Exploring Arts in Education: Arts Integration Isn't Just For Education Majors

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Abstract

This paper argues that by integrating meaningful arts experiences into curriculum planning, teacher training programs ought to provide opportunities for students to engage with the arts as an essential component, not just for teacher education preparation, but for various transferrable skills. Using the presenter's teaching context, at a diverse urban college in the United States, this paper will explore how arts integration takes students on a journey of self-discovery and meaning-making. The paper will introduce a design of an introductory course in Arts in Education in a teacher training program at the Associate degree level. The semester-long course is taken by a student population from linguistically diverse, immigrant, low-socioeconomic communities that are historically underrepresented in higher education. Many immigrant students from non-western educational systems have had very little to no arts education experiences. While required for education majors, the course is also offered as a liberal arts elective for non-education students. The paper will showcase the theoretical and practical underpinnings of the course design that pursues two goals, simultaneously. (1) The course's goal is to teach ways of integrating the arts into planning academic and multicultural curricula for K-12 classrooms. (2) The course aims to create spaces for students to explore their own relationship with arts, or the ways of meaning making. Creative and critical thinking skills are enhanced through hands-on projects, technology-based activities, and reflective writing as well as school visits (fieldwork). The presentation will offer examples of innovative practices implemented in the course to show how the arts can positively influence their academic, social, emotional development as students, parents, employees, and leaders.

Keywords: *arts education, arts integration, teacher education*

1. Introduction

Arts education, defined broadly as the process of teaching and learning how to create and produce the visual and performing arts and how to understand and evaluate art forms created by others, provides a teaching model to integrate the arts with core academic subjects [1]. Equity, social justice, diversity, and inclusion are important elements of arts education — connecting active, creative, relevant and liberating learning through individual and collaborative processes and experiences. Yet too often, arts education and arts programs have faced existential threats due to budget cuts and curriculum constraints at all educational levels, private and public [2, 3]. I teach a semester-long arts integration teacher education course at a diverse public urban college in the United States, which includes a student population from linguistically diverse, immigrant, and low-socioeconomic communities, that have historically been disproportionately underrepresented in higher education. Research has also shown disparities in arts education within these communities [4]. This paper argues that through integrating meaningful arts experiences into curriculum planning, teacher training programs ought to provide opportunities for students to engage with the arts as an essential component, not just for teacher education preparation, but for various transferrable skills. This paper also fits into the call for more investigations on best practices used in arts integration courses and how the practices are enacted at other colleges and universities [5].

2. Institutional and Program Context

In Fall 2013, a new system of general education requirements and transfer guidelines for undergraduate students was implemented in my urban college. One of the flexible course

"areas" was Creative Expression. Within the Creative Expression "area", ELE110: Arts in Education, is one of the choices for education majors and non-majors. Course learning outcomes include:

- Identify and apply the fundamental concepts and methods of a discipline or interdisciplinary field exploring creative expression, including, but not limited to, arts, communications, creative writing, media arts, music, and theater.
- Articulate how meaning is created in the arts or communications and how experience is interpreted and conveyed.
- Demonstrate knowledge of the skills involved in the creative process.

The course's overarching goal is to teach ways of integrating the arts (literature, visual art, drama, dance, music) into planning academic and multicultural curricula for K-12 classrooms. For non-education majors this is a stand alone course which exposes them to the five art forms, literature, dance, drama, visual arts, and music.

3. Design of the Course: Concept of Integration

The National Education Association (NEA) in the United States created a Framework for 21st Century Learning that states: to be successful, contributing members of society in college and in their careers, students need communication, collaboration, critical thinking, creativity, and innovation skills [6].

In the course students learn about the benefits and challenges of curricular integration and the importance of developing effective pedagogy for diverse learners. A major component of this course is to articulateconnections between the arts and all core subjects through hands-on projects, technology based activities, and reflective writing. Furthermore, the course is about exploring the arts, but also exposing students to the possibility of learning in, with, and through the arts and the educational opportunities the arts can create.

3.1 Formal Assignments

Throughout the course, students engage in low and high stakes reflective writing.

- *The Arts and Me* asks students to reflect on how the arts have been/not been a part of their formal/informal education and/or life. Students also include their thoughts about the arts as part of primary and secondary education and their feelings about taking the class. It is through this assignment that many low income and immigrant students from non-western educational systems share having very little to no arts education experiences or meaningful exposure to the arts.
- *Fieldwork Observations* requires education majors to observe classroom instruction in public schools. Non-majors watch videos of classroom instruction. All students in the course are required to write reflections that analyze classroom instruction, connecting what they observe with course content.
- *Field trip - Fine Arts Performance/Museum Attendance* allows students to experience an out-of-school arts-based event, ideally an art form they are least familiar with.

Other projects include:

- *Group Lesson Plans and Presentations* in which students in small groups create a mini-lesson with, in, through, or about a particular art domain. Groups can choose any grade level and subject area (science, math, social studies, language arts, foreign languages, etc.) to integrate the art form. There are in-class workshops to help groups prepare for each lesson plan presentation. Students collaborating in groups learn to connect with each other, and this learning extends to the transferrable skill actively sought at the work place.
- *Arts Integration Journal* is a major final project for students to start collecting and organizing ideas, strategies, and materials that might be useful for future teaching. It is also a showcase portfolio. Students have the freedom to create their journal in any medium they prefer; the journals can be creatively bound or digital/virtual.

4. Creativity

Many times, students are hesitant to approach in-class activities, assignments, and projects that require original thinking. They prefer to be told the "correct" answer. Creativity is inherent in every person, but most people lose it environments are not conducive for creativity [7]. Many students, when asked if they are creative, express negative reactions. Most students tend to have a fixed mindset on what it means to be creative thinking that being creative is only for the talented few [8]. There have been several instances when students shared their fear of taking the course because they were not "an artist" or "not very creative". I tell my students that by the end of the semester, I will prove them wrong. The class becomes a safe environment where students can explore and experiment without fear and judgement. I ensure to model creativity for my students through my teaching and encourage them to share their creativity in a supportive setting [9].

4.1 Examples of Practices Implemented to Influence Development as Students, Parents, Employees, and Leaders

"Wild Creations: Where the Wild Things Are": Students are asked to role-play as 3rd gradesrs and engage in the integrated visual arts, literature, and science activities.
"Name Art/Graffiti": After discussing the history and conceptual symbolism of graffiti, students are asked to create their own name "graffiti". The design of their Name Art is personalized: cultural background/identity, the meaning of their name, personal likes and dislikes, etc. A brief tutorial on how to create lettering (such as bubble lettering) is given. Many students are shocked that the assignment involves creating lettering similar to doodles in their notebooks. They are encouraged not to focus on their "artistic skills" but on their design.

5. Student Reflections

Over the years, students have shared their own perception on the learning taking place in the course. Some of the comments include:

- "This class definitely pushed me out of my comfort zone, I used to always think I would not do well as a teacher because being creative is such a big part of it especially when teaching younger kids, but after this class I learned that it is possible to be creative after learning how to actually tap into that part of myself."
- "I learned a lot about my own strength and weakness from this course. I understood that I need to work more to become more creative, so that I can make creative lesson plans in the future."
- "I'm a crimal justice major, but I wanted to take this class bc I'm a new father. I was reminded what it's like to be a kid...to look at the world and explore and discover. I have a better understanding to help nuture my daughter's creativity.
- "I know that I am a leader (there were times I wanted to give up for the semester but hey it had to get done) but I know that I am creative. I'm a Psychology major, and I know that if I was to ever have my own practice or step foot in a classroom with everything I know now, I am CONFIDENT I'll do great! I feel so motivated to create now. It was almost like the beast in me was dormant, but now that I am up I ready."
- "The arts are a differentiation itself. I had never reflected on that up until I took this course. I love how the arts can reach each of the different needs of students."
- "I got a better understanding of myself. I realized that I am capable of creating a lesson that is engaging to the student. When selecting this major I second guessed myself on my potential. I can say I now have the confidence."
- "At the beginning of this course I was not convinced that secondary students could benefit from arts integration [AI] because I thought the curriculum would be too easy. But I stand corrected in this belief of using AI in my curriculum….In my defense I am a product of "traditional learning".

As evidenced by student feedback, the course creates spaces for students to explore their own relationship with arts and to develop as future teachers.,

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