



A module series introducing new ideas for the classroom

HOW TO THINK LIKE AN ARTIST

By Rachel Fendler, Sara Shields, and Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner

This outlines a six-lesson art-making unit created by educators Rachel Fendler and Sara Shields, and artist Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner. This unit is appropriate for students in Grades 9-16, and encourages them to think and research like an artist. Students will conduct research to inform their art making and a story they want to tell while applying Kathy's research process.

This lesson includes:

- A broad overview of the big idea and goals
- Detailed steps for six lessons
- Discussion prompts and pointers on how to do them
- Recommendations for art materials
- Links to poetry and performances by Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner

There is an accompanying Learning Lab collection where you can view examples of each lesson. Please visit smithsonianapa.org/learn/making-art/ to find the Learning Lab in the How to Think Like an Artist module.



Still image from *Anointed*, written and performed by Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner.

Let's begin!

OVERVIEW	
BIG IDEA	<i>What does it mean to think like an artist? How do artists tell stories about the communities they are a part of? What stories can you tell as you engage in research and artmaking about your local community?</i>
GOALS	<p>In this unit, students will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognize that artists engage in research as they create their art. Students will identify and get to know an artist. • Summarize the process that artist's move through to go from inspiration to creation. Students will trace the artist's practice. • Explore artists' research processes as you begin your own research about a big idea and how that big idea is relevant to your community. Students will pick an area of interest to them, motivated by their physical location. • Reframe your inspiring idea from your research and use it as a catalyst for a story. Students will write their own story. • Develop their story through artmaking. Students will do 5 artmaking activities to prepare themselves for the final lesson by creating a repertoire of artwork to use in their final piece. • Remix their previous work and create a piece that tells their story or captures the parts of their research that resonate deeply.
CREATION	Students will create a variety of artworks and engage in a robust process of research and making art.

CONSTRAINTS	
TIME REQUIRED	Can be modified according to your class or session time.
BEST FOR AGES	Secondary and Higher Education Art Classrooms, Grades 6-16
MATERIALS	A variety of materials that you have access to with your students are recommended. Teachers will need a minimum of 5 materials OR material processes to introduce students to in the 5th lesson.

IMPLEMENTATION

LESSON ONE:

Recognize that artists engage in research as they create their art. As a class, view videos of artists, interviews, examples of their work, to introduce and show their artistic processes. In this lesson, they will explore the work of Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner.

- Students will select 3 to 4 sources below to learn more about Kathy’s poetry process. Students should take notes while looking at these sources:
 - [Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner’s Bio](#)
 - [Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner’s video performances](#)
 - [‘She Who Dies to Live’ performance featuring Kathy and artists Jocelyn Kapumealani Ng, Jahra ‘Rager’ Wasasala, and Terisa Siagatonu](#)
 - [Article from the Poetry Foundation on Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner](#)
 - [Video, discussion, and process for - BUTTERFLY THIEF](#)
 - [Video, discussion, and process for - MONSTER](#)
 - [Video, discussion, and process for - RISE](#)
 - [Video, discussion, and process for - ISLANDS DROPPED FROM A BASKET](#)
 - [Video, discussion, and process for - TWO DEGREES](#)
 - [Video, discussion, and process for - DEAR MATAFELE PEINAM \(opening performance at the United Nations Climate Summit 2014\)](#)
- Students will create a visual journal response that documents the research process Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner moves through to research climate change in her community. Their journal should explore how to think like an artist and/or the artist’s research process.
- Engage students in a [gallery walk critique](#) and ask them to respond to the question **“what is your key takeaway from this visual response?”**

LESSON TWO:

Summarize the process that artists move through to go from inspiration to creation. ***What question drives their process, what material sources inform the process, how are these (re)presented in the final product or project?***

1. To start Lesson 2, lead a Think, Pair, Share (TPS) with your students. Place them in groups and ask them to share their visuals from Lesson 1. The steps for Think, Pair, Share:

T: (Think) Teachers begin by asking a specific question about the topic, for example, ***“What question do you think drives Kathy’s process?”*** Students “think independently” about what they know or have learned about the topic. Ask students to spend a few minutes writing a question that they think might drive Kathy’s work. Avoid giving them an example, sometimes the best work will come out of the tension and discomfort of not knowing - trust that your students can figure it out!

P: (Pair) Next, students should be paired with another student or a small group. The makeup of the groups doesn’t matter, since this activity is focused on having students think about the big ideas behind Kathy’s process and not just about the content of her poems and work. Students share their thinking with their partner or small group. Remind students of the question: What question do you think drives Kathy’s process? Ask students to spend time thinking in their groups and end the discussion by recording the question they think might guide Kathy’s work.

S: (Share) Teachers expand the “share” into a whole-class discussion. Ask each of the small groups to report out to the class. It might be helpful to have students record the question they came up with on a whiteboard, smartboard, large paper, or shared document. Lead a discussion that synthesizes these questions and leads the discussion down into whole group conversation about the questions driving Kathy’s work.

2. Now, have the small groups form larger groups and ask them to move through the (TPS) process again. Here are the steps for this iteration:

T: (Think) Teachers now move to asking students to consider what material sources inform the process and help Kathy answer her big questions. ***What processes does Kathy engage in to research, prepare, write, and perform her poems?*** Students “think independently” about what they know or have learned about the topic. Ask them to jot down a few processes before getting into the larger groups.

P: (Pair) Next, students should work in the larger groups you assigned. Again, the makeup of the groups doesn’t matter, since this activity is focused on having students think about the big ideas behind Kathy’s process and not just about the content of her poems and work. Students share their thinking with their partner or groups. Remind students of the question: What processes does Kathy engage in to research, prepare, write and perform her poems? Ask students to spend time thinking in their groups and end the discussion by creating a list of processes that Kathy might go through to research, prepare, write, and perform her poems.

S: (Share) Teachers expand the “share” into a whole-class discussion. Ask each of the larger groups to report out to the class. It might be helpful to have students record the processes they came up with on the whiteboard, smartboard, large paper, or shared document. Lead a discussion that synthesizes these processes into whole group conversation about how an artist moves from inspiration to creation. Keep this visual to use in the next lesson.

LESSON THREE:

Explore the artists' research process as you begin your own research about a big idea and how that big idea is relevant to your community. This can be the list of possibilities from the previous lessons, Lessons 1 and 2: artist interviews, site visits, archives, etc.

1. Review the outcomes from Lesson 2 , reminding students how to do research about a big idea like Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner does. Encourage them to use Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner's process in this lesson.
2. Demonstrate for students how to do research online, showing students both how to find sources and how to take notes. It is important to show students how to find a range of sources, not just news articles and artifacts. Remember that interviews, photographs, and artwork can also be sources for research. These formats might be helpful:
 - a. Cornell Notes
 - b. Guided Notes
3. Have students identify an issue that is interesting to them. Be sure that they think about how it is situated within their local communities. An example of this is how Kathy explores how climate change impacts the Marshall Islands. [Click here](#) for a list of BIG topics that can be a starting point for students to research their locations.
4. Ask students to create a map that shows how this issue is connected to themselves and their community. This activity will help students begin to focus on their issue in a more personal and local context. Don't skip this step, it is important that students connect their big idea to themselves and their local community, much in the way Kathy has connected the global issue of climate change to her own identity and as Marshallese woman. To do this mapping, students will need to:
 - a. Begin to do research.
 - i. Students will record their research in a visual journal, research journal or notebook. For an idea of what this might look like, check out how Kathy researched and documented her thinking about the [Runit Dome, nuclear testing, and the subsequent poetry project, Monster](#).
 - b. Students should pick at least 6 sources or locations for information, ideas, images etc. The list you made in the previous lesson will be helpful for them
 - i. Students will record a list of the sources they identified and highlight the sources they chose to focus on.
 - c. Remind students that they might need to look at more than 6 things to find the 6 they will settle on (they can repeat sources - so they may find 2 newspaper articles, one national database, 2 photographs, and a legend). Possible sources of information might include:
 - i. Newspaper/magazine articles
 - ii. Online Databases
 - iii. Demographic Data
 - iv. State/Federal Archives
 - v. Interviews
 - vi. Oral Histories
 - vii. Books
 - viii. Artwork
 - ix. Maps
 - x. Site visits (you can do this on google maps)
 - xi. Legends, folktales, stories
 - d. Students will create a map that looks at the connections between their research, themselves, and their community and environment. These mapping tools might be helpful:
 - i. <https://www.canva.com/graphs/concept-maps/>
 - ii. <https://www.mindmup.com/>
 - iii. <https://bubbl.us/>
 - iv. <https://www.mindmeister.com/>

LESSON FOUR:

Reframe the inspiring idea(s) from the research and use it as a catalyst for creative writing. It might help to ask students to identify what parts of their research were most inspiring or memorable. **What stands out to you? How can you use these ideas and inspiration to write creatively about your topic and its relevance to your own community?**

1. Remind students that they can revisit the examples of Kathy's process and poetry/creative performances:
 - a. [Video, discussion, and process for - BUTTERFLY THIEF](#)
 - b. [Video, discussion, and process for - MONSTER](#)
 - c. [Video, discussion, and process for - RISE](#)
 - d. [Video, discussion, and process for - ISLANDS DROPPED FROM A BASKET](#)
 - e. [Video, discussion, and process for - TWO DEGREES](#)
 - f. [Video, discussion, and process for - DEAR MATAFELE PEINAM](#) (opening performance at the United Nations Climate Summit 2014)
2. Lead a discussion that revisits the results from previous lessons, playing particular attention to how the research process happens and how Kathy moves from inspiration to creation.
3. Ask students to return to their research from the previous lesson and begin to write something using that research. Remind students NOT to write a nonfiction educational summary of their research. It is important to encourage using research as inspiration for creative writing in one of the styles listed (feel free to add more!). Here is a list of possible approaches to writing. This list was adapted from bespokeclassroom.com:
 - a. **Life Store:** Create the store of your research. What does this mean? Consider this! If your research could be represented by a store, what would it look like? What would you sell in your store? Who would be your customers? Where would your store be located, and what would it be called? What would the inside and outside of your store look like? What would you do in your store? Use the "store" as a metaphor for your research.
 - b. **Ransom Poetry:** Have you ever seen a ransom note in a movie or TV show? A stereotypical ransom note is a message made up of cutout letters, words, and pictures that is supposed to disguise the handwriting of the criminal. Create a poem using this ransom note style (that means cutting out letters, words, & images from magazines and newspapers) that encapsulates your research.
 - c. **Rambling Autobiography:** Do you know what it means to RAMBLE? Has a teacher ever asked you to STOP rambling in your writing? What does that mean? Rambling means that the writer jumps around from one idea to the next while also including random, seemingly disconnected ideas. Write a brief autobiography of your research that begins with "I was born in..." and then allow your mind to flow with ideas as they come. Let your subconscious mind take control and write about whatever memories from your research "pop" into your mind. Don't edit, critique, or revise your writing. Let it ramble.
 - d. **The Simile Challenge:** A simile is a type of comparison that uses "like" or "as" to connect two things in order to illustrate a point. Write a brief story about your research in which you use as many similes as you possibly can.
 - e. **Write a Legend:** A legend is a traditional story that's sometimes regarded as historical but unauthenticated. How can you use your research to create an unauthenticated story about your research? [Here is a great video that might be helpful.](#)
 - f. **Create a Comic:** Comics are a great way to tell the story of your research, but be sure to take the time to write a script before you dive into drawing! Be sure you know your genre, understand your main character's goals/challenges, create a consistent and believable setting, and include a beginning, a middle, and an end. Once you've done this, start drawing!
 - g. **Compose a Song/Rap:** Is music more your thing? Try taking some time to compose an original song about your research ideas (with or without the music). Think of a title, work on lyrics, come up with a first and second verse, and connect them with a bridge!
 - h. **Write a Short Story:** Compared to novels, short stories often get overlooked as an art form, but these singular works of fiction deserve a closer look. [Short stories](#) give readers all the compelling characters, drama, and descriptive language of great fiction, but in a truly compact package.
 - i. **Create a Kids' Book:** Children want to read stories about other children who are a little bit older than themselves. So think about your audience and make your main character a little older. Craft a short, easy to digest story that is focused on your research/big idea. If you have time, add some illustrations!

LESSON FIVE:

Develop your research through your artmaking. Ask students: *how can you DO SOMETHING with your creative writing, your research, and your ideas? How can art help you do it? What materials will help inform this process? What materials reinforce your research?* This assignment doesn't have to be an illustration of their creative writing from the previous lesson, but instead a chance for students to learn about new art processes while simultaneously thinking about their research. This lesson is also a great opportunity for students to play with materials and processes without the stress of a finished project! Encourage them to BE an artist and explore the materials by seeing what they can do with them. It is important not to rush this work--artmaking takes time and learning new processes can be tedious.

1. Lead a demo a day for five days (this may be longer depending on the length of your class times). Each day you will demo a new artistic process (using your available materials and artistic knowledge). At the end of each short demo ask students to practice the technique while they also expand on their creative writing and research from the previous lessons. Encourage them to do whatever they want to explore their thinking from the previous lessons and research. Also encourage them to keep all of this visual thinking, experimentation, and research reflection work. This work will become the pieces for their final piece, so it is important that they keep all of this work (even if they don't love it). The final lesson will ask them to remix all of these pieces into a finished piece, this is difficult to do if students don't keep all of the work.
 - a. Consider how the five material processes that you choose to demonstrate can be used together (remember that the final project is a remix of these material explorations).
 - b. It would be helpful for the teacher to demonstrate both the material exploration and the conceptual thinking required in the exit tickets (see next step), to ensure that students are doing the work of connecting their material processes to their research ideas. An example of this might be to think about how pollutants infiltrate water systems while working with watercolor and/or crayon resists--these materials and processes mirror the research ideas. Ask your students how the materials help them think about their research ideas.
 - c. It would also be helpful for students to have their notes out while working on the material processes to add to them or remind themselves of them.
 - d. You may want to add extra time for students to do the material exploration if they are struggling with understanding how the processes work.
2. At the end of each class period or practice session ask students to write an exit ticket that records (this means that students will do this 5 times, one for each of the demonstrations/work periods you offer):
 - a. What they learned about the material process you demonstrated and they practiced
 - b. What connections they made between the art process and their research topic
 - c. Any ideas that came to them as they work working (this can be helpful when they complete their final pieces)

LESSON SIX:

Remix your previous work (from all 5 lessons) and create a piece that tells, explores, expands your story and your research. Students can create new work for this step as well, but the focus should be on how they can use parts of the work they have already engaged in and expand those ideas into a finished piece. Remind students that this final piece is not an illustration of their research, but rather remixing their research and artmaking into a final project that shows how their big idea is tied to their community and themselves. This is an important part of this lesson, if you skip over this discussion and reminder, students will have a tendency to annotate or illustrate their research, instead of thinking about themselves and their community are impacted by their researched big idea.

1. At the beginning of the lesson ask students to get into groups of two and spend the day sharing their creative writing, material explorations from the demo progress, and research. Have students respond to each other by answering the following questions:
 - a. **What stands out to you in my work?**
 - b. **What do you want to know more about after seeing the collection of work?**
 - c. **What is the most interesting thing you learned from looking at my work?**
2. Ask students to use a minimum of five ideas from their previous work (any of the lessons up to now) and remix them in a way that creates a finished piece. Students should be encouraged to use their artmaking to convey the story of their research and highlights the connections between their research, themselves, and their physical location. Students should also be encouraged to use any of the artistic practices they have explored in the previous lessons OR already are familiar with. They may create new work for this step.
3. Remind students that just because they found something in their research it does not mean it has to be a part of the final piece in an explicit way—encourage students to model Kathy’s thinking and continue to think more conceptually as they move towards their final project.
4. Teachers are encouraged to do several low-stakes, peer driven, check-ins throughout this process where students are put in small groups to discuss the following questions (you can mix and match these for the different critiques so students aren’t answering the same questions over and over). During the critiques, it is usually helpful to end by asking students to write down a plan for their next steps. This ensures that they are taking the content from the critiques and applying it to their work as they move forward:
 - a. Big Idea Questions:
 - i. **What story/message do you think I’m trying to tell?**
 - ii. **What parts of my work makes you feel something?**
 - iii. **What stands out to you in my work?**
 - iv. **What do you want to know more about after seeing the collection of work?**
 - v. **What is the most interesting thing you learned from looking at my work?**
 - b. Composition Questions:
 - i. **What do my compositional choices make you feel?**
 - ii. **Is the composition harmonious or disjointed? Does this contribute to or distract from my message/goal/story?**
 - iii. **What do you wish was here that isn’t?**
5. We recommend engaging in one longer form mid-point critique. Liz Lerman’s [Critical Response Process](#) is a great model for this! It is important to use midpoint critiques so that students can make changes to their work and not just use the critique as a final evaluation of their performance.