



Greater Good in Education
SCIENCE-BASED PRACTICES FOR KINDER, HAPPIER SCHOOLS

FINDING WONDER THROUGH ART IN COMMUNITY

"The arts have an incredible potential for expanding interconnectedness, for reaching people, touching them, and increasing empathy and compassion in the world."

— Olafur Eliasson

OVERVIEW

Students walk in their neighborhood and capture an image of a visual design that inspires awe.

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- To introduce students to seeking awe and wonder in their everyday lives
- To nurture positive social behavior
- To cultivate a greater sense of well-being
- At the beginning of the school year or semester to build a sense of community

TIME REQUIRED

- ≤ 30 minutes

LEVEL

- High School
- College

MATERIALS

- PDF of the [Design Principles of Visual Awe](#)
- Writing and drawing materials
- Post-it notes

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will:

- Explore their neighborhood to identify a visual artifact that evokes awe in them
- Capture the artifact in a visual format of their choice
- Reflect on the emotions and sensations they feel in relation to their artifact

ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Adapting Practices for Students with Special Needs](#)
- [Making a Practice Trauma-Informed](#)
- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#)

CHARACTER STRENGTHS

- Humility
- Empathy
- Awe

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Social Awareness
- Relationship Skills

MINDFULNESS COMPONENTS

- Open Awareness
- Non-judgment

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- In honoring students' lived experience, this practice involves a neighborhood walk in preparation for an in-class activity.
- Take a walk in your neighborhood to capture an image of something you like the look of, a visual artifact that evokes [awe](#) for you.
- What emotions and sensations do you feel in relation to your artifact? Why did you choose it? What did this experience bring up for you?
- Note whether the artifact demonstrates one or more of the [Design Principles of Visual Awe](#) including: repetition, light/dark contrast, parts signal the presence of a holistic process, and hints of vastness.
- Prepare to model the task for your students. Share your own awe experience with your artifact by displaying your image and introducing the [Design Principles of Visual Awe](#).

INSTRUCTIONS

OVERVIEW

Provide students with the following guidance for a neighborhood walk to prepare for an activity in the upcoming class.

- Tell students:
 - *In preparation for an activity in our next class, take a walk in your neighborhood and notice something that you like the look of, that looks beautiful and inspiring, e.g., graffiti, flowers cutting through the sidewalk, an interesting architectural structure, etc. We will refer to it as a **visual artifact**.*
 - *Consider what emotions this visual artifact evokes in you and why you might have chosen it.*
 - *Create an image of your artifact by drawing or taking a photo of it.*
 - *Bring the image of your visual artifact to our next class.*

The following are instructions for the in-class activity.

- Tell students:
 - *It is important for us to seek wonder, glimmers of awe in our everyday lives. One way for us to experience awe is to explore visual art. Here is an image of a visual artifact from my neighborhood which I find awesome.*
- Display the image of your visual artifact and explain why you chose it.
- Next, instruct students:
 - *In small groups, please take turns in displaying and describing your image of the visual artifact from your neighborhood.*
 - *Explain why you chose the artifact and what emotions it evokes for you.*
- When all students have shared in their groups, introduce the [Design Principles of Visual Awe](#) to the whole class by either distributing copies or projecting the digital images.
- Afterwards, display the image of your artifact again and this time analyze it using one or more of the [Design Principles of Visual Awe](#).

CLOSURE

- Display the student-created images around the classroom. Invite students to take a simulated walk through each other's neighborhoods by viewing the images. Instruct students to place post-it notes next to images they are drawn to, identifying and noting the following:
 - *Where do you see repetition?*
 - *Where do you see light/dark contrast?*
 - *Where do you see parts of a whole?*
 - *Where do you see vastness?*
 - *What, if any, emotion do the images you selected evoke?*

EXTENSIONS

- Create a calming classroom environment by playing soft music/nature sounds.

- Ask students to choose one of the artifacts shared by their peers.
- Invite students to sit in silence and to draw the artifact.
 - A [suggested approach](#) might be to draw using their non-dominant hand, helping them to focus more on “seeing” the object and less on their drawing skills.
 - Encourage students to forgo judgment by acknowledging that using a non-dominant hand may be challenging.
 - Ask students to share how it felt to draw with their non-dominant hand.

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- Consider what worked or did not work.
- What modifications would you make?
- Seek informal student feedback to learn from their experiences.

THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

This practice is an adaptation of a [photovoice methodology](#) in which participants use photography and stories about their photos to identify and represent issues of importance to them. For example, in [this community building project](#), 11 youth and 18 adults from seven different neighborhoods in an American city were brought together in small groups. Participants noted that the photovoice experience offered an opportunity for reflection on familiar surroundings and for exploration of diverse perspectives.

In [a recent study](#) researchers interviewed 132 adults at two different art museums in London to assess whether and how people experience awe during an art museum visit. One of the findings was that exposure to art work may be associated with feelings of awe.

[Another research](#) study determined how interior spaces give rise to a feeling of awe through their architectural design. A group of 41 undergraduate students in Canada were presented with 60 photographs depicting different interior spaces. Participants envisioned themselves in the spaces they had observed and responded to a survey about their emotional states. The findings suggest that architectural features such as immensity may lead to awe.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Visual art has the potential to benefit students of all backgrounds and abilities. For example, low-SES students who are more involved in the arts tend to [do better at school](#), are more likely to graduate from high school, and are more likely to aspire to, attend, and graduate from college.

Visual art also has the potential to make the “wonderful” a bit more concrete and describable, allowing students to directly experience awe and enjoy its [individual](#) and [collective benefits](#). Indeed, awe-inspiring visual art experiences can increase [happiness](#) and [health](#), thus having a positive impact on students’ well-being. Wonder and awe have also been shown to [improve positive social behavior](#) that can lead to building a classroom culture of sharing and collaboration.

SOURCE

Keltner, D. (2023). [*Awe: The new science of everyday wonder and how it can transform your life*](#). Penguin Press