

Art: Art & Beliefs

What if art helped students communicate important feelings, thoughts, and beliefs?

Justin wanted his elementary art class to see art as one way of making invisible things visible. He saw this as part of helping them to express their own ideas and beliefs and to understand others. This gave learning about different art forms a purpose and made art more personal, relevant, and relational.

“The children sat in a circle, and I placed a large box in the center, labeled ‘The Invisibility Box.’ We talked about invisible things: our unexpressed thoughts, feelings, and beliefs. I started with some examples: ‘My beliefs are invisible as long as I only think them. I believe God loves us, but you can’t see my belief until it gets expressed in some way, like writing about it. Perhaps I am happy—you see that when I express it in a smile or the way I walk.’

“I asked each child to think of a feeling, belief, or thought that they would be happy to share with others and to ‘put’ it in the box. When everyone (including me) had ‘put’ their invisible item in the box, we looked and saw that the box was still empty. I explained that we can use art materials as one way to make the invisible things in the box visible. We might do this by drawing, by taking photographs, or by using clay or fabric. Children took their invisible things and choose a simple way to make them visible. For example, one student drew a smiley face and colored it yellow to convey happiness. I made something to express my own thought and beliefs.

“This is the beginning of a series of lessons that explore different ways in which artists make the invisible visible. We went on to look at portraits, sculpture, landscapes, and other art forms to learn how artists show more than what they superficially see. I wanted this introductory lesson to set the framework for what was to follow.”

What’s going on here?

Justin **saw** art as relevant to his students’ inner lives, as a way of understanding others, and as a way in which beliefs are embodied.

He **engaged** the children in focusing their attention on art in connection with belief (the box and initial art activity) and helped them see within a new framework (making the invisible visible in order to understand and express). The children were engaged in sharing feelings and beliefs.

Justin **reshaped his practice** by setting the context for the class's interaction (the circle), by using a focal object (the box) and a focal idea (visible/invisible) to frame the lesson, and by making his own artwork as part of the lesson. He modeled the engagement he was looking for by joining in.

What does this have to do with faith, hope, and love?

One aspect of art is that it can be about artists and viewers communicating, drawing people into a relationship. Christianity is at heart a relational **faith**, and God is the great communicator. Another aspect is that it is informed by our beliefs and convictions: we are whole people, and faith is not separate from our other activities. Justin included a faith example (invisible beliefs made visible in our work) in an art lesson where it fit naturally, demonstrating that faith is related to all areas of life. He developed skills with a purpose—to communicate and to understand others, an expression of **love** and **hope**.

What difference does it make?

Justin saw different art forms as a way to express thoughts, feelings, and beliefs and as a means to understand others better. In this way, he not only was making both art and faith more relational and relevant, he also was giving children an overarching concept to organize their exploration of different art forms.

Where could we go from here?

Teachers could explore with students what thoughts, feelings, and beliefs they see expressed in works by various artists. They could consider whether they share those feelings or agree with those beliefs, and why, and how they might have designed the art work differently if they feel or believe differently.

Digging deeper

Christians have faith in a God who is driven by love to communicate with his people and draw them into a relationship of love (Hebrews 1:1). The Bible is the story of that communication through creation, through events in history, through the prophets, and finally through the coming of the person of Jesus (John 3:16).

In Jesus the invisible God became visible. God took on human form and lived among us. He knew family life and friendship (Luke 10:38-42), grief (John 11:35) and tiredness. When Jesus's disciple Philip asked what God was like, he replied, "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9).

That communication continues through the Holy Spirit and through the Bible. God used material things to communicate: creation, events, writing, people. Artists reflect a little of that process by making their invisible beliefs, thoughts, and feelings visible in paint, stone, fabric, and glass.

The sun meets not the springing bud that stretches towards him with half the certainty that God, the source of all good, communicates himself to the soul that longs to partake of him. William Law

Communication between people and also between people and God is imperfect now, but the Christian hope is that one day people will know God as he knows each of them (1 Corinthians 13:12). Communication holds out hope to many who feel isolated in society. Believers can learn to communicate their faith, hope, and love using the things of God's world, making the invisible visible.



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