

Join Matt and Laura as they chat with Trevor Bryan, author of the Art of Comprehension, about bringing the arts into the classroom and fostering meaningful conversations around art.

Announcer 1: You're listening to the Creatively Connected Classroom Podcast, episode number 37.

Announcer 2: Welcome to the Creatively Connected Podcast from EducationCloset. Connecting teachers and ideas one glue stick at a time. Here's your hosts and K12ArtChat founders, Matt and Laura Grundler.

Matt: Hey, everybody. This is Matt and Laura Grundler. Welcome to another episode of the Creatively Connected Classroom. We are with another amazing host-

Laura: They're all amazing.

Matt: They are.

Laura: I love our guests, because I feel like they're good friends of ours and we always get to learn such amazing things from them. Welcome, Trevor Bryan.

Trevor: Oh my gosh. Thank you so much for having me. I'm glad it finally came together.

Laura: We're very excited to have you. We've been fans of yours for such a long time.

Trevor: Likewise.

Laura: We were super excited that you released your first book this year.

Matt: The Art of Comprehension.

Laura: The Art of Comprehension. Super exciting. We would love it if you could just start by telling the audience a little bit about yourself, your educational background, and your mission.

Matt: Just kind of where you are and all that.

Trevor: I've been an art educator for 20 years. I went into art education with the mission of trying to bring the arts into the academic arena. That's where I started. I

realized very quickly that I didn't necessarily have the tools to discuss art the way that I wanted to with my students and colleagues, with people who didn't have necessarily the art background that I did or the art training that I did. That quickly became my second mission. I had a really great experience with the arts growing up. I grew up 20 minutes outside of New York City, so I saw lots of museum shows. I saw Broadway shows. In high school, we went to the Shakespearean Theater at Drew University where my brother went. I saw lots of Shakespeare.

Trevor: It was almost instinctual that the arts could play a larger role in education. I thought they were underutilized. I thought there was a real power in my art education that just wasn't recognized or seen in the academic aspect of schools. That was my mission going in. Like I said, I hit a little bit of a brick wall in terms of my ability to discuss art the way that I wanted to. So, I went on a mission to find a better way of talking about art and discussing art with people who didn't have the background that I did or a lot of my art major friends did. That's where I wound up with the Art of Comprehension.

Trevor: About 10 years into my career, I started working on what became the Art of Comprehension, which came out in 2019. I started doing that work around 2010 with two colleagues, Justin Dolci and Donna Donner, who are two ELA teachers. We found a way that not only allowed me to bring arts into the ELA classroom in a really meaningful, efficient, effective manner, but it also produced just wonderful conversations about art. Part of the whole thing with this book and with this project was it allowed me to bring the joy that the arts brought to my life and to share that with my students and with my colleagues who didn't have the experience I did.

Laura: Gives me the warm fuzzies. It does. Clearly, we believe in arts integration and the power of the arts to impact learning, not just in the art room. Correct me if I'm wrong, but you've also taught English, as well as art. No?

Trevor: No, I didn't. When I was going into teaching, I did consider being an English teacher, and I was really comfortable with ELA and that aspect of it, but I never taught it. When I graduated college as an art major, I studied at Bank Street College of Education to become a regular ED teacher, a classroom teacher, and I just quickly realized after a year of that I missed the art room, I missed the environment. I loved the way the art room functioned and the feel of it and what was happening in it. I also realized that, as a regular education teacher, I just wasn't going to have the time to bring the arts in the way that I imagined. I ultimately just decided to go back to the art room.

Laura: From my perspective and I feel like a lot of the teachers I work with feel like it's almost hard as the art educator to break into the regular ed classroom or the English classroom or the science or social studies classroom. How do you feel you fostered that relationship to make those connections?

Trevor: The first thing, I was really fortunate to have colleagues that were receptive and open. Just to back up, when I was in sixth grade, I was probably one of the first students in New Jersey to go through the writer's workshop. That had just come into play around '86, '87. Lucy Calkins took over Teachers College. There was a woman who was good friends with my mom's best friend who brought that program into our school's district, Glen Rock. She went through the program with Ralph Fletcher, who is an icon in writer's workshop and as a writer. I'm going to be presenting with him hopefully at the NCTE conference coming up in 2019. It's like a full circle moment for me. We're going to be presenting. We haven't presented, so hopefully everything still works out. We've been accepted and all that. That's a super nice, full circle moment for me.

Trevor: I was pretty familiar with ELA going in. I just happened to be working with two colleagues who were receptive to the ideas. Donna Donner taught an inclusion class, and so that's where I started. I wound up in a reading comprehension workshop. Going back to my second mission of trying to find a better conversation about art, when I was in that workshop, the reading comprehension skills, the way that they're trying to get kids to talk about books and the methods that they had for that using reading comprehension skills, I was like, "This sounds an awful lot like the conversations that I have with my painting friends and my art friends." I thought, "Oh, we could definitely teach reading comprehension skills through artwork." I luckily found colleagues that were open to that. We tried it, and it worked.

Trevor: I think they saw the value right away, because through the visual texts, through discussing artwork, we were able to get kids who normally didn't participate in the conversation. We were hearing voices that weren't being heard. Kids were raising their hands who didn't raise their hand. We were getting the whole class community vested in the conversation. I think that the teachers that I was working with saw that value. Actually, they were able to push their conversations further through this approach. They were talking about topics that were difficult topics to talk about in their classrooms, because we based it on art, which was more accessible. Because the art of comprehension provided a structured conversation that was accessible to everybody, it allowed us to have really robust, strong conversations in those classrooms.

Laura: That's awesome.

Matt: That makes me want often wonder, because I know I made a really strong connection with one of the ELA teachers at my campus, why do you feel that the connection is so strong between the art classrooms and especially ELA? They just seem to fit so well.

Trevor: In my mind, all of it is just art. Books are works of art. We have plays, we have movies, we have fine arts, we have songs, music, and then we have books. For some reason, over time, the ELA and books have kind of gotten separated out of the pack. Really, books are an art form. Writers are artists. When we are reading books, especially literature, we are art appreciators. If you just look at it that way, it's all the same stuff. That's why I feel comfortable in the ELA world is because it's all the same. What I really believe the arts are are just a way for us to comprehend and explore a human experience. Books do that. Artwork does that. Movies do that. Plays do that. Songs do that. Music without lyrics does that. Poetry does that. Essays do that. Articles do that. I think when you start looking at it that way, it makes sense that all this stuff would fit the other really easily.

Matt: That's awesome. Your first question that you started out with during the chat was something so simple, was to have the kids when they're looking at a piece of art to write down as many different things that they see or that they can put their finger on. Why do you feel that's so strong? Why do you think that's-

Laura: The starting place.

Matt: ... a good starting place?

Trevor: From an ELA position, that's just decoding the picture. If we are to give kids a paragraph to read, we would want them to read every word before they really started talking about it, but you have to gather all the information. That's one way to look at it, is it's just a simple decoding. We want to take in all the information that the artist provided us, just like we want to take in all the information that the writer provided us. You can't just pick out a few words and think you have the meaning, because you might be missing a really important word that might flip the whole thing on its head. That's one aspect of it, is just training kids to slow down and look. I think that's an important skill. Observation, that's a common art practice.

Trevor: The other reason why that's so important is because it allows every child to participate. When I say I see black or I see green or I see a hand or a finger or an eye and I turn to the student who has the least amount of confidence and I say, "What do you see? Do you see any colors?" it allows them to come up with a correct answer in public. I think for a lot of our striving students, they don't get a lot of opportunities to provide a correct answer in public. At a very simple level, that's what that allows that

kid to do. It allows that kid to enter into the classroom community and be part of the community and be seen by his or her peers as part of that community. I think that's a really important aspect of education, is bringing everyone into the mix.

Trevor: It also helps, in that same vein, if you have ELL students by pointing out hand, dress, black, blue. It helps develop language for everybody. As simple as that first step is, that practice is, I think it goes a long way. In education, sometimes we just have a tendency to skip over those really small victories. As we all know, the small victories are sometimes the biggest victories.

Matt: The biggest ones. For sure.

Laura: Why is mood such an important component to the Art of Comprehension?

Trevor: From a humanistic point of view, I think all of our interactions are based on moods. Every decision we make is based on mood. We tell ourselves stories constantly. "What's going to go on tomorrow? Tomorrow's either going to be a great day or a hard day or a scary day or a difficult day. I have this class coming in. Oh my gosh, I feel so nervous." Everything we do functions around mood, and that's what the arts are. Every artwork is based around that because our human existence is based around how we feel about certain things, how we bond to people, how we think about situations.

Trevor: Mood becomes a really simple way for everybody to engage with in artwork, because we all understand moods. Even little kids understand moods. It becomes a really simple entry point. I truly believe after doing this for so many years that every artwork that I look at, whether it's a painting or a play or a movie or a TV show or even just thinking about my own life, the most significant moments are swathed in mood. That's how we operate as humans. At the very basis, I think that's what art does is it helps us to explore and comprehend the moods that we feel and the moods that we experience.

Matt: I think it also helps people to understand each other better, because they have something they can connect with and go, "Oh, yeah. Yesterday, my day was really bad and I know that your day is really bad." Or, "I understand where you're coming from."

Laura: If I'm reading a book or I'm looking at a work of art, I can empathize with the character or the person in the painting and say, "I know what it feels like to be sad."

Matt: Or to be made fun of.

Laura: To be made fun of.

Trevor: I just think when you look at these national moments of tragedy, what do we do? We come together. We sing songs. We create white candles, which is a visual experience. We put down flowers, which are symbols of love and hope. We have all these basically artistic actions. I really believe that one of the functions of the arts is that it fosters joy and connection, even when times or topics are difficult. Sad songs say so much... the piano player-

Laura: It's Elton John.

Trevor: Elton John.

Laura: Candle in the Wind. I mean, if you want to Elton John, there's a lot of them.

Trevor: It's what Matt was talking about, that there's this connection. Artists often times can put our emotions into some kind of accessible, concrete, symbol system, whether it's an artwork or a song or a poem, and because they've stated it and shared it as a gift to all of us, it helps us to come together and process our emotions and process our experience. I just fundamentally believe that's what the arts do; they just foster joy and connection, especially in those really difficult moments. We see it play out over and over and over again, if you look for it.

Laura: Even in just something you said earlier about having difficult conversations... I was working on a Kerry James Marshall work of art. I can't remember the title of it, but it's an African American police officer. The person that I was working on the curriculum with said, "Is this something that is okay to present in the classroom?" I said, "Well, why not? To me, it engages the high school students in a conversation that is a difficult thing going on in our society right now." To be an African American police officer in a very contentious... just seeing that, there's a lot of questions and curiosity about how does that police officer feel? How are they respected in their community? How are they respected as a police officer in that community? There's a lot of great conversation that could be really moving and help the community move forward if we have those conversations. Even in that, though, it's difficult. I mean, those are difficult conversations.

Trevor: The artwork, at least, provides a launching pad for those conversations. If you took away the artwork, it's really hard to get a conversation going without a shared experience and without some common ground. I use Peter Reynolds' artwork all the time. A lot of listeners are probably familiar with The Dot. When we look at Vashti on that first page, she has her back turned towards a blank page. A lot of times with my students, we talk about that blank page as, "What's your blank page?" We all have things that we turn our back on that are difficult, that are hard for us.

Trevor: That very simple illustration becomes a launching pad for some really serious conversations. Your blank page could be as simple as, "I'm not good at math, and I don't want to do my math homework," or, "I know my best friend has a real problem." Not so much in elementary school, but we have these real issues that that can be a launching pad, because everyone's blank page is different. At least when we share it that way, everyone knows what a blank page is and what we're talking about. When someone shares something that's a little bit more personal, we understand where they're coming from. That story shows us, when we turn and face our blank page, we can help others to turn and face their blank page.

Laura: So courageous.

Trevor: I mean, as simple as that book is, that is such a great message to share with kids and such a great message to share with adults and colleagues. Peter as an artist, as a writer, he creates a very simple story, which if we foster good viewing skills and good discussion skills around these very simple artworks, we can have a really profound change on people's lives.

Laura: Couldn't agree more. Clearly, we're fans of Peter Reynolds', too.

Trevor: to my choir.

Laura: I was just sitting here thinking about his new book, *Say Something!*, and empowering children to say something. I think that that's what your practice of the art of comprehension really does, is it empowers students to have an opinion, to develop an understanding of how to express that opinion, and have it be validated.

Trevor: Rich Czyz, who wrote *Four O'Clock Faculty* and we co-founded the *Four O'Clock Faculty* blog... I think what one of the things that bound Rich and I when we started teaching together 16 years ago was just this idea... we didn't know how to say it 16 years ago and we didn't know what we were doing 16 years ago. This idea that we're really trying to help students to find their voices and share their voices, I think that is the very basis. I think that's what ties me to Peter Reynolds' work as well, is just this very simple notion of trying to find ways that students can access their voices and share those voices.

Trevor: I've been teaching 20 years. I don't think I'm particularly good at that mission in a lot of ways, but that's the mission I'm on. That's what I believe in and that's what I'm trying to get better at, is coming up with ways that I can help students to share their voices. It's not even students. I think it reaches colleagues. It's adults. We need more voices. A lot of my teaching is impacted by my own inability to share my voice. Really searching over the last 20 years to find my voice and what my mission is and going

through that process and really thinking about it, I hope it's helped me to help other people to find their voices.

Susan Riley: Hi there. This is Susan Riley, founder of EducationCloset. If you love these conversations with team Grundler and friends, please be sure to check out K12ArtChat on Twitter. The chat is held every Thursday at 8:30 PM Central, and it's a great way to continue the conversation. Just go to Twitter.com and search #K12ArtChat. We look forward to chatting with you over there soon. Now, let's head back to the show.

Laura: We had an off-recording conversation about that very thing. I think as we grow from student to adult, hopefully we're continuing to learn and search for that mission. I do love that you're talking about allowing the colleagues and the adults to find their voice, too. I think that that is something that we really need to empower all adults to do. I happen to be a big fan of Brené Brown. Matt laughs at me. She's a fellow Texan.

Matt: She's great. She's awesome.

Laura: Yeah, she's amazing. I'm reading Dare to Lead right now and just thinking about if we were all empowered to share our mission and be clear, she says clear is kind, I think that we would move forward as educators in a more meaningful way. But sometimes we hold back when we shouldn't.

Trevor: I totally think from a creative standpoint that's because traditionally my education experience was that we're focused on good. When we focus on good, it's very limited, it's very known. My mantra from an art education standpoint is I'm not that interested in good; I'm interested in interesting. I want people to explore what interests them. At first, the reality is you're not going to be very good at sharing that interest. You have to really learn how to share that interest, and that takes time. In education where we have rubrics and grades, we're always judging whether things are good.

Trevor: Just to go back to Peter Reynolds for a minute, the story of The Dot as I understand it, or one of the starting points of The Dot was when he decided to be an illustrator, he decided to draw every night. One night he fell asleep while he was sketching in his sketchbook, and the marker stuck to the page. It created the dot. If he showed that drawing to anybody and was like, "Look at this great drawing I did," no one would consider it a great drawing. It wasn't that Peter thought that the drawing was good, but there was something interesting about it. From that moment, he was able to explore that idea, whatever caught his eye or caught his attention, and then create something out of that. If he was just focused on good, he would have just crumpled up that piece of paper and basically said, "Oh, I wasted a piece of paper," and thrown it away. That's not how creative things generally happen, because creative

things are new and unfamiliar. When things are unfamiliar, they don't look usually very good.

Laura: I was just sitting here thinking about... Sorry.

Matt: No, go ahead.

Laura: I mean, so many artists that were... pretty much all of them were not good when they started. The big joke is that you don't become famous until after you're dead or whatever, which is not true. Anytime you try something outside the box, it's not good, but innovation doesn't have to be good. It has to be interesting and new.

Trevor: One of the things that's impacted me so greatly is... I have a friend. His artist name is MOMO. He's a professional artist, and he was a street artist back in the '90s. He makes his living painting murals all over the world. I was best friends with him in third, fourth, fifth, in sixth. He moved on the first day of seventh grade. We were best friends. He's a very successful artist. If you know the LIFEWTR bottles, he was the first artist on the LIFEWTR bottles. I got to paint at the Facebook headquarters in New York. We did a mural together. I got to paint with him.

Trevor: What was so amazing about MOMO is that when he was eight and nine, if he was interested in something, he just went after it like nobody else. I'd always just show up at his house and he'd always have a project going. We made videos. We made bow and arrows. We carved wooden boats. Whatever he was interested in, he just explored it to no end. We built crazy forts. We had bamboo mazes. We had all kinds of stuff going on. He could draw like no one else, but when his career started to take hold a little bit, he got interested in street art, which was a little more abstract. It was a way that masons used to create buildings and stuff. Applied geometry, maybe that's what it's called? He got interested in applied geometry or whatever the phrase is, and he just explored it. That's how he started creating his abstract work off of this geometric theory. He made his own tools. It was all exploration.

Trevor: Another artist that he knows Eh Soon, who's a super successful artist. So much of her work is just about getting an idea and running with it and doing these crazy things that you wouldn't even imagine are possible, and they pull it off. At the root of their work, it's just this exploration about what they're interested in and seeing if they can do it. I feel like that is what's so important about any artist. J.K. Rowling didn't know Harry Potter was going to be successful. She was actually told she should become an English teacher, because she wasn't going to be able to survive on the royalties of her book. She just was interested in this thing and created it. I feel like that's the skill that artists and creative people need, is to just go after that thing that interests them.

Matt: I was going to ask for some words of wisdom, but I think that was pretty wisdom-full.

Trevor: That wasn't too rambly?

Matt: No.

Laura: No, it was amazing. Matt and I talk about just the idea of play and exploration being so limited for our kids today and not given the time. They're not really given the time to build their own bow and arrow.

Matt: Or bamboo fort.

Laura: Or my brother building a skate ramp in the backyard. Our kids today are so scheduled. I've probably talked about this before, but I am a huge Dr. Seuss fan. I don't know if people know that. Heavily influenced by the great Dr. Seuss. I love the book that was published after his death called Hooray for Diffendoofer Day! The idea is that the teachers teach whatever is interesting to them and the kids, and then here comes the state test. Oh my gosh, the principal thinks they're going to fail, fail, fail. Basically, they're able to pass the test because everything that they've been learning in exploration-

Matt: All goes together.

Laura: ... all goes together, because they're problem solvers. They're able to solve problems. They're creative. I love the message in that book, because to me it says exactly what I would want... if I were the principal of a school, I would want my teachers teaching kids how to think for themselves. So much of that boils down to exploration.

Trevor: Yes, it's exploration. Just to take that a little step further, I think it's the ability to do a deep dive. I wrote a book in 2019. It took me about two years. I worked on it probably for almost three or four years. Just a funny story. I gave my first book to my 10th grade English teacher. In 10th grade, I almost failed 10th grade English, because I couldn't finish my term paper. My college, I went to Hartwick, they almost didn't let me graduate, because I didn't fulfill some writing requirement.

Trevor: My ability to be a professional author was not founded in my ELA classes. I played soccer really seriously and I was a very serious art student. When it came time to try and write a professional book, I figured out what I needed to do, how to write a professional book. I attribute that not to necessarily my ELA classes in a lot of ways. I attribute it to my ability to be able to dive in and research and look at stuff and ask questions. I think that skill to do a deep dive into something, whatever it is, no matter

how meaningless it is or how meaningless it appears to be, that skill to be able to dive into something deeply and have it consume all of your time and all of your energy, that is such an important skill.

Trevor: How long did the Wright brothers work on the airplane? How long did Thomas Edison work on the light bulb? How long did Steve Jobs work with computers? It wasn't because he developed these skills; it's because he was able to key in on something that he was obsessive about. I think when kids find things they're obsessive about, we should let them run with those things, because that skill of being able to do a deep dive and invest all of your energy and power in it... if you want to talk about standards, I think they hit tons of standards doing that two-month-long exploration, even if it doesn't amount to much. I really believe it's how humans operate and how they work.

Laura: I'll let you ask the question now. I get really excited during the podcast. I have one of those ADD brains that everything comes right out. I'm going to let Matt ask. I'm going to try.

Matt: I mean, that was basically a lot of what we want to hear. I don't know if there's more to say to that.

Laura: Any last words?

Matt: For me or for him?

Laura: For you or Trevor. Anyone? Anyone? I mean, there's just so much. I could keep bending your ear. I could do this all night long. What Matt was going to ask earlier and then he got really excited about your answer was what would be something you'd like to leave the listeners with?

Trevor: What would I like to leave the listeners with? Man, that's kind of a tough question. From an art education standpoint or just-

Laura: Education, art education, creativity.

Matt: I mean, maybe even just meaningful conversation. Where could someone start? How would they get started if they're like, "Well, I don't have time," or, "I don't have this or that or this"? Where do they start?

Trevor: They start by-

Laura: Buying your book.

Trevor: From that perspective, I think just having conversations with kids and having conversations with colleagues. I really think that one of the things that's underappreciated in education is just the power of a conversation. I think we learn so much from talking to each other and talking with each other and providing space and room for everyone's voice to be heard and be developed in our educational spaces, whatever that may be, is a really important thing. I don't think we should teach standards as much as hit standards. I think we hit a lot of standards when we give everyone an opportunity to share their voice, become part of the classroom community through conversation.

Trevor: I've learned so much talking to people that I've been connected with through Twitter, through Voxer, through all social media way more than I ever could through just reading or just thinking that I know what I'm doing and just going about my business. Really talking to people, letting everyone share the voice, I think, is such a powerful thing. That's not going to show up on a standardized test. It's not going to show up on a rubric. We're not going to teach that through putting goals or objectives on the board but really trying to create and foster environments in our classrooms, whatever we teach, where conversation is really rich. I think it still all boils down to that human connection. Our ability to speak and speak to each other and listen to each other is a really human trait. I think that the more that we foster that uniqueness of the human species is really a powerful thing. That's where good education is found.

Laura: You can take a breath. That was beautiful.

Matt: That was pretty profound. We can't thank you enough, Trevor, for coming to talk with us. The friendship that we've created since Four O'Clock Faculty... I kind of forgot about that. I was glad you brought that up. We had a lot of fun. I wish we could have hung out a little bit more at the Blue Bunny.

Trevor: Absolutely. I totally agree.

Matt: We will definitely have to do that again.

Laura: It'll happen again someday.

Trevor: We'll be there again. Absolutely. Thank you so much. I just have to say, I really love the work that you do for the art education community and the education community in general. I think what you're doing adds so much value to so many people's lives and so many students' lives. Thank you for doing that. Please keep it up. I really appreciate what you're doing. It's such wonderful work.

Laura: Thank you, Trevor.

