

Sock Toy Project
Fall 2017
South Albany High School
Albany, Oregon

Focus Grade and Subject Level: Sophomore English Class

Core Text: *Night* by Elie Wiesel

Supplementary Text: *Let the Celebrations Begin!* By Margaret Wild and Julie Vivas

Essential Question: How do patterns of behavior influence our ability to succeed when we face fear?

Materials: Pair of socks, buttons, thread, needles, stuffing, ribbon, Sharpies, googly eyes, scissors, hot glue guns, miscellaneous art supplies, sandwich bags for storage, Beanie Baby-style gift cards.

Description of Project: After learning about the Japanese American Internment Camps and reading the World War II memoir *Night* by Jewish concentration camp survivor Elie Wiesel, students engaged in a reading of the picture book *Let the Celebrations Begin!* by Margaret Wild and Julie Vivas. This book, based on true events, tells the story of the women at Belsen Camp who decided to make toys out of scraps for the children believing that, even in dark times, there are ways to find joy and hope. In the spirit of Christmas, students used youtube videos and teacher-provided handouts to create sock toys to be distributed by class representatives and Elementary Mentors (an elective class) at four local elementary schools. The Mentors and class representatives read the story to their classes, ranging in grades from kindergarten to 5th grade, shared the project, and gave each student a sock toy. Upon their return, they shared their stories with the class and students wrote a reflection on the project. A step by step PowerPoint of the process used for this project is attached.

Teacher Reflection: This was a wonderful project for students, and teachers, to engage in two weeks before Christmas. It allowed us to look beyond the disturbing events of the Holocaust to embrace hope. Since the holidays can be a challenging experience for many students as they go home to difficult situations every day, it is my hope that this lesson brought some joy to them in their “dark” times as well.

Having engaged in many interdisciplinary art projects with students, I have grown into the habit of subconscious reflection before the projects begin. Anticipating that students would forget, or choose not, to bring supplies, I frequented Goodwills, other local thrift stores, and WalMart for buttons, thread, stuffing, ribbons, and any other decorative items for the sock toys. I purchased packages of socks from WalMart and sold them to students who did not bring socks of their own but wished to make a toy at cost. (Two students paid it forward the Friday before Winter Break by asking who in their class had not paid and covering their costs...this was an extra special gift to their teacher who knew that the

spirit of giving had touched their hearts.)

One lesson I learned in the course of this project was that many students have not grown up with what I consider basic skills...like threading a needle and tying a knot. This is something I will begin the lesson with next year. I also discovered that our handouts (as this was a shared project with another English teacher) describing how to make three different sock toys needed to be more explicit. While some students were able to look at the image of the sock toy and recreate it, or take the more complex directions for the sock monkey and piece it together, many would have benefited from more explicit, step-by-step instructions. We found some good videos on youtube of sock snowmen, at least one of which required no sewing skills. While I like the fact that many students now know how to thread a needle properly and sew on a button, more students would probably have completed their sock toy on time had they worked with a step-by-step video. In addition, the snowmen only require one sock allowing students to share a pair.

As my classroom evolves into more and more of an integrated English/Arts classroom, I also need to take time to organize the large space I was given this year to function efficiently. Sharing supplies between two English classes for seven periods each day meant that things got messy and things got lost. Needles especially were elusive. (We took to sweeping our own floors at the end of the day to round up stray buttons and these slim, silver objects.) As class periods are 50 minutes long, I resist losing time to clean-up in most cases. (I would rather do it myself during break, lunch, or after school than have students milling around at the door because clean-up to them meant class is over.) I realize, however, that this is an important part of projects and students need to learn to take responsibility for keeping their space clean. Routines and clean-up change depending on the art project, but clean-up is definitely something that I want to work on efficiently integrating into that routine.

Finally, while it is more time-intensive and sometimes stressful, the joy of working with other teachers who share my vision provides me with a huge adrenaline rush. My English 10 teaching partner and Elementary Mentor/Social Studies teaching partner made this project possible. Without the E.M. contact especially, we would not have had classrooms readily available to us and transportation to the four different elementary schools. Because of the relationships the mentor students had built with their respective classrooms, students were able to effectively share the story of another group of children in another time who were given handmade toys in celebration of childhood.

Student Reflections:

“I see a connection [between Elie’s story and *Let the Celebrations Begin!*] by the fact that they both are just holding on by a thread - Elie trying to survive and the women trying to find joy in making toys for the kids in the camp out of the little that they had. Art helps us know how hard it was to make toys for the kids in the camps. It was so hard trying to make these toys and trying to do it when, in a concentration camp, it must have been super hard for them to do that for the kids.”

“I see how that maybe if the Jews would’ve had just a little joy it might have helped them. Same thing goes for the kindergarten kids maybe going through some rough times, and these toys can help them. [Art] helped me open my eyes that the little things do make a difference. After seeing the kid that got my toy look so happy and actually love the thing that I wasn’t expecting someone to like is pretty cool. I hope they learned that they should give and they should remember the feeling they had and they should want to make others feel that way.”

[This project] shows us what people would do to see kids smile after such hard times.”

“A connection I saw between the project and Elie’s story is that, in the book, they did not have regular toys so they had to make things out of scratch like we did for the project. Art shows us how things were back then. The way it shows us is how we made toys out of socks, string, etc. I hope elementary [students] learn that you don’t have to have expensive toys to have fun.”

“In Elie’s time, during the camps, I’m sure there were kids that made and had sock toys. For some of them, it was probably all they really had. At least to call theirs. The sock toys are now history and are a way we can connect to what happened. [Art] helps us visually understand all they had. It helps me think about how prized the toy must have been to them and how it was probably one of the only things they had for comfort. I hope the elementary school students learn some history from it and learn to appreciate what they have and that they live now instead of back then.”

“The connection between the project and Elie’s story is they’re both connected to Jewish culture and concentration camps. Creating the toy helps us understand the hard work the ladies went through to make the toys for the little Jewish kids. What the little kids learned was how emotional it was for the people at the concentration camps. They also learned how cool it is to get a sock toy. (All the kids in my class were so excited, loved the toys, and were very thankful for them.) This project was lots of fun and the kid I read with in elementary mentor at Lafayette loved his sock and gave me a hug. Also other kids hugged us because of how much loved they felt to have those toys.”

“I think creating toys and giving them to the little kids was a great way to understand that the simplest things can change a kids whole experience.”