

*Ubiquity: The Journal of Literature, Literacy, and the Arts*,  
Critical Praxis Strand, Vol. 12 No. 2, Fall/Winter 2025, pp. 7 – 26  
Ubiquity: <http://ed-ubiquity.gsu.edu/wordpress>  
ISSN: 2379-3007

**Tangible themes: Arts integration and a literacy experience as a work of theatre**

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*Ubiquity: The Journal of Literature, Literacy, and the Arts*, Critical Praxis Strand, Vol. 12 No. 2,

Fall/Winter 2025

## Abstract

In elementary school teacher education, ideas of meaningful art integration and even envisioning teaching as an art are of particular salience when it comes to working with texts written for children. Theatre is an artform that is text-based, integrative, and relational. In this praxis essay, I describe an integrated art + literacy + making project based on Dolly Parton's *Coat of Many Colors* (Parton, 2016) that I conducted with preservice elementary teachers as part of the "Introduction to Arts Integration" course. I applied the analytical framework of theatrical design to ask the question, "What would happen if I approached this learning experience as a play?" Student reflections show how the project helped them connect with the story and their peers, as well as their personal experiences as learners and thoughts on their futures in the classroom.

Key Words: Pedagogy, elementary teacher education, art, arts integration, multiliteracies, hands-on learning

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The arts are an important part of elementary education. The ways in which artful practices and activities become part of elementary classrooms are many and varied, and they often have to do with teachers' understandings of the role of art in children's development (McTamaney, 2019). At the same time, it is important to think about how preservice elementary teachers (PSTs) can explore their own creativity. After all, the nature of their connections to artistic practice is likely to play a role in how they relate to different forms and means of their students' artistic expression (Smith-Shank, 1992). These considerations are what led me to document one of the projects in the course "Introduction to Art Integration", which I taught in the Fall of 2023 to a cohort of Elementary Education majors in their semester before student teaching.

According to the Kennedy Center's definition, "Arts Integration is an approach to teaching in which students construct and demonstrate understanding through an art form. Students engage in a creative process which connects an art form and another subject area and meets evolving objectives in both" (The Kennedy Center, 2020). This definition highlights the importance of the process of connecting art to any other content area that happens during creative engagements. These engagements, in turn, need to have the right combination of structure and openness for individual creativity to blossom. Pedagogical innovations in this area can be seen in the work of scholar-educators who create rich environments for children to combine creativity, play, and literacy development (Kuby, 2017; Thiel, 2015). In higher education, arts-centered transdisciplinary experiences have been shown to help students in non-arts majors connect to the relational and humanizing aspects of their chosen future careers, such as medicine (D'Alessandro & Frager, 2013). For elementary teacher education, innovations

around art integration show the importance of PSTs' engagement in activities that give them a chance to both experience art and respond creatively (Whitin & Moench, 2015; Hipp & Sulentic Dowell, 2019). In our class, though we held ongoing discussions and activities related to standards and skills, one of my main pedagogical goals was to give students the opportunity to engage with established art forms (visual arts, theatre, music, movement) in joyful, affirming, and exploratory ways. This meant that process was always more important than product, that everyone's identity as an artist was supported and uplifted, and that multiple forms of tacit, embodied, and informal knowledge were always welcome.

We began our class with the premise: Teaching is an art. This statement is frequently presented in opposition to conceptualizing teaching as a science, as an acknowledgement of the significance of emotional work that teachers do and of the fact that each class, and indeed each student, are unique in many complex ways. This means that a standardized approach does not always provide satisfactory answers to the question of why some classrooms feel so alive, inspiring, and connected. As a metaphor for good teaching, art paints a picture of responsiveness and attunement to student needs, and creative leadership in addressing these needs in a manner which, like the grand jeté of an experienced dancer, appears effortless. To me, this meant that a class on art integration had to be the place where my PST students could engage in artistic exploration in a space that would focus on affirming their ideas rather than perfecting techniques. By working with them on developing their identities as creative individuals, my goal for the course was to help them find and/or grow their confidence in their own talents, be they in visual arts, theatre, music, dance, creative writing, or any other.

The idea to work on Dolly Parton's *Coat of Many Colors* (Parton, 2016) emerged from thoughts and conversations in the second half of the course, when unpacking the concept of

“integration” became really prominent. Part of this prominence came from the students’ expressed concerns that they may end up working in school contexts in which the kind of overt and well-supported integration of the Kennedy Center’s definition may not be possible. And yet, with a nudge from our reading of McTamanev (2019), we were convinced that even in more restrictive and standardized contexts, there is a way to bring art into the classroom, even if it has to be done subtly. As we worked to imagine classrooms where art would be a way to be rather than just a series of activities to do, *Coat of Many Colors*, as an illustrated book version of a popular song, offered a ready example of an integrated approach and a multi-literacy experience that could inspire further iteration through different media (Herrmann & Gallo, 2023). I wanted to encourage these iterations by exploring the story with the kinds of materials and making techniques that were depicted in it, i.e., found textiles. In our case, they came from garments donated to our university’s fiber arts lab.

### **Engaging with a Text: What Is the Theme?**

Engaging with written literary text often means relating the aesthetic experience of the author’s particular use of language to something personal: a memory, an emotion, or a way of thinking. The emotional relationality here is particularly powerful in its connective capabilities. When an engagement of this type happens in the classroom, our collective humanity becomes evident in the shared response (Boldt & Leander, 2020). When one thinks of a classroom that provides these kinds of responses and experiences often, the metaphors of teaching as an art, and a classroom as a work of art, come to mind. Central to this kind of deep engagement with texts is responding to them through a creative process. Students elaborate on the author’s points, or argue with them, by using their unique artistic voice; thus, integrating their process with that of

the author as well as their peers. But how does one go about designing and incorporating such projects?

Theatre is an artform with especially strong parallels to teaching in the fact that both have relationships at their core. So, I asked, “What would happen if I approached this learning experience as a play?” I have worked for many years in theatre and film as a costume designer and artisan, and I taught these disciplines to undergraduates. While collaborating with performers on character-creation, I have come to understand that what we see as material or inanimate has a sizeable effect on how we construct our worldviews and our relationships. In my work with PSTs in the course, I encouraged them to approach the use of materials creatively, for example, when constructing collages that incorporate found objects (sticks, random office supplies, etc.), or when placing words and images together into a kind of multi-modal poem (Figure 1). This kind of artmaking decenters the idea that one needs to have complete control over a medium in order to be considered an artist and instead cultivates sensitivity to the vibrancy and possibilities of expression that can be found in any material (Bennett, 2020). Engaging in this type of composition as a shared activity, in turn, helps facilitate the movement of relational flows, when spontaneous smiles, gestures, or conversations that happen around shared or disputed aesthetics bring closer interpersonal connections (Leander & Rowe, 2006). These connections are what help sustain the classroom community moment-by-moment and across the long term. By creating space for PSTs to explore their emotional responses to materials and artistic media, I worked on establishing a caring classroom community where all could feel safe enough to be vulnerable, which is necessary to the process of sharing one’s creative work with others.



Figure 1. *Tapestries made with reclaimed yarn and found objects*

The elements of drama, originally laid out by Aristotle in *Poetics* and subsequently adapted by generations of theatre artists, writers, and educators for the purposes of text analysis (Thomas, 2014), tell us that one of the most important ways to understand a text is through establishing its theme. In literacy classrooms, we ask the question: “What is this story about?” As theatre artists, we ask: “How did this story make you feel?” When constructing an artistic, rather than analytic response to the text, the theme is not about the summary of events, but rather the emotional heart of the text. Following the emotional story of *Coat of Many Colors*, we get at two main thematic strands. First, this is a story about the power of gratitude and possibility of overcoming dire circumstances by focusing on the good in people and situations. Second, this is a story about love and the power that love has to transform meager objects into a source of joy. These strands can be woven together to formulate the theme as “love becoming tangible.”

We experience the tangibility of love when we give or receive a gift, especially when the gift is handmade. In terms of the classroom project, this was manifested in making and exchanging small hand-sewn items.

### **Structuring the Project: From Theme to Learning Design**

It is important to note that the theme that emerges from this kind of emotional analysis is the theme for the activity; and not the template by which every student should be encouraged to interpret the text. My personal connection to the story informs the learning design, part of which involves giving PSTs time to discuss and process the text in order to think and feel through their own personal connections. In practice, this means that the theme for the activity needs to be able to accommodate heterogeneous interpretations. In this respect, the theme of “love becoming tangible” and the corresponding activity of handmade gift exchange provided my students with a structure for the specific material way to express what *they* felt was most important to learn from and to share about *Coat of Many Colors*.

According to Halverson and Halverson (2019), education is learning which is designed. Teacher education also has an incentive to model the pedagogy which is discussed. Thus, we begin with establishing the learning objectives by asking the question “What are we learning and why?” In line with our orientation toward process, the answer is this: through exploring the idea of love becoming tangible, we are learning the transformative value of creative work. This work done by hand and with intention, is a way to connect to the story through shared lived experience in our classroom community.

Once this thematic connection was established, I focused on developing the exact plot, or timeline of the activity. Structuring the events of the project to parallel the story being told in the text is a helpful way to design learning that is multi-modal and embodied, regardless of students’

age. Another lesson of the theatrical artform is that time and materials are not infinite, but the constraints they entail can become generative by focusing attention and effort where they are most important (McBride et al., 2023). The project took place over three days:

Day 1: Introduction and group read,

Day 2: Makerspace workshop,

Day 3: Gift exchange.

The meetings were held weekly, with an additional week between meetings 2 and 3 (see Appendix A for details). The class time was three hours a week, once per week. Meetings 1 and 3 took up about 45 minutes of total class time; meeting 2 was a full three hours.

Following the thematic connection brings into focus the idea of tangibility. I refer to the more-than-physical attributes of any given object; to the relational and emotional history that becomes inextricable from them. In this new materialist understanding (Barrett, 2013), the relationships of matter, memory, feeling, and intention are constantly emergent, multidirectional, and dialogic. The gift of a handmade object includes the creative thinking, the conversations between the maker and the textile, their personal relationship to the recipient, the story, and the overall relational landscape of the class. The process of conceptualizing, designing, creating, and giving away the object makes it all tangible. In turn, the giving and receiving of such objects helps the students further iterate and refine their connections to the focal text.

### **The Makerspace and the Classroom**

The sewing portion of this activity was a collaboration between me and Alexandra Capps, head of the Fiber Arts Lab of the Wond'ry, Vanderbilt University's makerspace, based on a typical introductory workshop she developed. Beginners to sewing can choose to make either a small heart-shaped pillow or a small patchwork decoration to be displayed in an embroidery

hoop (Figures 2 and 3). I chose the workshop setting to be separate from the introduction to the text and reflections on the theme for reasons both ideational and practical. From the ideational standpoint, I wanted to allow the students some time with the text, which is simple enough in its structure yet carries powerful emotional energy. From the practical one, I wanted to give students as much time as possible with the materials in the context of a single 3-hour period. After all, though we did engage in artmaking before, this was the first time we went somewhere else to do it, and I knew it would take some time just to get familiar with the space.



Figure 2. *Pillow project*

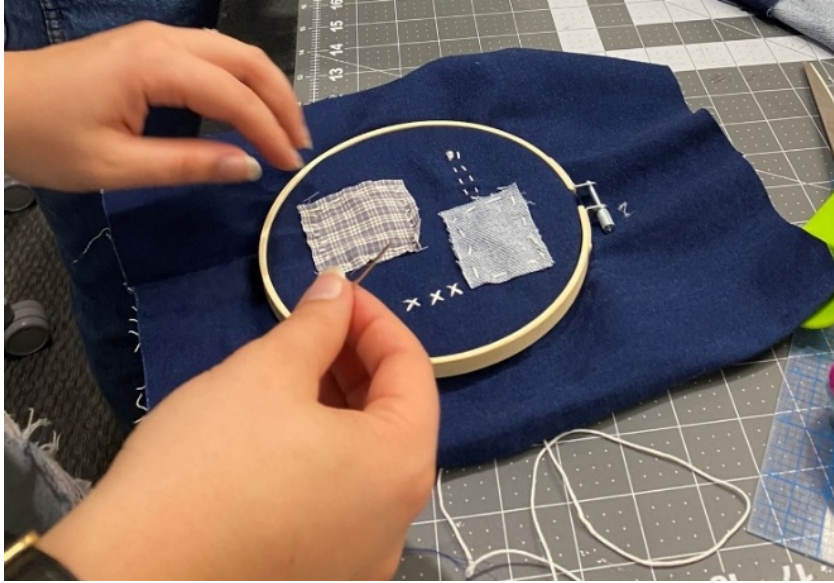


Figure 3. *Patchwork project*

The workshop began with basic hand-sewing instruction for those who needed it, and then students went about choosing their materials and designing their gifts with suggestions from instructors when solicited. In a room full of textiles with all kinds of colors, textures, and patterns, creativity took on a different character than in a typical classroom with beige walls and institutionally neutral furniture. Students remarked that creating works of fiber art in a space like this felt energizing and empowering. Many students expressed that the time at the makerspace was the most engaging part of the activity, with one student writing in her post-class reflection: “The actual act of sewing the heart and choosing the materials with which to make it was a very engaging and invigorating part of the lesson.” Students also recognized the ways in which this material engagement helped them build relationships with each other, and the thematic connection to *Coat of Many Colors* was clear: “I *loved* the sewing activity we were able to learn, make art, and foster community all while still connecting to the book” (emphasis and punctuation in data).

The gift exchange took place at the beginning of the class period after Thanksgiving break. I cannot help but think that the holiday atmosphere that we were fully immersed in in all parts of our greater surroundings added to the festive mood in the classroom space. The students' initial responses were a mix of gratitude and awkwardness, the kind that happens when we experience something which makes us feel appreciated and vulnerable at the same time. Especially those for whom this was a first foray into sewing felt conflicted. One student said, "The pressure of giving it as a gift made it a little more stressful." But in several post-gift-exchange reflections, the words "love" and "loved" show up as testament to the relational bond experienced through it. The gratitude for the handmade gift, and the pride in it, that the narrator of *Coat of Many Colors* spoke of, was certainly tangible in our class that day.

### **Community and Our Collective Felt Change**

Popular discourse tends to view art as a product of talent rather than an outcome of practice within particular systems of knowledge. But if we are to take seriously the notion that teaching is an art, PST preparation should include training in, and with, these systems. Considering the applicability of theatre-based learning design, the answer to the question of, "What would happen if we approached the classroom experience as a play?", is evident in the changed nature of relationships of students to the text and of us to each other, and the way that the tangibility of the experience connected us to the text's themes. This can be summarized as the following observation in the post-gift-exchange discussion:

I feel like going through the process of actually making something made me realize how much time and work that the mom must have put into making an entire coat out of rags for her daughter... It really helps you understand what other people went through and other people did to make things that they give you.

We can see that following the theatrical artform by enacting, rather than merely imagining or describing, key moments of emotional connection, or in other words, making tangible those parts of the story whose materiality is interconnected with its themes, creates physical and temporal space for personal histories, social connections, literacy practices, and artistic expressions to intertwine and come together in ways thereto unexplored. At the same time, this theatrical approach helps PSTs practice important pedagogical skills, such as empathy, being able to listen and relate to multiple perspectives, and creatively solve problems. Development of these skills is one of the central arguments for bringing theatre-based approaches to teacher training (e.g., Walan, 2022). More importantly, personal and shared connections that are at the heart of arts-integrated pedagogies have the potential to move teacher training toward preparing PSTs for meeting the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse learners (Pauly et al., 2019). Thus, engaging with focal texts through artistic response is vital not only for establishing individual connections to literacy materials, but for building relationalities that are at the heart of strong classroom communities. In these shared creative explorations, literary metaphors gain new meanings and, subtly or overtly, who we become to each other after the experience is not who we were to each other before.

### **Connections Between the Past and the Future**

I described my process of working through finding the emotional core of a text and translating it into a fiber arts-inspired project with the hope that it can be applied in a variety of contexts. The details of the activity, including the specific text chosen, length of time, physical place, and materials available, can all be adapted. What is important to retain is the through-line of giving students adequate time and space to establish an emotional connection to the text, a tangible way to explore and share this connection with their classmates, or even the greater

community if possible and appropriate, and an understanding that this process is more valuable than any resulting product in and of itself (Springgay & Rotas, 2014).

Understanding art as process rather than as product is at the heart of the connection between art and teaching; and the artist's practices of connecting to the world through free exploration of ideas with materials, followed by reflection, refinement of technique, and sharing discoveries with others are also important pedagogical practices (Tarr, 1996). This attention to process has led to calls to rethink teacher preparation as a method of wholesale transfer of knowledge from college classrooms to the site of PST's future work, and instead to approach it as a complex assemblage, or a multi-layered development of iterative learning through multiple experiences in and out of formal educational structures (Strom & Martin, 2022). The complexity is further highlighted by the fact that teacher education is a unique field in that it works across distances in space and time. In class, PSTs are theorizing their future identities as teachers by referencing their past as students and their present as both and in-between. Learning experiences that are attuned to the intense emotional as well as intellectual labor that PSTs are undertaking in the process of making these connections have the potential to be transformative. After all, one of the biggest inhibiting factors to arts integration is the fact that though many PSTs have an intellectual understanding of the pedagogical value of the arts, they have not experienced art as a liberatory practice and therefore see their lack of mastery of traditional media as a barrier to bringing it into their classrooms (Rule et al., 2012).

As a relational and process-centered artform, theatre provides a basis for all kinds of activities that show a sustained commitment to process-based arts pedagogy. The innovative lesson described here, which is based on practices of theatrical design, expands the understanding of practicing empathy and perspective-taking through embodied enactment to

include working with materials in order to express a personal connection to the story.

Incorporating theatre-based approaches into teacher education is happening in various contexts and programs around the world (Lummis et al., 2014; Moral-Barrigüete & Guijarro, 2022). The important work of arts integration from pre-K and throughout college curricula needs to continue highlighting the complexities and nuances of learning as it occurs in a variety of contexts, and for this reason, the learning of educators in these environments deserves to be acknowledged more fully. My own learning through this activity, as an educator and researcher as well as an artist and a maker, has been significant. Given the choice to do this again, I would hold more sustained discussions with PSTs on how we discover emotional connections to a text, and I would give them the space to talk through how they would approach big emotions with their future students. I would also think seriously about having PSTs choose their own focal texts, with some guidance around possible ways of constructing creative responses. Alternatively, since my students reacted so positively to the change in surroundings, I would work to bring them to other places: the movement studio, the art gallery, the theatre stage, and, of course, the makerspace. Noticing the ways in which some spaces invite certain kinds of creativity while others potentially inhibit it could give the PSTs some ideas about how they can subtly transform their classroom environments in order to invite the arts, even if they find themselves in more restrictive or standardized school structures.

In their final reflections, students shared memories of past experiences, in and out of classrooms, which came to their minds at various points of working on this project, bringing with them feelings and associations that spoke of new possibilities. Several presented ideas of how they would take parts of this project and adapt it to the elementary classroom in age-appropriate ways; but the main benefit of framing a literacy-based creative making activity as a gift

exchange lies in its power to create connections and a sense of a caring community. As one student wrote: “The art of teaching cannot be siloed to one teacher, one moment, or one lesson; teaching is threaded throughout time and stitched into the fabric of our being. It has the capacity to—years later in life—build skills initially taught and practiced in elementary school. Art carries memories and emotions, not confined to the moments it is performed or created.”

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## Appendix A. *Coat of Many Colors* project worksheet

# *Coat of Many Colors* Project

In-class: Nov 9th, 16th, and 30<sup>th</sup>, 2023



This project aims to explore a well-known text in multi-modal ways. It will consist of reading, listening, discussion, crafting an original fiber-arts item, sharing, and reflective writing. We will complete it in class, over the course of three sessions. Our source text is Dolly Parton's *Coat of Many Colors*.

### **Session 1, November 9<sup>th</sup>:**

Introduction to the work:

- Who is Dolly Parton? How did her childhood experience lead to the creation of the work?
- We'll listen to the song, then read the book. In what ways does the experience differ?
- Questions for reflective writing: What parts of the story resonate with you? What do you see as the main message of the story?
- We will exchange names for recipients of our hand-made gifts.

### **Session 2, November 16<sup>th</sup>:**

- We will meet at the [FAB Lab of the Wond'ry](#) at 4:30
- Alex Sargent will lead us in creating a hand-made craft that you will make as a gift for your assigned partner. If you don't get a chance to finish, you can take your supplies with you to continue working at home.

### **Session 3, November 30<sup>th</sup>:**

- We will exchange our handmade gifts.
- Questions for reflective writing will be shared at that time.
- We will do a debrief session as a large group.