

“They Mean Something More!” Teaching about Symbols Using Balanced Integration

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When you think about elections, what comes to mind? For many, some of the most memorable aspects of elections are the symbols used to promote a candidate (a log cabin), a particular political party (a bull moose), or an ideal (the liberty bell). Since the election of 1796, buttons, slogans, and, most importantly, symbols have become a mainstay of the American election system.¹ The log cabin symbolized the childhoods of Andrew Jackson and Abraham Lincoln; the sun represented hope on Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential election posters. Many people without formal instruction in what symbols mean understood the messages these symbols were intended to convey because symbols are a powerful tool of communication. Sometimes we mediate the meaning of symbols without ever consciously considering that we are viewing representations, not words.²

In this article, we (a fourth grade teacher, a fifth grade teacher, an art teacher, and a graduate student in education) describe and consider our efforts to teach the importance of symbols as a powerful means of communication in an integrated, cross curricular social studies/art project.³ In designing this project, we kept the following in mind: Integration is a tool not a goal;⁴ it should be planned;⁵ and it should reflect balance between the subjects being integrated.⁶ We considered the following key questions: How can we teach students to understand the importance of symbols as a means of communication? How can we organize lessons that prompt students to think artistically, master social studies concepts, and meet important curricular standards using a balanced approach to integration? The project described here was implemented with a fourth grade class.

Social Studies Lessons

The fourth grade study of symbols began with an exercise on common symbols that children see in daily life (including the symbols for Apple Computers, McDonalds, Nike, and famous sports teams). Throughout this activity, students displayed a high level of enthusiasm and interest in what the symbols represented.

They were thinking about symbols before they developed a formal definition of the concept. They openly asked questions and shared their thoughts: “I don’t know that symbol”; “That’s the Nike swoop!” They also responded personally to some of the symbols: “I love the Colts!” The exercise succeeded in activating students’ curiosity about symbols.

Once the introductory activity was completed, the teacher displayed the Great Seal of the United States and asked students to point out the various symbols within that emblem. Students quickly pointed out several symbols and discussed their meanings. The eagle had to “represent the U.S., because that is our national symbol.” Other students thought that the arrows “could mean battle or war” and the “stars were for states, like the flag.” The students were able to point out items that they thought were symbols (e.g., “the eagle has a shield”), but could not always explain why these items were symbolic, or what each might mean. For example, one student asked, “What does the shield mean?” After a brief discussion, some students came to the conclusion that the shield might mean “protection.”

This lesson culminated in a scavenger hunt to find symbols around the school, during which students kept a record of the symbols they observed and what they thought each one represented. As we walked through the school, students discussed whether or not certain images were symbols. They discussed the ways that symbols could represent more than one thing, or carry multiple messages. For example, one student pointed to the signs outside the bathrooms: “The sign is for women, but it’s a bathroom, too!” The students actively considered what symbols meant, and how they were used. After the scavenger hunt, we discussed the symbols they encountered and worked to define the concept of “symbol.” One student said that symbols are things that “mean something more,” which proved to be their final definition. Most important, students comprehended the definition of the symbols because they saw examples of them in their own lives and actively thought about their meanings and purposes.



The students' preliminary definition of symbols as a means of communicating something more than the simple image of an object was developed further in the subsequent lessons. We segued from symbols that students encounter daily to the use of symbols on presidential china. The students viewed images of presidential plates via PowerPoint slides; together we discussed how symbols were used to represent the United States (eagle, shield, etc.), the personal ideals of a particular president (Washington's sun, Jefferson's shield), and the state of the nation during a specific period (Lincoln's storm clouds). Examining the plates led to a discussion about the use of color as a symbol. The students noted, "Lincoln's clouds are darker than Harrison's," which led them to wonder, "Why are there such differences among plates?"

We introduced students to the work of Caroline Harrison, who designed the china for her husband, President Benjamin Harrison.⁷ The class discussed several questions about the symbols on her plates including:

Why did she place corn on the outer rim of the plate?

Why did she use the same eagle as Abraham Lincoln?

What colors did she chose for her husband's plate?

Why did she select those particular colors?

This led students to discover that the corn stalks and the blue and gold colors symbolized Indiana, and that the eagle represented both the United States and Harrison's status as a Civil War veteran. We discussed other Indiana state symbols and their historical, cultural, political, and environmental meanings. We used this lesson as a springboard to our integrated project. In their art class students would be designing their own commemorative plates, incorporating three or more symbols of the state of Indiana.

Art Class Lessons

The art teacher began her lesson by reviewing how symbols were used on presidential china; in addition she focused on how the use of patterns and designs could strengthen symbolic messages. Students began to consider their design options (patterns, colors, and symmetrical and radial balance) as they made sketches of their commemorative plates.

The sketching process allowed students to explore the myriad artistic choices they had and the symbols they wanted to use. Students typically began by choosing which symbols they wanted to dominate the center of their plate, in a style similar

to what they had seen on presidential china. Students selected various images, ranging from a cardinal (the state bird), and the torch of wisdom (as can be seen on the Indiana flag), to a peony (the state flower). After students selected several symbols for the center of their plate, they worked to balance the images they selected.

After transferring the outline of their designs to the actual plate, students had several options with regard to how to finish them—they could use special paints designed to be used on glass (which turned out to be a little faint and required several coats), or color their images with sharpies. Many students used leafing pens to add accents to the designs.

The Art Fair

Our integrated presidential plate project culminated with an informal art fair to showcase students' artwork. Each plate was accompanied by a hand-written caption explaining its creator's historical insights and artistic choices. Students addressed questions from both social studies and art perspectives:

What symbols did you use in your design?

What did you learn about symbols from the experience?

What elements and principles of art did you use in your plate design?

What would you change about your design if you could?

On the night of the art fair, parents and classmates viewed the finished project as well as a slide show with photos of students at work on their projects.

Balanced Integration: Lessons Learned

While this particular project did not emphasize the use of symbols in elections, the vocabulary, concepts, and methods of inquiry that students learned are applicable to election-related issues. The use of symbols in election materials is similar to their use on presidential china and commemorative plates; they communicate a deeper message. Furthermore, the integration of social studies content and art deepened students' understanding of symbols as powerful means of communication.

The "museum cards" students wrote to accompany their plates explained the symbols and demonstrated significant insights into what they had learned about Indiana and how symbols can be used.

A fourth grade student wrote, "The woods represent all the parks and reserves, and a sun represents life, and a river in the middle represents one of our most memorable rivers, the Wabash River."

Another student wrote, "The Abraham Lincoln eagle represents that we are part of the United States...the 19 stars represent that we were the 19th state."

The study of presidential plates enabled students to apply

their understanding of how symbolic representations could be used to their own plates. In addition, students applied the artistic principles of balance, symmetry, and application of color as a means of strengthening the symbols' meanings. A fourth grader wrote, "A big pink peony in the center of the plate is the state flower of Indiana. At the bottom of the plate there's a red feathery cardinal. The border of the plate has elaborate corn stalks." This student organized the symbols of Indiana in a way that reflected her understanding of the principles of art. Similar to the work with presidential plates, students can be taught to analyze the use of symbols in American elections and create their own election-related materials, including posters, buttons, commemorative plates, or even t-shirts.

In the future, we would work to ensure that all components of the project were a bit more balanced. Some students were so focused on the art project that they underplayed social studies content. To alter this emphasis, we would require students to write more about their use of symbols on their museum card. When combining art and social studies, teachers should be attentive to the potential for the art component to overpower content-based learning.

These lessons demonstrate one way to help students see the importance of symbols in daily life, in school decoration and architecture, in official government objects and events, and in election materials and communications. Creating their own plates enabled students to select appropriate symbols and use the principles of art to strengthen their message. This project will help students as they work to "read" symbols (to decode their meanings), which a vital aspect of citizenship in a democracy in an election year. 🗳️

Notes

1. Philip J. Davies, "Campaign Buttons to Hot Buttons: American Election Images, 1789 to 2000," *Contemporary View* 277, no. 1617 (2000).
2. L. S. Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978).
3. A federal Teaching American History Grant supported this project, allowing students to work with ceramic plates. Any classroom could do a similar project using paper plates. Project Co-director Lynne Boyle-Baise assisted in the development of this effort.
4. Jennifer E. Holloway and John J. Chiodo. "Social Studies IS Being Taught in the Elementary School: A Contrarian View." *Journal of Social Studies Research* 33, no. 2 (Fall 2009): 235-61.
5. Marilynne Boyle-Baise, Hsu Ming-Chu, Shaun Johnson, Stephanie C. Serriere, and Dorshell Stewart. "Trying to Revalue Elementary Social Studies: Dilemmas and Insights," *Social Studies Research* 6, no. 2 (Summer 2011): 135-50.
6. Jere Brophy, and Janet Alleman. "A Reconceptualized Rationale for Elementary Social Studies," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 34, no. 4 (2006): 428-54.
7. President Benjamin Harrison's Presidential China, store.jfklibrary.org/Benjamin-Harrison-Presidential-China/PAAAAAMODBEKBBFL/product.

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