

Integrating the Visual-Performing Arts in the Social Studies Curriculum = Engagement and Access

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Elementary teachers must be resilient. They have to be. Elementary students almost unconditionally hold negative attitudes toward social studies and rarely understand the importance of social studies or its relevance to their lives (Zhao & Hoge, 2005). In addition, in the present era of accountability, high stakes testing, multiple lingual settings, and a growing diversity in their classrooms, elementary teachers have to be flexible, creative, and welcome change. They will try anything to get their students to learn, especially in a content area like social studies that gets such limited support as a result of little or no standardized accountability on the district, state, and national levels (Burstein, Hutton & Curtis, 2006; Hutton & Burstein, 2008; Smith, 2008; VanFossen, 2003).

This article discusses the importance of using the arts as an access strategy to help students learn social studies. Although the study and use of the arts in elementary school curriculum has been shown to increase academic achievement overall (Brouillette, 2010; Darby & Catterall, 1994; Eisner, 1999, 2000; Holzer, 2009), the arts in general have all but disappeared from the elementary school curriculum. Short of some cutting and pasting and working with construction paper, a disciplined, purposeful use of the visual and performing arts, from a standards-based perspective, is illusive at best to most elementary school teachers. Volk (1998) has demonstrated the multicultural links made by an intentional arts education. Eisner (2000) and others (Damm, 2006; Grallert, 2009; Holzer, 2009; Raymond & Broderick, 2007) continue to demonstrate the need for a comprehensive arts education, but teachers face the practical reality of accountability and assessment in curriculum other than the arts, suggesting that they ignore and 'leave behind' the arts altogether.

This article builds upon the work of Mishook & Kornhaber (2006) and Bresler (1995) who discuss the need for co-equal arts integration, where the arts and content area curriculum are taught for equally measured outcomes. In this way, the social studies and arts curricula that are being left on the shelves can be effectively taught in an integrated manner to enhance student learning and reclaim content that is being left behind (Burstein & Knotts, 2010). Mishook & Kornhaber and Bresler also discuss a subservient arts integration model, where the arts are used only as an access strategy for the content area curriculum that is the focus of assessed outcomes. Although they argue that a comprehensive, coequal arts education is clearly preferred over one that uses the arts solely as an access strategy to other content, we argue that any use of the arts can and does only enhance students' understanding of the social studies content that it serves. Zhao & Hoge state "students have the greatest difficulty with abstract concepts related to time and place" (2005, p.219). So while we urge teachers to strive for a co-equal integration and equal assessment of both the social studies and arts curricula, we believe

that the use of the visual and performing arts in studying social studies content can only enhance student learning, make concepts more real and relevant, and enliven engagement and motivation in the elementary classroom (Jones, 2005). The use of the arts makes those social studies concepts real and concrete; when students can see, hear, and touch something from another time and place, or even merely representative of that time and place, it helps to make their learning fun and challenging, but also concrete and context-driven, and ultimately, more relevant to their daily lives.

Benefits of Aligning the Arts and Social Studies

The social studies curriculum is comprised of several social sciences including economics, political science, history, cultural anthropology, philosophy, sociology, and geography (National Council of the Social Studies, 1996). Of those, cultural anthropology best lends itself to the integration of the arts. Many cultures express their cultural norms through the visual-performing arts allowing a multifaceted view of inside that culture. Culture, especially visual culture is “inherently interdisciplinary and increasingly multimodal” (Freedman, 2003, p. 2). By integrating the visual-performing arts, teachers tap into several strategies to help students make their own meaning of socio-historical events. Using arts strategies can encourage open-ended thinking, “risk-taking, critical thinking, and diligence” (Gullat, 2008, p.14). To encourage teachers to use the arts with social studies, the elementary curriculum should be taught with a multidisciplinary focus rather than piecemeal by subject area or time slot during the school day. In the real world, concepts and skills are not used as discrete bits of information but used as an integrative approach to solving real world problems. Educators need to teach and model these integrative strategies with our children using an approach they will likely use as adults in the workforce.

As part of a multidisciplinary approach, critical thinking skills are essential in helping students analyze open-ended problems and situations in the social studies curriculum. The visual-performing arts help enhance critical thinking skills by providing visual and kinesthetic problems to consider from multiple vantage points. In the visual arts, several researchers promote the use of aesthetic and critical inquiry to promote critical thinking (Burton, Horowitz & Abeles, 2000; Housen, 2001; Lampert, 2006). While aesthetic inquiry focuses on the exploration of the general nature of art, critical inquiry is more specific to analyzing one piece of art (Lampert, 2006). Both inquiries propose to assist students to use multiple strategies to solve and evaluate open-ended problems and to consider various alternatives and multiple vantage points (Lampert, 2006). When examining the social studies curriculum, these strategies in the arts are aligned with similar strategies used in social studies inquiry. In fact, Levstik and Barton (2005) advocate using observation, analysis, open-ended problems, and multiple perspectives in learning history that aligns nicely with the same skills in aesthetic inquiry.

The following section outlines the use of the four visual and performing arts, discusses cognitive and classroom benefits of each art form, as well as practical applications and examples for the elementary classroom.

Integrating the Visual-Performing Arts

Drama

Elementary teachers have noted a variety of benefits for their students after using various art forms to enhance the presentation of social studies curriculum. When students use drama and character portrayal to demonstrate their knowledge and skills, they develop self confidence and gain a better understanding of the events they are enacting (Morris, 2001). Obenchain and Morris (2001) also found that the use of melodrama engages students in learning content, while addressing multiple perspectives, and making historical connections across time and space. This use of drama and melodrama allows students to engage with major historical figures that are representative of the period, as well as giving voice to the poor, women, and the disenfranchised in ways that social studies texts do not often offer (Hutton & Burstein, 2008; Morris, 2001).

Using the dramatic arts also provide students a multi-sensory approach to learning social studies content. Students must use imagination, risk-taking, and critical thinking in using all five senses to create a character within a historical time period or cultural context. Gullatt (2008) states, “dramatic activities provide opportunities to see, hear and create learning opportunities” (p.19). Therefore, students are using multiple intelligences to make sense of content. In fact, McMaster (1998) describes the benefits of using drama because it employs metacognitive strategies such as analysis and evaluation during the acting process. Using this process to make sense of complicated events such as the American Revolution provides students multiple ways and perspectives to make meaning of this historic period. For instance, students could act out what it might be like to sign the Declaration of Independence, knowing that to do so, to stand up for a potentially unpopular belief, might make them the target of hate and violence. This practical application to modern-day bullying and hate crimes has overwhelming relevance in modeling how to effectively participate in democratic dialogue in grade- and age-appropriate ways, and is developmentally appropriate way to get students critically engaged with the concrete and relevant issues of their time.

Music

Teachers use music in the classroom to raise awareness of multiple historical perspectives, and enhance understanding of history and culture (Taylor, 2008). The use of music has been found to enhance student understanding of folktales, fairytales, and building meaningful context (Kite, 1994). Music is multicultural and can be used to compare cultures across time and place (Elliot, 1995; Volk 1998). This consciousness-raising about the multiplicity of culture(s) allows students to value the customs, behaviors, and traditions of “others” (Waterbury, 1993).

In addition to raising awareness and providing context, the arts including music provides an alternative communication system for students to express what they know and feel. Multiple sign systems are alternative modes of communication used to construct meaning about new information (Berghoff, 1998; Gullatt, 2008). When children learn difficult concepts in social studies, music can provide one pathway to communicate their understanding besides the more traditional forms of speaking and writing. Creating and singing a song about the life of a child during the Gold Rush uses creativity as well as multiple intelligences to show content understanding. In this way, students gain a concrete understanding of what life was like in an alternate time period and make real and relevant connections to their daily lives.

Dance

Just as in music, dance employs an alternative communication system by using the non-verbal forms; the human body and facial expressions to make sense of content. Dance allows students to express emotions through use of their body while placing themselves in the context of a character, historical figure or everyday person. Dance, by nature, is interdisciplinary with the inclusion of rhythm, movement, music, dramatic arts, and even visual arts through use of line, shape, and form (Nunn, 2002; Volk, 1998). Students have the opportunity to use the creative processes while also attaching emotion to situations or events within the social studies curriculum. By using all senses, intellectual, emotional, and physical, the use of dance makes curriculum come alive in a unique way (Nunn, 2002).

In addition to communicating through the body, dance is multicultural. Every culture has movement or dance that represents a history or ideals about that culture. By learning dances of various cultures, students are expressing and practicing how that culture comes alive in physical form (Rovegno & Gregg, 2007). They can express how these cultures live and pass on their traditions, mythology, and folklore. Dance is one more lens students can use to understand social construction and values within various societies studied in the elementary social studies curriculum. Using dance and movement to enact the Westward Expansion, for instance, is one way that students can immerse themselves in content. Students can create dance movements to show the common daily activities of cowboys, families in wagon trains, and Native Americans and compile them in a ballet to demonstrate the events of people moving West in the 1800's. This higher order task embeds social studies concepts in unique and specific ways (Brouillette, 2010; Holzer, 2009).

Visual Arts

Teachers also use various forms of the visual arts to enhance the teaching of social studies. In an extensive standards-based curriculum using the art of Rembrandt, Smith (2008) found the use of Rembrandt's art helped to enhance learning about the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) themes of culture, and continuity and change. In addition, inquiry based lessons using Rembrandt's art also raised issues and questions

about the relationship between the public and private lives of artists, making the learning much more higher order and context driven. The use of primary sources, artifacts, and hands-on objects has long been seen to enhance student learning by illustrating the stories of individuals and groups, offering relevance and context, and asking students to practice the processes of a historian (Morris, 2000; Raymond & Broderick, 2007). Beyond the text of children's literature, well-chosen illustrations can also be used to make learning more intriguing and comprehensible to students (McGowan & Guzzetti, 1991).

The use of the visual arts in studying social studies content is a concrete and explicit tool to gaining multicultural perspectives (Volk, 1998). Using the visual art of a particular culture (i.e. masks, painting, pottery) brings that culture into the classroom in a visceral and tangible way that the text leaves in only two dimensions (Grallert, 2009). Having children engage with the art of a particular people or time period adds an element of context that allows them to 'see' the people through their own eyes. It is easy to use the benefit of technology and almost any museum's website to bring art into the classroom. Many museums even have an artifacts lending program so that teachers can bring pots, baskets, jewelry and other cultural artifacts into a classroom. In this way, for instance, students can use the arts of a local Native American tribe to deconstruct what that culture might have been like (Why were the pots shaped in this way? What did the designs on baskets and/or the painting on pots attempt to represent for the people of that time?). Teachers can even use two dimensional reproductions of art from local museum sites, or reproductions of newspapers, or statuary from recent or ancient times to provide an opportunity for students to engage with the art of a period so that they might reconstruct what was important to people of the time period. In this way, students could compare ads from a modern day newspaper with ads from a newspaper from the turn of the 20th century to compare and contrast economic demands of the local area. This higher order task using concrete artifacts lends relevance to students as they see some of the same economic concerns transcend time and place.

Conclusion

"Social studies teachers should be encouraged, and provided with more opportunities, to learn new skills, methods, and teaching resources to engage students in life-related activities" (Zhao & Hoge, 2005, p. 220). The use of arts integration in the social studies curriculum is just such a method (Taylor, 2008). The use of the arts as a tool to study social studies concepts, helps students make connections, find more relevance to their daily lives, and enhances their understanding of major historical figures, as well as those more marginalized and disenfranchised communities throughout time and place.

The use of the arts as an additional pathway to social studies content helps better develop student understanding. Using the arts develops student understanding by providing concrete tools and access strategies, and often asks students to enact with or even create a tangible product; this connects students to the content in real, explicit, and relevant ways. Students can use the arts as a tool to demonstrate how they make sense of concepts, vocabulary, and content in social studies. Students make tangible gains in academic achievement (Brouillette, 2010; Darby & Catterall, 1994; Eisner, 1999, 2000; Holzer,

2009), and also make strides in critical thinking, open-ended problem-solving, and developing an appreciation for the perspective of others.

We urge teachers to strive for a co-equal integration and equal assessment of both the social studies and arts curricula (Bresler, 1995); in this way elementary teachers can reclaim social studies teaching that is being lost in the present era of high stakes testing and accountability of curriculum other than social studies. But we believe that any use of the visual and performing arts in studying social studies content can only enhance student learning, make concepts more real and relevant, and enliven engagement and motivation in the elementary classroom. The examples we provide here demonstrate that the use of the arts makes those social studies concepts real and concrete; students not only gain content knowledge, but also gain conceptual knowledge like perspective taking, problem-solving, and multi-sensory approaches to open-ended and critical thinking (Jones, 2005). When students can engage with an artifact, a song, a tool, or artwork from another time and place, or even merely representative of that time and place, it helps to make their learning fun and challenging, but also concrete and context-driven, and ultimately, more relevant to their daily lives.

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