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Joni Starr: Arts Integration, Part 2

[arts integration, co-teaching, Joni Starr, teacher training programs](#)

Arts integration as a teaching approach started to come into its own in the 1970's and 80's. For over 30 years, the [John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts](#) in Washington, D.C., has been offering arts integration learning opportunities for educators.

They [define the practice of arts integration](#) as “an approach to teaching in which students construct and demonstrate understanding through an art form. Students engage in a creative process which connects an art form and another subject and meets evolving objectives.”

Today this practice of integrating arts with standard classroom subjects is growing as students, teachers, parents, and administrators recognize the value and strength of creative capacity in the 21st century.

In my 30 years experience in arts education, I find the challenge of arts integration is reflected mainly in two points:

1. A clearly stated outcome for the lesson.
2. A thorough understanding of the material being taught.

There are many wonderfully effective lessons that equally partner the arts disciplines with non-arts disciplines, where the outcomes are well matched for teaching two disciplines in one lesson.

For example:

- The levels of the rainforest and the levels of dance choreography.
- The contours of a map and the contours of texture in visual art.
- The understanding of character objectives in literature and drama.
- The understanding of fractions in math and in time signature in music.

Other times, when implementing arts integrated teaching and learning the outcomes are less clear or become complicated. Time is spent closely reading the standards to see which ones might connect across disciplines and which ones might be manageable in the allotted class time. Outcomes can easily become long and multi-layered to address objectives in both subject areas, thus confusing both teacher and student. And teaching can easily sway towards one discipline more than the other, ultimately negating the practice of arts integration.

It is important then to clearly understand how both the arts and non-arts subjects truly integrate. How they support and connect to each other and how they allow for the practice of creativity in the classroom. Arts integration at its best allows students the creative opportunity to be leaders in their own learning.

In writing and implementing arts integrated lessons, many teachers falter in their confidence of one of the subject areas. If the art teacher is asked to integrate with a science concept, the art teacher must understand the concepts of science. And if a math teacher is asked to integrate with music, then the math teacher must understand music content. A strong solution to this is for teachers from differing disciplines to partner teach and/or learn from each other. In these cases the outcomes are often clear and the lessons effective and impactful for students.

This content understanding and/or partner teaching can, however, be a tall order for any teacher. Most teacher training programs do not integrate the arts into teaching, they actually separate them. Arts teachers are trained in their specific discipline and there are deeply important and valid reasons for this. So when asking teachers to make effective use of arts integration in the classrooms, it is a shift for both arts and non-arts teachers. Sometimes successful, sometimes not.

The benefits of arts integration for both teaching and learning are well documented and highly impactful, yet preparing teachers to do their best work so their students can as well, remains an area of growth.

Do you have examples of best practice for preparing teachers to integrate the arts and/or non-arts content? Or a strategy for facilitating effective collaboration?

Join the conversation by offering your perspective in article comments, social media shares, or by emailing Heather at hvsouthard@gmail.com with a prospective blog post for the MAEIA blog.

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