Integrating Arts in the Classroom: A Strategic Approach to Support Common Core State Standards

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Abstract

Arts integration is a teaching and learning strategy complementing the new Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The rigorous expectations of CCSS demand a pedagogical shift to ensure our students have the knowledge and skills needed to thrive in a global society. Arts integration strategies provide the learning processes needed to develop and build these 21st century skills. Historically, perspectives and policies have influenced teaching and learning. Changes in current perspective and policies will continue to impact shifts in classroom practices. This article will examine these shifts in a North Mississippi school district underlying their efforts of transforming teaching and learning to best prepare today’s student for tomorrow’s future.

Keywords: arts integration; common core; common core state standards; CCSS; arts in the classroom; whole school initiative; Mississippi Arts Commission
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Today’s schools are creating pedagogical shifts to ensure a deep content knowledge base with strengthened cognitive and meta-cognitive processes for our students. Such pedagogical shifts are required to best develop and hone skills needed to compete as college and career ready as well as to meet the demands of global citizenry. This paradigm change stems from implementation of Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and next generation assessments designed to prepare our students with 21st century skills to be able “to create and innovate, communicate, collaborate, and think critically to solve problems” (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, n.d., para 6). Knowledge by itself is obsolete. Knowledge is the foundation of any learner, but the 21st century skills are the tools that will create new knowledge in our new world.

In defining 21st century skills, Saavedra and Opfer (2012) suggest “similar types of complex thinking, learning, and communication skills” that are “relevant to aspects of contemporary life in a complex world” (p. 8). As our world continues to advance and become more connected and inter-woven through innovation and technology, students will need skill sets beyond those prevalent in the Industrial Age in order to succeed. Meeting the demands of new standards to support such skills will redefine traditional teaching and learning experiences (Sawchuk, 2012). The “sit and get” experiences of traditional classrooms will only develop the demands of yesterday’s standards, not the skill sets necessary to master the expectations of the new CCSS.

Thus, it is important to explore connections of arts integration and CCSS in the classroom related to teaching and learning. This exploration is of unique importance to a high-performing (B-rated) public school district that has one elementary school that currently has a successful (C-rated) accountability standing. The questions addressed in this article include: 1) How does arts integration affect the process of teaching and learning?; 2) In what ways does arts integration reconcile the differences in performance and practice for teaching and learning?; and 3) What implications does arts integration in the classroom hold strategically for improving the overall outcomes of teaching and learning?

Literature Review

Ideological Perspectives on Arts Integration

Learning organizations have debated the concept of arts integration throughout the years, involving a variety of perspectives and interpretations (Bresler, 1995; DeMoss & Morris, 2002; Gullatt, 2008; LaJevec, 2013; Marshall, 2014; Mishook & Kornhaber, 2006). Currently, the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts (2014) provides a contemporary definition in an effort to simplify the educational endeavors of integrating the arts in schools. “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” (Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, 2014). They identify three strategies of arts in schools. One strategy is to develop arts as a curriculum in
which the teaching of art subjects occurs within the school, but as a separate entity from other subjects. Another strategy is as an arts-enhanced curriculum where art concepts are used to support or supplement other disciplines with no link or connections to the art objective. The third strategy is an arts-integrated curriculum where the explicit teaching of art objectives and other content objectives provide a true integration of the learning between the two subject areas. The transformational teaching and learning strategy with the most effect on the teaching and learning process is the arts-integration practice, where content objectives of both the art form and the academic area play major roles in the learning experience. Most often, the arts-enhanced practice is a starting point for this transformational practice, but not necessarily an effective strategy for interdisciplinary integration or development of high-order thinking skills.

Similarly, Bresler (1995) identifies four art integration constructs, “subservient integration, co-equal integration, affective integration, and social integration” (p. 33). Educators do not teach a true art objective in the subservient concept, which correlates with the Kennedy Center’s arts-enhanced curriculum where the art form, only supplements the core area. A simple example of this experience would be an English language arts (ELA) lesson in understanding the story element of “setting” for reading comprehension by asking students to sketch or draw a visualization of the setting in the story read by the student. Teachers use the artistic component as a formative assessment task to demonstrate understanding of the reading element. However, they do not explicitly teach or integrate the specific art objective with the reading skill or strategies.

Bresler’s co-equal integration and the Kennedy Center construct of an arts integrated curriculum suggest the best practices to enhance the process of teaching and learning. Both subjects honor equal value, and teachers use the true integration of both objectives in the instructional practice. Imagine a science lesson where teachers expect students to learn and demonstrate understanding of convex and concave lines. The teacher explicitly teaches the visual art elements of line and shape, integrating and connecting them with the scientific terms of convex and concave. The students then demonstrate their understanding of the art elements and scientific terms by producing a visual art product using lines to create convex and concave shapes with color to enhance the differentiation of the terms. In the simplest form, an arts-integrated or co-equal lesson allows both content objectives to be driving vehicles in the student experience, demonstrating strategies to improve overall teaching and learning.

DeMoss and Morris’ (2002) qualitative research study recognizes a widespread differentiation of arts integration practice, with most instruction evolving between the art enhancement aspect and the co-equal integration construct. Many different designs initiate this practice gap. Obstacles in implementing the co-equal, arts-integrated curriculum can be from teacher’s innate understandings, perceptions, or attitudes (LaJevic, 2013) as well as lack of cooperative collaboration between art experts and academic area teachers (Bresler, 1995, Gullatt, 2008, LaJevic, 2013). Most academic teachers have no training in visual arts, music, theatre, or dance, and the majority does not understand arts integration teaching and learning practices. It is imperative for extensive on-going professional development as well as created opportunities for teacher collaboration to transform the educational culture (Gullatt, 2008). Teachers must buy-in and understand the practice or they will fail to integrate effectively. This, therefore, may be the most impressive challenge of implementation.
Influential Policy on Arts Integration: No Child Left Behind

As mandated by the 2001 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, each state developed its own content area standards, and measured these standards through high-stakes standardized assessments in ELA and math for grades three through eight. This powerful federal legislation established accountability for our public schools providing us with a systematic data approach to measure school effectiveness. Groen (2012) proposed that the legislation has had an immeasurable influence on education by changing “how teachers teach” and “what subjects are taught” (p. 2). He suggested curricular changes by schools include more time in tested areas and less time in the fine arts or social sciences, if at all. The Center on Educational Policy (2008) supports this suggestion with their study findings. “Forty-four percent of all districts nationwide have added time for English language arts and/or math, at the expense of social studies, science, art and music, physical education, recess, or lunch” (p. 26). This leads us to believe the only important value in today’s classrooms is in regards to tested areas. The whole-child needs remain at the school door, leaving other academic, social, and culture demands in the cold. In reference to how teachers teach, Zhao (2012) indicates that today’s instruction focuses strictly on the test. In his book, World Class Learners, he states “…rigid curriculum objectives and mechanistic preparation for standardized testing hijacked curricular diversity and pedagogical exploration and flexibility” (p. 40). School accountability by high-stakes testing leads to teacher accountability. When the test scores drive the instruction, teachers lose their instructional freedoms. Even in areas where social studies is taught, the instructional practices confirmed by Jackson Starr (2012) in his exploration of his personal experience in the teaching profession include, “teaching lessons that are tailored to these tests, not with the goal of inspiring critical thinking” (p. 245). Educational psychologist, Kyung Hee Kim addressed NCLB influences by stating, “Teaching to the test discourages purposeful creativity development and stifles children’s creativity in schools” (Britannica Editors, 2010). This evidence suggests high-stakes accountability has narrowed instructional practices to be about the achievement score and not the learning process.

The current instructional model in classrooms, according to Saavedra and Opfer (2012), is based on the teacher-centered transmission of information, “…students can learn information, but typically don’t have much practice in applying the knowledge to new contexts, communicating it in complex ways, using it to solve problems, or using it as a platform to develop creativity” (p. 9). Expectations in today’s classrooms focus on low-level cognitive skills with simple recall processes. Scheer, Noweski, and Meinel (2012) suggest today’s classrooms are intra-disciplinary with very little cross-curricula connections for the learner. They suggest that a more constructivist approach to education may yield better results in developing higher-order thinking skills. “Teaching such meta-cognitive competencies needs to go beyond isolated information acquisition in certain subjects, towards a holistic learning through experience and reflection in projects” (p. 8). Instructional strategies that develop higher-order thinking skills rely on the learning process. If the process is more teacher-centered or has a narrow focus, then student-thinking skills will continue to be low-level and mundane. Full implementation of CCSS will drive classroom transformations in teaching and learning demanding deeper understanding and a focus on meta-cognitive processes for all students. Next generation assessments by Partnership for Assessment of College and Career Readiness (PARCC) and Smarter Balance Assessment consortia implemented in the 2014-15 school year will measure more than content...
knowledge, also to include student demonstration of this knowledge through high-order thinking skills in performance-based measurements (Herman & Linn, 2013).

**Influential Policy on Arts Integration: Common Core State Standards**

College and Career Readiness (CCR) anchors ground The Common Core guiding not only what students should know, but also what they should be able to demonstrate (National Governor’s Association Center for Best Practices, 2010). Common Core provides standards in ELA and math with literacy components in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects. The vertical alignment of the standards from kindergarten through 12th grade, narrows grade level foci to develop intense understanding of content knowledge and enhanced development of 21st century skills. The National Coalition for Core Arts Standards has developed new art standards, currently in their final review process, in visual arts, music, dance, theatre, and media art, which parallel the CCSS. These standards “…emphasize the process-oriented nature of the arts and arts learning” (National Coalition for Core Arts Standards, 2014, p. 6). In 2012, the College Board prepared a review for the NCAS paralleling connections of the CCSS and NCCAS conceptual framework. Their findings supported a wealth of art connections in all grade level CCSS within the four CCR anchor strands: reading, writing, language, speaking and listening (National Coalition for Core Arts Standards, 2012).

**Table 1**

*The College Board Findings*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CCSS Anchor Standard</th>
<th>Amount of Standards Reviewed</th>
<th>Arts-Based References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking and Listening</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Source: National Coalition for Core Arts Standards, 2012

Findings in the ELA standards include specific mention of art production as well as references to critical-thinking opportunities using art in support of or as a mean of the content standard. The review also noted a significant number of skills-based alignment connections between NCCAS’s “creative practices” to the CCSS in both English language arts and math demonstrating the meta-cognitive process opportunities arts bring to developing 21st century skills (National Coalition for Core Arts Standards, 2012).

The marriage of Common Core and the new arts standards will provide extraordinary possibilities for cross-curricular lessons to engage students in deeper learning through the arts and of the arts within all core academic content areas. According to Marshall (2014), teaching and learning experiences will have to shift from the teacher-led, student surface understandings of content to a more exploratory student-centered environment where students strengthen their content knowledge base and develop high-order thinking processes or 21st century skills. Arts integration provides an avenue to support CCSS and transform teaching and learning. Marshall (2014) promotes arts integration as “a rich and complex approach to teaching and learning that not only aligns with new initiatives in education that prioritize conceptual and procedural skills.
but could also contribute to education’s transformation” (p. 104). This design allows teachers the freedom to use a variety of arts integrated strategies to structure the students’ learning experience needed to meet the demands of today’s new standards, therefore, redefining teaching and learning to align performance and practice in a new era.

**Inconsistent Performance and Innovative Practice for Teaching and Learning**

A large school district in Northeast Mississippi is making movements in arts integration practices across all K-12 campuses. The district currently holds a high-performing (B-rated) state performance ranking. In the last two years, the district and one of their elementary schools have seen a disconnection between performance levels. As the district has risen in the accountability model, the elementary school has stagnated as a successful (C-rated) level. The district and the school reflect common demographics such as race and socioeconomic subgroups. However, the performance inconsistencies suggest a need to align best practices within the district to all schools, including this particular lower performing school. Arts integration is a strategic approach the district implemented to align performance and practices. This teaching and learning practice provides interdisciplinary opportunities grounded in student-centered learning to develop and strengthen high-order thinking skills strengthening CCSS implementation and preparing for next generation assessments.

In the realm of arts integration, the school district celebrates three (3) whole schools, one (1) model school, and six (6) arts in the classroom schools participating in Mississippi’s Whole School Initiative (WSI) supported by the Mississippi Arts Commission (MAC). The WSI is “an arts integrated conceptual approach to redesigning school environments that create a culture of collaboration and transparency” (Mississippi Arts Commission, 2009). According to the district’s Whole School Arts Coordinator, their over-arching goal is to develop arts-integrated strategies in schools throughout the district to engage all in the learning process (Personal communication, February 25, 2014).

During the 2013-2014 school years, the C-rated elementary school with a focus on CCSS implementation embraced the arts integration practices to better support the new standards and 21st century teaching and learning in an effort to raise student achievement. They are in their first year with arts integration implementation participating in the Arts in the Classroom (AIC) program. The AIC is the introductory aspect of the WSI providing the initial steps of building school understanding and practices to integrate the arts (Mississippi Arts Commission, 2009).

Through the first year AIC grant implementation, the school has experienced a transformation in the learning culture. This culture shift comes directly from the MAC grant funding for effective, on-going teacher training, school and district leadership support, and the school’s art educators’ leadership and involvement. This shift could not take place without the support of the MAC grant and on-going professional development. Arts integration training by local teachers and outside experts in visual arts, music, dance, and theatre has helped build teacher understanding and confidence to explore these new strategies. Periodic model school visits throughout the state for building and district administrators and academic teachers have helped develop a vision and goal for full arts integration implementation. Arts integration
experts visiting the school and giving model lessons in all arts perspectives for all academic classes has demonstrated a climate of arts integrated success in their own personal domain.

At the school, each teacher has the support of the building leadership to step outside the box and bring this new perspective of learning to the classroom. Recognizing a need to change current teaching and learning practices to serve students during the CCSS implementation era, the school began using the arts as an instructional strategy in all core classes. For each nine-week period, a core academic area implements these strategies by creating at least one arts integrated lesson in each teacher classroom. At the end of each grading period, the faculty celebrates the art-integrated experiences by sharing lesson details and student learning successes through visual and commentary mediums.

Marshall (2014) suggests art educators serve as implementation leaders, “to fully delineate and promote arts integration as the complex, dynamic practice so that those outside the field can see its potential” (p. 105). Building level art educators should be an agent of change within the school providing support and direction of cross-curricular connections and experiences. At this Northeast Mississippi school, each teacher has access to the art educator resource daily in the building for collaboration and support. The art educator works with the academic teacher to help build lessons and activities where co-equal, cognitive integration can transpire. The school’s art educator’s efforts extended to co-teaching lessons where the academic teacher needs more support or guidance. This element of support has been one of the most essential reasons for the school’s cultural shift.

The school hopes to continue as an AIC school for a second year in 2014-15 to strengthen their arts integration foundation and continue to explore and develop those strategies. The recent addition of media arts in the arts integrated movement is especially relevant to current practices. The school has a background and healthy foundation in technology with tools and strategies in place making integration of this artistic form seamless. The culmination of these experiences supported by the MAC has provided this school with the knowledge base and skill set to grow in arts integration and support pedagogical shifts demanded by CCSS and next generation assessments.

Continuing the AIC program through the 2014-15 school year will help the school develop a strong foundation in moving to a WSI identity for the 2015-16 school year. The school district has had a wealth of successes with high-performing (B-Rated) WSI and star (A-Rated) Model schools. The school district’s Whole School Coordinator supports the district’s vision in engaging all types of learners with the arts integration strategies to help meet the demands of the CCSS (personal communication, February 25, 2014).

**Integrating Arts as Intervening Provisions: Implicating Policy, Perspective, Performance and Practice for Teaching and Learning**

Arts integration strategies offer effective practices to respond to the disconnection between public schools and the expectations of our 21st century society as implicated by traditional educational perspectives and policies. The federally mandated measures of NCLB have developed current teaching and learning practices that focus on high-stakes testing outcomes as
opposed to higher-order thinking skills. This development has obscured the contemporary perspectives of teaching and learning, leaving today's student ill equipped for the future. Accountability and measurement of school effectiveness is and will continue to be a part of our educational culture. Measurement of school effectiveness, however, needs to be valid by meeting the expectations of society. The demands of CCSS and next generation assessments will transform the measurement disconnects of NCLB high-stakes testing. The expectations of these new standards go beyond what our students will know by ensuring the demand for what they will be able to demonstrate. As these expectations of standards and measurement change, so will the teaching and learning experiences in every classroom. Arts integration supports CCSS and next generation assessments by providing a strategy to transform teaching and learning experiences.

Arts integration is a powerful approach to improve modern teaching and learning practices. The approach directly affects the students’ learning by creating richer experiences through interdisciplinary connections and creative processes. Pedagogical shifts need strategic approaches to ensure effective change. The common threaded themes of Common Core and National Coalition Arts standards support this strategic approach through arts integration strategies. Both arts in the classroom and arts integration play an important role in the applied strategy. Arts-enhanced practices can serve as introductory steps for arts integration and a strategy to initiate shifts in teaching and learning. Full arts integration will support the alignment and complimentary effects of CCSS implementation to make the transformational shifts needed in teaching and learning. Both approaches insist on interdisciplinary connections to develop content knowledge, but most importantly, both strategies focus on the process. The learning experience of the student is the integral element. Students become vital components in their own learning. This experience not only develops understanding of content, but also builds and develops an understanding of how to learn. Using arts integration to transform historical teaching and learning practices will help develop the instructional strategies needed to meet CCSS and modify the next generation’s skill sets to include critical thinking to solve problems, creativity and innovation, collaboration, and communication.

One elementary school and school district in North Mississippi is attempting to align performance and practice to improve overall teaching and learning experiences by implementing a joint initiative with arts integration and CCSS. Understanding the new era of teaching and learning to support the demands of a 21st century global, innovative workforce through more rigorous standards and new accountability assessments is necessary. The traditional elements of education will not sustain today’s student needs. Their goals to improve student achievement and to align school and district performance levels with the complimentary constructs of arts integration and CCSS will better serve their students today for success in tomorrow’s future.

Arts integration provides a unique opportunity to connect teaching and learning strategies to meet the new CCSS, thus preparing for next generation assessments that will measure student achievement and school effectiveness. Most importantly, it helps shift classroom practices developing a culture of interdisciplinary strategies to help our students to create and innovate, communicate, collaborate, and think critically to solve problems, therefore, building the 21st century skills set needed for success in today’s global society.
References


