

>> THE INFUSION AND CONFUSION OF STANDARDS: VISUAL AND PERFORMING ARTS IN THE CORE CURRICULUM

An Advocacy Paper for the Integration of Standards

Fran Chadwick, Cal State San Marcos, USA
 Antonette Hood, Cal State San Marcos, USA

How can teachers effectively teach the content standards developed by the Department of Education and adopted by their districts? Education in the United States is involved in a standards-based reform movement. Educators are responsible for instruction focused on specific standards in several areas of the core curriculum: Language Arts, History/Social Science, Mathematics, Science, Visual and Performing Arts, Technology, Physical Education, and Health. Although standards exist in each of these curricular areas, not all are formally assessed by the states. In California, where both authors are teacher educators, some subject areas are marginalized, or eliminated from the curriculum. Unfortunately, this has been the case with the visual and performing arts.

In a typical California classroom today, one might observe a lesson being taught, which directly addresses a particular objective. The objective is based on a standard, which has been posted in the students' full view. The standard is usually hung on a wall, or written in bold colors or large letters on a chalkboard or whiteboard. Implicit in this practice is the notion that, because the standard is visible to the teacher and students, everyone in the classroom will stay focused on it, and students will relate their learning accordingly. If one observes for a sufficient amount of time, one might see students being informally assessed by the teacher to determine whether the standard has been met. Ultimately, the teacher will administer a norm-referenced, state standardized test, which *theoretically* parallels the standards taught. School districts are financially compensated for administering tests and reporting results; schools rely on this compensation to supplement their tight budgets. In California, language arts and math are the only curricular areas annually tested during the elementary school years.

Confusion and segregation of standards

In the Goals 2000 Educate America Act, then President Clinton called for the "development and adoption of a voluntary national system of skill standards for each area of the core curriculum" (Goals 2000). When this standards-based legislation was enacted, the arts earned recognition as part of the core curriculum alongside the traditional curricular subjects: language arts, social studies, math and science. In 2002, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was passed by the U. S. government. The intention of this act was to ensure "that all students, regardless of their background (would) receive a quality education." Subsequent to the passage of NCLB, kindergarten through 12th grade institutions became designated as *low performing* schools if scores on standardized tests did not meet a state-specified measure. This effort to provide "a quality education" and improve student learning through this standards-based reform movement has ironically had adverse results. The emphasis in California classrooms today is on *test scores*, rather than on *conceptual understanding* of content. Thus, in response to concerns about its low performing schools, the California Department of Education appears to have actually *institutionalized* low performance!

Schools are evaluated annually based on students' performance on high-stakes, norm-referenced tests. As an outcome of these test scores, the future of schools—funding, personnel, and the autonomy with which they conduct business—is literally *on-the-line*. Teachers' instructional strategies have become less dynamic. Rather than teaching for understanding, teachers are asked (and often required) to teach from a prescribed text which directs what they say, what students do, and which materials to use in the process. It is not uncommon to visit a school where all students of the same grade level are on the same page in their corresponding textbooks, regardless of their ability levels and classroom

placement. Although in the days preceding the standards-based reform movement and NCLB, student performance was indeed low, the state's current response has not ameliorated the key problem. The proverbial pendulum has swung directly from left to right. Many believe the answer to the problem of low performance resides somewhere in the middle.

There is a further, more critical issue related to the standards-based reform movement in the United States: Students are not getting the educational experiences that lead to deeper understanding and love of learning. The standards-based reform movement was never intended to focus solely on the *what* of education, but rather on the *how*. Our professional practice—*how* we teach—must change if we are to reach and motivate the 21st century student.

Infusion and integration of standards

It is not the language of painters, but the language of nature which one should listen to; the feeling for the things themselves, for reality, is more important than the feeling for pictures.

Vincent Van Gogh

Subject matter or *content* instruction has traditionally been taught in isolation. While some teachers have begun to infuse the arts into their curricula, many do not understand that infusion of art activities is not integration. Despite the efforts and emphasis of teacher preparation programs on the authentic integration of content standards and objectives across curricular areas, the segregated coursework model continues to be perpetuating, as it has for generations. Students continue to be taught with a focus on one content area, (e.g., reading, spelling, math, social studies, science, health, or physical education)

Transforming Education through the Arts Challenge (TETAC 1996), a study involving more than 20,000 children in six U.S. states, found that curricular integration is a *best practice in education*. This five year national educational reform initiative examined cross-curricular integration thirty-five schools, representing a cross-section of socio-economic and demographic strands (rich, poor, urban, suburban, and rural). With the assistance of art mentors, several collaborative teams developed a multidisciplinary curriculum focused on an essential question, or enduring theme. "All of the art lessons involved [concurrently] teaching math, science, language arts, and citizenship" (42). The findings showed the TETAC approach significantly improved students' knowledge of the arts in any type of environment. Additionally, teachers noted an increase in student motivation. The cross-curricular integration of various subjects, "enabled students to make connections across curriculum areas, and improved how they express themselves through writing" (44).

Why the visual and performing arts change learning

Champions of Change: The Impact of the Arts on Learning (Arts Education Partnership 1999) compiles seven major studies, which provide evidence of enhanced learning and achievement when students are involved in a variety of arts experiences. Researchers in this study found that learners can attain higher levels of achievement through their engagement with the arts. In their findings, the researchers discovered the following reasons why the arts change the learning experience:

- The arts reach students who are not otherwise being

reached.

- The arts reach students in ways that they are not otherwise being reached.
- The arts connect students to themselves and each other
- The arts transform the environment for learning.
- The arts provide learning opportunities for the adults in the lives of young people
- The arts provide new challenges for those students already considered successful
- The arts connect learning experiences to the world of real work

These findings illustrate a "remarkable consensus among the researchers", despite their independent investigations. This research helps substantiate what some teachers and parents already knew intuitively – the arts are critical to education and learning. According to the Arts Education Partnership (1999) "Learning is deepest when learners have the capacity to represent what they have learned, and the multiple disciplines of the arts all provide modes of representation."

What is authentic integration?

"During the past quarter century, literally thousands of school-based programs have demonstrated beyond question that the arts can not only bring coherence to our fragmented academic world, but through the arts, students' performance in other academic disciplines can be enhanced as well." Ernest L. Boyer

Globally speaking, educators are overwhelmed by the exponential increase in the quantity of knowledge they are expected to impart to their students. Travis, Picard, and Lang, refer to this as an "explosion of knowledge" (1999, 2). In their writing, they promote staff collaboration and curricular integration as an evolving and essential school model (Travis, Picard and Lang, 1999). It is becoming increasingly difficult to be the *all-knowing* classroom teacher, one who effectively teaches all content standards. Many state and national documents recommend striving for in-depth learning of concepts, softening the curricular boundaries, and increasing authentic interdisciplinary connections.

According to the Arts Education Partnership (2003), *arts integration* is "an effort to build a set of relationships between learning in the arts and learning in the others skills and subjects of the curriculum" (3). This appealing effort is embraced by educators as a "theoretical, research-based or philosophical conviction that it is a powerful way to learn and practice fundamental skills, knowledge and attitudes in the arts and other disciplines" (ibid.). Some consider it "a pragmatic and, perhaps, expedient way of providing comprehensive instruction in the arts and other disciplines within the confines of the limited school day and within the constraints of available manpower and financial resources" (ibid.).

The framework and standards documents in California call for a comprehensive education in each discrete discipline although they support the notion that interdisciplinary connections enhance learning and simultaneously meet standards. The Visual and Performing Arts Framework for California's Public Schools (1996) describes three modes of instruction: 1) subject-centered arts instruction, 2) instruction connecting the arts disciplines; and 3) instruction connecting the arts and other core subjects (18). It is in the realm of the third mode that the authors believe that *authentic integration* resides. They recommend creating experiences to engage children's hearts, minds, and bodies—lessons allowing for *authentic learning*. In 2002, the California Department of Education provided teachers with visual and performing

arts content standards, which were designed to increase the knowledge, concepts and skills that students should acquire at each grade (CDE 2002).

The disciplines of the visual and performing arts *powerfully* influence effective and authentic learning. For example, content standards in social studies require students to learn about the differences and similarities among cultures. When content standards in the visual and performing arts are united with those in social studies, students experience a dynamic confluence of their learning. By performing various cultural dances, analyzing and creating visual works of art, and emulating the cultures' musical sounds and songs, and dramatizing daily life of people in a specific time and place, they *experience* authentic integration.

Authentic integration occurs when learning activities meet content area standards in more than one discrete discipline. The lessons include learning objectives for each standard, and engage students in, *real-life* activities. Authentic by nature, the arts provide students with meaningful, and relevant learning opportunities. Teachers "chunk" and align standards, making connections that add depth and understanding. Through careful planning they begin with one curricular area and select standards addressing big ideas or understandings of the content to be taught. They examine the visual and performing arts standards for potential connections. The final integrated lessons will then include *objectives addressing content standards for each discipline*. Despite common practice, the *infusion* of arts activities is not integration. Once again, authentic integration includes *objectives addressing content standards for each discipline*.

In response to the stated problems—meeting standards in all content areas, and the segregation of content areas—the authors advocate for the authentic integration of the visual and performing arts standards. They believe teaching *with* and *through* the arts is both viable and valuable. They further believe the integration of the arts standards will transform learning.

How the arts transform learning

According to *Champions of Change* (1999), there is strong evidence that learning in the arts has significant affects on learning in other domains. It is no longer to be regarded as a superfluous, optional activity that makes little contribution to a substantial education. In fact, "learning through the arts can help 'level the playing field' for youngsters from disadvantaged circumstances" (1).

Quality arts instruction will also:

- Enable young people to have direct involvement with the arts and artists.
 - Require significant staff development.
 - Support extended engagement in the artistic process.
 - Encourage self-directed learning.
 - Promote complexity in the learning experience.
 - Allow management of risk by the learners.
 - Engage community leaders and resources.
- (Champions of Change)

The integration of arts, when done with understanding and conscientious construction of curriculum planning, provides real, or natural, connections between and among the standards of other curricular areas. This is well illustrated by Allen (2004), who describes one teacher's story of the integration of arts in her language arts classroom. As part of her teaching unit, she assigned a novel, *The Weirdo*, to be read by her students. Each student created "a pottery place setting that showed

how a chosen character evolved in the story...The place mat represented the character's driving force, the plate showed how (the character) changed in the story, and the bowl showed the sacrifice made by the chosen character" (6). The elements of design, color, and form were thoughtfully considered in the project, and were complementary of the character in the context of the story.

Allen also describes how a visual arts teacher helps students "apply the math concepts of proportion and ratio to their art class portraits of famous early Americans they are studying in a history unit" (6). In this case, the authentic integration of math, visual arts, and history are logically and usefully portrayed. The notion of *mutual reinforcement* effectively integrates multiple layers of standards to increase student understanding.

Using children's literature

There are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of examples of children's literature that integrate a variety of curriculum content areas and their corresponding standards. The compilation of books for preschool and school-age children is constantly growing, and teachers and parents often have ready access to colorful, meaningful, and creative stories and books to supplement student learning. Using children's literature to supplement instruction has become a common practice in schools in the United States. There is a potential and significant role children's literature can play in students' learning. Through beautifully illustrated stories, students who learn visually learn best when the verbal is accompanied by visual representation. Illustrations bring further meaning when students receive instruction about the artists' choices of the elements of visual arts: color, line, space, shape, and texture.

One example of the use of the integration of visual arts elements in a work of children's literature is *Grandfather Tang's Story: A Tale Told with Tangrams* (Tompert 1990). In this story, which is illustrated by Robert Andrew Parker, a Chinese girl and her grandfather play a game in which they create a story using their seven tangram pieces. In this activity, each person arranges the pieces, or tans, into different characters or elements of the story. The tans are cut from a square, and must be of specific size and shape (math standards). The storytelling (language arts standards) is done orally, and is complemented by the tangram pictures created by the participants. The cultural connection to China becomes a history lesson for students (social studies standards), as well. The book's illustrator has interpreted Tompert's story by using the elements of visual arts (visual and performing arts standards). His drawings draw the listener into the story, and capture the essence of Tompert's own vision and story content. One might think the inclusion of a beautifully illustrated book in instruction would be sufficient to address visual and performing arts standards. Alas, it is *not*! It is only with explicit instruction in the use of arts elements, and specific application of the visual arts standards suggested by an in-depth analysis of the art within the book that the corresponding standards would be authentically addressed.

Summary

Does the integration of the arts standards in our public schools need advocacy? The authors believe it does. With budgets squeezed tightly, and accountability levels at an all-time high, perceptions about the importance and logic of integrating arts standards across the curriculum—indeed, integration of standards of *all* subject areas—may be hovering near an all-time low. For teachers, incentives to include the integration of standards may lack allure. The intrinsic reward, as experienced

by participants in the TETAC study (1996), may not sustain other teachers in other places.

Despite the plethora of research and testimonials suggesting the importance and positive influence of integrating the visual and performing arts standards, school administrators and teachers may resist change. Frankly, one must ask, "Do school administrators and teachers take heed of, or have ready access to the research?" The authors suggest they do not. Consequently, it is up to those who have frequent contact with school staff to promote the integration of arts standards so every child has an opportunity to represent what they have learned—the enduring understandings. The infusion and confusion of integrating standards is an enigma that might be solved when educators understand the positive impact of the authentic integration of the visual and performing arts on all areas of their core curriculum.

References

Allen, R. (Spring, 2004), 'In the front row: The arts give students a ticket to learning' in: *Educational Leadership*, Alexandria, VA, Association for Curriculum and Development (retrieved September 1, 2005, from www.ascd.org/affiliates/articles/cu2004spring_allen.html).

ARTSEdge (nd), *What the arts change about the learning experience*, 3 (retrieved September 9, 2004, from www.artsedge.kennedy-center.org/champions/exec_summ.html).

Arts Education Partnership (2003), *Champions of change: The impact of the arts on learning* (retrieved September 27, 2005, from www.aep-arts.org/champions.html).

Boyer, E. (1995) in: Murfee, E., *Eloquent evidence: Arts at the core of learning* (retrieved September 1, 2005, from <http://home.comcast.net/~c.art/advocacy/presidco.pdf#search='eloquent%20evidence%20boyer>).

California Visual and Performing Arts Standards (2001) (retrieved September 27, 2005, from www.cde.ca.gov/re/pn/fd/documents/visperfmarts-stend-comp.pdf).

No Child Left Behind Act (2002) (retrieved September 1, 2005, from www.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/budget06NCLB/index.html).

Tompert, A. (1990), *Grandfather Tang's story: A tale told with tangrams*, New York, Crown.