

Part 4: Concepts, themes and issues

This fourth part of the series focuses on concepts, themes and issues and includes three lesson ideas. Please be aware that some of the issues touched on in these lesson plans might not be suitable for your students. You can avoid certain issues by using different pieces of art to base your lesson on.

Imagine a trip to a gallery. Piled into one of the corners of one of the rooms is a large mound of sweets in colourful wrappers spilling out across the floor. A guard approaches you and invites you to take a sweet. What do you think? What do you do?

You later find out that the installation weighs 79.4 kilograms – the same weight as the artist's partner, Ross, before he died of AIDS in 1991. The pile is replenished regularly – more sweets are added to replace the ones which have been removed.

Art like this can work well in the classroom. First of all, in order to appreciate the installation, students would need an explanation. During exhibitions, the artist, Félix González-Torres, would get to know the gallery guards and talk to them about his work in the hope that they would then pass on this information to visitors. In the language classroom, the explanation can come from either the teacher or from a text.

Secondly, the social or political themes that an artist chooses to work with might be ones that a teacher wishes to address with his or her students. For example, the work of the Cuban-born artist mentioned above is often thought to reflect his experience of being HIV positive. This point may be particularly relevant for teachers working in a CLIL context (i.e. those who teach language in conjunction with other subjects – biology or social education, for example).

Finally, contemporary or conceptual art may challenge pre-conceived ideas of what art actually is. Or it may give rise to issues for discussion and debate such as controversy, censorship and commercialism in art – all great for the communicative language classroom.

The following three lesson ideas exploit these three levels: explaining an installation, addressing social or political themes and discussing controversies relating to the concept of art.

Lesson idea 1: *Wrapped coast*

Christo and Jeanne-Claude are well known for their impressive environmental installations such as temporarily wrapping the Reichstag in Berlin in fabric or surrounding eleven islands in Miami's Biscayne Bay with over half a million square metres of pink polypropylene.

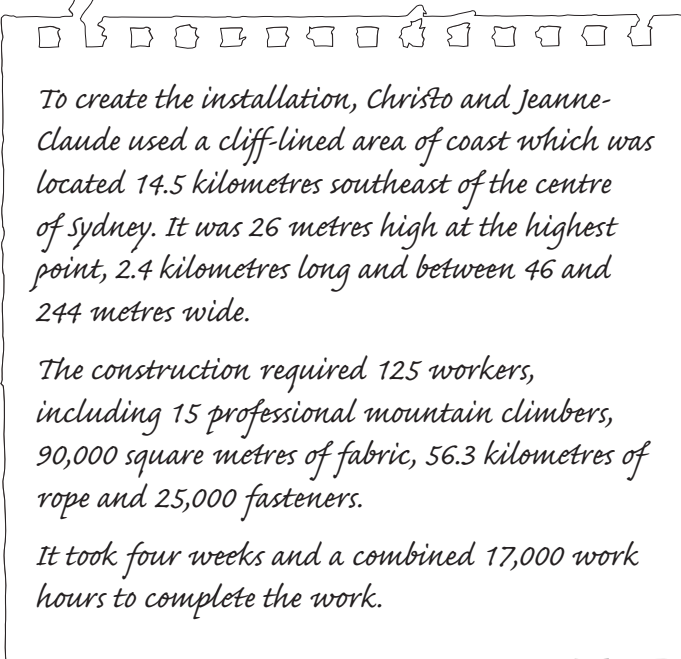
There are a lot of possibilities for using images of their work in class and many of these can be seen at their website, <http://www.christojeanneclaude.net>.

This lesson idea uses one of their pieces of work, *Wrapped coast*, which can be seen at <http://www.christojeanneclaude.net/projects/wrapped-coast>. This activity will allow students to practise listening to and writing down large numbers

1. Start off by showing students a photograph of Christo and Jeanne-Claude and asking them to guess what sort of art they create. There is a photograph of the couple at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christo_and_Jeanne-Claude
2. Tell your students that you have a photograph of one of their installations that was created in 1969. Tell them that, before you show it to them, you are going to dictate all of the ingredients that were used to construct it.
3. Write any potentially problematic vocabulary from the passage below on the board and make sure that your students are familiar with it, for example:
 - *cliff-lined*
 - *coast*
 - *fabric*
 - *fastener*

Part 4: Concepts, themes and issues

4. Dictate the following passage slowly and repeat the figures as often as your students require:



To create the installation, Christo and Jeanne-Claude used a cliff-lined area of coast which was located 14.5 kilometres southeast of the centre of Sydney. It was 26 metres high at the highest point, 2.4 kilometres long and between 46 and 244 metres wide.

The construction required 125 workers, including 15 professional mountain climbers, 90,000 square metres of fabric, 56.3 kilometres of rope and 25,000 fasteners.

It took four weeks and a combined 17,000 work hours to complete the work.

5. Allow students to compare what they have written.
6. Ask students if they can imagine what the installation looked like. Perhaps you could ask them to make quick sketches.
7. Finally show students a photograph of the *Wrapped coast*.
8. Find out what your students think of the work and, if necessary, direct them to the website mentioned above where Christo and Jeanne-Claude discuss answers to common questions about their work.

Some other examples of contemporary or modern art which could be used in similar ways include:

- *House* by Rachel Whiteread – <http://www.youtube.com/watch?gl=ES&hl=es&v=MEtsYIIIfkw>
- *The Treachery of Images* by René Magritte – http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Treachery_Of_Images

Lesson idea 2: Global warming

Note: Spencer Tunick's images, as well as the YouTube clip about the creation of the Swiss glacier photo, contain groups of naked people. Please use this material only if you are confident that students are going to be comfortable with the content.

Spencer Tunick is best known for his installations that feature large numbers of nude people posed in urban locations. In August 2007, Tunick collaborated with Greenpeace and persuaded 600 volunteers to pose naked on a Swiss glacier.



Photo Session for a Greenpeace Campaign on the Aletsch Glacier
© Laurent Gillieron/epa/Corbis

This lesson idea looks at how art can be used to bring a theme into the classroom – in this case, climate change. You will need:

- access to YouTube in class so you can watch this clip:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NuY7hHJdhCQ>
- a copy of this Guardian article
- for each student:
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/aug/19/artnews.art>

1. Put students into pairs or small groups.
2. Tell them that they are going to see a video clip with the sound turned down. In their pairs or groups, they should decide the following:
 - What is happening?
 - Where is it happening?
 - Why is it happening?
3. Let everyone share and compare their ideas.
4. Tell students that you are going to give them an article that explains all. Give out copies of the article and ask students to read it as quickly as possible to find out the answers to the three questions.
5. Ask students if they would volunteer to pose nude on a Swiss glacier in the name of art.
6. Write these words on the board:

carbon	dioxide	warming
effect	environmental	footprint
global	fossil	sea
caps	fuels	gas
glacier	carbon	climate
greenhouse	greenhouse	ice
ice	age	levels
policy	change	retreat

Part 4: Concepts, themes and issues

Ask the students to arrange these words so they form 12 word pairs that are related to global warming.

Answers:

carbon dioxide, carbon footprint, climate change, environmental policy, fossil fuels, glacier retreat, global warming, greenhouse effect, greenhouse gas, ice age, ice caps, sea levels

7. Go over the answers and ask the students if they can explain what each of them means.
8. Alternatively, for homework, ask students to write a definition for each item.

Lesson idea 3: But is it art?



Untitled 1966 © 1998 Kate Rothko Prizel & Christopher Rothko ARS, NY and DACS, London 2010

For this activity, you will need to compile a slideshow of contemporary or modern art images to show your students. Choose pieces that challenge the definition of what art actually is. Any of the works that have been mentioned above may work well for this. You could also choose any of the following:

- *Fountain* by Marcel Duchamp – [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fountain_\(Duchamp\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fountain_(Duchamp))
- *One and three chairs* by Joseph Kosuth – http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/One_and_Three_Chairs
- a Mark Rothko piece (a copy of one of his paintings is attached at the end of the article)
- anything by Joseph Beuys – <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beuys>
- short-listed entries from any year's Turner Prize – <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/turner-prize>
- a photograph of a piece of graffiti from the town that you share with your students
- a photograph of any controversial piece of local public art

Note: For instructions on using image search engines, go to this article on onestopenglish: <http://www.onestopenglish.com/section.asp?catid=59439&docid=155387>.

1. Tell your students that you are going to show them a number of art images. Tell them that you want them to give each piece a mark out of ten, which should correspond to how much they like it.
2. Show the slideshow slowly.
3. Play the slideshow a second time and for each image, find out who gave it the highest and lowest marks.
4. Focus on the students who have given the lowest marks. Find out if they can say what they dislike about the pieces on display. Try to pull others into the conversation if possible.
5. Ask everyone to do one of the following tasks:
 - Write a definition for the word *art*.
 - Write a brief description of the sort of art you like.
 - Write a brief description of the sort of art you don't like.
6. Allow students to compare and share their ideas.

7. Dictate the following quotations and ask students if they agree or disagree with them

"Imagination without skill gives us public art." (Tom Stoppard)

"There is no such thing as modern art. There is art – and there is advertising." (Albert Sterner)

"A picture has been said to be something between a thing and a thought." (Samuel Palmer)

"To the accountants, a true work of art is an investment that hangs on the wall." (Hilary Alexander)

"The job of the artist is always to deepen the mystery." (Francis Bacon)

"Art is a marriage of the conscious and the unconscious." (Jean Cocteau)

"Public art is the art that the public can't avoid." (George Wyllie)

The next article will look at personal perspectives and meaning.

INTEGRATED SKILLS IMAGE



Photo Session for a Greenpeace Campaign on the Aletsch Glacier © Laurent Gillieron/epa/Corbis



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