

Ubiquity: The Journal of Literature, Literacy, and the Arts, Praxis Strand, Vol.3 No.1, Spring 2016, pp. 75-94
Ubiquity: <http://ed-ubiquity.gsu.edu/wordpress/>
ISSN: 2379-3007

Why Arts Integration Is So Important to Me as an Educator

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Ubiquity: The Journal of Literature, Literacy, and the Arts, Praxis Strand, Vol.3 No.1, Spring 2016

Abstract

Art is an integral part of learning and it provides opportunities for reflection while facilitating higher-order thinking, problem solving, and critical thinking skills. For students, arts integration is pivotal for facilitating a rich, educational experience. An arts-integrated curriculum provides avenues for creativity and inspiration by giving students opportunities for reflection through self-expression and learning by tasks that require doing. In this paper, I will address the importance of arts integration in curriculum, explain important terms, provide a short literature review, and then give some practical applications of arts integration based on my teaching experiences and those of other educators. Implications for arts integration in every-day teaching will be provided.

Keywords: Arts integration, creativity

*Ubiquity: The Journal of Literature, Literacy, and the Arts, Praxis Strand, Vol.3 No.1, Spring
2016*

Why Arts Integration Is So Important to Me as an Educator

Introduction

How creativity, through the arts, impacts learning is a topic of study that stirs in me a passion for knowing more about how art can influence learning. As an elementary school educator and now a doctoral student, this topic continues to *tug at my brain*, as I want to learn as much as I can about creativity in the classroom and how it influences engagement with learning activities, and, more importantly, how it influences critical thinking skills and problem-solving skills.

The integration of an arts-based curriculum to facilitate creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills is the premise from which I design teaching and learning in my own elementary classroom. The reason for using art to facilitate creativity is based on learning that I have observed from my students when art has been provided as a vehicle for fostering creativity. I am a teacher of gifted-identified students, and creativity is a huge domain of my daily instruction. I have found that integrating the art into all of my teaching helps facilitate the learning of concepts and skills. The students engage in art making where materials are made readily available for their learning in hopes that this approach results in students' artistic expressions and creativity while they attain valuable knowledge and skills. I believe that my excitement in teaching through an arts-integrated approach excites my students and propels them into thinking of numerous possibilities for their learning. My students have grown to expect lessons that will be arts-based because this is my regular practice.

In this paper, I will define important terms, provide a short literature review of the theory of art integration, and discuss practical applications of art integration in my teaching experiences

and from other educators I have interviewed. Some implications will be provided and conclusions also will be extended. Parent consent has been given for the student artwork in this paper for the purpose of publication, but all student names of the artwork will remain anonymous.

Definitions

The following are some definitions of arts integration and creativity in curriculum.

Arts integration. Arts integration has many definitions and understandings in the fostering of creativity through the arts. I will be using definitions of arts integration as provided in the literature by Eisner (2002) and LaJevic (2013).

Eisner (2002) explains that arts integration can include using art to explain a period in history through photographs, or it can include “music and architecture of the period” (p. 40) that is being studied. Arts integration can also facilitate exercises and activities in problem solving along with seeing how connections can be made in the sciences and the arts simultaneously, while teaching the same concept (Eisner, 2002).

LaJevic (2013) states that arts integration is, “a dynamic process of merging art with (an) other discipline(s) in an attempt to open up a space of inclusiveness in teaching, learning, and experiencing” (p. 2). Within this definition, the implementation of art for learning includes art experiences within all the disciplines.

Creativity. There is not any one universal definition for the word, yet scholars do offer many definitions from which insights can be gained. “Creativity is the production of novel and useful ideas in any domain” (Amabile, 1996, p. 3). According to Gallagher (1985), creativity is a “mental process by which an individual creates new ideas or products, or recombines existing ideas and products, in a fashion that is novel to him or her” (p. 303). Bush (2014) explains that

creativity originates from knowledge in a particular domain while deviating from that knowledge, as one pushes against the knowledge while propelling the domain forward.

Hetland (2013) states that her idea on creativity includes “nurturing creative persons through creative processes in creative places” (p. 66). Providing learning spaces where creative, thinking processes can emerge from students has been a goal of mine since I began my teaching career. I believe that cultivating creativity by planning for creative outlets where students can explore and express themselves impacts the literacy of students.

With the various definitions of creativity offered by scholars, diligence is required when defining the word for a particular project or work. For purposes of my reflections and future work, I have chosen the definitions from Hetland (2013) along with what Bush (2014) offers. Both of these definitions closely explain creativity in my classroom and my understanding of creativity in regard to developing critical thinking and problem-solving skills and providing avenues of innovation for students.

Some Pertinent Literature

Providing engaging learning activities for students in the 21st-century classroom is essential. It is in the primary grades that teachers lay the foundation for all learning that will follow. Inspiring students toward learning and developing a love and zeal for knowledge cannot be minimized. Planning lessons that are enticing and engaging will not only pique the interest of a student, but sustain that interest because “greater engagement often translates into higher achievement, with more advanced reading, better writing, and higher standardized test performance in classrooms where engagement is high” (Bohn, Roehrig, & Pressley, 2004, p. 270).

The arts provide an avenue that can be used to facilitate student creativity, but how does it inform cognition and literacy and, ultimately, how do the arts impact curriculum and practice? Harste (2014) states, “I find it generative to think of curriculum as a set of social practices and then to begin to ask questions: What kinds of social practices are in place and, as a result, what kinds of literacies are valued?” (p. 90). So what does literacy look like in students’ everyday lives in regard to *in school* experiences? What is valued as evident in curriculum and teacher practice? Do student experiences include sitting for long periods of time completing written assignments, or does literacy for children encompass engagement that requires *doing*? How difficult is it to learn through doing? According to Maguire et al. (2012), “Individual and collective art projects ask students to engage in self-expression as well as to participate in collaborative productions that necessitate moving beyond established comfort zones” (p. 369). Integration of the arts in content areas makes content acquisition extremely meaningful while stretching students’ imaginations and comfort levels: “Art integration’s capacity to foster conceptual/procedural skills and metacognition is a powerful rationale for moving it into the core of education,” (Marshall, 2014, p. 106).

It is imperative that engaging and meaningful tasks are offered to students. Without this engagement, literacy will be viewed as something unfamiliar and placed upon students. Art fuels creativity while providing meaning to tasks within the classroom. Relevancy in teaching is imperative, but why is it so critically important? Vygotsky (1986) states, “The tasks with which society confronts an adolescent as he enters the cultural, professional, and civic world of adults undoubtedly become an important factor in the emergence of conceptual thinking” (p. 108). Lessons that integrate art require different thinking capacities which lead to student creativity. Conceptual thinking is going to be required from our students as they move into adulthood.

While we do not know what the job market will look like in twenty years, we do know that creativity will be required to perform most adult work in the marketplace. Arts integration can help foster conceptual thinking, whereby students are more prepared for what society expects of them after their high school years. Without opportunities to reflect and express thoughts and ideas creatively, students may miss out on developing problem solving skills, critical thinking skills, and social skills, such as logical reasoning. Efland (2002) explains that if educators want to engage learners to their fullest cognitive capacities, integrating information from many disciplines provides greater insights of knowledge than teaching subject matter separately.

Through arts integration, the mission of educating students so they will be able to attain conceptual understandings that are connected and that are meaningful can be accomplished. Students may then use this knowledge, as they prepare for an uncertain, future workplace.

Cowan (personal communication, July 23, 2015) states, “Visual literacies help facilitate opportunities for conceptual thinking that involves synthesis, analysis, and evaluation on Bloom’s Taxonomy.” Art, as visual literacies, is powerful when integrated into learning tasks in the major disciplines within the classroom. According to Baker (2013), “The arts contribute to, and enrich, our lives in ways that go beyond the three ‘R’s’ of education. However, it has often been questioned whether they contribute in any substantive way to education beyond enrichment” (p. 1). Some researchers contend that an art-integrated curriculum helps students think about the connectedness of the disciplines (Unsworth, 1999). While reviews are mixed on the “importance of the arts,” (Baker, 2013), especially in regard to student achievement, the experiences that art provides students cannot be denied. Suhor (1992) explains that the potential for human development and school organizational change, when students learn about different signs for language through gestures, pictures, music, or mathematics is illuminating. These signs

can provide a different perspective in regard to learning. The opportunities through the arts and experiences those avenues for learning could provide may have tremendous impact on student development. While I support this position, I think it is very important to understand more fully what arts integration entails.

Arts integration is a more complex task than just planning for an art activity to be used to complement a lesson. Arts integration involves allowing students to create, using materials that they find useful, with their own imaginations, while learning valuable conceptual content. As LaJevic (2013) writes, “Arts Integration can provide a quality unifying teaching/learning experience, yet it often gets interpreted and implemented in flawed ways” (p. 3). LaJevic further explains that arts integration is not for decorating a classroom, but it involves immersing the art within content areas for the purpose of student knowledge acquisition. According to Eisner (2002), “Students can be invited to define a problem that requires that it be addressed through several disciplines, including the arts,” (p. 40).

Giving students the ability to communicate using many different modalities adds depth to their educational experiences. Barton (2013) writes, “Being able to express information through a variety of communicative forms is something that can empower students in the arts” (p. 15). These ways of meaning-making can help content become substantial for students while engaging them in creative activities that are thought-provoking and powerful. The arts, as integration in the curriculum, can provide the stirring of emotions that can lead to higher levels of thinking, reasoning, and questioning. Eisner (2002) states, “The sense of vitality and the surge of emotion we feel when touched by one of the arts can also be secured in the ideas we explore with students, in the challenges we encounter in doing critical inquiry, and in the appetite for learning we stimulate” (p. 9).

Providing for these learning opportunities for students is not a small task: “Teachers may have good intentions when attempting to incorporate the arts into the classroom, but it becomes problematic when the arts are not sufficiently connected to student learning or treated less seriously than other subjects” (LaJevic, 2013, p. 3). Utilizing art and embracing creative expression throughout lessons is extremely important for student learning and the development of critical thinking skills.

Art Integration in My Classroom

Art for Content Understanding

Every teacher desires learning that is substantial for students. I have experienced through my teaching that all content can be taught through the arts. As engaging as artistic expression can be, I always look for the transfer of student learning. This is my ultimate goal for my students as an educator.

When thinking about creativity and the integration of art in my classroom, many examples come to my mind. I think of how my students learned about the terrain of the Oregon Trail through our studies of the Westward Movement in U.S history. Figure 1 shows an example of how my students created hills, deserts, rugged trails, mountains, rivers, and valleys using pizza boxes as their backdrops, while using other materials to depict the landforms. They created covered wagons from their own research and design, in addition to the terrains. The art flowed naturally and knowledge about the Westward Movement followed.



Figure 1. A student created a model of the terrain of the Westward Movement.

My students have also created characters out of clay to demonstrate their visualization of characters in stories, as shown in Figure 2. My students made clay figures to depict the main character in *Abel's Island* by William Steig (1976).



Figure 2. Second Grade Visualizations: The character Abel.

Art for Self-Reflection

Another group of my students created body biographies where they described different parts of their bodies. These masterpieces illustrated how the children identified with themselves and how each part of their body described their interests. In Figure 3, one of my students stated

that her brain thinks about drawing, her nose smells crayons, her hand touches a pencil, her mouth tastes lasagna, her eyes see big dogs, her ears hear dogs barking, her heart feels happy, and her feet go to art classes. This learning activity was done as an activating strategy for a unit of study we were going to begin on each child's uniqueness as a gifted student in my classroom.



Figure 3. A fifth grade student's drawing illustrates how different parts of her body describe her.

I am convinced that every concept, skill, topic, and subject can be taught through creativity strategies. This creativity can be in the form of art that is connected to creative writing, storytelling, and music used to express learning through rap, song, or chant, while artistic expression through paintings, drawings, sculptures, and photographs can also facilitate concept building.

While being responsible for my students' knowledge acquisition, much of my emphasis is on arts integration through the content I teach. However, I do believe there is a place in the school for art that serves the purpose of inspiring and fostering understanding of social causes.

My students have engaged in playwriting, where they wrote a play about some lemons who only wanted their *own kind* to live in their community, as illustrated in Figure 4. Other fruits began moving into the neighborhood and the lemons (through my students' writings) had to decide how they would resolve that conflict. This project was done around the "9-11" anniversary in our country. Anyone living in New York at that time in 2001 understood the prejudices that were extended in the aftermath of the tragedy and the uneasiness of the U.S. government, states, and neighborhoods within communities. This was a tumultuous time, yet living harmoniously was necessary to convey. Through the playwriting the students resolved how to *not go about* resolving conflicts.



Figure 4. Fourth-grade students' Lemon Land characters.

Students have created Frayer Models (Frayer, Frayer, & Klausmeier, 1969), to learn vocabulary, which in this particular case illustrated this child's social awareness of poverty as shown in Figure 5. The word desperate, as interpreted by this child, meant poor. With the numerous meanings of the word, depending on context, this is what the word meant to one of my students.



Figure 5. Frayer Model: Desperate.

Other Educators' Integration of the Arts

Integrating the arts, while making practical applications of an arts-integrated curriculum, is not always an easy endeavor without barriers. Teacher perceptions of the difficulty of the task may impede the integration of arts into state-mandated curriculum, leaving a teacher feeling as if there is no room for the arts. When integrating the arts into the curriculum versus viewing art as an *add-on* to the curriculum, the integrating approach may seem more acceptable for teachers.

Dewey (1934) explained that experience involves “undergoing and doing” (p. 46), and I contend that this action is quite prevalent in learning tasks. “A painter must consciously undergo the effect of his every brush stroke or he will not be aware of what he is doing and where his work is going” (Dewey, 1934, p. 47). An arts-integrated approach to teaching provides that doing, and through that doing, students learn. I recently interviewed a colleague of mine about how she integrates art into her kindergarten classroom at a Fine Arts Academy. I asked her how she facilitates creativity pedagogy in her teaching and her reply is worth considering:

I employ a variety of strategies to facilitate creativity in the classroom. The most important, I feel, is that I remain vulnerable as an artist in front of my class. I create, I make mistakes, and I am honest about when I am happy and unhappy about my artwork. I allow my mistakes to be turned into better pieces of art and

I allow some of them to tank, but I do it all in front of my students so that they see that it is all part of the creativity/artist process. I encourage it all! Even the stuff that looks weird, or dark, or just plain bad! I encourage an explanation of the thought process, but that is all. (Sudberry, personal communication, July, 4, 2015)

My colleague continued to explain that when students are engaged in creativity, they don't even realize that they are learning. School becomes fun and engaging; not something *placed upon the students*.

Another interview I conducted was with a university professor on the importance of creativity in learning for students. I asked her if she considered another topic for her dissertation before she decided on creativity in writing and she said she had considered social studies: "I was looking at creativity and the social studies curriculum...social studies being poorly taught... taught as fact...important for our democracy...ability to analyze and make cuts across the disciplines" (Cowan, personal communication, July 23, 2015). In order to make those movements across the curriculum, students must have the necessary skills to do so. It takes critical thinking skills to be able to make such connections, and those skills can be fostered through an arts-integrated approach to learning, where imagination and the complexity of thought can be nurtured. As Eisner (2002) writes, "Imagination is no mere ornament; nor is art...they might help us restore decent purpose to our efforts and help us create the kind of schools our children deserve and our culture needs" (p. 16).

I was able to visit a school where imagination was at the core of the learning at a STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Mathematics) school in Seoul, South Korea in the spring of 2015. The artwork that was in the halls and on display was connected to instruction that had taken place within the classrooms. One display I remember so well was of creative works

that had been made out of recycled materials. These products were a result of learning that was connected to a study of ecology. The woodworking classes at the school make creative objects (integrating engineering, math, and the art component), and the students sell their products and send the monies to support a school in another Asian country. This philanthropic endeavor is wonderful for students to experience in elementary school. While visiting in one of the classrooms, I was able to observe students being taught English. Visual representations on an electronic board were being used to help the students learn some vocabulary. Art was everywhere in the school, and it was evident that the students were happy to be learning in their environment.

Implications and Conclusions

Creativity through the arts is seen as an optional rather than a crucial element for cognitive development in schools. The subject of thinking processes for cognition has been researched in regard to how the arts facilitate learning (Sousa, 2006; Winner & Hetland, 2000; Stevenson & Deasy, 2005), but visibility of the arts in schools is limited. Sense making (learning) and orchestrating learning spaces through creativity for meaning making to take place relies heavily on teachers' understanding of a comprehensive model of how the arts can help facilitate higher levels of thinking processes.

The implications through my practice, readings, and interviews on creativity in teaching and learning and the implementation of arts integration have only served to incite in me a desire to want to research more extensively on this topic. My personal teaching experiences with creativity and the influence it has on learning have served to fuel my passion for the topic. My research on arts integration and creative opportunities has supported the observations I have made in my own classroom on creativity in motion, but now I want to study how facilitating the

process of creativity fosters thinking skills and how those skills influence student sense making (learning). I am very interested in researching thinking processes (Bowen, Greene, & Kisida, 2013) that occur in the minds of students by creativity that is facilitated through the making of art and how students express those thinking skills.

Teaching through the arts is challenging, yet the rewards are compelling. Researching the integration of the arts in curriculum is no less daunting!

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