The case for integrating the arts with Common Core

At Mary Collins School in Petaluma, teachers Liza Eichert and Gena Richman designed a unit of study that focused on science, but also involved math, social studies, and literacy. The teachers brought their grade 2-3 students together with third-graders from Eugenia Praetzel’s class at McDowell Elementary for an interactive cross-town learning experience. Working together, the three teachers planned a field trip to the Marine Mammal Center in Sausalito and actively engaged their students in studying the local watershed, from the Petaluma River to San Francisco Bay to the Pacific Ocean.

But it was an art display at the Marine Mammal Center that helped bring this far-reaching lesson together. The display, based on the Hindu legend of Indra’s Net, illustrated the interconnectedness of human beings and the ocean habitat. With this artwork as a guide, the students created a similar display that melded their understanding of the local watershed with their concern about human disruption of the ecosystem. They fashioned their net from plastic bags collected from the banks of the Petaluma River and handwritten messages voicing their hopes, concerns, and acts of caring for the environment.

With this activity, the teachers used arts integration as an instructional strategy to create a richer and more lasting learning experience for students. This allowed students to connect their academic knowledge with the world outside of the classroom. It made school-based learning relevant to their lives.

Completing this art-infused project also encouraged students to apply 21st century skills—creativity, problem-solving, perseverance, collaboration, and the ability to work through multiple ideas and concepts—as they processed information and created a final product. Developing these skills lays the foundation for successful implementation of the Common Core State Standards.

WHAT IS ARTS INTEGRATION?

Arts integration is instruction that incorporates content and skills from the arts—dance, music, visual art, and performing art—into core academic...
subjects. It seamlessly merges the arts standards with core content standards so that students can make connections and engage in real-life contexts.

Studies show that when the arts are integrated with content area instruction, students become more engaged in the learning process. As engagement increases, student achievement is heightened and the need for discipline declines.

And there’s more. When the arts are incorporated across disciplines, students are able to identify themes and commonalities between and among content areas. They can use knowledge from one content area to shape a creative product or process in another. This ability to “cross disciplinary boundaries” is a real-world skill that students can use throughout their lives when completing complex tasks.

Among parents and the general public, there is strong support for arts education. A 2008 poll by Lake Research Partners found that a significant percentage of people believe that public education should build students’ capacity for imagination in order to prepare them for the future. Poll participants said that focusing on the arts “will better address the demands of a 21st century workforce and success in a global, knowledge-based economy.” They favored blending technology and core instruction with education in the arts and using the arts to develop students’ ability to innovate.

With the change to Common Core State Standards and Smarter Balanced assessments, educators are taking note of these ideas and exploring the ways that arts-integrated teaching can build essential student competencies. A student’s ability to synthesize, analyze, and reason can be developed in an arts-integrated curriculum, as can those key 21st century skills known as the 4Cs—communication, collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking.

“The arts are about ideas,” says Kennedy Center teaching artist Deborah Brzoska, presenter at a recent SCOE workshop on the Common Core, higher-order thinking, and the arts. “The arts are cognitive activities that exercise young minds and challenge students to think in different ways.”

“When coupled or integrated with complex thinking in other subjects,
arts integration opens up new avenues of seeing, understanding, and communicating about the world,” says Brzoska. “Nurturing these abilities in our young people is vital to their futures in college, careers, and as contributing members of society.”

CONNECTING COMMON CORE & ARTS STANDARDS

There is a national effort to develop next-generation arts standards that have clear, direct, and meaningful linkages to the Common Core. A draft of the national arts standards has already been produced and the public review period for those standards recently closed, with final approval of the standards now pending.

Last December, the College Board issued a report that identified the connections between the Common Core and draft arts standards. Researchers looked for content-based and skills-based connections within the two sets of standards. They found that both the Common Core and the arts standards share a goal of ensuring that students become self-directed learners who can abstract a given situation and represent it symbolically. Other commonalities include encouraging and supporting students to:

- Actively seek to understand other perspectives and cultures
- Adapt communication to audience and purpose
- Analyze and interpret the communication of others
- Become proficient in new areas through research and study
- Understand complex works of literature through close reading
- Construct effective arguments
- Reason critically and use evidence
- Employ technology thoughtfully to enhance work
- Use technological tools to explore and deepen understanding of concepts

David Coleman, president of the College Board and one of the authors of the Common Core Standards for English Language Arts, recommends that teachers “use the arts as powerful tools to develop and refine skills of observation and interpretation that are the cornerstone of Common Core.” Because the arts have unique parallels to the Common Core, arts integration can be an especially beneficial addition to the curriculum.

LOCAL EXAMPLE:
NUEVA SCHOOL FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS

Arts integration is a founding principle of Nueva School for the Performing Arts, one of eight “schools within a school” that Windsor High students can choose as an instructional hub for their junior and senior years. As a California Partnership Academy, the program combines rigorous academics with a career focus on managerial, performing, and visual arts.
At Nueva, teachers present a core curriculum of English, social studies, and career technical education through the arts. Students study multiple forms of practical writing, apply listening and speaking skills, conduct career research and exploration through internships, and learn to create, produce, and perform traditional productions and original ensemble theater. By desegregating expressive arts and emphasizing transferable skills, the program gives students an opportunity to approach learning in a new way.

Teacher David Beal says that delivering the core curriculum through the lens of art heightens student engagement. Increased engagement leads to increased attendance, because students want to be in school every day.

Nueva’s students present two major performances each year, which are integral to the school’s arts integration focus. The students are responsible for all aspects of the presentations, from set and costume design to public relations, and they work on these tasks throughout the year.

When asked about the challenges of integrating arts in core curriculum, Beal explained that teachers have to be open not only to the demands of their content area, but also to the direction that students take their learning. Teachers need to leave their egos at the classroom door and be ready to move with students as they create their own meaning from the content.

He adds that the best examples of arts integration are always a collaborative effort between content area teachers and art teachers—and they require a great deal of planning.

Jessica Progulske, who taught social science at Nueva School for four years, has some words of advice for teachers interested in trying arts integration—don’t force it. “Avoid dropping art into lessons for the sake of incorporating art and look for authentic ways to integrate art into lessons.”

She also recommends that teachers consider art as a method of formative assessment. “Provide opportunities for students to demonstrate mastery through an art-based project, assignment, or inquiry. And remember that art is not only visual, but also includes digital art and performing art. The possibilities are endless,” she says.

Additional resources on this topic

- **Guiding Principles for the Arts, Grades K-12**, by David Coleman
- **The Arts and the Common Core: A Review of Connections**, published by the College Board, December 2012
- National Coalition for Core Arts Standards, [nccas.wikispaces.com](http://nccas.wikispaces.com)

**About this publication:** Content for this issue of the SCOE Bulletin was provided by Karen McGahey, SCOE’s Common Core director, kmegahey@scoe.org.