



Accessible and Alive: Six Good Reasons for Using the Arts to Teach Curriculum

The traditional way to transmit knowledge within many tribal communities was for older generations to take on the job of teaching the children. For example, in the old days very young Inuit girls learned to use the razor-sharp woman's knife, the ulu, by watching their mothers and grandmothers cut meat, trim lamp wicks, cut seal or caribou skins, even cut their hair. Boys watched their fathers and grandfathers use the longer man's knife to butcher a walrus or cut skins into strips for dog harnesses. The teaching took place naturally and quietly, part of the rhythm of daily life. All the life-skills in early tribal communities— weaving, pottery-making, carving, hunting, sewing, etc. — were passed on largely by example and learned through trial and error. Necessity was the test, survival the reward.

We are still teaching the disciplines our children need to thrive, but in a far different world. We teach them language, because they need to become good communicators in speech and in writing; reading, so that they can learn on their own what other people know; mathematics, so they can operate successfully in the concrete world of making and exchanging; geography, history, science—they all seem important to success.

But if our goal is for children to become knowledgeable, critical thinkers who are good at solving problems, we need to pay attention to the “how” of teaching. We need to stimulate curiosity. We need to teach children how to analyze problems on their own and let them practice solving those problems creatively. We need to help them energetically absorb, remember, and apply skills and knowledge. And the arts can help us do this.

There are six powerful reasons for integrating the arts into the daily curriculum:

1. The arts make content more accessible.
2. The arts encourage joyful, active learning.
3. The arts help students make and express personal connections to content.
4. The arts help children understand and express abstract concepts.
5. The arts stimulate higher-level thinking.
6. The arts build community and help children develop collaborative work skills.

Reason 1: The Arts Make Content More Accessible

Over the years when I've asked teachers how they learn most effectively, a few have said they learn by listening to new information. But far more have said they learn best if they see something visually or get a chance to try it out. Apparently most of us learn best by looking, talking, making, or moving, or by teaching someone else, and so do the children in our classrooms.

Some students' first love and first talent is talking rather than writing. Teachers can help these students practice writing skills by channeling the talking into oral storytelling, which then leads to writing down the stories and editing the written versions.

For students who are visual learners, drawing might provide a doorway to writing. I sometimes ask first graders to draw a picture to represent a special word they are thinking about when they come into the classroom in the morning. If the word is "stomachache," for example, and the picture of a sad face appears on the page, a sentence such as "I threw up" may follow quickly. The sequence of idea-to-picture-to-words is a natural one.

Visual learners might also use drawing to work out story problems in math: "If Corey buys six packages of potato chips, gives one each to three of his friends, and eats one at lunch, how many will he have left?" Amanda can draw the six packages of chips, use arrows to show the transfer of three of them, cross out the fourth, and then count how many are left.

Some children learn best when they engage their whole bodies. These kinesthetic learners might want to act out a story before writing it down, or use their bodies to form geometric shapes or demonstrate the movement of planets. I watched Michael, a second grader with language-processing problems, working on an alphabet book. The book was to include an action word for each letter of the alphabet. As Michael thought of each word, he would break from his seat and move his body to act out the word he was about to write. When he came to the letter "m," he hunched over, curled his arms under, and did a bouncy monkey walk for a moment. He then



In personal Math Puzzles books, students use words and drawings to show multiplication problems.

popped back into his chair and started writing “monkey.” I helped him convert the noun to a verb phrase, “monkeying around.”

Later, in a sharing circle, Michael stood up and led his peers in a short conversation about the letter “m”: “In my alphabet book, I wrote an action word for ‘m’—monkeying around. Do you have another different word for ‘m’?” A couple of children raised their hands and offered other “m” action words. Michael’s willingness to take the risk of teaching his peers came, I think, from the confidence he gathered from acting out his words and then slowly spelling them into his alphabet book. He was sure in his mind and his body that he was right.

The examples and suggestions in this book illustrate how to integrate the arts into lessons in as many forms as possible. The goal is that each child will find a favorite option at least once during the day, and over time, all students will have the opportunity to lead with their strengths. By integrating the arts, we allow children to play on all their strings.

Reason 2: The Arts Encourage Joyful, Active Learning

Every Saturday, the grandchildren come to my house to play. Sylvie usually asks, “What are we going to do today, Bubbe?” And I respond with a list of choices: “We can draw or paint; we can read a book; we can play cards or dominoes or catch; we can do a puzzle; we can dress up and have a tea party” The list is a long one, everything on it is full of learning and fun, and everything on it is attractive to the children.

Why should school be any less engaging? Why not appeal to children's innate yearning for fun? I watched Richard Lewis, director of the Touchstone Center for the Arts in New York City, captivate a kindergarten class by walking into their classroom when they were studying the ocean, taking off his shoes, rolling up his pants, and tiptoeing across the floor. "Why are you walking like that?" the children asked. "So I don't get my pants wet in the ocean," he said. They stepped into his drama. "Watch out for that shark!" they warned, and Richard leaped and dodged. At age five, the trip from here to anywhere is a short one, and a piece of theater like that has instant results. The children were ready now to think and write about the ocean with new excitement and curiosity.

The fact that students are having fun and being playful is not a sign that work has stopped. On the contrary, the real work of a fully-engaged brain—gathering new data and connecting it with old—may be just beginning. "Play is children's work," Piaget tells us. If work is defined as exertion directed to producing or accomplishing something, then many types of productive play are important educational work.

Theater games provide a way to study history, current events, literature, and even the systems of the body or the process of photosynthesis. Hopscotch is both fun and educational if the squares are marked with spelling or vocabulary or Spanish words. Children almost always enjoy making images, and those images can demonstrate their understanding of a character in a novel or the geographic landscape of a region. The dress-up corner can spark narrative writing. An explanation of the steps of a line dance can develop into expository writing. When we use the arts to get the work of the curriculum done, we soften the hard line that is so often drawn between play and work and increase the possibility of joyful learning.

The power of surprise

One of the reasons that working with the arts is fun is that the work is full of surprises. For example, writing poetry tips you into a new place. You have to think in pictures. You have to talk in a condensed language. You have to tell the truth or the poem sounds lame, even to you, or especially to you.

One of my favorite moments in school is when a visiting poet begins to read to the children. Michael Dennis Browne, a poet and teacher in Minneapolis, entrances whole-school audiences through gentle surprises. Here's a poem written by his young son, Peter McLean-Browne.

My Rat

His eyes are like shimmering rubies on a necklace of light.
 His hair is like sunrays woven into his body.
 His voice is as soft as a bed made out of rainbow-colored silk.
 His feet are as swift as the wind.
 His voice is as dark and gruff as a storm raging in us filling with darkness.
 His tail is as weak as a fish out of water, but as long as the patience of
 someone always waiting forever and ever.
 His teeth are as shiny as the bright jewel in the center of the earth.
 When he cries he makes a flood of clearness.
 He is crying right now, because it's the end of this poem.

After three or four such poems, the air changes. Children listen with more edge. They wait for the surprise. They expect the unexpected. As the oddness of poetry sucks them in, they begin to develop agile minds.

Reason 3: The Arts Help Students Make and Express Personal Connections to Content

It is a truism (with a lot of research behind it) that children are reluctant to learn something in which they have little interest. Researcher Geoffrey Caine says, “We need to help learners create a felt meaning, a sense of relationship with a subject, in addition to an intellectual understanding.” (D’Arcangelo 1998, 24) Relevance, a connection to life outside of school or to other things they’ve already experienced and learned, helps children care about what is newly presented to them and to make meaning from it. For most children, the arts provide a natural route for connecting with the curriculum in a personally meaningful way.

Fifth grade students in Minneapolis study ecosystems and are required to learn a basic vocabulary related to environmental studies. Teacher Erin Klug and artist Usry Alleyne helped students use poetry, drawing, and videography to make and express a personal connection to the topic. They invited students to study and describe an environment they personally enjoyed, using the vocabulary words that they’d learned: “environment,” “tolerate,” “prefer,” “organism,” and the names of the five senses. Many chose their own rooms, drawing pictures and writing poetry to describe the space—and the lives that filled that space.

They then videotaped the images, reading their poetry off-camera. The children edited and polished their writing. They practiced reading smoothly and with expression. The project not only absorbed the students, but their focus and effort paid off in work they could share with pride and in a new understanding about what really makes a viable environment.

When I wanted to teach a group of children about the material simplicity of tribal people’s lives, I showed the children a picture drawn by an Inuit hunter of all the things he owned, titled *Things in My Life*. There were about twenty objects on the page. I then asked the children to draw a picture of the things in their lives and gave them a large piece of white paper. The children filled the papers. Many resorted to lists of words and finally gave up on that, too. In the discussion that followed we heard, “Look at all that stuff I have and he has only a few things to take care of.” “How did they do it? How did they get along with so little?” Not only did the children learn about an important aspect of Inuit life, but they also challenged their assumptions about what’s necessary to live a life.

Self-expression

One of the most important payoffs of using the arts as a teaching tool is the many opportunities they provide for a diverse group of children to express their thoughts and feelings, and in the process to share something vital about who they are. In the midst of the homogeneity of the school curriculum, the opportunity to sing your own song is a gift.

In arts residencies designed by my daughter, teacher and artist Elizabeth Crawford, we used the arts to help children understand issues of exclusion, discrimination, and cliques. We asked the children to write poetry about their feelings when they or someone they cared about was excluded or included in a game, a party, or just in conversations. Then they made large drawings of themselves at a time of exclusion or inclusion. The bodies expressed sadness or happiness in both the faces and figures. These drawings were mounted on corrugated cardboard and then placed around the school in settings that seemed natural to the figure (on the playground, in the lunch room, etc.) After photographing the figures in their settings, we exhibited the slides (with a projector) and the figures (standing around as a set) during a performance of the children reciting their poetry. The cumulative effect of the drawings, the slides, and the poetry powerfully evoked the hurt and happiness we cause one another by rejection and acceptance. This was a rather elaborate project, but the poems or the figures alone would have provided an effective reminder of the costs of exclusive behavior. Our goal in such arts-inclusive activities is to make an environment in which personal expression is safe and valued.

Reason 4: The Arts Help Children Understand and Express Abstract Concepts

Science writer Patricia Wolfe says, “Many of our strongest neural networks are formed by actual experience. Without the concrete experience [of a subject], the representation or symbol may have little meaning, no matter how much someone explains it to you.” (Wolfe 2001, 137–8) Storytelling and movement help Peter Lawton’s first grade students at City of Lakes Waldorf School in Minneapolis learn beginning math concepts. The children hear stories and recite poems that have numbers buried in them, stories about Sister Hazel, who walks with even steps; Uncle Albert, who walks with a cane and heavily on every other step; Junior, who runs and kicks up his heels on every third step; and the giant Finn M’Coul, whose mighty strides cover ten steps! As they recite, they move in a circle, emphasizing the number sets—of ones, twos, threes, up to tens—about which they are chanting. The recitations and movement provide physical and imaginative access to the abstractions of addition and multiplication.

During social studies, simulated interviews, role plays, and reenactments can help bring a period of history to life. For example, in a unit on westward expansion in the nineteenth century, two students might simulate a conversation between two children traveling in a covered wagon. Likewise, movement and drawing can help clarify scientific processes and poetry's concrete images can help express big ideas. Effective learning moves from the known to the unknown, from the familiar and personal to abstract understandings. The arts help students to make these leaps with confidence.

Reason 5: The Arts Stimulate Higher-Level Thinking

There are basically three kinds of thinking that we want to encourage in our children: attending, discerning, and inventing. Attending and discerning are the more analytical skills. They involve paying attention, reporting accurately, sifting through information, and noticing the relationships among the facts explored. Inventing takes students one step further to building upon what they have previously learned and thought so they can make new meaning (for example, solving a problem or creating a new approach or vision). It requires an imaginative understanding.

A fourth/fifth grade class at Prairie Creek Community School in Northfield, Minnesota, wanted to challenge the whole school to think deeply about hunger and the distribution of the world's food supply. Using colored tape, the class outlined a rough map of the world on the floor of the gym. Then during a whole school assembly, they told a story about people from different countries each getting different amounts of food. That seemed pretty obvious to the children—different numbers of people need different amounts to feed their numbers.

As the students narrated, however, people were selected to dramatize the story. Each country was allotted the number of people that represented their percentage of the world's population and the amount of food represented by that country's actual share of the world's food. When most of the school had crowded into China and were given a tiny bag of candies while a handful of people in the USA were given a large bucket of candy, the children were amazed and incensed. Even the class that had researched the topic seemed impressed by the dramatized reality of the distribution. In a discussion afterwards, these five- to eleven-year-olds struggled to come up with new solutions for the world's food distribution problems. Throughout the project the children attended to new information, discerned inequities, and invented/imagined new ways to do things.

The task of developing children's capacity to do all three kinds of thinking cries for the interjection of the arts. The arts provide the tools to help students develop the intellectual muscle for paying careful attention, recording accurately, and analyzing from multiple points of view. And they offer one of the few reliable routes to understanding the world not only as it is, but as we might imagine it to be. The arts will help our students develop minds spry and courageous enough to function at a high level in a world constantly in flux.

Reason 6:

The Arts Build Community and Help Children Develop Collaborative Work Skills

As visiting teachers in an arts residency focused on multicultural understanding, my daughter Elizabeth and I were using storytelling, poetry, music, dance, and visual art to help the children in a small K–5 elementary school appreciate a culture very different from any they had ever known—that of the Inuit of the Canadian Arctic. At the end of our weeks together, everyone assembled in a huge circle in the gym. We had come to enjoy Arctic games—playful, competitive demonstrations of skills such as blindfold balance-beam walking, arm pulls, and relay races.

The final game event was the high kick. A helper held a stick that had a small piece of bone dangling from the end by a cord. The bone was at a low level, easy to kick. The player ran towards it, and leaping from one foot, tried to kick the piece of bone. The helper then held the stick a little higher and then higher, and the trick was to see how high each player could kick.

After each kicker went as high as he or she thought possible, I invited the whole group in the outer circle to help in the way the Inuit do. We chanted together, “Aiaiaiaiaia . . .,” as the kicker ran towards the bone, and then “yah!” as the kicker leaped in the air. Without fail, with the chant in their ears, the kickers went far higher in their leaps than they or the audience had thought they could. The point of the lesson was that a crucial element in the survival of the Inuit for thousands of years, in one of the earth’s least hospitable environments, has been their understanding that the united effort of the group makes possible what no individual can do alone.

Educators have always known, and research is now confirming, that children’s deepest, longest-lasting learning comes when they are working with others. Teachers at every level understand the value of having students work in small groups to solve problems and demonstrate their understanding. Peers serve as “highly available and active companions, providing each other with motivation, imagination, and opportunities for creative elaboration of the activities of their community.” (Rogoff 1990, ix)

Doing creative things together creates and sustains community. It also promotes the type of learning that is retained long after a project is complete and that motivates future exploration. Children working together on a piece of art will engage in intense social interaction, absorb and expand their learning, and perhaps lift the project to a level of imaginative expression and understanding that one student alone could not manage.

In a collaborative mural project, for example, students must pay careful attention to each other’s work to ensure that the images ultimately connect to make a single, group-generated image. In a mural project sponsored by Origins, teacher-artist Elizabeth Crawford directed the construction of a large clay mural in which separately constructed tiles ultimately fit together like a huge puzzle. Collaboration was required in every step of the process.

First, children came up with ideas for images to illustrate a theme from their curriculum. Everyone created at least one image in a pencil drawing. Next, they worked out a design for the mural using all the drawings, transferred the mural design to a large template, and laid a grid over the template.

Each child translated the drawing from one square of the grid into clay, making certain to match lines and shapes with contiguous squares. The children knew that their individual pieces contributed to the quality of the whole composition and most stayed focused and careful. After the teacher fired the clay squares, the children painted them and assembled them into a complete picture that was mortared to the wall. A collaborative *tour de force!*

Music, too, provides wonderful opportunities for collaboration with harmonies, rounds, and call-and-response songs and chants. Ghanaian musician Sowah Mensah taught a group of students to drum in the manner of indigenous African ensemble playing, with its complex interweaving rhythms. In this form of musical collaboration, drummers make music as both separate *and* connected players. When Sowah taught this form of ensemble playing to eighth grade students, they learned about a culture in which tension between the individual and the group is desirable and natural—indeed, the source of good music. And in learning this, they learned a valuable lesson in the skills and benefits of collaboration.

Even poetry, a solitary art, finds a form of collaboration in class poems written with the teacher as scribe, or in literary magazines organized around themes, or just collected and edited by the children as the annual literary publication. Child editors work with child writers. Student graphic

The final step in creating this ceramic mural was to combine individually-made tiles into one fluid, complete image.



designers work together, cutting and pasting. The result is distributed in the school and to parents, and a poetry reading crowns the collective effort. In all these examples, children learn collaboration by practicing it in arts-integrated projects that they love. And through continued practice of collaboration, they deepen their sense of connection to each other.

The Friend of Learning

In the book *What Is Art For?*, scholar Ellen Dissanayake suggests that when we apply art to a task we elaborate upon the task, putting our mark upon it in such a way that it is more special and therefore more meaningful to us and to others. [Dissanayake 1988, 92] The maker is connected in a more intimate way to what he has made, to the world, and to the people who see and use the artful thing. The maker thereby becomes more able, lively, confident, and connected. When we make our marks, we establish a place in the world for ourselves.

In this book, there are many examples of children who have been given the opportunity to make their marks, to elaborate, to make special. Some of the examples may strike the reader as true art, others as more making than art-making. I have not been very concerned to restrain my examples to “pure” art experiences, whatever those are, but rather to give as many instances as possible of children elaborating upon the curriculum until they make it special and thereby their own. And when they do, they begin to love learning.

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