



CREATING ART THROUGH CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICE

"Art enables us to find ourselves and lose ourselves at the same time."

—Thomas Merton

OVERVIEW

Students create a "scrapbook" of meaningful images, then use those images to engage in a contemplative art process.

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- At the beginning of the school year to set the tone for the class
- To help students create personally meaningful art
- Anytime for an art class

TIME REQUIRED

- Minimally, one hour for each of the two parts
- May also be accomplished over a longer period (such as a semester) with Part 1 created in increments, and Part 2 in one or more class sessions

LEVEL

- Middle School
- High School
- College

MATERIALS

Part 1:

- A source of ideas and images, e.g., magazines, photos from Internet, personal drawings and photos
- Cell phones or cameras (if available) for creating photos
- Digital folder or color printer

Part 2:

- The saved images to be used in a collage or assemblage, or as references for working with any 2D or 3D media
- Poster board, clay, canvas, or other media for assembly of art project
- Glue, paint, other art materials as desired

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will:

- Use art-making as a means of building self-awareness and personal meaning
- Develop a sense of freedom and inspiration in art-making
- Release fear and self-doubt by shifting the emphasis from the end product to the process of art-making

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-Awareness
- Self-Management

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

How does it feel when you come across an image that is especially appealing or meaningful to you?

INSTRUCTIONS

- Explain that art-making can be a contemplative practice that affects us internally, through our thoughts and emotions, as well as externally, through the creation of objects and images that can serve as a source of inspiration and healing.
- Emphasize that the process of making art is most important; the product that results from the practice is not so important.
- This practice can be simply an “exercise”, which may be especially freeing for those who feel they lack artistic talent or skill. The point of this practice is not to make “good” art, but to observe our minds while engaging in the creative process.
- Assure the class at the outset that what they produce will not be graded or evaluated.

- Tell students:
 - *In the first part, we'll create a collection or "scrapbook" of personally meaningful images. In the second part, we'll use our scrapbook as a reference while we engage in open-ended and self-reflective creative work.*
- Explain that a scrapbook can provide inspiration and organization since at the beginning of a new art project, it can be daunting to face the openness of a blank page.
- Reflecting first on ideas, topics, and images that resonate gives students a place to start and allows the intuitive process to occur. It also provides fuel for ongoing reflection while engaging in the process of art-making.
- Tell students:
 - *Begin by stimulating your imagination and your senses by spending time browsing and collecting images and ideas that you find emotionally stirring. Look through personal photographs, books, magazines, etc. Spend time outdoors, watching and listening. Photograph sights that move you. Find images online. Anything, no matter how silly or insignificant you think it may seem to others, is fair game. Your collection is for you alone, so give yourself permission and freedom as you gather your images.*
- Have students save images and objects together in an album, box, or envelope; if they're collecting digital images, save them together in a folder or digital photo album. If they like sketching and taking notes, have them carry a sketchbook to collect their ideas. Whatever format they pick will be their "scrapbook."
- Students should feel free to add and remove items from their scrapbook over time; it can represent an ever-evolving record of what is interesting and significant to them.

PART 2

- If possible, have students choose their preferred art-making materials, such as paper and pen, collage, charcoal, pastels, clay, or watercolors.
- As students begin the process, intersperse these instructions as appropriate:
 - *We're going to start by sitting silently to relax and focus our minds.*
 - *Gently breathe in and gently breathe out. [Pause for a minute or two.]*
 - *Take a few minutes to browse through your scrapbook, lingering over the images you've collected.*
 - *You may find that a question or response arises naturally in your mind.*
 - *As you begin working with your materials, see if you can maintain an awareness of not just what you are making and the process of creating it, but also how you are feeling and what you are thinking about.*
 - *If a thought or inspiration arose for you at the beginning of the session, is it still present?*
 - *Feel free to move more slowly than usual, or pause and close your eyes.*
 - *You might notice how your mind moves from idea to idea: you may begin your project with an initial intention or inspiration, like making an image about your childhood, or a subject you saw on the news. But after some time has passed, you may be thinking about someone you used to know, or a favorite song.*
 - *The mind naturally jumps from topic to topic, so try to be aware of how your ideas change while you work.*
 - *And, if at any point you want to refer back to your scrapbook, please do so.*

CLOSURE

- Leave some time at the end of the session to allow students to reflect on their experience. How did this process feel? What did they discover about themselves? About the process of making art? Was it helpful in any way?
- Some students may wish to “show and tell” their creations with the class, or students may pair-share about their art-making and their experience.

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

What parts of the exercise seemed easiest for your students? What was challenging for them? What did you notice about the impact of this practice on students’ self-awareness and experience of art-making? If you repeated this exercise, would you make any changes to the processes or materials?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

While research on the effectiveness of mindfulness programs in schools is still in the early stages, studies have found that mindfulness may reduce stress in students, increase their [well-being](#), and improve their [attention](#) and executive functioning. In addition, some research studies suggest that mindfulness practices can also foster [curiosity and learning](#).

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Education is often conducted as an “outside-in” process: the student is an empty vessel to be filled with facts, figures, and ideas that are supported by outside sources. While this method has its place, it ignores a student’s own wisdom and life experience as it relates to the content. As a result, students often leave school not knowing who they are and what they value.

Through contemplative practices such as this one, students are given the opportunity to deepen their self-knowledge by choosing and observing the impact of what is personally meaningful to them.

Goethe once wrote, as noted by physicist and contemplative practitioner [Arthur Zajonc](#), “One comes to know nothing beyond what one loves. And the deeper and more complete the knowledge, the stronger, more powerful and living must be one’s love and fervor.”

SOURCE

The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society (CMind) transforms higher education through contemplative practice. Founded in 1997, CMind organizes conferences, retreats, and the annual Summer Session on Contemplative Learning in Higher Education; creates and identifies useful resources; and connects a global,

multidisciplinary community of educators through our primary initiative, the Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education. See <http://www.contemplativemind.org> for more information.