

PROMISING PRACTICE

Exploring a Vision for a Global Literacy and Learning Environment: Addressing the Needs of Economically and Culturally Diverse Student Populations Through the Arts

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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The learning process is just as much a cultural and social process as it is a cognitive process. To answer the call for diversity in the representation of knowledge for English language learners, we as educators must acknowledge and embrace a variety of means to express the learning experience. Words do not always transfer across cultures and experiential backgrounds, but communicating through the arts can open up doors for communication and learning for students who face the barriers of language or economic or cultural differences. The common limitation may be *words* as a second language. The global learning environment is the image, the multimedia, the music, the social media, and the web that many students from all backgrounds share.

Broadening the definition of literacy and learning and thus our perspective on curriculum to include the visual and communicative arts can make school relevant across cultures and various backgrounds. *Learning through the arts* research and strategies can transform the twenty-first century classroom by making learning an experience that uses critical and creative thinking skills, communication, and collaboration to develop the intellectual character of students and enhance learning and literacy skills through an innovative learning environment designed for culturally and economically diverse students (Cramer, 2014; Jensen, 2013).

Using an arts-based literacy curriculum that integrates multiple ways of knowing can help students develop creative thinking skills and nourish their imaginations. Enhancing learning and literacy with the visual and communicative arts can provide a repertoire of scripts necessary for visualizing and negotiating meaning in the culturally diverse classroom of twenty-first century learners whose everyday literacy is collaborative and often image-based (Park, 2012).

The Effects of Poverty on Learning

Jensen (2013) presented a perfect case for using the arts and images for increasing vocabulary through his research on how poverty affects learning and engagement. Without an image, words can be meaningless. Words help students “represent, manipulate, and reframe information” (p. 25). Limited vocabulary can result in less comprehension. Less comprehension can result in less participation. Less participation can result in less learning.

The Effects of the Arts as a Catalyst for Thinking and Learning

Brooks (1999) advocated constructivist teaching practices that ask learners to transform and internalize information as opposed to the traditional college classroom, where information is just restated in different forms such as tests or reports. Instead, students should interact with information visually and through other forms of artistic expression. Then, students can shape their perceptions through the sharing of their perceptions with others

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whose experiences may provide insight by allowing the learner to see through the lens of experience, language, and culture of others (Jha, 2012, p. 171). As English language learners use language, images, and modern technologies to negotiate meaning and cross cultural and social understandings, learning is manifested in meaning construction—the process of forming a perception based on the imagery, form, and language of the visual or communicative arts text translated through the experience of the reader (Cramer, Ortlieb, & Cheek, 2007).

There is much evidence from educational researchers in support of the arts as a catalyst for thinking and learning. In *The Arts and the Creation of the Mind*, Eisner (2002) validated the arts in education as a means of enhancing imagination and creative thought: “We do indeed see in our mind’s eye” (p. 4). In further support of creativity and the communication and social skills necessary for learning and working, Eisner claimed that the arts help us create our lives by “expanding our consciousness, shaping our dispositions, satisfying our quest for meaning, establishing contact with others, and sharing a culture” (p. 4). Jensen (2001) reminded that it is not that students cannot learn without the arts, but that “the arts enhance the process of learning by nourishing the sensory, attentional, cognitive, emotional, and motor capabilities systems connected to learning” (p. 2).

Benefits of Using the Arts as Pedagogy in the ELL Classroom

According to the National Art Education Association (2018)—based in part on the introduction pertaining to the visual arts, dance, theatre, and music submitted to the Secretary of Education—proposed benefits of using the arts as pedagogy in the ELL classroom include the following:

1. Incorporating the arts to develop thinking dispositions can elevate current instruction modes to meaningful methods of learning that provide multiple ways of knowing and understanding across the various disciplines.
2. The arts can teach students to think by using multiple literacies to express themselves and communicate with others in a meaningful way through a common language—the image—especially for today’s visual learners.
3. The arts can provide a means for multiple cultures to find common ground for understanding one another and our world. After all, symbols and images are the universal language.
4. The arts can allow students to appreciate and come to see the perspectives of others through a safe medium where there are always many ways to interpret, and they see through the lens of their experiences.
5. The arts can provide an aesthetic environment of learning, seeing, and creating where students’ emotions, intuitions, and feelings matter, allowing them to learn with their whole being through their bodies, their voices, their minds, and their imaginations.

Communication Through the Arts Routine for ELL—an Exemplar for Success

In a previous publication (Cramer, 2014), I created a thinking and responding routine called *The Four D’s of Determining Meaning*, which can be used to help develop oral and written communication skills for ELL students by initiating the lesson with a visual of the painting, *Starry Night*, by Van Gogh (see Figure 1). The Four D’s of Determining Meaning are as follows:

1. Describe: First, students view and describe the image.
2. Discuss: In the second step, students discuss what they see with others to expand their vision and powers of observation.
3. Defend: In the third step, students defend their claims based on what they see, feel, or know. For example, one student defended his perception by noting the tiny village in the bottom of the picture where no one was seen outside, and the dark and a fire surrounded their village. He described the setting as a tiny village in Vietnam where the people of the village prayed to a shiny star for peace. His story ended with the star granting peace and happiness, and the people became “amicable.” The student came from Vietnam and was able to view the image through the lens of his own experience using a digital translator to add the word *amicable*.
4. Direct: In the final step, students tell the story of the image in text by directing a performance of their understanding through a scripted narrative. For example, the students created a play where the villagers were fighting an enemy from another land. They wrote out the scene in dialogue including the plea to the shining star.

The Scene: A tiny village where people do not get along.

Villager 1: “We must flee this land and escape our enemy, or surely we will die.”

Villager 2: “I am afraid and mad. Who will help us?” Then a shining star appears, and all people make a wish for peace.

Villagers: “Peace! Peace in our village!” And people became amicable. *The end.*



Figure 1: The image of *The Starry Night* by Vincent van Gogh is a faithful photographic reproduction of a two-dimensional, public domain, work of art. This file has been identified as being free of known restrictions under copyright law, including all related and neighboring rights.

Conclusion

Many students from impoverished backgrounds or those struggling with cultural and language differences do not see themselves as thinkers and contributors to their world. Training educational leaders to use arts-integration strategies has the potential to transform our classrooms into cultures of inquiry that reflect critical and creative thinking and authentically prepare our students to be lifelong learners by incorporating socially interactive instruction that promotes self-efficacy and develops effective college- and career-readiness thinking and communication skills in preparation for meeting the demands of career and life skills necessary for success in a global society (Cramer, 2018).

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