Beyond the Frame: Reading the Paintings of Elizabeth Murray

A Joy2Learn Middle School English Language Arts Lesson Plan

Connection to Joy2LearnProfessional Development

This lesson plan mirrors the instructional model introduced in the Joy2Learn professional development mini-workshop, *Reading Beyond the Page: Using the Arts to Build Observation, Interpretation, and Evidence-Based Reasoning in Middle School English Language Arts*. This lesson intentionally mirrors the thinking routine introduced in the professional development:

Core Meaning-Making Routine:

- NOTICE → INTERPRET → SUPPORT

Instructional Bridge:

- TRANSFER → Apply the routine to written text

Students use one core meaning-making routine throughout the lesson: NOTICE → INTERPRET → SUPPORT. Discussion and writing are ways students express that thinking rather than additional steps. TRANSFER serves a different purpose: after students practice the routine with Elizabeth Murray's artwork, the teacher explicitly bridges the same thinking to a written text.

Grade Level

Grades 6–8

Time

60–75 minutes

ELA Focus

Teachers can adapt this lesson to support instruction in:

- Close reading
- Inference and interpretation
- Theme and central idea
- Author's/artist's purpose
- Speaking and listening
- Evidence-based writing

Learning Objectives

Students will:

- NOTICE specific visual details and artistic choices in Elizabeth Murray's work before deciding what they mean.
- INTERPRET what those details and choices might communicate, drawing on relevant knowledge and vocabulary.
- SUPPORT an interpretation with specific visual evidence and explain how the evidence connects to the interpretation.
- TRANSFER the NOTICE → INTERPRET → SUPPORT routine to a written text.

Common Core Alignment

Primary Alignment

- RL.6.1 / RL.7.1 / RL.8.1 - Cite evidence and draw inferences from text.
- SL.6.1 / SL.7.1 / SL.8.1 - Participate in collaborative discussions and support ideas with evidence.

- SL.6.2 / SL.7.2 / SL.8.2 - Interpret information presented in diverse media.

Supporting Alignment

- RL.6.2 / RL.7.2 / RL.8.2 - Determine theme or central idea.
- W.6.9 / W.7.9 / W.8.9 - Draw evidence from texts to support analysis and reflection.
- W.6.1 / W.7.1 / W.8.1 - Support claims with reasons and evidence, when an analytical response is used.

Materials

- Joy2Learn video clip: Murray Dis Pair: https://youtu.be/OcjQfLB86lE?si=3_x6lrEFGdYdR6z8
- Images of Elizabeth Murray paintings: https://elizabethmurrayart.org/2000s
- NOTICE → INTERPRET → SUPPORT organizer or notebook paper
- Sticky notes or digital annotation tools
- A short poem, paragraph, or literary excerpt for the TRANSFER activity

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Teacher Modeling (15–20 minutes)

- Display Elizabeth Murray's painting "Dis Pair" by pausing the Joy2Learn video clip. Don't give students much information about Murray or the work.
    - https://youtu.be/OcjQfLB86lE?si=3_x6lrEFGdYdR6z8
- Model the Core Meaning-Making Routine: NOTICE → INTERPRET → SUPPORT

Teacher Think-aloud: NOTICE

- The teacher might say: “I'm going to begin by describing only things I can point to. I'm going to try not to decide yet what I'm looking at. I notice two large, irregular blue forms. One is higher and one is lower. Both have rounded sections and narrower sections. I see several openings or recessed areas inside the blue forms. Inside some of those openings I see green, black, and lighter areas. I see thin orange-yellow lines that curve and loop across the blue surfaces. I also see some straighter-edged forms projecting upward. The outside edges aren't rectangular. The forms themselves create the outside boundary of the artwork. And I notice that the two large forms resemble each other without being identical.”
- Stop and make the cognitive distinction explicit: “So far I haven't said what these things are or what they mean. I've described evidence that someone else can look at and verify. I want to say that these look like something. But the moment I say, ‘That is a _____,’ I've begun interpreting what I'm seeing.”
- Ask students: “What do these forms remind you of?”
- Students may see shoes, faces, machines, creatures, bodies, or something else.
- The teacher can then say: “Notice what just happened. We moved from what we can see to what those visual details might represent or suggest. We moved from NOTICE to INTERPRET.”

Teacher Think-aloud: INTERPRET

- Model an interpretation before revealing the title or subject of the painting: “The fact that there are two similar large forms makes me think they may be connected in some way—a pair, partners, or two things interacting. They don't seem peaceful or neatly arranged to me. Their shapes point toward one another and seem almost tangled together. So one interpretation I could make is: This artwork might be showing a relationship between two things that are connected but also in tension with each other.”
- Use a whiteboard or similar tool to highlight that the above is an inference, rather than a fact.
    - NOTICE: There are two similar but separate forms positioned closely together.
    - INTERPRET: They might represent two things in a relationship with one another.
- Ask students: “What would I have to do next before asking you to accept that interpretation?” Hopefully students arrive at: “Support it.”

Teacher Think-aloud: SUPPORT

- Return explicitly to observable evidence: “My interpretation was that these two forms might have a relationship that involves both connection and tension. What makes me say that? First, there are two large forms, and they share many visual features—the same dominant blue, similar rounded shapes, green recessed areas, and looping orange lines. That makes them seem related. But they're also separate forms positioned at different angles. Parts of them seem to push toward or crowd one another. So, the evidence doesn't prove my interpretation. But it gives me reasons for making it. Evidence isn't just something I notice. I also have to explain how what I noticed supports what I think.”

The Reveal

- Say aloud the title of the painting: Dis Pair
- Ask students: “What do you notice about the title?” Students may hear “this pair,” “dis pair,” or “despair.”
- Play the full Joy2Learn video clip: Murray Dis Pair: https://youtu.be/OcjQfLB86lE?si=3_x6lrEFGdYdR6z8
- Ask students: “How does this new knowledge change—or strengthen—your interpretation?”
- Return to the teacher’s original interpretation: “Earlier I thought these might be two things in a relationship. Now I know they're a pair of shoes, and I know the work is called Dis Pair. Does that make my original interpretation stronger, weaker, or just different?”
- Ask students: “Could someone construct a different interpretation from the same artwork? What would make one interpretation stronger than another?”
- The desired answer isn't the teacher agrees with it or that's what the artist meant. It's that the interpretation accounts for relevant evidence, and the viewer can explain the connection between the evidence and the interpretation.

Guided Practice (Optional)

- Choose another of Murray's paintings: https://elizabethmurrayart.org/2000s. As a whole class, guide students through the Core Meaning-Making Routine (NOTICE → INTERPRET → SUPPORT) without offering much of your own thoughts.

Collaborative Practice (15 Minutes)

- Students work in pairs or small groups with one Elizabeth Murray painting. Assign or allow groups to choose one Elizabeth Murray painting: https://elizabethmurrayart.org/2000s. Groups use the same three prompts rather than a new discussion protocol.
- NOTICE: "What do you notice?"
- INTERPRET: "What do you think it might mean or communicate?"
- SUPPORT: "What do you see that makes you say that?"
- As students talk, the teacher may extend the conversation with questions such as:
    - Which detail most influenced your interpretation?
    - Could another interpretation also be supported by the artwork?
    - How does that evidence connect to the interpretation?
- Students record one group interpretation, at least two pieces of visual evidence, and a brief explanation of how the evidence supports the interpretation.

Writing Application (15–20 minutes)

- Students turn the thinking they have already done into a short evidence-based response.

- Prompt: “What is one idea Elizabeth Murray’s artwork might communicate? Use at least two specific visual details to support your interpretation, and explain how each detail supports your thinking.”
- A simple organizer can use the same routine:
    - NOTICE: Which details matter most?
    - INTERPRET: What do you think the artwork communicates?
    - SUPPORT: Which details support your interpretation? How does each detail connect to your interpretation?

Optional Writing Extensions

If the instructional goal calls for a different writing form, teachers can extend the same evidence-based thinking rather than introducing a separate process.

- Narrative: Write a short story inspired by the artwork. Afterward, identify the visual details that shaped important choices in the story.
- Object Monologue: Choose one object from the artwork and write from its point of view. Explain which visual details influenced the voice or perspective you created.
- Visual Analysis: Explain how one or two artistic choices - such as color, shape, : composition, or scale - contribute to an interpretation of the artwork.

TRANSFER - Application to Reading (15 minutes)

- Make the connection to reading explicit rather than assuming students will transfer the routine on their own. Display a short poem, paragraph, or literary excerpt connected to a theme or idea raised by the artwork, such as perspective, change, identity, fragmentation, or seeing familiar things differently. Do not introduce a new comprehension protocol.
- Students apply the same three prompts to the written text:
    - NOTICE: What words, phrases, images, patterns, or details stand out?

- INTERPRET: What might those details suggest?
- SUPPORT: What in the text makes you say that? How does the evidence support your interpretation?

- After students respond, ask: “What was similar about the thinking you used to interpret the artwork and the thinking you used to interpret the written text?”
- Emphasize: “The art helped us make the thinking visible. When we read, we use the same meaning-making routine: notice relevant details, interpret what they might mean, and support the interpretation with evidence from the text.”

Reflection

- Students complete:
  - One important detail I NOTICED was…
  - I INTERPRETED that detail to mean…
  - The evidence that best SUPPORTED my interpretation was... because…
  - When I TRANSFERRED the routine to the written text, I…

Assessment

Formative

- Teacher listens and looks for whether students can:
  - NOTICE specific, relevant details before interpreting
  - INTERPRET those details in a plausible way using relevant knowledge and vocabulary
  - SUPPORT an interpretation with specific evidence
  - Explain how the evidence supports the interpretation and apply the routine to a written text

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Summative

- Students submit a brief evidence-based interpretation of the artwork using NOTICE → INTERPRET → SUPPORT and a short response showing how they applied the same routine to the written text.

Assessment Rubric

Criteria	Advanced	Proficient	Developing
NOTICE	Identifies specific, significant details and artistic choices.	Identifies relevant details.	Identifies few or vague details.
INTERPRET	Develops a thoughtful, plausible interpretation connected to details and relevant knowledge.	Develops a reasonable interpretation connected to details.	Interpretation is unclear or weakly connected to details.
SUPPORT	Uses specific evidence and clearly explains how it supports the interpretation.	Uses relevant evidence and explains the connection.	Uses limited evidence or does not explain the connection.
TRANSFER	Independently applies NOTICE → INTERPRET → SUPPORT to a written text.	Applies the routine to a written text with appropriate evidence.	Needs support applying the routine to a written text.

Closure

- Return to the opening question: “How can a work of art function like a text?”
- Students complete: “Artwork can be read like a text because...” Possible responses:

    - Artists communicate ideas through choices and details
    - Viewers can interpret those details
    - Different interpretations can be possible
    - Evidence helps us explain and defend our thinking
- “Today we used Elizabeth Murray’s artwork to make meaning-making visible. We noticed details, developed interpretations, and supported our thinking with evidence. Then we transferred that same routine to written language. The medium changed, but the habit of evidence-based meaning-making remained.”

Connection to the Joy2Learn “Reading Beyond the Page” Professional Development

This lesson follows the core meaning-making routine introduced in the Joy2Learn professional development mini-workshop.

PD Framework	Classroom Application
NOTICE	Students closely observe Elizabeth Murray’s artwork and identify specific visual details and artistic choices before deciding what they mean.
INTERPRET	Students construct plausible meanings by connecting noticed details with relevant knowledge and vocabulary.
SUPPORT	Students identify visual evidence and explain how that evidence supports an interpretation in discussion and writing.
TRANSFER	After practicing the core routine with art, students explicitly apply NOTICE → INTERPRET → SUPPORT to a written text.

Teacher Notes

- Keep the core routine visible throughout the lesson and return to the same language repeatedly: NOTICE → INTERPRET → SUPPORT. Discussion and writing are not additional steps; they are ways students communicate and refine the thinking generated by the routine.
- Encourage multiple interpretations when they are grounded in the artwork. The goal is not to identify one “correct” meaning, but to develop an interpretation that can be supported with specific evidence.
- Use arts vocabulary and background knowledge when they help students notice and interpret more precisely, but avoid turning them into additional steps. Terms such as composition, perspective, symbolism, mood, and emphasis can be introduced in context as students need them.
- Treat TRANSFER as an explicit instructional bridge, not as a fourth meaning-making step. Students should actually apply NOTICE → INTERPRET → SUPPORT to a written text before the lesson ends. This keeps the arts experience connected to the ELA goal of reading comprehension rather than positioning art as a replacement for reading.
- This reflects the central message of the revised “Reading Beyond the Page” professional development: The arts provide a context for making evidence-based meaning-making visible; explicit transfer brings that thinking back to reading.

NOTICE → INTERPRET → SUPPORT | TRANSFER → WRITTEN TEXT