Sculpture Inspires Chicago-Area Students

Each year, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), in association with the National Writing Project, presents the James Moffett Memorial Award at the annual NCTE convention. Through this award, grants of up to $1,000 are given to one or more kindergarten through university classroom educators, to support teacher research projects inspired by the work of James Moffett.

This is the second in a series of three articles in The Voice that take a look back at last year’s Moffett Award honorees and feature each of the winning project proposals. How did each of the three projects turn out, and what did students learn from them? Can they be replicated elsewhere?

In this issue, we look at teacher Judith Ruhana’s art interpretation project. Ruhana, a teacher-consultant with the Chicago Area Writing Project, took advantage of the Skokie Northshore Sculpture Park as a means to expose her middle school students to high-level thinking about art.

BY JUDITH RUHANA

Winning the James Moffett Memorial Award in November 2001 was the thrill of a lifetime. The national recognition the award provided was a fulfilling culmination of over 20 years of teaching. But specifically, the award gave me a chance to pursue a project that I had been interested in for three years.

On the edge of my city—Evanston, Illinois—and less than one mile from my school is a wonderful resource: the Skokie Northshore Sculpture Park, with over 50 outdoor sculptures. My project involved small-group studies of sculptures—one per group—chosen from the park by the students. The components of the project were multidisciplinary and involved multiple ways to indicate learning and high-level interpretation of art. The components of this project were as follows:

- A photographic impression of both the sculpture and the group
- An artistic representation of the sculpture in a medium closely resembling that of the original
- A written impression of the sculpture by each group member in any form: i.e., poetry, song, description, short story
- A journal record of the group and how it worked
- An original creative element
- A visual presentation of all the elements presented on poster board
- An oral presentation of the project at a special Team Night for parents.

At the time of my project, I taught in an urban middle school, Nichols Middle School, and my language arts classes were a mix of over 100 seventh and eighth grade students from diverse racial backgrounds. About one-third of my students were on free or reduced lunch, and about one-third of them did not own their own computers. When I had attempted this project previously, I found that the results were uneven because of the socioeconomic disparity of my students: the students with computer systems and money available to them did significantly better than those with fewer resources. What the Moffett Award did was to even the playing field economically so that all students had equal access to resources that would enhance their presentations and projects.

The resources provided by the grant for each group of students were as follows: a disposable camera and film processing; a journal; general art supplies; $10 for each group to spend as they wished on their projects; and the cost of buses to transport the students to and from the park.

Preparation

With a little help from me, the students arranged themselves in groups in my language arts classes and spent a week preparing for their day at the park. We had some posters and books from the first time I had tried this with students, so this group could see a model. I reserved the computer lab for my classes for the week following the project and enlisted the services of other teachers to help explain how to artistically plan for the poster presentation, how to best use cameras and video equipment, and how to work effectively in groups.

We also had to plan out the technical resources we would take with us on the day we visited the park. In addition to the resources the grant provided, the students were able to sign out video equipment and a digital camera from the school’s equipment supply. Some students brought additional equipment from home. As a happy benefit of my involvement in designing

Left to right: A group of students from Moffett Award-winner Judith Ruhana’s class with the sculpture, Snow Blind, that they chose for their group study; preparing the presentation; and the final project.
On the Project at Last
It was a rainy day in May when all 100 of us loaded into the buses and headed for the park. With rubrics, cameras, journals, sketchpads, and lunches in hand, we spent four hours gathering data for the project. First, the students were required to view all the sculptures in a one-mile stretch of the park and then come to me with their choices. This worked well, and soon the groups were settled around their sculptures for photos and study. Amazingly, no one was absent, and all participated actively.

When we returned to school, we used the cafeteria to continue the group meetings and planning. Students were also given one week of class time in my room to get their work ready for the Team Night. There were 25 projects, and all of them were exemplary in some way: the art, the written work, the journaling, the poster presentation, or the oral presentation. There were PowerPoint presentations, overhead presentations, video shows, musical accompaniment, and even a dance. One group presented their work in Spanish and English; another in sign language and the spoken word; another with instrumental interpretations. Every student brought at least one family member to the Team Night. One of the artists whose work was in the park came because a group invited him to do so.

Several things astounded me about this project: the students were serious about their work and enjoyed the chance to be assessed on a wide variety of elements; they were brutally honest in the self-examination of how they worked as a group; and they exceeded all expectations I had for their ability to creatively interpret a work of art in more than one medium. Because access to resources was equal, the presentations were even. Sure, some of them were absolutely amazing and some just met the standard, but it wasn’t because some students had resources that others didn’t have.

Ironically, I will not be a part of this project again because I have a new job at a new school: English department chair at Evanston Township High School (EETHS). But I take with me the memory of how supported I felt by winning the grant; the excitement of the awards ceremony at the NCTE convention in Milwaukee; the enthusiasm of my students—all 100 of them—on that rainy day in May and during the weeks that followed. In my office at ETHS, the James Moffett Memorial Award certificate hangs on my wall and three of the sculptures, as recreated by my students, sit on my shelf. This project was what good teaching and exciting learning is all about.

Thank you, James.

Judith Ruhana left teaching language arts at the middle school level to become the chair of the English department at Evanston Township High School in Evanston, Illinois. She continues her contact with the Chicago Area Writing Project and has begun to write a novel—as all English teachers are inclined to do—titled The Bone China Luncheons.

Reminder of a Great Opportunity: Apply for the 2002 Moffett Award
It is time once again to encourage colleagues—and perhaps yourself—to put together an application for the James Moffett Memorial Award. As The Voice reported in its last issue, applications for this annual award, given by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) in conjunction with the National Writing Project, are due April 1, 2002.

At the core of the James Moffett Memorial Award is a grant to support teacher research projects inspired by the scholarship of James Moffett. Each proposed project must display an explicit connection to the work of James Moffett and should both enhance the applicant’s teaching by serving as a source of professional development and be of interest and value to other educators. All kindergarten through university classroom educators who teach at least three hours or three classes per day are eligible to apply for the grant, and proposals on which two or more educators have collaborated are also welcome. Briefly, each application must include:

- a cover page
- a proposal of not more than five double-spaced pages that includes an introduction and rationale for the work; a description of the explicit connection to the work of James Moffett; initial objectives for the study; a focused project description that includes a timeline; a method of evaluating the project; and a narrative budget
- a letter of support from someone familiar with the applicant’s teaching and perceived ability to implement and assess the proposed project

Complete details on the award and applications for it can be found in the November-December 2001 issue of The Voice or by contacting Laura Johnston at NCTE (phone: 800/369-6283, email: ljohanson@ncte.org).