



Project Summary: Partner Portrait Collages

Project: Partner portrait collages
School: North Eugene Academy of the Arts
Class: Language Arts (58 students—two sections of freshmen)
Product: 8x11 portraits (consisting of photographs and text) of a peer partner

The goals of the project were to:

- Understand the qualities of character, perspective and narrative in the novel *Ricochet River*
- Explore the qualities of character, perspective and narrative through personal interviews and first- and third-person written storytelling
- Represent ideas and tell a story using photographs and other visual images as symbols
- Foster habits of mind
- Explore the aesthetics of photography and collage

Aaron Thomas believes that all his students have a compelling story to tell; the challenge is helping them understand that storytelling requires artistry and skill. “I’ve got some kids who don’t see the point of language arts. Getting them to focus on narrative, perspective and character development in their reading or writing can be like pulling teeth. Integrating photography into my class helped me teach what I wanted to teach in a different way.” Working collaboratively with Jennifer Salzman, a photographer and teaching artist with ArtsWork in Education, Thomas designed a project that made concepts related to the craft of writing concrete. As they explored issues of perception, narrative and character while reading the novel *Ricochet River*, students designed a portrait collage of one of their classmates that represented the life and story of that person using words and images.

When they began reading *Ricochet River*, Thomas led discussions on the perspective of the book’s characters, asking students to find specific evidence of how the protagonists saw the world, their friends and their lives. Midway through reading the novel, Thomas paired students up, deliberately grouping students together who did not know each other well. Using a 3-page guide, each student interviewed his or her partner, asking questions such as: What are your strengths and weaknesses? What are your greatest fears? What has been the most challenging moment for you in the last five years? Students used the results of their interviews to introduce their partners to the class and to write a short story in the third person with their partner as the main character. The stories had to reflect details from the interview and be grounded in a realistic context. Students then re-wrote the stories in the first person, changing aspects of the story to fit the shift in narrative perspective. “Students are used to writing about themselves in the first person, but this challenged them to think about how the personal perspective of their partner might alter the story they had written,” said Thomas.

Once both stories were complete, Salzman introduced the concept of portraiture in photography and the use of symbols in collage to metaphorically communicate a message. After taking and printing digital portraits of each student, she worked with students to use the photographs as the foundation for a collage of their partner that reflected what they had learned through their interviews. When the collages were complete, students chose a single line from the first-person story they’d written to abstractly represent an essential element of their partner. Salzman digitally scanned and enlarged the work, and then added the text selected by the students. After a final lesson in professional mounting techniques, the individual portraits were ready to be assembled. The portraits were bound together in an accordion shape with each

pair of portraits angled to face one another. Thomas described this presentation format as the culminating metaphor for the project—with students' partner portraits facing one another.

"I think there was a real burden of responsibility among the students to finish the project. If they had been doing self-portraits, some of them might have just not bothered or not put in much effort. But the fact they were responsible for whether the story of their partner was going to be told and displayed made them put themselves out and do great work."

—Aaron Thomas

The project grounded abstract concepts in literature to students' lives and relationships with their peers. Thomas believes that while all of his students will not end up being writers, that this project helped them see that stories are all around them and that it takes skill and attention to tell them.

This summary was produced in partnership with E3: Employers for Education Excellence (www.e3oregon.org).