

Promoting Understanding: Teaching Literacy through the Arts

by Nancy Witherell

The audience was silent. The dancers stopped. Students, through movement and dance, had just illustrated the destruction, debris, and heartache caused by the dropping of the atomic bomb. Suddenly, these students, deliberately disorganized, ran to pick up scattered Ping-Pong balls that symbolized the rampant destruction. Thus, through movement and interpretation, they began the difficult process of rectifying a horrible wrong and, through cleaning up the disarray on the floor, symbolizing the initial process of repairing the damage of World War II.

The students achieved three main outcomes in this reenactment of an incredible period in our history: 1) they showed their understanding of the breakup of the atom through their overall movements; 2) they summarized a portion of World War II; and 3) through body movements, they demonstrated their understanding of a period of history no one wants to see repeated.

The members of the audience remained silent. They had been affected in a way they could not have been by reading a written report. More important, through dance and movement, the students had depicted not only their understanding of historical facts, but also their understanding of the resulting environmental, economic, and social repercussions.

This movement exercise, with its planned outcomes and knowledge measurements, is an example of an effective educational practice in which students learn nontraditionally. For many of them, it was more productive than writing a four- or five-page, 1,000-word theme on the effects of the atomic bomb. For some of them it was not. But all of them gained an understanding of war's devastation in a way that a paper-and-pencil task could never match. Such is the power of teaching through the arts.

For thousands of years, early societies passed on knowledge through dance, movement, drama, music, and the visual arts. Even today, tribal

dances and sand-painting ceremonies, besides their dramatic symbolism, exist as reminders of generations past. Cave paintings, wall paintings, and carvings all provide visual documentation of ancient lifestyles and events. Reed instruments, leather-covered drums, and bamboo flutes are other means by which musical tradition has been passed forward.

Only in recent history, with formalized education employing letter and number symbols, has the use of the arts to pass on knowledge begun to disappear. Technology in modern society has caused a shift in the definition of intelligence, to the point that intelligence is now largely quantified on the basis of standardized test results. Phrases such as "It doesn't take a rocket scientist" reinforce the current notion of intelligence. In today's society, someone talented in the visual arts, dance, or music is considered "gifted." In contrast, a superior mathematician or scientist is termed "brilliant" or "exceptionally intelligent."

In fact, all superior artists have studied, practiced, and refined their skills. Like mathematicians and scientists, their superior performance is the outcome of initiative, hard work, determination, and intelligence, not the result of a "gift."

That children learn in different ways is not news to educators, nor is it news to society. Educators must employ strategies that promote growth and development in our students and use

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methodologies that take into consideration various ways of learning. Recent brain research and work regarding “multiple intelligences” are challenging conventional wisdom on what defines intelligence and how children learn.

In the theory of multiple intelligences, Howard Gardner has conceptualized a view of learning that helps explain the diversity in students’ abilities. Gardner identified eight different intelligences: linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial (including visual abilities), bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalist. Gardner emphasizes that his theory is not completely formulated and that, in the future, other types of intelligences may be identified.

One derivative of this theory is that interactions of intelligences, such as musical and bodily-kinesthetic, may be considered completely separate intelligences. This possibility becomes especially important in learning through the arts because of the extent to which these connections can increase performance. For instance, a student with bodily-kinesthetic ability has the basis to do well in dance. Combine such talent with musical intelligence and the student will excel. Possibly, if there is also a strength in interpersonal skills, “a star is born.” In most cases, stars are not born, but made, and the teacher’s role is

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to strengthen areas of weakness, as well as to challenge areas of strength.

With advancements in technology, brain research has developed rapidly, providing many implications for teaching and learning. According to Eric Jensen in *Teaching with the Brain in Mind*, children customize their developing brains through environmental influences. In brain-compatible learning, educators provide stimuli to a child’s learning environment to produce a more active brain, thereby increasing his or her learning. Such stimulation becomes extremely important in the arts. According to Jensen, today’s biology suggests that the arts lay the foundation for later academic and career success. He goes so far as to say that a strong arts foundation builds creativity, concentration, problem solving, self-efficacy, coordination, attention to values, and self-discipline.

Whether we focus on multiple intelligences or brain research, the importance of teaching through the arts is compelling. The theory of multiple intelligences and its growing support in brain-research findings have been accepted more often in theory than in application as teachers struggle to create an arts-infused classroom. Some applications are too superficial to be considered true uses of multiple intelligences. Asking elementary students to draw pictures to go with a story may appear to be using the arts, but it does not necessarily constitute teaching through the arts.

There seems to be some confusion about how to infuse art into a lesson effectively, as opposed to adding art as a motivator or a response to reading. Five basic principles of teaching through the arts must be understood before the planning of effective art integrated lessons.

Principle 1

Targeted outcomes must be clear. They cannot change because the teaching or assessment is nontraditional.

Whatever a teacher wants children to learn does not change because of the method of teaching. If the objective is to have students describe a character through a song, that point must be made clear. Students need to understand that the assignment is to describe the character—they just happen to be writing a song to do so. Songwriters often write descriptions of characters in songs, and using one of them as a model (such as “Charlie Brown, He’s a Clown” or “Eleanor Rigby”) can help teach this concept. If the objective is to demonstrate the mood of a chapter by drumbeats, students must blend their knowledge of music with their understanding of the chapter. They must be able to beat out a playful, sinister, or disastrous mood, as the case may be.

Such behaviors must be taught first. Discussion along with demonstration will help teach students the idea of beating out a mood. First, they must be able to define what a mood is and explain how an author can hint at a mood. They must know what kinds of moods can be found in a story. Then their interpretation would focus on such matters as: How does the mood sound? In other words, how does danger sound? Peaceful? Mysterious? As long as the outcomes of the teaching remain the focus, the arts can be an effective vehicle to help students gain understanding.



Principle 2

All possible arts (and intelligences) must be included, as long as this inclusion does not seem contrived.

If we are truly trying to enrich the learning environment, we must consciously strive for the best and enhance learning experiences in all areas. In the theory of multiple intelligences, Gardner discusses how connectivity within the intelligences fosters greater learning. In brain-compatible learning, Jensen states, the use of art is not just to draw, but to teach thinking and to build emotive expressiveness and memory—a remarkable demonstration of the brain's plasticity. He also states that by learning and practicing art, the human brain actually rewires itself to make more and stronger connections. Educators must design lessons that encourage this learning process. Students improve in areas in which they are challenged to go beyond their "status quo." Teachers should help students use a variety of art forms and foster the combination of intelligences as long as activities are congruent with the outcomes; it is easy to mistakenly turn the art form into a nontraditional form of busywork.

Principle 3

The learning must be accomplished through the arts, supported by teaching through the arts.

This principle is easily misunderstood. In arts-infused lessons the "art" cannot be just an

add-on, but must be an integral part of the lesson. For example, one teacher explained to me how she would assess her students' knowledge of magnets. After some wonderful hands-on experiments with magnets, she was going to put the students into a "magnet movement" activity to see if they understood how likes repel and opposites attract. Each child was to have a plus marked on one hand, representing positive charge, and a minus on the other, representing negative.

A wonderful idea, but why for the assessment? If a child truly comprehends better through movement (bodily-kinesthetic intelligence), then using it as an assessment makes the learning too late. Using movement, opposite "chains," and repelling duets in the instructional phase would foster ownership of these concepts. Then, perhaps, having the students draw and label on paper, along with an oral discussion, would reinforce the outcomes.

Principle 4

All intelligences should be fostered while students continue to use reading, writing, and math skills in conjunction with the arts.

Infusing the arts in the classroom has proved to foster understanding in the traditional subjects. This does not mean that the arts supersede these subjects, but that they become the vehicle to improve academic weaknesses. For instance, in my methodology classes, I ask teacher-prep stu-

dents to make visuals representing components in lessons they are planning. These visuals serve as a rehearsal for the writing of that lesson. Some students include pictures, some design graphic organizers, and others simply brainstorm lists of ideas. These visuals are shared, discussed, and eventually written into formal lesson plans.

According to Gardner, people truly understand something when they can present knowledge in more than one way. Formalizing the plan prepares them for the future. A picture of a math book drawn in a plan book will not get past the principal's scrutiny in a formal observation. It can, however, serve as a visual organizer for an important lesson that the principal will observe. More important are the creative thinking and planning that take place while drawing this visual. Obviously traditional outcomes must take precedence, for most students are not going to be able to literally dance their way into a job.

clever, resourceful, friendly, poor, lonely, and kind. Students could choose to exhibit these traits through movement, visual arts, music, or graphic organizers. The assessment tool would set up the expectation to show understanding of the character, and the optimal product will include the expected traits. It is the task of the student to make sure the teacher can understand and identify the traits included in the analysis.

Putting It All Together

Lessons that include these principles show a conceptual understanding of teaching through the arts using the theory of multiple intelligences. It's not teaching everything at once, but blending the unit of study to include areas of the arts. As an example, one literacy unit designed to infuse the arts focused on the young-adult novel *Sing Down the Moon*, by Scott O'Dell. In this story of the Navaho culture, the two main characters, Bright Morning and Tall Boy, are forced to join the 1864 episode called "The Long Walk." The Navaho were coerced from their homes in northeastern Arizona and marched 300 miles to imprisonment. Due to the severity of the march, followed by four years of imprisonment, hundreds of Navaho died. In this heart-wrenching story, O'Dell gives the readers a clear view of the setting, emotions, strength, and finally, the enduring hope of the Navaho.

Four areas were chosen for an integrated curriculum: dramatic arts, visual arts, spatial relations, and music. The four areas of concentration ensured students' understanding as they learned through the arts. The intelligences—linguistic (drama), visual, spatial, and musical—were chosen because the events in the book lead easily to the infusion of these artistic areas. For instance, one chapter of the book about the rescue of Bright Morning by her boyfriend, Tall Boy, was used for dramatization. This particular chapter, which shows the characters' courage and initiative, contains a high degree of action and dialogue. It was easily adapted to a reader's theater format, which included ample dialogue, dogs barking, and a furtive escape.

A second chapter, which contained a detailed description of Canyon de Chelly, fostered growth in the visual arts. After reading the chapter, students received books showing pictures of Canyon de Chelly and the Grand Canyon, helping them obtain a clearer, visual orientation for the setting of the story. After rereading the setting, the

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Principle 5

The assessment must fit the mode of presentation.

Teachers hesitate to utilize arts-infused lessons in their classrooms because they are not sure how to evaluate nontraditional products, such as dance, drawing, or song. At this point we must return to Principle 1, stating again that targeted outcomes must be clear and not change because the teaching or assessing is nontraditional. If outcomes for a unit of knowledge will be shown through dance, then the assessment instrument must evaluate the intended outcomes.

Nontraditional teaching calls for nontraditional assessment tools. Rubrics or product-analysis checklists are appropriate choices. If an arts-infused lesson's outcome identifies a character's personality traits, the teacher must look for the traditional answers in the nontraditional assessment. If students are asked to show these traits in their own way, a product or analysis checklist would remain the same for multiple products. For example, in the case of the children's book character Maniac Magee, character traits students can be expected to discover include independent,

students drew chalk pictures to show their understanding of the story setting. Students were given a product-analysis checklist stating the expected criteria. The setting assessment was based on the inclusion of these criteria as shown:

When drawing your setting, it is important that you take into consideration the criteria for a setting. Ask yourself the following:

What does this particular setting include?

Does the setting contribute to the mood of the story?

Does the setting help explain the period in which the story occurred?

Does the setting provide insight about lifestyle?

Are there any symbols within the setting? Explain them.

Does the setting show the passing of time?

Does the setting suggest a season?

Have you included all the necessary surroundings?

Would someone familiar with the book be able to guess which book setting was being described?

Portray the setting accurately, drawing support from the story.

The chapters describing "The Long Walk," along with a historical map, nurtured spatial intelligence. Groups received five colors of yarn, one color for each state—Utah, Arizona, Colorado, and New Mexico—and a fifth to diagram the trail. The students, using the floor as their work space, were told to make large outlines of the four states and to show the route of "The Long Walk." Index cards and markers labeled states, towns, and forts they considered important to the understanding of the story. One group folded index cards to represent mountainous areas.

Music was the fourth area included in this literacy unit. The teacher purchased Native American flute music and chants from a local

music store. The Native American music was used at the beginning of the unit to set the mood and to motivate students. After reading about the "The Long Walk," the students were placed in groups and told to write chants about the feelings of the Navaho people. Groups were set up for successful completion of this task by using a variety of effective teaching strategies. Students were given a list of the expected criteria, they listened to tapes of Native American chants as positive models, and finally, a discussion was held on the use of repetition in chants and how repetition adds power to the chant. Once the chants were complete, these moving pieces were read while Native American flute music played as background to the reading.

In all these lessons, the activities were geared to foster a clearer understanding of the story. The arts included in the unit are supported by the actions, setting, and problems from within the book. The activities planned grew out of the story; the art intelligences emphasized were not forced on the story but had natural connections leading the students to gain in their comprehension of the text.

Often educators turn what should be a hands-on experience into a textbook experience. When teaching through the arts we have to creatively transfer what may have been suitable as a textbook experience into the artistic mode. In the long run the knowledge and understanding gained are well worth the effort.

The challenging element of lessons that foster growth through the arts is in designing the lessons. The arts are the instrument of teaching and therefore instrumental in fostering understanding. We need to explore using the arts for teaching and their application to classroom practices, and utilize strategies and techniques to promote the process of learning through the arts. Once these techniques are incorporated into the classroom, the results are literally dramatic.

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