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Zoom Teaching: Arts and Literacy Connections during the COVID 19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This article is centered around an original poem I created as a response to my own frustrations surrounding the phenomenon of “Zoom teaching” for my first and second grade class. In this paper, I will provide a personal account of Zoom teaching while I incorporated the arts into a reading comprehension activity. Additionally, I have included a literature review which highlights current research related to the nature of Zoom teaching and the benefits of arts integration within reading and writing instruction. My own personal experiences related to the arts are included as part of the reflexive nature of this article for me, as a doctoral student, to shed light on my own attitudes and experiences related to the integration of arts and literacy lessons because this will be the focus of my future dissertation. Finally, I will explain a process I have adapted to integrate the arts and writing. Future research will be necessary to explore the nature of utilizing these approaches to foster student engagement and create a meaningful bridge to literacy for diverse student populations.

Keywords: Arts and writing integration, visual arts, arts and reading comprehension, arts and communication, arts and literacy acquisition

Zoom Teaching: Arts and Literacy Connections during the COVID 19 Pandemic

Many of the creative experiences that children need in order to develop and grow have been taken away in schools, and they have been replaced with an intense focus on traditional academic skills (Danko-McGhee & Slutsky, 2007). Children naturally possess an ability to create art without frustration, and this can help to foster continuous literacy development and language acquisition, especially for diverse learners because it can foster communication and self-expression (Danko-McGhee & Slutsky, 2007). It is therefore necessary for educators to embrace a redefinition of literacy which allows children to engage in alternative literacy experiences that do not solely rely on traditional forms of oral and written language (Danko-McGhee & Slutsky, 2007), such as visual, drawing, and pictorial representations. Increasing the role of arts integration into an expanded view of literacy is critical, especially for children acquiring a new language (Binder, 2011). This article is a reflection on how the arts supported my students during a period of Zoom teaching in 2021, and it also draws upon current research in on Zoom teaching and arts and reading integration, as well as arts and writing integration.

Zoom Teaching

It is necessary to highlight research that explored important connection between student engagement and the nature of teaching using the Zoom platform. Lee and Moskowitz (2020) studied student engagement on the Zoom platform at the beginning of the COVID 19 pandemic. The investigators' original thoughts were that more digital technology was necessary to increase student participation. Instead, they noticed the need for human physical connection that persisted through the separation from other students, teachers, and peers (Lee & Moskowitz, 2020). Findings from this study noted that student engagement increased when students were given the opportunity to share their thoughts with others (Lee & Moskowitz, 2020). Similarly, Wellner

(2021) also studied the relationship between the Zoom platform and student engagement during the COVID 19 pandemic. Wellner (2021) noted the term “Zoom-bie students,” which describes the Zoom boxes that are left black as students take themselves off of the screen and were completely disengaged with the class lesson. Wellner (2021) explains that not all of the body’s senses are heightened during Zoom teaching, thereby creating Zoom fatigue and detachment. Wellner agrees with Lee and Moskowitz’s (2020) assertion that physical togetherness and a human connection is necessary to increase student engagement while learning on the Zoom platform.

I noticed my students’ engagement rose while utilizing an integrated arts-based approach to support literacy acquisition and create a feeling of “togetherness” as described by Lee and Moskowitz (2020). It was as though they woke up and finally responded to my creative instructional endeavors. The following poem, “Zoom Boxes,” explains my own frustrations towards “Zoom teaching” in my classroom. At the time, too many students were not engaged, or they were not on the screen and they were only “seen” as a black box.

Personal Experience

Zoom Boxes

*So many Zoom boxes
So little time
So, why are some black?*

*Where are you?
Are you coming back?*

*So little connection
So much frustration
So much to do!*

*Where are you?
Are you coming back?*

So, just crawl through the screen

(you say)
Maybe in a dream
One day

Where are you?
Are you coming back?

So many Zoom boxes
So little time
So, why are some black?

As I refined my own reflexive thinking, the above poem was born. As an elementary school teacher for 27 years, I cannot help but ponder ways to increase student engagement, especially during this time of Zoom teaching. So I put pen to paper and crawled into my own mind. I will explore each verse as it relates to my journey as an educator and arts advocate.

So many Zoom boxes
So little time
So, why are some black?

Where are you?
Are you coming back?

During the 2020-21 school year, I taught first and second graders at a Title I school, which means that over 90% of my students received free/reduced lunch. They all *wanted* to learn, yet some students turned off their screens. Some students were in their parent's cars. Some had constant endless screaming and loud noises all around them during our Zoom class sessions. Some experienced anxiety from staring into the screen all day. I understood. However, I did worry and wonder where they were, and more importantly, where their thoughts were, and if I could have any of their attention. I hoped my students would come back so that I could see them on the screen! They all *needed* me.

So little connection
So much frustration
So much to do!

*Where are you?
Are you coming back?*

One fateful day, they all did come back, and this is how it was done. I have always been a proponent of integrating the arts into my classroom instruction, but on this particular day, I learned *why*. I had everyone's attention. This was the proverbial once in a blue moon event during Zoom teaching. Since I had this gift of their listening, I knew I had to *keep* it. This is what I said:

Today, I'm going to read a great story to you called, "The Day it Rained Hearts," by Felicia Bond. But what I'm going to ask you to do is listen differently and really pay attention to what the characters do, because at the end, I will ask everyone to draw all that you remember about the story. It isn't an art project, you will sketch things you remember from the story with a pencil. This is all about "remembering" so that you will be able to tell another person what happened.

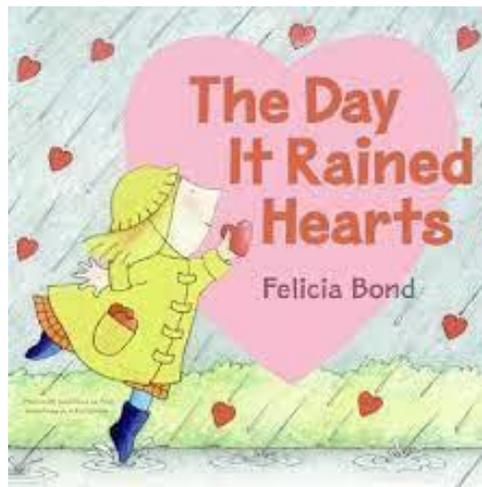


Figure 1. From "The Day it Rained Hearts," by Felicia Bond. Copyright 1983 by Harper Collins.

For once, I saw every student on the screen. I saw student faces instead of mostly black Zoom boxes. Everyone was there; even some brothers and sisters who weren't in my class appeared on the screen. Of course, I *really* read the story that day because I wanted it to come to

life. I was absolutely elated, and I felt a stronger connection to my students. After the story, I reviewed each page with the students during a “picture walk,” and they participated to retell the story orally with me. Then, I closed the book and said:

Now, on the blank paper in front of you, draw all that you remember from “The Day it Rained Hearts.” Remember, this is not an art project. You are using your pencil to draw everything you can recall about the story. Later, I will give you time to color and label your pictures. You may start now.

Every single student worked intently on drawing what they remembered. This was apparent because I could see every person on their screen looking at their picture and writing. There were no “black boxes” to represent unengaged, uninterested students. Afterwards, every child used their picture to write what happened in the story. They were *all* engaged on this one particular day. I doubt they would have been so engaged if I did not make it special with the arts infusion.

*So little connection
So much frustration
So much to do!*

Now, they were connected. I did not feel frustration as on many of the other days during this school year. Students were tapping into their comprehension skills to remember and understand the story. All of my students were reflecting, drawing, and making connections to the story. Now, I needed to recreate this experience on other days. I felt that incorporating the arts into my literacy instruction was the answer.

Reflexive Process

Thinking back and reflecting on my own life, the arts has always been my saving grace. I was not always interested in what my teachers were lecturing. I was not outgoing, and much of the time, a teacher may not have ever really known that I was ever there. I was somewhat of a “little black box” during a time of regular face-to-face classes because I was so disengaged. I

have always had a connection to the visual arts and art history, but only my 6th grade teacher incorporated these topics into her teaching day. I remember looking forward to every school day that year in 1981. Fast forward to 1991 when I was a junior in college and had the fortunate experience to be a part of a forward-thinking liberal studies program which incorporated art history, music, literature, and science into the classes. The classes were challenging, and the tests were mostly essays, but I loved it. Looking back, I can now see that the *connections* are what drew me to the arts infusion. It is what helped me learn about myself and the world around me.

*So, just crawl through the screen
(you say)
Maybe in a dream
One day*

Metaphorically, I believe part of me can crawl through the screen to capture students' attention and increase engagement. My thoughts are supported by current educational research, which I will briefly discuss in the following section to highlight the importance of integrating the arts with reading and writing instruction.

Arts Integration

Children can be guided not only to *look*, but to *see* art in different ways to foster critical thinking about a variety of subjects (Pantaleo, 2017). Arts integration utilizing drama-based pedagogies has provided a meaningful way for students to show improvement on three areas of a standardized test: identification, alliteration, and rhyming (Carney et al., 2016). The arts can also act as a starting point to foster writing skills for at-risk students (Olshansky, 2008) and can make text accessible for English Language Learners (Binder, 2011) as well as native speakers (Cappello & Walker, 2021). The arts also allows students to communicate content knowledge as well. The use of drawing has been shown to increase student understanding of many topics, and arts literacy-based instructional practices can assist literacy development for more students than

the linguistic symbol system alone (Gangi, 2020). The use of visual arts can also aid in the adult-child communicative discourse processes (Chang & Cress, 2014).

Research shows that the arts are not widely incorporated into classroom instruction (Irwin, 2018). A disconnect between the arts and the reading or writing activity can occur with traditional modes of teaching, and standardized testing has all but eliminated the arts in classrooms across the world (Irwin, 2018). Educational policy continues to promote standardized literacy practices that privilege print and minimize the role of visual arts, and, as a result, children's art is not given a priority in schools (Binder, 2011). The arts can also support academic language development for English Language Learners, but the heavy focus on standardized testing reduces their exposure to the arts, which could enhance students' aesthetic knowledge and personal understandings of the world (Glause, 2019). Nevertheless, teachers can integrate meaningful, arts-based activities if they are provided with proper professional development. For instance, teachers will complete arts activities when modeled for them (Grant et al., 2008). Educators can create powerful new possibilities for children's reading and writing by using arts-based activities. Exploring methods which spiral and integrate the arts into literacy instruction could prove to be beneficial for students, while eliminating the insipid nature of routine linear instruction.

Conclusion

Danko-McGhee & Slutsky (2007) discuss that the art created by children is a working language itself, telling what the child knows without using words. Danko-McGhee & Slutsky (2007) also mention that once stories are drawn on paper, they are more easily remembered, students are able to revisit and retell their experiences, and the art becomes the language of the child. I experienced this with the arts infusion after I read the story, "The Day it Rained Hearts,"

and I saw how engaged my students became to draw what they remembered. It was also as though they felt a sense of relief, too, because their thoughts were captured with their drawings on the paper in front of them, and the writing was approached with ease afterwards. This was such an important day for me in my own reflexive thinking about the arts and literacy connection, and it has changed my approach to reading and writing instruction forever.

*Where are you?
Are you coming back?*

*So many Zoom boxes
So little time
So, why are some black?*

As educators, I believe we must think creatively in order for our students to turn off their black boxes on Zoom. My class mostly came back, either in person, or on “Zoom” since the day that I read, “The Day it Rained Hearts,” and I am forever grateful. We are now involved in an arts-based reading and writing process I adapted from Olshansky (2008) for my classroom for at least an hour every day. It was adapted due to my own classroom budget constraints, and because of the nature of teaching on Zoom during a pandemic. I will note that I did purchase the watercolor paper for my students, and my school purchased the 16-tray watercolors, crayons, as well as assorted construction paper. We start our week on Monday thinking about time-of-day, weather, and place for our settings in great detail. I model the thinking, language, and an artistic process for my class, then students create a quick sketch on a blank sheet of paper. After this, students create their settings using watercolors and watercolor paper. On Tuesday, I instruct my students to think of two characters (animals or people). Then, they draw and create the images on a blank sheet of paper, and afterwards, students cut the characters out and glue them right into their settings. After this, they think of an “interesting character” who will make something happen in their story, and the same process of creating, cutting, and gluing this character occurs

in student stories. On Wednesday, students utilize a “lead sentence” graphic organizer adapted from Olshansky (2008) along with their created setting and character artwork to start writing their stories. Thursday and Friday are set aside for students to write their books using the visual images in their artwork to create text. Friday is a special “share” day where my students love to read their created stories to each other.

Table 1

Weekly Process of Art-Making and Story-Writing

Focus	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Teacher Instruction	Time of day Weather Place (Inside or Outside) Discuss setting	Two characters Create an interesting character Discuss characters	Lead sentences using organizer	Assist students as needed	Assist students as needed Facilitate sharing
Students	Create quick sketch Create settings with watercolors on watercolor paper	Draw and create characters on blank paper Cut/glue characters onto the settings	Students write lead sentence and begin story	Students write their stories	Students finish writing stories Students share their stories with each other

My students’ reading and writing scores have shown improvement, and they are saying things like, “I love writing,” and “I love to read,” so much more than before I infused the arts into my literacy instruction. Students also are thinking ahead to future stories they will create, and they have internalized our weekly process. Zackery (2016) also notes how integrating the

arts influenced critical thinking skills for her elementary-age students as well, and discusses how the arts have assisted the learning process in all subjects for her gifted and talented students.

The following pieces of artwork were created by first and second grade students in my class during the winter of 2021, while I was “Zoom teaching.” All of the artwork was created using the above-described weekly sequence on Mondays and Tuesdays. The first piece was created by a first-grader. His setting was space, and his characters were astronauts.



Figure 2. Anonymous, Copyright 2021. Reprinted with permission.

The next piece was created by a second-grader. Her setting was the kitchen, and her characters were her family and chickens.



Figure 3. Anonymous, Copyright 2021. Reprinted with permission.

The last piece was created by a first-grader. Her setting was the park, and she was the main character along with a butterfly and another friend.

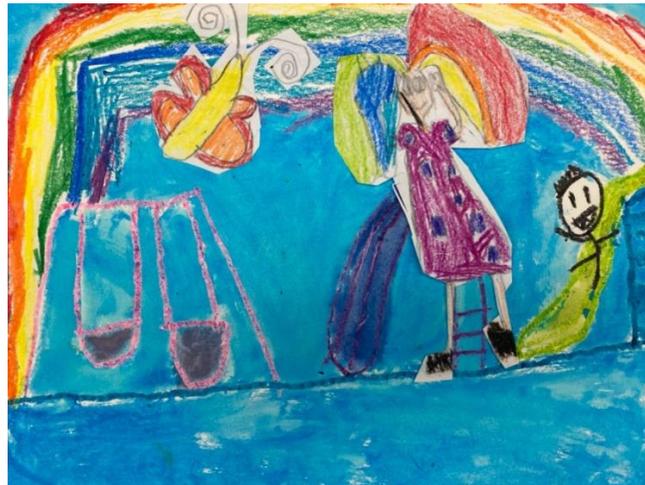


Figure 4. Anonymous, Copyright 2021. Reprinted with permission.

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