Campaign for Artful Resistance: Celebration of the Arts

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“Art is my favorite subject in school. I get to use my imagination. I love art.” Robert, a third grader, gives voice to a love for learning that is meaningful and makes a large impact on his life. Countless numbers of students at all levels of education express similar feelings.

Theorists and researchers have also established that arts education supports cognitive development, language development, reading achievement, motor development, decision-making skills, memory, and increased cultural awareness (Dickinson, 1997; Lynch, 2013). A core component of John Dewey’s vision for Progressive Education was the arts as a process of inquiry that created meaning and purpose (Goldblatt, 2006). But arts programs are being eliminated—or greatly reduced—as budgets are cut and funding is being used to purchase programs that prepare students for tests, especially in low-income schools (Hawkins, 2012; Thigpen, 2014).

Save Our Schools (www.saveourschoolsmarch.org) is a national grassroots organization dedicated to the equitable funding for all public schools; an end to high-stakes testing used for the purpose of student, teacher, and school evaluation; teacher, family, and community leadership in forming public education policies; curriculum developed for and by local school communities; and professional, qualified, and committed teachers in all public schools. Last year, this organization created the Campaign for Artful Resistance (CAR) to heighten public awareness of the importance of the arts. The CAR mantra is, “Think nationally; act locally.”

My college embraced CAR by creating a day-long Celebration of the Arts Festival with interactive music, improvisational theater, storytelling, poetry, painting, dance, puppetry, and juggling. We were also able to arrange a special performance by Grammy award-winning musician Tom Chapin, a strong supporter of teachers, arts education, and the elimination of high-stakes testing.

More than 100 families attended. It was a joyful, glorious day filled with smiles, laughter, and hugs. It was also a day to send the message that we need to take proactive steps to create schools that are dedicated to developing the whole child for lifelong success rather than preparing them to take standardized tests.

References


Art, Technology, and Home Literacies Equals Engagement

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Envision, if you will, a third-grade classroom with students working independently, even as they brainstorm collaboratively in small groups about comic books they are creating about immigration. The hum in the classroom and the fact that the students unanimously voted to work on their projects during recess support the notion of arts and technology integration for student learning. In order to learn about immigration and extend their experiences with informational text, these third graders used different modes to create print-based comic books and then expressed themselves digitally using their iPads and a mobile application software called Explain Everything (EE; MorrisCooke, 2014, Version 2.4; retrieved from: http://itunes.apple.com).

We share Lamar’s (pseudonym) compositions as illustrative examples of this process. After reading informational texts, his comic book (see Fig. 1) told a story about a character leaving his family to come to America. Lamar shared that he used the color red to indicate the worry his family felt about him leaving home.

Lamar’s EE (see Fig. 2) brought life to his print-based comic as he was able to create a rap through his home literacies. EE allowed Lamar to create animation by using characters from his print-based comic with background pictures. He wrote text, added sound effects, changed his intonation, and created a rap to present his narrative. He shared that it took him two attempts to record the rap, as it was impromptu and unsupported by any writing. The opportunity to incorporate this home literacy would likely be unavailable with traditional forms of writing or art.

The students demonstrated a level of engagement in both forms of the project that is rarely seen in relation to informational texts. While the focus of the unit was designed to meet the CCSS, the teacher strategically and actively elected to use art and technology—students drew comic books and composed on iPads—thus enabling them to use their home literacies and represent their knowledge and learning. The use of EE allowed students to create a new art form by using modes beyond what was available in the print-based comic book.
Art Does Align with CCSS

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“Art helps me because it’s part of my life. And without art, I wouldn’t be like... ‘Oh, those mountains are beautiful.’ . . . I wouldn’t be like that.”

—Sophia

Like other kids her age, my six-year-old daughter, Sophia, is a budding artist. She carries around a sketchpad and enjoys creating original characters as well as pausing Pokémon shows and drawing what she sees. A couple of years ago, she surprised us with the observation that cute characters in cartoons have big eyes. I never noticed that.

I was curious to see what would happen as Sophia entered first grade this year. Would the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) mean an end to her artistry? Would her days be filled with worksheets and tests?

As it turns out, no.

“I love making art in school. It’s one of my favorite things,” Sophia told me.

In a recent unit on the human body, students in her class created skeletons using various pasta shapes. In art class, they studied cave paintings, learned how materials were made, and created their own scenes on crumpled paper bags. At various times throughout the school year, parent volunteers led Mini Museum lessons in which they introduced an artist, showed examples of the person’s work, and then led students in creating their own pieces.

(In fact, this program is aligned to the CCSS, and materials are easily accessible to non-specialist volunteers.) Sophia’s cat mummy came out of a Mini Museum lesson on Egyptian art, and her cat drawing derived from a study of Georgia O’Keefe (see Fig. 3).

We know that early experiences in the arts can help students build skills and confidence. Alternatively, neglecting this development can lead to later problems. Howard Gardner (1982) explains that young artists may abandon their creative pursuits if they have not achieved a satisfactory level of proficiency by adolescence.

Reference

Picture This: A Simple Paradigm Shift

Beth Olshansky, University of New Hampshire (Beth.Olshansky@comcast.net)

The wealth of quality picturebooks available today reminds us of the natural marriage between text and image. Sometimes the illustrations convey meaning beyond the written text; sometimes the text conveys meaning beyond the illustrations; almost always the combination of text and image together moves readers beyond what each alone can convey. This powerful partnership is often overlooked in the classroom as schools focus on raising test scores.

While I cannot predict how long Sophia’s enthusiasm for making art will continue, I am grateful to her teacher and school for valuing art education alongside the CCSS.

Reference
Our narrow view of literacy may actually harm those students who struggle with words. Alternatively, a picture-based approach to literacy learning (creating pictures, reading pictures, writing to pictures) can open doors to a lively engagement with both visual and written text (Frankel, 2011; Olshansky, 2008).

With a simple paradigm shift, we can reclaim our birthright as makers of meaning in pictures and words. I am committed to advancing Artists/Writers Workshop (www.picturingwriting.org). Defining pictures and words as equal languages, we read illustrations in quality picture-books for both meaning and craft in much the same way we read writing. We model making meaning in pictures and in words—creating images, reading images, and writing to those images. Not surprising, the more detailed the image, the more detailed the resulting written text, which is why the art should always precede the writing.

Medium also matters. The standard classroom fare (crayons, markers, colored pencils) pales in comparison to richer art materials (my personal favorites: crayon resist and collage made from hand-painted papers). The richer the materials, the more nuanced students’ thinking and writing.

A simple paradigm shift can make all the difference, especially for students who struggle.

References

Time and Space for Teachers to Explore Literacy through the Arts
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There were mixed responses from graduate students in our respective Reading and Language Arts classes as they reacted to assignments designed to engage them in multimodal literacy experiences. I’m not good at drawing. Aren’t art teachers supposed to be doing this? Do you mean we can do it any way we want to? I love art.

We are professors in side-by-side offices who share similar perspectives on the role of the arts in reading and language arts. Our views align in that we see the arts as an elemental part of being human (ArtsEdge, 2012), and we subscribe to expanded definitions of literacy that include multiple sign systems such as music, dance, and visual arts that allow us to think and communicate beyond what is possible with language alone (Albers, 2007; Eisner, 1998; Harste, 2001). We often wonder how to make the arts more accessible in the lives of the teachers with whom we work because we believe that their learning experiences influence the learning opportunities they create for their own students (Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2005).

Therefore, we are concerned that the arts have been marginalized for teachers and students immersed in the realities of the Common Core State Standards and high-stakes testing. As a result, we often integrate art and language arts in the graduate courses we teach. Cathy, inspired by Albers’s (2007) work with teachers, encourages students in her Language Arts course to play with art by keeping a sketchbook. Each student experiments with and reflects on various art techniques that have been used to illustrate award-winning picturebooks. Guided by Spitler’s (2009) work with teacher literacy identity, Louise asks students in her Content Area Reading course to examine their own beliefs about literacy and learning through self-portraits constructed of materials that represent significant literacy moments in their lives. While some students are initially hesitant about our assignments, most of them eventually share that they have been changed in positive ways that they did not anticipate. Their reflections on their work are often quite moving.
and deep as they express themselves in modalities that take them out of their comfort zone. Of course, we cannot determine with certainty the full impact of such engagements, but we have witnessed that something special happens when teachers have the time and space to explore their own creativity, and they are eager to share it with their own students.

References

NCTE Literacy Education Advocacy Day 2015: March 5
Join NCTE members from across the nation for NCTE’s Literacy Education Advocacy Day on Thursday, March 5, 2015. NCTE members attending Advocacy Day will learn the latest about literacy education issues at the federal level and have a chance to interact with people highly involved with those issues. See http://www.ncte.org/action/advocacyday for details.