other books were also used to gather information: From the History Speaks series, *Annie Shapiro and the Clothing Workers' Strike*, by Marlene Targ Brill and *Brave Girl: Clara and the Shirtwaist Strike of 1909*, by Michelle Markel. Although these are picture books, they both convey valuable information and beautiful illustrations that we felt would be excellent additions to the resources, given the ability of picture books to marry art and text.

We also found a Cornell University website[1] about the fire and its aftermath to be invaluable for our research as it contained a variety of photos, charts, and archival data. From this site we learned about the personal stories of many of the employees who, like Rose Hauser, worked at the factory. Moments before the fire broke out at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, Rose Hauser was working on the ninth floor singing the popular song of the day, "Every Little Movement Has a Meaning of Its Own." After the fire she recounted the horror of that day in an interview with Leon Stein. Reading transcripts of interviews from the survivors and using content area strategies like a Plot Diagram to visually organize all the information helped our class to experience a more personal perspective on the event.

A Plot Diagram is an organizational tool focusing on a pyramid or triangular shape, which is used to map the events in a story. This mapping of plot structure allows readers and writers to visualize the key features of stories. It has a basic triangle-shaped plot structure that represents the beginning, middle, and end of a story. This concept can be traced back to Aristotle

1 http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire/

in *Poetics.* Gustav Freytag (1863) modified Aristotle's system by adding a rising action and a falling action to the structure. This version of the graphic organizer supports both Aristotle's and Freytag's conceptualizations of plot structures. Yet, students in our classes were also encouraged to replace the basic triangle shape with an image, such as a burning fire, that could also represent rising and falling action.

Defining and Designing Memorials

The second night of class the students came into the room to see a pile of 146 scraps of white cotton (similar to the material used for the making of the shirtwaists) scattered haphazardly on a table in the center of the room. Once everyone was seated, we asked the class to discuss what the pile of fabric was for, why we had placed it there, and what the symbolism of it could be. Comments such as these were offered:

" Wow, that looks like the fabric the people were sewing to make the blouses."

" Look there are a ton of them—how many do you think there are?"

" Hey, I bet there is one for every person who died."

"That's a cool idea- it's like a memorial."

Next we distributed copies of the document, "The Shirtwaist Blouse," and read it as a class. After our discussion on the blouses and the significance of the scraps of material, we began to explore the concept of memorials through their definitions, purposes, and materials. We examined different types of memorials, focusing specifically on their creation, messages they conveyed, materials used, how and why they were created, and what they represented. The information we gathered was put into a graphic organizer that is commonly used in content area literacy, called a Concept Map. Concept Maps are graphical tools for organizing and representing knowledge. They include concepts, usually enclosed in circles or boxes of some type, and relationships between concepts indicated by a connecting line linking the concepts (Novak & Gowin, 1984).

For additional inspiration, we referred to the January/February 1995 edition of *Art to Zoo* created by the Smithsonian Institution to help educators teach with the power of objects through an interdisciplinary, multicultural approach. Entitled *Memorials: Art for Remembering,* the purpose of the issue was to create classroom ready materials drawing from their exhibitions and programs. Through these materials we learned of the different types of memorials, materials that could be chosen based on durability or function, and the selectivity involved in creating a memorial that emphasizes certain aspects of a person or an event to be memorialized. Here are examples of the memorials that our students designed for the victims of the Shirtwaist Fire (Mercurio, 2016, Private Collection).

After learning about the significance of memorials, we introduced the students to the works of two artists that memorialized the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire and its victims, by using different materials and methods of expression. The first article we read: "*In Art, Recalling a Century-Old Tragedy,"* by David Gonzalez, describes the art of Anthony Giacchino. Each year, to commemorate the anniversary of the fire, Mr. Giacchino would write the names of the victims in chalk on the sidewalks outside the addresses where the victims once lived. For the 100th anniversary of the tragedy, he looked for a better way to visualize the enormity of the lives lost and decided to mail letters to all of the last known addresses of the 146 lost lives. "Inside each envelope was a small message—in case the address still existed and the current occupant opened

the envelope—asking people to reflect on the tragedy, as well as a poem written by Morris Rosenfield days after the fire." By the time the article was published in the *New York Times* on February 14, 2011, 130 letters had already come back, most stamped: "Return to Sender," "Deceased" or "Return—Undeliverable" (Gonzalez, 2011).

The second article, *"From Triangle to Tazreen,"* by Kathy Boccella, introduced the students to Robin Berson, an artist and activist. A resident of New York City, she learned of the with the Remember the Triangle Fire Coalition by making replica shirtwaists as props for commemorative events. After the centennial, Benson and other members of the Coalition began looking for ways to raise awareness and funding to build a permanent memorial on the site of the building, which is now owned by New York University. Taking inspiration from the AIDS Memorial Quilt, she thought it would be fitting to create a quilt in memorial tribute to the Triangle factory workers, since most were working as seamstresses. Benson created a website and database of images from the fire and asked local artists, quilters and fashion students to contribute 12 x 12-inch squares. She also wanted to call attention to the sweatshops still in existence today, such as the one in Bangladesh at Tazeen Fashions that killed 112 workers (Boccella, 2013).

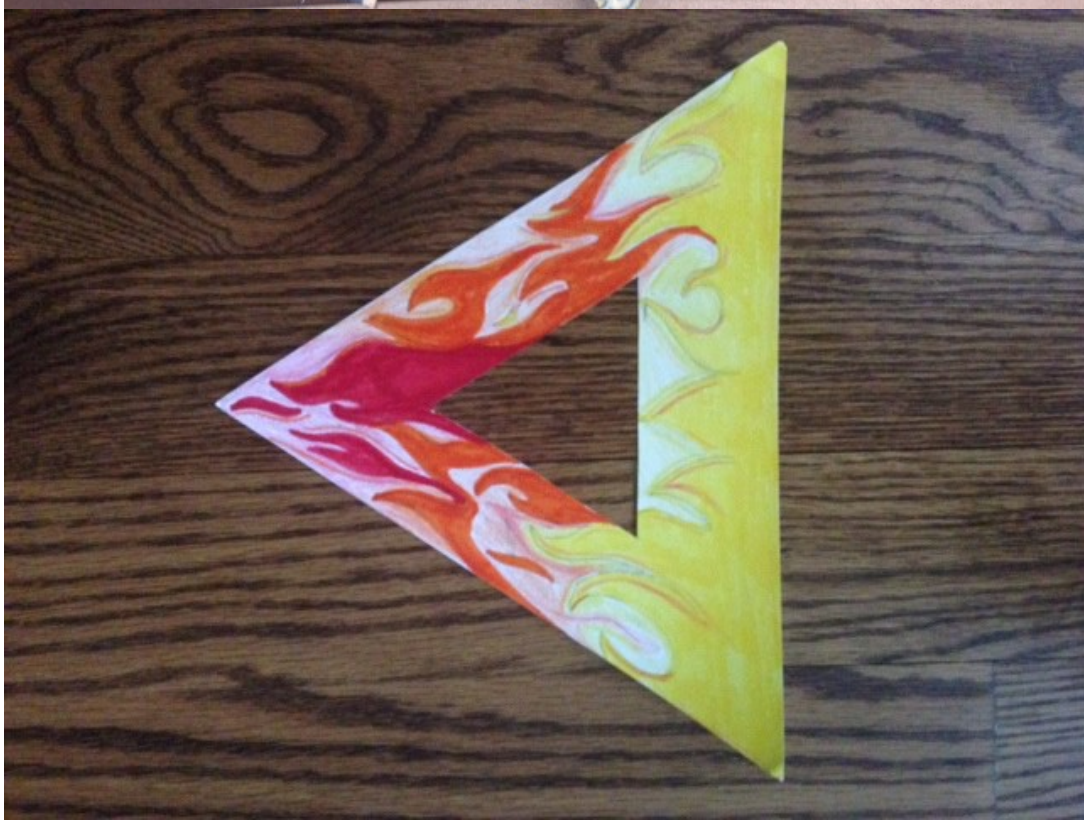
The completed quilt, measuring 10 x 7 feet, consists of a mosaic of faces of the people who died. Benson noted: "I wanted lots of faces and young eyes looking out. I didn't want only images of the fire. I wanted to emphasize what was lost. You just look at these pictures, and it breaks your heart" (Boccella, 2013).

Lesson Plans, Literacy and Legacies: The Art of Teaching Memorials

After eight weeks of learning about memorials, content area reading strategies and the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire, through a variety of materials, the pre-service teachers were ready to design their own lessons blending the worlds of literacy, history and art. On the last night of class we came together to share all that we learned. The classroom was turned into an art gallery, where each student was given wall space and a table to display their work. As we hosted an intimate cocktail party, we celebrated the knowledge we learned, the teaching ideas we created, and remembered the lives lost on March 25, 1911.

The lessons the pre-service teachers designed around the creation of a memorial to the Triangle Fire exceeded our expectations. Each student addressed a variety of national and Connecticut art education content standards they had been taught to use in their art methods courses and combined them with the content area reading strategies they learned in our course. Some of the standards commonly used for this project were:

- Students will produce a piece of art that has historical context (4a-c);
- Students will make connections between visual arts and other disciplines (6a,c);
- Students will produce a design that uses symbols and ideas (3b);
- Students will show how to select and apply media and techniques (1a-c);
- Students will reflect upon, describe, interpret and evaluate their own, and others' work (5a,b,e,f) (http://www.nationalartsstandards.org/).



Reminding and Remembering: NYC Memorials to the Fire

A Stitch in Time Saves Nine

Our goal for these pre-service art teachers was to find a way in which we could teach the students *our* content (literacy strategies) while celebrating *theirs* (art). Although these students were required to take this course for state certification, our goal as professors was to find common ground through a historical event from which all could learn and find motivating. Brophy (2010) explains motivation as the initiation, direction, quality, and persistence of behavior. Donald (1999) sees it as a commitment to learning. We believe that, like the sewing of the shirtwaists, taking the time to develop and design lessons and activities that make the content relevant to our students, will help to motivate their creativity as future teachers. By using the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire as the anchor to explore content area literacy strategies, and the creation of memorials as the catalyst to process artistic meaning, we believe we have found an intersection of personal interest and motivation (Wlodkowski and Ginsberg, 1985; Keller, 1987; MacKinnon, 1999; Frymier, 2002; Brophy, 2010).

At the conclusion of the course, our art students met all the requirements of state certification for content area literacy practice. Along the way, they embraced the theoretical framework of the Common Core and the NCCAS Standards by learning how to make connections between art, history and literacy, which provided them "with a common language with which to describe the cognitive skills" that they address in their subject area and cultivate through "rigorous and meaningful arts experiences" (as cited by Ruppert & Johnson, 2014).

In the future, we hope, that when words are not enough, our students will be able to take the experiences they learned in our class and share similar lesson ideas with their own students.

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