

# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

*Teaching Note*  
Political Discourse in a Visual Art Classroom

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PHOTO BY CHRIS RODRIQUEZ ON UNSPLASH

Lessons anchored to current events that students feel passionate about often make for great instructional practices. My International Baccalaureate (IB) students, predominately Haitian immigrants and Haitian-Americans living in small, lower-middle-class homes or crowded apartments, are proud of their heritage. In a case of perfect timing, an opportunity arose for me, their IB Visual Arts teacher, to provide for them a format to respond to the January 11, 2018 “shithole countries” statement by President Trump. My students had been quite vocal about Trump’s statement upon returning from their winter break. The impetus for the lesson was a *New York Times* article I read on January 25, 2018 describing an interchange between a White House curator and a Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum curator, with the White House curator asking for permission from the Guggenheim representative to borrow Van Gogh’s *Landscape in Snow* for display in the White House. The request was denied, and the Guggenheim curator instead offered Maurizio Cattelan’s artwork titled *America*, a toilet made of 18-karat gold. Quite a statement. My thinking was this: If the Guggenheim curator can suggest artwork for President Trump’s White House, why can’t my middle school art students do likewise?

The day after the article was published, my students and I read the Matt Stevens *New York Times* article, discussed its central idea, and then examined an online copy of Van Gogh’s *Landscape in Snow*. We had just recently completed a four-week unit on Dada, so students in my three IB Visual Arts classes, mostly sixth- and seventh-graders, were learning that art can be a simple yet effective medium for political discourse and protest. The Middle Years Program (MYP) of the IB encourages students to make practical connections between their studies and the actual world. Interdisciplinary actions are highly encouraged in the MYP, and I saw this lesson as a connection between the arts and social sciences. The lesson also addressed two IB Visual Arts objectives: (a) recognizing that the world contains inspiration or influence for art and (b) identifying an artistic intention. All the parts of a successful lesson seemed to be there. Given the demographic makeup of my students, I was also expecting some interesting proposals. After we read the article together in class, I asked my students two questions: (a) If you were to create a work of art for the Trump White House, what would it be? and (b) Why this particular work of art? I gave my students twenty-five minutes to respond in writing. Little or no talking took place among my usually boisterous students in all three class sessions. Only one of my 58 students asked if it was permissible for her to respond in a negative, anti-Trump manner. I told her that she is entitled to her opinion and to respond to the two questions as they were written. In no way did I wish to break away from my neutral delivery of the lesson. I wanted genuine responses.

In analyzing the 58 responses the next day, four themes emerged. The first theme I labeled *Thoughtful Art*, as students proposed artwork that was aesthetically pleasing or encouraging in its message. One student said she “would create an inspiring work so he (Trump) can be a better president.” Another student offered to “paint a field of running horses as a beautiful decoration.” The second theme I simply called *Dada*, as two students drew from our

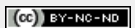
previous unit. One boy said his artwork would be “Dada to frustrate and confuse the Commander and (sic) Chief.” The other boy titled his artwork “Sadness” and described it as Dada with small shapes of cut sandpaper. The third theme I titled *Spiteful Art*; here, students described art that sent a message of disapproval toward President Trump. One girl said she “would make a painting of Obama because Trump made America worse again.” Another student “would draw a picture of America and all the chaos he has created.” One boy wrote, “I will create a red, white and blue flag on a trashcan to show our current state.” The fourth theme I labeled *Vulgar Art*, as six submissions contained references to feces. One student offered to the White House “a sculpture of a poop emoji painted orange to express my views of Trump.” Another student would “draw a pile of poop because that what Trump is.”

Wittingly or unwittingly, President Trump provoked a playground fight with some of my students who were willing and able to fight back, armed with ideas that were either original or reshaped. These iGen students (those born after 2004) were aware of President Trump’s public insults, and they understand how his words create an atmosphere of hate and denigration towards non-Whites. While not all students responded in negative fashion toward President Trump, I believe the assignment provided a safe platform for political discourse for all of my students, for some of them their first experience in documenting a political stance. I think the lesson also brought students closer to understanding social science concepts like political cartoons, campaign logos, and works of art like Picasso’s *Guernica* or Rockwell’s *The Problem We All Live With*. Finally, the lesson reinforced the belief that life really is an inspiration for art.

Absent from my students’ responses were any references to sexual assault, groping, or sexism, some of the many rude activities that President Trump has either been accused of or bragged about. Perhaps the young girls in my IB Visual Arts classes have not yet reached the age to experience or fully understand such harmful acts or they are unaware of the President’s past. It seems that, with this particular group of minorities, issues of race and heritage are more important and sensitive issues than gender-related ones—at least for now. Yet there are other issues that teachers can incorporate into their lessons to create student buy-in and enthusiasm. Animal rights, issues related to LGBTQ, environmental protection, transgender soldiers, and global warming are all topics that can evoke opinions and stimulate deep, important conversations in the classroom. It is crucial for teachers to provide platforms for students to openly and safely express their opinions, frustrations, fears, concerns, and hopes about the world in which they live. Such lessons and classroom activities can be both cathartic and stimulating, depending on the child and her or his perspective on life—especially for minorities living in the Age of Trump and the politics of hate, discrimination, and lies.

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