

In my early teaching career, I attended an evening of lectures sponsored by an organization called Ignite Memphis with speakers who were educators from around the Memphis area in all types of education systems. The goal of the evening was to spread ideas about what works in classrooms, how to get students interested in different topics, and overall how to succeed as a community of educators for the current and future students of Memphis. The speakers addressed challenges of hearing vs. listening, incorporating more STEM options in schools, and the benefits of bringing outside information into the classroom to engage students in things they feel connected with. These lectures were incredibly inspiring and encouraged me to begin implementing some of their ideas immediately with my own students.

My 11th and 12th grade British Literature classes discussed some authors and poems that were the epitome of the Romantic period. William Blake was one of the authors we focused on because he was a well-known poet and painter of the time. We read a pair of his poems, “The Tyger” and “The Lamb” that used symbolism to help represent the good and evil characteristics of human society. To help make the importance of these lofty Romantic ideas resonate with high school students, our classes discussed what characteristics we find in ourselves that often conflict with each other and wrote about how they work together to make up each of us up as a single individual. It was here that I introduced the idea of taking part in a hands-on type project to my students to gauge their receptiveness to this type of learning. With their acceptance of this idea, we chose symbols similar to those of our poet that we felt best represented these ideals and sketched them out. Then we invoked the artistic talents of Blake himself and transferred these self-chosen symbols onto ceramic plates with pottery paints--making the once conceptual ideas now a concrete object they will forever remember.

After completing our paintings, my student Meira Braverman remarked that “it’s nice to take a break from talking and listening,” and that “having a new medium really enhances not only our work environment but the rest of the day.” When I asked the students how they perceived the incorporation of tangible resources into our classwork, student Sima Clapman was eager to explain that by “doing a visual [and] seeing what we were learning, we were more focused, so we remembered better.” The last part of our project included adding a quote to their plates from William Blake himself that reads, “Without contraries is no progression.” This reminds our students and us as teachers that we need to keep an open mind about the different perspectives we encounter and that opposing ideas often push us to explore our peers’ and our own ideas more deeply.