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10-1-2001

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Sanders, Sara, "Seeing the World Anew: Creative Arts in the Honors Curriculum" (2001). *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council --Online Archive*. Paper 90.
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# Seeing the World Anew: Creative Arts in the Honors Curriculum

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*"The real voyage of discovery consists not in finding new lands but in seeing with new eyes."*
—Marcel Proust

In the sixteen-year history of the Honors Program at Coastal Carolina University, some three hundred students have completed the program. We have graduated only two fine arts majors, and we currently have a student who is double majoring in art and marine science. Most of our students are science majors. In order to be invited into the honors program, students have to be excellent in verbal and analytical skills, but research on multiple intelligences (Gardner, *Multiple*) has shown us that those are only two of many ways to make sense of the world. Honors students are usually skilled learners in all the traditional senses; they are likely to be the ones who will invent, discover, and lead. True genius in all these areas comes from seeing what everyone has already seen in a new way. Creative arts can help honors students see what is before them from a new perspective.

In the academy, we are seeing a shift from traditional, objective ways of knowing toward a more personal way of knowing with greater emphasis on the teacher as facilitator of the student's discovery of his/her own knowledge (Barr and Tagg; Palmer). Gardner suggests that feeling is essential in making and appreciating art but is often considered antagonistic to the objective, scientific process (*The Arts* 328). Darwin noted that through time his work as a scientist dulled his ability to respond to aesthetic stimulation:

> …formerly pictures gave me considerable and music very great delight. But now for many years I cannot endure to read a line of poetry….I have also lost my taste for pictures and music…My mind seems to have become a kind of machine for grinding general laws out of large collections of facts….if I had to live my life again, I would have made a rule to read some poetry and listen to some music at least once every week…for perhaps the[se] parts of my

[1] The Writing Project is a national program with regional centers designed to empower and support teachers in improving the teaching of writing k-12 across the nation.

> brain…would thus have been kept active through use. (in Gardner, *The Arts* 322-23)

Ganim and Fox (9-10) contend that words actually separate us from our feelings by working as interpreters of feeling rather than experiencers of it. In their work as expressive art therapists, they have discovered that we all have the ability to pay attention to and create visual images that help us move more deeply into understanding and into making meaning of our life.

We (Sara and Janet, the authors of this article) find art a significant dimension of the honors education, one that can help honors students realize the full potential of their intellect and life experience. The first place in which we explored the connection between art, writing, and learning was in a graduate seminar for K-12 teachers that is offered at Coastal Carolina University every summer through the Coastal Area Writing Project.[1] The two of us had team taught the summer institute for several years, and introducing art into the curriculum transformed our process and results. Writing in response to prints of art masterpieces, doing blind contour drawing, and using watercolor and pastels to represent important symbols and metaphors in our lives helped the teachers in the institute put aside the formulas and traditional names they had used for life experiences and go more directly and powerfully into "seeing" their work and lives in new ways. Using writing as a tool for discovering and connecting ideas was still the focus of what we were doing, but visual art took us into writing more efficiently and more deeply than we had gone without it. As a result of this experience in the summer writing institute, colleague Ginger McIntyre Manning joined the two of us to give a workshop at an annual meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English, using visual art as a means of helping teachers muster the courage needed to teach from the heart. We prepared workshop materials for thirty-five participants and hoped that at least eight would show up. One hundred people came to that session. We explained what we were going to do and that we had watercolors for only thirty-five. Everyone stayed anyway. The interest in and hunger for art was obvious. These experiences with teachers encouraged us to explore art as a vehicle for seeing the world from a new perspective in other areas as well.

In the freshman honors seminar Sara taught at Coastal Carolina University, the first essay was an autobiographical narrative. As a prewriting activity for that essay, she used a lifelines strategy developed by Linda Rief (48-51). After the students made a list of ten positive life events and ten negative ones in class, Sara asked them to prepare at home a graph that would show when the event happened on the horizontal axis and how positive or negative each event was on a scale of 1-5 on the vertical axis. Sara suggested that students use symbols rather than words on the graph and bring it to the next class as a beginning point for our writing workshop. She imagined they would sketch a quick graph on a piece of notebook paper. Two days later the students arrived with posters, banners, computer graphics, stickers, sketches in many colors of marker and colored pencil. Their creativity was impressive, but Sara was especially surprised by the amount

[2] Peter Rillero has written about the value of haiku for helping college biology students observe nature more carefully.

of time they'd spent on a non-graded, prewriting assignment. She congratulated them on their wonderful charts and apologized for not having been clear about the nature of the assignment and the amount of time she'd expected them to spend doing it. "Oh, we knew it wasn't graded. We did all this because we really liked having a chance to be creative. We don't get many chances to work with color and drawing." They spent hours on an assignment for the sheer joy it brought them…learning at its best.

> *"…the task is not so much to see what no one yet has seen, but to think what nobody yet has thought about that which everybody sees."* —Schopenhauer

Our work with teachers in the Writing Project summer institute and the lifelines insight in the honors freshman seminar encouraged us to consider more ways to include the creative arts as an option in the honors curriculum. During a freshman honors seminar class just before Halloween, we read essays about the masks we wear in our daily lives, the faces we prepare "to meet the faces that [we] meet" (T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" line 27). Sara brought face paint, construction paper, glue, markers, pastels, ribbons, and stickers and asked the students to write about their own masks and then to make one and write about what it represented. They took pictures of each other wearing masks or face paint and mounted some of the artifacts for display in Sara's office. Paul Crowther claims that "artwork and artistic creation…clarify individuality and transpos[e] it into an enduring form" (179). The mask-as-metaphor exercise allowed the students to express their individuality visually and served as a powerful avenue into writing about the things we hide in our lives and the things we choose to present to the world. The process of art allows students to become active participants in creating meaning (Rico 16). Writing about art helps us "brave the mystery dividing the seen from the unseen, image from text," and teaches us "to look and look again more closely" (Hirsch 10).

> *"Whether or not you can observe a thing depends upon the theory you use. It is the theory which decides what can be observed."* —Albert Einstein

In another effort to bring creativity into the work of our largely science-oriented honors program students, Janet and Sara developed a haiku workshop called "Awakening to Wonder." Most of the students had been introduced to haiku in elementary school as a kind of syllable puzzle, but our goal was to introduce students to the haiku as a powerful means of paying attention to things in a new way. Haiku, when created in their best Zen sense, are a way to let whatever is before us be our teacher. In our haiku workshop we begin by talking about the origin of haiku and reading together a selection of classic haiku by poets including Basho, Buson, and Issa. Then we go on a walk through nature…in the forest if there is one nearby, on the beach, beside a river or pond, in a garden….and collect images for our own haiku. We find the form of the haiku to be good discipline for forcing careful consideration of insight and word choice. The

simple, powerful statement of an insight helps students be present in the moment and see more clearly the truth and beauty of the nature before them.[2]

> *"Vision brings a new appreciation of what there is. It makes a person see things differently, rather than see different things."* —Herbert Guenther

After the two of us had been using a variety of creative arts regularly in our teaching, it occured to us that a stretch of time longer than the traditional class period would greatly enhance the possibilities of combining art and learning. We designed a fall writing retreat for the honors program freshman seminar curriculum to provide this opportunity. Each fall, now, students in the honors freshman seminar spend a whole Saturday at a writing retreat and in exchange have a week without honors seminar classes. (They spend six hours at the retreat, give up three hours of class time, and feel good about the exchange.) All the students in the Honors Program are invited to join the freshman retreat, and faculty are also invited to participate. Each year the retreat is held off campus in a natural setting. Once we were in a rustic cabin near a pond; three times we've met on the beach, once using "nature as hieroglyph" as our theme. One year, inspired by honors student Tammy Maher's high school experience with the Harpeth River Project in Tennessee, we held the retreat at a local river. We began at picnic tables on the bank of the Waccamaw River. Our goals were to get the students to immerse themselves in the deep experience of "the river" and to explore the river through many ways of knowing: science, poetry, art, and personal experience. We also wanted the students literally to *look at* the river from many perspectives: through a microscope, from a boat, and from the bordering banks and rocks. A biology faculty member showed us how to gather specimens from the river and how to examine them under microscopes. A poet on the English faculty talked with us about the river as metaphor and led us in some writing exercises related to our close observations of it—one of which was to create a *five senses* poem focusing on the sounds, smells, sights, tastes, and feelings connected to the river setting.

> *"I have learned that what I have not drawn, I have never really seen, and that when I start drawing an ordinary thing, I realize how extraordinary it is, sheer miracle."* —Franck

Janet brought indelible Uniball sketch pens, pastels, and watercolors and showed us how to use drawing and painting as tools for observing the river and its surroundings more carefully. The act of paying close attention in order to draw what one sees indeed helps us really to see things anew. Scholars of multiple ways of knowing such as Elliot Eisner of Stanford University explain that visual thinking and attention through eye and hand use aspects of the mind often termed "right-brained" that allow us to pay attention to the particular, the not yet named. The "left-brained" language function is very efficient in noting the familiar, naming it, and then, having

safely "boxed up" the concept, no longer busying itself thinking about this "thing" anymore. In the case of the river, we might see the river, name it dark, dirty-looking water and move on without seeing the tiny blue flowers growing along its banks or the patterns of gray-green lichen woven into the fabric of the river rock. Drawing and sketching or painting with color helped us to see what was there all along but not attended to. The powers of eye- and hand-knowing help us become more fully present to the moment and to all that presents itself in the moment.

A section of Sara's journal from the retreat is devoted to listing the shades of green in the scene in front of her. She stopped counting at thirteen shades, then began naming them—an awesome task. We took our writing and drawing materials onto a boat at the dock nearby and cruised down the river and back for almost two hours. The biology professor helped us identify the birds we saw along the way and wrote some poetry herself. After lunch we shared writings and drawings, and the poet helped us look for found poems in our writing. Many science-oriented honors students doubt their ability to write poetry, so the "found poetry" process has been particularly empowering for them. Each of us looked through all of the writing we had done during the day and underlined words, phrases, and sentences we especially liked. We copied these bits onto strips of colored paper that we arranged and rearranged on large sheets of newsprint until we had a "poem" that we liked. Then we glued the strips in place. We were allowed to tear off parts of the strip that didn't fit the sense of the poem, to copy lines as a refrain, and to add anything else the poem needed. The resulting work was far richer in visual image, metaphor and sensory "knowing" than much of the writing we had done previous to our "river immersion." We attribute much of this richness to the expansion of thought brought about by asking students to know about the river by thinking through their senses as well as representing what they were thinking through varied forms of written and visual expression.

During the retreat we wrote poems, stories, and responses to the river. Poet Nelljean Rice read what we had written and rearranged the words to create lively pictures and whole new meanings. Here is a poem Dr. Rice wrote with one of the honors students (following which, the poem Sara wrote and the one Dr. Rice helped her find):

### Refraction

My problem…
This isn't a bad thing –
a wasp like dirt tea –
it stings dry and watery
my skin blisters
like poison swimming under my skin
like lots of little parts waiting
for each other
I'd like to brew this pain

*—Nelljean Rice with honors student Kirsten Burg*

## The Waccamaw River

Dancing light—
Sky light,
Cloud white,
Leaf green and gold
Dance
Along the slick,
Wind-rippled surface.
Today,
The river dances quickly,
Speaks softly,
Smells of truffles,
Tastes of summer swims,
Baptism,
Fear of all I don't understand—
A deep mystery.

—*Sara Sanders*

## Word Weaving

A deep mystery
Drowns the river…
It writes women's
Chances…
The same thing
Speaks like
A mote-rippled
Light questions
The same thing
Like truffles
Today—
Too expensive
For baptism
But it drowns
All I don't understand.

—*Nelljean Rice with Sara Sanders*

The students agreed at the next class meeting that they'd like to publish an anthology of our river writing. They collected one piece from each student in the group and from each of the faculty members who had joined us for the day, edited the pieces, collected money to have them printed, and arranged for printing at a local copy shop. Here are some samples of student writing from the anthology:

## *from* **The River of Life**

Most rivers come together to make one as in marriage. Likewise, most rivers also split apart to form smaller rivers, or children. These rivers have many systems or families of related rivers. If the first ceased to exist, then all of the related rivers would not exist either. There could be one great, great grandfather river such as the Mississippi or the Nile that many other rivers or streams came from….the ocean represents death, or a greater/larger place of being. At the end of the river its waters of life flow into the ocean. They do not cease to exist; they just change forms, as in fresh water to salt water or secular to spiritual….there is more water in the ocean (afterlife) than there is in rivers. Only a select few of these waters get the chance to be reincarnated through evaporation and end up in a river again, starting life all over. Maybe it is only the good water that ends up in the cycle all over again or maybe it is sort of a second chance and the ocean is an unattained nirvana.

*—Ryan Bubucis*

## Water Dance

It dances through the world,
Free as anything can be.
It moves as it pleases,
With nothing in its way.
It is a slow waltz through a mountain forest;
It is a wild rhythm through the canyon;
It is a symphony of the sea;
It is a ballet leaping from the sky,
dancing before a chorus line of lightning.
It is the dance of the water,
The most natural dance in the world.
It is the most uninhibited freedom,
To dance with the feeling of the day.

*—Brianne Meagher*

### *from* **River**

What comes to my mind
Confluence of the Sava and the Danube, Belgrade
Confluence of the Sava and the Danube is the
heart of my town….
good live music, dancing, fun….
my grandpa and how we were throwing huge rocks in
the Danube to listen to the sound of the rocks hitting
the water….
peace
power
the song of frogs….

—*Jelena Mirkov*

### The River is Us

We are the learners and the river is the knowledge.
We flow and the river flows;
We are the river and the river is us.
We travel and the river travels;
We are the river and the river is us.
To discover, to create, we do the same, but
We are the learners and the river is the knowledge.

—*Tammy Maher*

This piece was written in response to poet Georgia Heard's advice in her essay "Don't Try to Avoid the Rocks" (38-39).

### *from* **Awoken**

Every time I bump into a rock it makes me hurt more….
Some of these rocks are sharp and better in retrospect.
The rocks will help you maneuver around the difficult
places so you can proceed smoothly?
That is how things always are
And life and water
Jagged
Water is the key to cleansing
After all, who wants stagnant water or loneliness?
I will let life run its course and I will be life itself.
But
I just keep running into bigger and bigger rocks.
I have life and imagination in my little whirlpool in that
river of life.

—*Susie Vogel*

*"Let the beauty you love be what you do."*
—Rumi

We used our day on the river as a catalyst for helping our campus community think about the link between art and environment. We hosted a River Day in one of our gallery rooms and invited everyone to stop by. Honors students were responsible for planning, promoting, and facilitating the event. They gave special invitations to the freshman composition classes since the experience lent itself well to a writing workshop. We bribed visitors to come with offers of free, river-related snacks including cheese goldfish, Swedish gummi fish, and rock candy. The honors students set up centers all around the large gallery space. The biology professor who had participated in the writing retreat brought over several microscopes for one center. Students collected buckets of river water for making slides and created a tabletop collage of trash and waste they collected from the river. Students decided that the colors in topographical maps made them a kind of art; they set up slide shows of maps of our local rivers. They ran videotapes of the service-learning river project Tammy Maher had been involved with in her high school in Tennessee. They made a brown wrapping paper "river" that ran from one end of the room to the other and provided chalk and markers for visitors to use in contributing to our river of words. On the walls there were quotations about rivers the students had copied onto large sheets of paper and decorated with pastel drawings. There were also large sheets of newsprint for writing river haiku. Tables all around the room were set up with books about rivers and about creative writing. They were supplied with colorful paper and markers and pages of suggestions about ideas for writing about rivers for our visitors. The students created a scrapbook of photos from our river retreat and had it on display along with copies of our river writing anthologies for sale.

*"No problem can ever be solved by the consciousness that created it. We must learn to see the world anew."*
— Albert Einstein

Art and music call to our soul in a different, more direct way than words do, just as poetry calls to us more directly than critical prose does. Honors students are hungry for creative opportunities, eager to have their spirits lifted, ready to take risks and make sense of seeing the world in new ways. Honors students are masters at traditional ways of learning and at verbal and analytical intelligence. We found that expanding honors students' repertoire of thinking and knowing through creative arts not only produces joyful exuberance for learning but results in enhanced forms of thinking and representing. Using creative arts in class gives students another perspective on the material, another way to *see* it, to care about it, and to *know* it.

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# Suggested Reading

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