

# An Arts Connection with a Focus on Improving Learning Standards

by Sandra H. Olsen, Stanley Panetski, and Walter S. Polka

## Introduction

At the twilight of the 20th century, the quest for educational excellence in the United States centered on legislation that would establish specific educational standards. The main focus of this reform movement was on traditional core curriculum subjects: English or language arts, social studies, mathematics, and science. Often this movement relegated the creative and performing arts, such as music, drama, dance, and art, to the “back burner.” Arts-oriented curricula, already at risk in countless school districts across the United States, were threatened again in the general rush to establish improved education standards.

## Empire State Partnership Project

The Lewiston-Porter Central School District in Youngstown, New York, and the Castellani Art Museum of Niagara University have collabo-

rated since 1997 to strengthen the role of the arts in the current reform movement. The Empire State Partnership Project of the New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA) provided funding assistance.

The Empire State Partnership (ESP) Program began in 1997 as an interagency collaboration between NYSCA and the New York State Department of Education (SED). This initiative was designed to identify, develop, and support best practices in educational and cultural collaborations that focused on achieving the New York State Learning Standards adopted by the New York State Board of Regents in the summer of 1996. The program was intended to increase teachers' and students' access to and use of the state's vast cultural resources and to spur the permanent integration and reinstatement of the arts into the state's classrooms, both as a curricu-

lar discipline and as a tool to help students master other curricular subject areas.

The ESP program is much more than another arts-in-education program. In addition to providing substantial financial support to the school-museum partnerships over a five-year period to plan, develop, and implement their programs, the ESP program has been distinctive in its design and delivery of professional development. Representatives from the school-museum partnerships are required to participate (ESP grant funds pay for room and board) in a summer seminar, Web-based workshops, and academic-year meetings (statewide and regional) that provide professional development and cross-project connections.

## Empire State Partnership

### Phase I

The Lewiston-Porter Central School District and the Castellani Art Museum have had a working relationship for more than fifteen years. Their current Empire State Partnership is founded upon clearly defined objectives, strengthened by support from the administration of both partners, and implemented by the work of an expanding project team. Teachers serve as the managers and leaders. The museum staff, the school's principal and ESP school coordinator, and the university-based project team evaluator all serve as assistants to, rather than

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managers or leaders of, programs planned and directed by teachers as “project leaders.”

For the ESP program, teachers in the art, social studies, and English departments planned curriculum together for the first time. They worked as a project team with museum staff and a professional education evaluator (a faculty member of Niagara University’s School of Education) to expand upon key parts of their existing curriculum. Gradually, the teachers came to view the museum as a rich educational resource rather than a source of “pre-packaged” programs and museum tours. They saw that it offered not only an art collection for document-based learning, but a “network” of artistic, cultural, and community contacts; an ideal constructivist education site; a partner in creative thinking; and a facilitator for implementing teacher ideas and curriculum plans.

The ESP team’s first task was to investigate the curriculum connections between and among the content areas of high school English, social studies, and art. The team saw that a key connector related to the contemporary New York State Learning Standards was English/Language Arts Learning Standard 3:

*Critical Analysis and Education. Students will listen, speak, read, and write for literary response and expression.*

The task, then, was to plan a curriculum project to engage students in interdisciplinary activities related to that specific learning standard. The Lewiston-Porter/Castellani Art Museum partnership secured an ESP planning grant in 1997. This project brought three artists into the tenth-grade English classrooms and visual arts studios for residencies, during which they discussed their work and creative processes with the students.

After the residencies all tenth graders took a field trip to the Castellani Art Museum. There they selected artwork from the permanent collection for a “Writing on the Wall” exhibition in the museum. After instruction in analytical writing, the students were assigned to compose a wall text that would interpret artwork for museum visitors. Fundamentally, the exercise empowered students to curate a museum exhibition with their analyses installed on the wall as interpretive texts.

Tenth-grade art students also created a piece of visual art that incorporated some aspect of the artwork they had selected for the Writing on the Wall exhibition, which was installed in an adjoining gallery. The art students also composed artists’ statements, which accompanied their work in the exhibition. Art students thereby fulfilled New York State Learning Standards 1 and 2 in Visual Art:



President Lincoln (Mr. Jim Getty) answering students’ questions in eleventh-grade social studies class.  
(Photo by student photographer)

*Creating, Performing, and Participating in the Arts. Students will actively engage in the processes that constitute creation and performance in the arts (dance, music, theater, and visual arts) and participate in various roles in the arts.*

*Knowing and Using Arts Materials and Resources. Students will be knowledgeable about and make use of the materials and resources available for participation in the arts in various roles.*

## **Our Constructivist Teaching and Learning Experiences**

We attribute the success of the initial Writing on the Wall curriculum to the constructivist principles employed by teachers and museum personnel in developing their instructional strategies. The ESP team encouraged students to use their experiences to actively construct understandings that made sense to them, rather than understandings delivered to them in already-organized form. The instructional perspective encouraged active learners who link their new knowledge to

prior knowledge and apply their expanded understandings to authentic situations (Eggen and Kauchak, 1997).

In essential constructivist terms, the ESP team recognized that the results of the curriculum-planning activities would vary with each individual, depending on experiences, knowledge, and cognitive structure (Danielson, 1996). These constructivist behaviors were further developed and reinforced, consistent with those specified for educators by Brooks and Brooks (1997) as follows:

- Encourage and accept student ideas and initiatives.
- Use primary sources along with manipulative, interactive, and physical materials.
- Encourage students to engage in dialogue.
- Encourage student inquiry by asking thoughtful, open-minded questions.
- Provide time for students to construct relationships and create metaphors.

The museum planning team members also judged such constructivist principles to be consistent with contemporary museum educational orientations (Hein, 1999). Accordingly, all planning team members embraced constructivist teaching-learning principles, which became an integral component of the partnership.

## **Our Empire State Partnership Programs**

### ***Phase II***

Following the initial year's success, 1998-1999 state grant funding increased tenfold. The Lewiston-Porter/Castellani Art Museum partnership could thus plan and implement more comprehensive interdisciplinary efforts for teaching the standards through the arts. The curriculum expanded horizontally to include



Tenth-grade students at the Holocaust Museum, Washington, D.C.  
(Photo by student photographer)

another discipline (social studies) and vertically to include another grade (eleventh). The program's interdisciplinary arts-oriented activities now addressed another key learning standard, the New York State Social Studies Learning Standard 5:

*Civics, Citizenship and Government. Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of the necessity for establishing governments; the governmental system of the United States and other nations; the United States Constitution; the basic civic values of American constitutional democracy; and the roles, rights, and responsibilities of citizenship, including avenues of participation.*

Focusing on overarching themes—"Rights and Responsibilities" and "Power and the Abuse of

Power"—in order to coordinate the English and social studies standards, an eleventh-grade English teacher produced a mock trial for Abigail Williams as the culminating project in studying Arthur Miller's "The Crucible." Two local assistant district attorneys and a defense attorney worked with students to prepare and deliver legal arguments on whether Abigail Williams would be found guilty of murder in today's democratic jury system. Students served as members of the press, court artists, bailiffs, and dramatic witnesses from the original trial. They wrote their own scripts, prepared press announcements before and after the trial, and documented the legal arguments as artists, videographers, and photographers. A city judge presided over the trial; students and parents served on the jury, deliberated, and delivered a verdict.

The second part of the eleventh grade's involvement in the ESP partnership brought actors from the

New York City-based Theatre for a New Audience (TFANA) to serve a residency at Lewiston-Porter. Using Shakespeare's "Macbeth" as their text, they guided eleventh-grade English classes through reading and movement exercises in the meaning and the flow of the language. With a variety of unique methods, the actors showed students not only what the play's characters were saying, but also why they were saying it. Following this intensive instruction, the students analyzed "Macbeth" to find its relevance to their own lives and the world today.

A third partnership project involved developing an interdisciplinary Holocaust studies curriculum that would integrate the same English and social studies state standards in the tenth-grade curriculum. This project reinforced the already-existing use of Eli Wiesel's "Night" in the tenth-grade English curriculum by integrating more comprehensive and vigorous studies in tenth-grade



Tenth-grade English teacher Patrick Heyden with a guest artist, Neil Tetkowsky, answering students' questions in tenth-grade English class.

social studies (world history) and art classes. Historic explorations, literary connections, and artistic renderings, both from the Holocaust and about it, were coordinated so students received multiple Holocaust-related learning experiences in a concentrated time period. The culminating activity of this interdisciplinary curriculum was an ESP-sponsored field trip, available to all tenth-graders, to the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. Students completed a booklet of analytical questions created by the English, social studies, and art teachers involved in the project. This booklet deals with the students'

intellectual, emotional, and moral responses to photographs, film, and artifacts documenting the events that took place in Nazi Germany, as well as their responses to the architectural space, materials, and design of the memorial itself. Art students had the freedom to create a work of art communicating their personal responses to their experiences at the memorial, with the option of substituting this artwork in the Writing on the Wall exhibition.

The Writing on the Wall exhibition was expanded in spring 1999 to include the theme "Rights and Responsibilities" and artwork pro-

duced by eleventh-grade students. In addition, a separate gallery space featured a "Year in Review" exhibition that documented the various ESP curriculum activities during the previous two years.

### Contemporary Experiences

Due to the multifaceted accomplishments of the 1998-1999 Empire State Partnership, the ESP team again expanded interdisciplinary programming for the 1999-2000 school year—vertically to include all ninth-grade students and horizontally to add music. Building upon the past two years, the team planned expanded interdisciplinary curriculum units that replicated the mock trial, Theatre for a New Audience, Holocaust studies, and Writing on the Wall. Public performances for both the mock trial and Theatre for a New Audience were added, thus sharing the exceptional learning experience with our community and demonstrating the importance of arts in the overall curriculum. Throughout this third year of the ESP program, visual art students, trained by consultants, took part in photographic and video documentation of all aspects of the grant programs. Visual art students designed most of the posters, programs, flyers, and invitations using Mac C3 computer technology and Adobe software purchased, in part, with ESP grant funds.

In 1999-2000, ninth-grade students also had the opportunity to interact with the TFANA in further developing their understanding and appreciation of Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet." The professional actors for TFANA conducted more workshops for our teachers and spent more time—seven days—"in residency" in our high school, directly teaching students. The longer residency allowed the actors to prepare students for an evening community presentation of the program "Shakespeare Tonight." Twenty-seven



Art teacher Cynthia Long showing students a work of art by guest artist Shelley Niro in tenth-grade art class.

ninth-graders voluntarily presented selected scenes from "Romeo and Juliet," and fourteen eleventh-graders presented scenes from "Macbeth." It was a pleasure to witness ninth-graders voluntarily presenting Shakespearean lines not only in their own class, but in front of a large community gathering—and having fun doing it. Obviously, the TFANA players had a positive impact on our students and our curriculum.

The ESP team constructed another new ninth-grade curriculum component around using computer technology to help students make valid comparisons between and among various examples of artistic statements. Using PowerPoint software, they made presentations that illustrated the similarities and differences of visual art, music, and poetry in mood, content, and structure. The long-term goal is for teams of students to design their own CD-ROM productions of comparative exam-

ples between literature, art, and music.

An entirely new curriculum component in 1999-2000 was introducing a historical re-enactor in eleventh-grade social studies. For two days, "President Lincoln" (Jim Getty) visited all eleventh-grade social studies classrooms. Students interviewed him on various aspects of his life, both private and political, including the reasoning behind many of his actions before and during the Civil War. President Lincoln also gave an evening talk and press conference for the community at large. In addition, the ESP project funded a presentation by President Lincoln to the Kiwanis International Club of Lewiston. Constructivist learning principles, thus, can transcend the school.

#### ***Programmatic and Student Assessments***

Throughout this arts connection experience, the ESP team used two

types of assessments for each component of the program: formal and anecdotal. Formal assessments included both authentic assessments—i.e., student work (writing assignments, student guides, creative artwork, documentary photography, and video production)—and surveys. Anecdotal assessments included written and oral responses to the ESP activities by students and teachers. Through informal contact between and among teachers and through shared responses at ESP staff meetings, students and teachers exchanged opinions with an eye toward continuously improving the content strands of ESP activities. However, the best anecdotal assessments were hours of interviews videotaped by a PBS crew with representatives of all the ESP stakeholders, especially the students. These video documentaries illustrate the personal intellectual growth that occurred as a result of the arts connection experiences.



Lawyers working with students for the mock trial. Left to right: Lisa Wegrzyn, asst. district attorney, Niagara County; eleventh-grade student Dawn Delahoy; eleventh-grade student Mike Castiglione; Holly Sloma, defense attorney. (Photo by student photographer)

The *Lewiston-Porter Sentinel* published the following educators' comments on the Lewiston-Porter/Castellani Art Museum partnership:

"A great display of the integration of curriculum; amazing to see what young minds can do when not confined to a set assignment. An example program to be a model for other districts."

—*Meghan Gee,*  
*special education teacher,*  
*West Seneca West High School*

"Tremendously enjoyed the visit to the Castellani Art Museum. Cross-curriculum teaching and learning were exemplified at this exhibit. It was evident that students participated in experiential high-level thinking educational practices. The fact that students were taught how to examine and analyze art and then synthesize this learning into writing was tremendous. 'The Crucible'—Abigail Williams reenactment and the visits to the Holocaust Museum were especially powerful."

—*Scott Payne,*  
*teacher on special assignment,*  
*Amherst Central Schools*

"I have seen the exhibit by the Lewiston-Porter students, and it exemplifies cross-curriculum learning as well as team teaching. What was most interesting to me was the use of newspaper articles and raised letters, as well as other materials, depicting the violence in the war in Kosovo. The way the students brought out what is happening in the world now and comparing it to history and slavery. . ."

—*Sr. Elizabeth Domin, principal,*  
*Sacred Heart Villa, Lewiston*

"The Lewiston-Porter School District's Empire Partnership, on display at Niagara University, is a great model for any school district that wants to incorporate the arts into various discipline areas. . ."

—*Joe Sankees,*  
*physical education teacher,*  
*Abate Elementary School, Niagara Falls*

Formal assessments were made during different phases of each ESP program and carefully evaluated, using multiple channels of feedback and analysis, to determine individual student cognitive and socio-emotional growth. For example, during the mock trial program all eleventh-grade students in English, social studies, and art participated in several pre-trial and post-trial assignments to determine their level of comprehension of the key themes, "Rights and Responsibilities and Power" and "Abuse of Power." Pre-trial assignments included the following:

- Reflect upon the rights and responsibilities concept and how current laws emanate from the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights.
- Reflect upon any injustice you believe has been committed against you by an authority, institution, or social agency.
- Link the personal example of injustice to the Bill of Rights to determine if your rights have been violated.
- Analyze the Salem Witch Trials and how they violated rights



Drawings by students acting as court artists for the mock trial.  
(Photo by Biff Henrich)

later determined by the founding fathers.

- Read and study the text of “The Crucible.”
- View the film of “The Crucible.”
- Consider the double setting of “The Crucible” (Salem and McCarthyism) and the idea of the title as metaphor.
- Evaluate the significant differences between a theocracy and a democracy.

Student comprehension of the concepts associated with the above assignments were monitored and assessed on an on-going basis via the following:

- personal journal responses
- shared experiences
- spoken and written formal analyses
- sketches of characters in “The Crucible”

During the mock trial program student comprehension of the key concepts associated with the themes

was measured by the following student assignments:

- Assist with writing pre-trial press releases and public announcements.
- Witness the mock trial in a general assembly fifty minutes long.
- Design the program cover for the mock trial.
- Participate in the mock trial as attorneys, court clerks, jurors, court artists, photographers, videographers, journalists, and word processors.
- Assist with building stage sets and props
- Photograph and videotape trial and jury proceedings for documentation.

After the conclusion of the mock trial experience, the following indicators of student progress and comprehension of the theme concepts were employed:

- Participate in a question-and-answer period after the trial.

- Discuss and write about the outcome of the mock trial.
- Complete the survey form.
- Take the English comprehensive Regents exam in January 1999.
- Take the social studies Regents exam in June 1999.

Professional analysis of our student survey results specifically demonstrated that the mock trial experience significantly increased student knowledge about our laws, about guilt or innocence in contextual settings, and about the powerful influence of fear and group-think mentality.

Two key statewide indicators of student standards comprehension were the New York State Regents exams (English in January 1999 and social studies in June 1999). Data from both of these statewide exams clearly indicate increased student comprehension of key content concepts associated with the New York State Learning Standards. As a matter of fact, several students indicated



WNET film crew documenting ESP exhibition opening for the PBS film “pARTnership.”  
(Photo by Nancy Parisi)

In September 1999, New York City's WNET broadcast "pARTnership," a documentary spotlighting several successful Empire State Partnership programs. The Lewiston-Porter/Castellani Art Museum segment contained these comments:

"School districts, and perhaps society at large, kind of consider the fine arts peripheral to life experience rather than at the center of it. And, I think, as educators, we have to realize that we can use fine arts experiences as core curricular activities that can promote learning."

—Frank Scelsa, English teacher

"The confidence level of the students was raised so much, to the point where now they felt comfortable analyzing not only art but literature. They were able to jump into critical analysis pieces and write them with a much more confident flair than they had before the ESP project came along."

—Patrick Heyden, English teacher

"When I saw 'The Crucible' being acted out in front of my eyes, my mouth dropped open. I thought okay, yes, this did cost money to do, but to be able to transcend textbooks and the everyday normal expectations of students and teachers and administrators, it just 'wowed' me. I couldn't believe it, and I think it 'wowed' everybody, and most importantly, the students."

—Heather DeCastro,  
school board member

"When you are on stage working with actors who do this for a living, and they really bring Shakespeare alive, like, you want to go to class. You know, you can't wait until the next day when you get to do it again."

—Tanis Winslow, student

"I always loved doing art, but this encouraged me to bring it out with a new technique that I have never used before by transferring the picture onto the canvas itself. I had never tried that before and it was different and interesting."

—Gretchen Wagner, student

increased confidence and comfort in writing selections related to their arts connection experiences (i.e., the mock trial program and writing about "The Crucible") on the English Regents exam. The local media spotlighted the achievement level of Lewiston-Porter High School students on the New York State English Regents exam: 98 percent of the Lewiston-Porter students passed that exam. The passing rate was 93 percent for other similar Niagara County schools, 92 percent for other similar New York State schools, and 78 percent statewide. Additionally, a greater percentage of Lewiston-Porter students passed the New York State Regents examination in American his-

tory than in the previous decade. We attribute the successes of our students on these statewide, standards-driven content examinations to using our arts connection as a vehicle to teach the New York State Standards.

## Summary

The educational benefits of our Empire State Partnership have been widespread, not only to our students via an enriched high school curriculum, but also to our faculty via interdisciplinary constructivist planning, and to our community via enhanced appreciation of the significance of the arts in teaching the basics. These benefits are consistent with a 1998 study of school principals in Iowa,



Student videotaping the mock trial.  
(Photo by Nancy Parisi)



Student jury in the mock trial.  
(Photo by Nancy Parisi)



Chris Stangler, a guest artist, answering students' questions in tenth-grade English class.



Members of the Theatre for a New Audience working with eleventh-grade students.  
(Photo by Nancy Parisi)

Minnesota, and South Dakota (Baron 1998), when they envisioned the following benefits of collaborative efforts with the arts community:

- Integrating community cultural and arts organizations into the instructional program as a means of fostering lifelong learning
- Helping students to know their community better and expand their horizons through exposure and engagement with the arts community
- Developing a greater appreciation among students of the importance of the arts in contemporary society
- Utilizing community cultural and arts organizations to provide a depth of information and experiences to the curriculum that schools would not otherwise be able to afford
- Integrating the arts into the taught curriculum to make education more authentic, relevant, and exciting for the student
- Defining the learning program for young people more broadly

to include both the schoolhouse and the larger community

These were the benefits we envisioned for the program. We can also state with assurance that they have become realities for the Lewiston-Porter Central School District and the Castellani Art Museum of Niagara University in their collaboration under the auspices of the Empire State Partnership.

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### Additional Information

Additional information, including visuals, is available on the following Niagara University web site: <http://www.niagara.edu/~cam>

To obtain video copies of the Student Art Show, the Mock Trial experience, or both, please contact Dr. Sandra H. Olsen at [www.sbo@niagara.edu](mailto:www.sbo@niagara.edu) or write Sandra H. Olsen, Ph.D., Director, Castellani Art Museum of Niagara University, Niagara University, NY 14109.



Student artwork for ESP student exhibition at the Castellani Art Museum of Niagara University: "Hope," by Marlene Heuer. (Photo by Nancy Parisi)