



How to Infuse the Arts Into Learning Environments

The importance of the arts' ability to engage students should not be underestimated or understated at a time when nearly half of all students in major American cities are not graduating from high school on time. The research on the causes of the dropout problem portrays these students as failing to connect with anyone or anything before they vanish. Arts education can provide the critical connection to engaging young people in learning.

A growing body of research within the arts points to the conclusion that challenged and disengaged students are even more likely than other students to benefit from high-quality visual arts instruction. In addition to helping young people develop important knowledge, skills, and habits of mind, the arts have a great capacity to engage many students who otherwise would be alienated. Such a capacity is particularly important for English language learners, who might be able to engage early on with visual arts education in ways that motivate practice and create a context for development of skills in speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Such skill development in the context of making and

looking at art that expresses personal ideas may ultimately be shown to benefit language use in subjects that require greater facility with English.

The potential for such advantages is enhanced when the arts are at the center of a school. Such schools can transform themselves into vibrant learning centers. As Steven Seidel, the director of the Arts in Education Program at Harvard's Graduate School of Education, put it in a 2005 essay: "When students, teachers and others (including administrators, parents, artists) gather around a work of art created by an artist or a student in the fourth grade and they strive to understand that work—what they see, what it means to each of them, what it makes them feel—they not only make sense of the work, they build community and understanding among themselves."

Olivia Gude helped stimulate such a conversation at Chicago's Charles Steinmetz High School. After reading about racial tension at the school, Gude, who is a professor of art education at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, approached the principal with her portfolio and an idea:

to have Steinmetz students work together under her supervision to design and create a multi- racially themed piece for the school. The principal gave Gude the go-ahead, and after 2 years of work with over 100 students, Steinmetz High's foyer sparkles with intricately designed panels of glass-tile mosaic. Working with elementary school children, teens, and inter-generational groups in rural, suburban, and urban settings, Gude has created public art that represents school curriculum and community values. She wonders: "Why shouldn't every high-quality school enliven itself with products of student creativity?"

The infusion of arts doesn't end when school is out. Excellent after-school programs abound that offer students opportunities to engage in visual arts challenges that are aligned with the school's curriculum. In Lawrence, Kansas, for example, the Van Go Mobile Arts program serves students from low-income families, many with mental health and educational challenges. Under the program, students are paid to create commissioned artwork, such as designing and building public benches.

"The bench-building program helps kids understand that they are contributing to the community," says program director Lynne Greene. "They have a chance to be the 'giver,' rather than the receiver. Their self-confidence grows so much. They also feel more connected to the community, and we know that the more connected they are to the community, the more likely they are to develop as positive members of it as adults."

Museums, too, are critical to infusing art throughout a community. The high-quality materials produced by museums, the knowledge and skills of museum educators, and the museum collections themselves are extraordinarily valuable resources to extend learning far beyond the classroom. "The objects we hold in stewardship for our culture have many dimensions of significance and can participate in many aspects of the education enterprise—from the social studies teacher who wants to connect students with art depicting or made at the time of the Civil War, to the French teacher who 'takes her students to France' by visiting a museum to see French art, to the elementary school teacher whose students find the theme of community embodied and illustrated by art from across the globe," says Kent Lydecker, Director of the Museum of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg, Florida, and the former Associate Director for Education at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

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