**WHY ARTS INTEGRATION? From ArtsEDGE, Kennedy Center**

**Two Big Reasons**

**Why are educators interested in arts integration?**

While the concept of arts integration is not new, there is an increased interest and a growing number of programs and schools focusing on arts integration. Why are educators showing this interest? There are two predominant reasons:  
  
1. Arts integration practices are aligned with how students learn.  
  
2. Arts integration energizes teachers by providing increased professional satisfaction.

**Reason 1: Arts integration practices are aligned with how students learn**

Ongoing research about how humans learn supports constructivist theories of learning1. These theories reflect the characteristics of effective learning which include learning that is active and experiential, reflective, social, evolving, and focused on problem-solving. Arts integration provides learning experiences that reflect all these characteristics.

When students learn through arts integration, they are engaged in **experiences** in which they **actively build and demonstrate their understanding** of both the art form and the other curriculum area. For example, students may create dances about the solar system, theatrical scenes about various perspectives of the Great Migration, or songs about math concepts. To do this, students must take what they know and understand about each subject area (e.g., dance and the science of the solar system) and communicate it to others through the art form. Students become active learners as they build on, extend, or challenge their prior understandings.

**Reflection**, an inherent part of the creative process, is integral to arts integration practice. Within the creative process, students create, **reflect**, assess, and revise their dance, drama, song, poem, or film based on an established criteria. Reflection is woven throughout the creative process as students reconsider the impact of their choices on an ongoing basis. When students have completed their work, they engage in additional reflection about the clarity, accuracy, and meaningfulness of their products. This reflection transforms these experiences into learning2. These verbal or written reflections offer insights for teachers and students. Teachers gain insight into students’ growing understandings, which they use to guide their decisions about the next instructional steps. Students gain insight about their own learning process, creative process, and products.

By its very nature, arts integration engages students in **social and collaborative learning**. Dance, music, theater, and media arts are collaborative art forms; the visual and literary arts have aspects of collaboration, too. When arts integration is the approach to teaching in a classroom, purposeful conversation, not silence, is the norm. Teams of students work together to consider how they can demonstrate what they know and understand. For example, after students gain information about the solar system and the elements of dance, they work in small groups to plan ways to demonstrate their understanding. Together, students make decisions about the science content and the dance process and how to best present it. Through conversations they listen, clarify their ideas, and negotiate for the best solutions. Their understanding of both content areas is expanded and deepened as they hear each other’s ideas and explain their own.

Arts integration engages students in the creative process where learning is dynamic and **evolving**. The creative process involves students in revisiting ideas and revising their work. For example, at the beginning of a unit about the solar system, students might create a dance demonstrating their initial understandings. Students could return to the dance midway through the unit as their learning progresses, or they could revisit it at the end of the unit. The dance provides an authentic medium in which students demonstrate their growing understandings. Ideally, throughout a student’s school career, dance (or any other art form) would be one of the tools they would use for constructing and demonstrating their developing understandings. Each year, students would gain further knowledge and skills in dance that they would apply to the next dance they create.

Arts integration places students into the role of **problem solvers**. The arts demonstrate that many questions have more than one right answer. The creative process requires that students create their own solutions to problems, make choices, and evaluate the results of those choices. Students explore, test their ideas, and refine their thinking. They also develop appreciation for other students’ solutions to the same problems.

When learning is active and experiential, reflective, social, evolving, and focused on problem-solving, it becomes engaging and motivating. Because arts integration aligns with how students learn best, students find it personally meaningful and are drawn to it. They seek more opportunities to learn in and through the arts. For example, at-risk high school students report that their involvement with the arts is often the reason they come to school and stay in school3.

**Reason 2: Arts integration energizes teachers by providing increased professional satisfaction**

Not only is arts integration engaging and motivating for students, teachers find that it also energizes them and their teaching. Teachers that have been relying primarily on textbooks and worksheets as instructional strategies report that they feel increasingly discouraged by the drudgery of teaching and the lack of student engagement4. Many become bored or disenfranchised, and even leave the profession.

Teachers participating in arts integration programs say that arts integration puts them back in touch with what originally excited them about teaching. They want classrooms full of engaged, curious, and responsive students. They want to do what is best for student learning. They want to be excited about going into the classroom every day.

Arts integration can change the entire classroom culture. When every student is participating, engaged in purposeful conversation with their peers, and focused on making sense of the content in both the art form and the other subject area, the room fills with focused energy. Arts integration’s alignment with the education of the whole child results in a similar alignment with the concept of the “whole teacher”—the energized professional that makes learning engaging and challenging for students, and who enjoys tapping into his/her own creativity for teaching. Teachers regain a sense of efficacy when they see the positive impact of arts integration on their students’ learning.

*“In the context of school cultures that frequently dismiss teachers as part of the problem, this approach [arts integration] affirms that teachers are part of the solution. When teachers are given the authority and responsibility to reflect on their work and make it better, their morale and their practice improves. Arts integration becomes an invitation to personal growth and learning that changes their identity as teachers…”* —Nick Rabkin and Robin Redmond5

In Third Space: When Learning Matters, the authors comment on the impact of arts integration on teacher satisfaction and renewal:

“Indeed, teachers in the case study schools said they derive delight and professional renewal and satisfaction from incorporating the arts into their teaching. They enjoy teaching more, primarily because of the responsiveness of their students, and the new level of collaboration with other teachers in the school.”6

Additionally, the impact of arts integration on school culture has been documented in two evaluation reports about the Kennedy Center’s Changing Education Through the Arts (CETA) program.

“Teachers and leaders…remarked that arts integration had come to define the way things are done at their school, made the entire atmosphere of their school more positive and cohesive, and helped make their school more child-centered…”7

“Repeatedly teachers and leaders reported that their school’s arts integration program had strengthened staff collegiality and collaboration.”8

“Teachers claim they are approaching curriculum differently, taking more risks, open to serendipity in the lessons, excited by the changes and the possibilities, and motivated by the professionalization of their work made by continuing education.”9

To conclude, in the past, and even somewhat today, the arts have been seen as something extra, and something fun to do if students needed a break from “real learning.” We now know that arts integration aligns with current best practices for teaching and learning, and that it offers a powerful way to help teachers return to the joy of teaching.