

Sensory Visualization: A Writing Strategy for Students

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Abstract

This paper describes the use of a Sensory Visualization strategy to engage secondary pre-service teachers in a writing activity integrating current or historical events through the modality of the senses. Students write papers from the viewpoint of a person in an event after viewing a photograph or illustration of the event.

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Amazingly, very few of my secondary pre-service teachers - with the exception of a few history majors - are familiar with "The Little Rock Nine" and the effort to desegregate the nation's schools. As a writing exercise in my content literacy class, I pull visuals of current or historical events and invite students to write using a strategy called Sensory Visualization. Students in the classes represent a wide range of disciplines - art, English, history, physical education, technology, and science to name a few. I have used visuals such as newspaper photographs of local sports events, Hurricane Katrina, and most recently, the devastating tornado in Joplin, Missouri.

Students are each given a worksheet with the categories of Sight, Sound, Taste, Touch, Smell and Emotions printed on it. Then as a visual is presented to the class, they are asked to select one person in the illustration or photograph to focus on. Beneath each category, they write words or phrases depicting their thoughts from that person's point of view. For the assignment on the "Little Rock Nine," I presented a picture from TIME magazine (2007, September 20) of Elizabeth Eckford with the jeering crowd as she attempted to enter Little Rock Central High School. Although students took the roles of different people in the photograph, the majority - male and female alike - chose the position of Elizabeth Eckford. Examples of entries under Sight, included "No one around to help me," "mean and angry expressions," "people yelling," and "school building," For Touch, "hot and sweaty from being in the sun," "sweat rolling down my back." For Taste, "dry mouth from the sun." For Smell, "perfume," "cigarette smoke" and for Sound, "yelling," "chanting," "screaming." An example of one student's entry is shown (Figure 1).

From their lists of words or phrases, they wrote a letter to a friend or relative or a Dear Diary entry from the perspective of their chosen person. An example is shown on of one student's entry (Figure 2). Some of the students chose to read their papers to the class after first pointing to the picture of the person about whom they wrote. At the conclusion of class, the instructor collected all papers.

Following presentations of their writings by volunteers, we discussed the culture of the 50's related to the African-American scene. The class was amazed by the treatment of African-Americans during that time and was able to empathize and also enhance their writing skills through participation in the Sensory Visualization strategy.

Figure 1. Example of Sensory Visualization Worksheet

Sight

1. Shaded light
2. The ground in front of me

Taste

1. The perspiration on my upper lip

Smell

1. People
2. Perfume of the women around her

Sound

1. People talking
2. Woman yelling

Touch

1. The feel of my books in my arms
2. Sun beating down on my head

Emotions

1. Crowded
2. Confused
3. Angry
4. Hated and Alone

Figure 2. Example of Writing Exercise for Sensory Visualization

Dear Cousin,

Why do people have to be so mean? Today as I was walking to school a crowd followed me. I don't understand why people hate me so much. Just because my skin is a different color from theirs they think I'm second class and don't deserve to go to school with their kids. I just kept waling and kept my head down. One woman in particular was shouting at me to get out of town. I don't think everyone felt the way she did, but no one was willing to speak up to defend me. It was so hot with the sun beating down on my head and the people crowding around, I just wish everyone would go away. I wish you were here so I wouldn't be so alone.

Elizabeth

References

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