

A Snapshot of Arts Integration

The term “arts integration” has come to mean a number of things, with plenty of academic debate surrounding the concept, so what exactly is everybody talking about? There are three ways that arts integration lives in a classroom, and they are closely connected to the teacher’s personal comfort level with the arts. They are all meaningful teaching strategies and have a place in the teachers “toolkit”, but by recognizing each of the three with their advantages and limitations, the teacher has the opportunity to make deliberate and purposeful decisions about her/his teaching practice.

Level 1 – Access Integration

This type of integration usually occurs when the teacher is unfamiliar or uncomfortable with the art form. This type of instruction uses the art form, but there is little or no specific arts instruction. An example of this would be showing a short segment of a ballet, then a time lapse sequence of a plant growing from a seed into a flower, and then having the students create a dance to illustrate the growth cycle. This type of integration is valuable for engaging students with various learning styles such as kinesthetic or auditory, and keeps school interesting and fun, but it does little or nothing to teach the arts discipline, the creative process, or critical thinking skills.

Level 2 – Interdisciplinary Integration

This usually occurs when the teacher has at least some knowledge and familiarities with the art form, and often involves collaboration with other teachers or teaching artists. An example of Interdisciplinary Integration would be collaborating with the music teacher during a social studies unit on the immigrant experience in which the students produce an opera on Ellis Island. Students receive instruction and are assessed on objectives in both content areas, and there is quality instruction in the arts that can lead to the student finding their own love for a particular arts discipline. The connections between the arts and the curriculum area lead to genuine opportunities to problem solve and develop critical thinking skills, but instruction is still differentiated and presented as discreet disciplines, and without careful planning students can be left to make critical connections on their own.

Level 3 – Infusion

This is probably the most difficult level to implement in the classroom, but ultimately the most powerful. This level requires that the teacher have significant knowledge of the art form and be very comfortable implementing it in the classroom. The teacher at this level is able to infuse the art form into the curriculum so that the connections between the arts and the area of study are seamlessly imbedded. In this type of lesson students may study the effects of political and social unrest on music by comparing the Baroque period with the evolution of musical styles during the Civil Rights era. Students not only draw direct connections between the arts and the world at large, but are given the skills and knowledge to continue their learning in both the art form and the curriculum area. It is at this level that the teacher can create a truly holistic curriculum that empowers students to take control of their own learning and become life-long learners.

