

Norman Rockwell's *Moving Day*: Inspiring Conversations and Stories

By **Lynda LeBlanc**, English and French teacher (USA) and Fulbright Roving Scholar in Norway 2024-25 and **Virginia (Gini) Lockhart-Pedersen**, Associate Professor, The Norwegian National Centre for English and other Foreign Languages in Education, Halden

Imagine you and your pupils looking closely at a slide of Norman Rockwell's painting *Moving Day*. No words crowd the slide, only a photo of the painting. Following a few minutes of silence and close inspection of Rockwell's masterpiece, you pose a few questions. You want to heighten the pupils' observation skills and then use those observations to help create a text. You continue with the following questions:

Moving Day (New Kids in the Neighborhood)
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- *Who do you see in the picture? Who is not shown in the picture?*
- *As you look carefully at the picture, what sounds might you hear coming from inside the moving van? What sounds might you hear outside the moving van?*
- *There are five children in the painting. Notice how the children are standing. Notice the children's faces. What might they be thinking?*
- *Notice the children's hands. What is each child holding? Why are they holding those items?*
- *Notice how each of the children is dressed. What might those clothes tell you about the children?*

Conflict is fundamental to storytelling and not limited to any one genre. Whether in crime fiction, romance, or fantasy, conflict generates drama and keeps the audience engaged (Ware & Young, 2010, p.214). So, you continue the conversation with your pupils:

- *Now, look carefully at the painting again. What conflicts do you see?*

Thus begins a condensed version of an English lesson that can be easily tailored for learners from primary school to college. This interactive lesson has been used at all levels throughout the Østfold region as well as with teachers at the Day of Language Conference held by the Norwegian National Centre for English and other Foreign Languages in Education in September 2024. In every workshop

and class, we have observed engaged learners and participants using the activities to help develop essential English language competences. The framework of using observation, questioning, and pupil-led choices to create dialogues and stories can be viewed as a foundation for an inquiry-based approach to teaching and learning English.

Visual Arts, Learner Engagement

In their research, Amirullah et al. (2022) posit that visual arts encourage learners to speak due to the pleasure learners gain from art activities. Amirullah maintains that "when combined with speaking, art can open doors for high levels of analysis and also challenge students to explore themselves and their surroundings and thus find opportunities for sophisticated comprehension and communication (p. 1)." The experiences we have gathered from various workshops and classroom lessons using the painting *Moving Day* mirrors Amirullah's claims. In a primary school class, two fourth graders created a written story they read aloud to the class about the older white girl trying to intimidate the young black girl holding the white cat. In their story, the younger girl refuses to tolerate the unkind remarks and even tries to build a friendship. Two boys in the same class created a story around the common interest of playing baseball to build a friendship between the black newcomer and one of the white neighborhood boys. This painting invites young and mature learners alike to look closely at the painting, articulate a possible storyline,

and share orally or in writing the stories they create.

Marilena Bevilacqua Martello's dissertation (2017) on the use of visual arts in world language instruction reinforces Amirullah's findings that learners tend to enjoy lessons that include visual arts, that interesting artwork heightens learners' curiosity, and, as such, encourages them to get actively involved in the activity and take risks in the language. She adds that learners tend to enjoy active participation such as dialogue presentations (Martello, p. 14). In our workshops, learners and teachers alike volunteered to share with partners and with the full class, showing active participation and risk-taking with their language. Curiosity, participation, and risk-taking are core skills necessary for inquiry-based learning (Gholam, 2019; Öztürk et al., 2022). Teachers using inquiry-based approaches must provide learning situations where these skills can be practiced.

Elements of an Inquiry-based Approach: Frameworks, Choices, and Agency

Our workshops on Rockwell's *Moving Day* include both written and oral dialogues and longer one-paragraph stories. Assessment criteria for the assignments can be adapted according to grade level and the expected product, but two requirements have been present in all our workshops: the learners need to identify a conflict and two characters from the painting are used in the story or dialogue. Giving learners a

clear framework that also allows for choice and creativity facilitates a classroom for inquiry learning.

Due to the short time allotted for many of the workshops and classroom visits, we did not provide background information on Norman Rockwell, nor did we share the historical importance of this painting. With more time, teachers can expand the lesson by encouraging learners to ask real-world questions about the painting and explore more complex story lines for their dialogues. On the other hand, this lesson can be easily adapted for situations with time constraints, which is the reality for many schoolteachers. The framework of the lesson is quite simple: the lesson begins with a combination of gazing at *Moving Day* and teacher-guided questions and continues so that learners look critically at the painting and briefly engage with it. Language support is added by visualizing words and phrases in front of the classroom. The written or oral task is then presented with the parameters of requiring a conflict and using characters from the painting. Pairs or groups of learners discuss possible conflicts and dialogues. This conversation and the words and phrases gathered during the conversation give many language learners the support needed to create the final text.

Not surprisingly, some learners may link their stories to personal experiences and include prior knowledge. For example, learners with pets may focus on stories that

include the cat or the dog. Sports-minded learners may write conversations about baseball. In one classroom from our experience, a pair of young boys included in their conversation that the baseball glove held by the newcomer belonged to Jackie Robinson, the first African American to play in Major League Baseball. Using art and the flexibility of choice creates a situation of ownership of the text.

Learners in this inquiry-based art and language lesson investigate their own interests and cultivate their creativity by writing a conversation about what they imagine occurring between two characters in the painting; this activity forces learners to communicate ideas with fellow group members and actively listen to other's ideas. In the final product, it is the characters who speak, not the learners themselves. This role-playing-like oral activity can encourage many learners to explore new ideas and practice new vocabulary without being nervous about saying something silly, ridiculous, or incorrect (Kjær, 2024, p.44). Finally, in this lesson, the learners, not the teacher, are the experts on the story they have created. The sense of pupil ownership and agency are a fundamental element in any inquiry-based approach (Gholam, 2019, p.117).

Identifying language learning

Below is an example dialogue from one of our workshops, created after looking at the painting *Moving Day*:

Suzie (young white girl): We live in this neighborhood.

Tony (young black girl): We live here too.

Suzie: Yes, but we've lived here longer. You don't belong here.

Tony: My cat likes it here.

Suzie: What did your cat say to you?

Tony: She said the people here are nice. What do you think? Is my cat right?

Suzie: No. Maybe. I don't know. I don't want to answer that question right now. What else did your cat say?

Tony: She said there might be some problems about her being white and different from how the other cats in the neighborhood look, but that the people here would see that she's still a nice cat.

As the example shows, the learners use the language in the practical task in the form of a dialogue, but it also shows the lesson helps learners understand the story elements of characters and conflict, including conflict about societal issues such as inclusion and prejudice. Through the interaction between Suzie and Tony, the learner addresses the tension of being new in a community while highlighting underlying biases. The learner's use of the cat as a metaphor introduces a creative way to discuss acceptance and diversity in a less threatening manner, revealing a communicative and intercultural competence teachers work towards in their English classrooms.

This example underscores how the approach may allow learners to explore language in a context that requires them to analyze, synthesize, and communicate nuanced ideas, thus deepening their understanding of both language and content.

Closing remarks

Through art, observation, and guided questions, the above inquiry-based approach shows how pupils, students, and teachers can be encouraged to investigate the details of the painting *Moving Day* by Norman Rockwell and use their personal experiences to inspire conversations and stories. The approach highlights purposeful observations, guiding questions and frameworks for individual choices. The process and products inspire pupils to express themselves orally and in writing, displaying oral and written, communicative and intercultural competences.

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