Drawing, Painting and Clay in a High-Stakes World

By Jay Hunsche

Art is a very useful, valuable, essential subject in school. There are many adjectives I could use to describe my feelings about art in school, but I could sum it up with one simple word: imperative. That’s what this essay is about. I’m not trying to convince you Art is the most important subject in school. All I want to do with this essay is tell you that art is important, why we need it in schools to keep education fresh, some examples of my experience and integrating subjects, and what is new in the field of teaching art.

Art in today’s schools takes a backseat compared to core curriculum subjects: Math, Language Arts, Science, and Social Studies. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and standards-based education reform has made American public schooling about “teaching to the test” and making children meet a set of standards. “When policymakers and educational theorists define curriculum for a school or classroom, they are also defining the forms of thinking that are likely to be promoted in the school. They are, in effect, laying out an agenda for the development of the mind” (Eisner, 2004, p. 148).

Schools are under pressure to perform well basically because their funding is at stake. As these pressures of performing well loom over every public school in the country, actions are taken to make up for any weak link each school or district may have. In that case, Art, Music, Physical Education, and other “enrichment” subjects
are either being cut or excluded. Many students are being pulled out of elective classes or never given a chance to take the class just so they can get extra help to pass the standardized test. For instance, one researcher reports that “it is a common practice for seventh- and eighth-grade students to lose their only elective class if they fail the state test. The elective course is replaced with a remedial math or reading class that is intended to help raise scores” (Beveridge, 2010, p. 5).

Our students can’t afford to lose Art Education just because the schools need to meet a set of standards set by our state government, or to get a reward from the federal government offered as an incentive to do well on the tests. Art helps children learn in so many ways! I’m hopeful the policymakers and curriculum designers are seeing the importance of Art Education. It’s not just visual art either, but also performing arts, every form of music and dance, Physical Education, and all elective courses that give students another avenue to explore. Narrowing the curriculum limits our possibilities. I had a professor in environmental science (IES 431) tell our class that the number one thing we have to protect is biodiversity. What makes biodiversity so important is the fact that there is so much in nature we do not know (example is the tropical rainforest), and how will we know if something can help us if we lose it? I believe we can apply this to education. How will we know if our students can help our world if we take away avenues for excellence?

**Arts Integrated**

One of the things I love about my job is the fact I can teach just about anything I want. Isn’t that unbelievable? In a world where teachers are basically being told what to teach, teaching towards tests, I can teach whatever I feel like
teaching. That’s the beauty of art. I’m not sure how much math, language arts, science, or social studies can be integrated into the music or P.E. program, but with art it is very easy to relate back to those core subject areas. This is one reason why it makes art so valuable. “While the arts should be recognized as subjects that can stand alone and be important in their own rights, parents and educators should also embrace the concept that the arts can enhance true understanding of a content area” (Gullatt, 2008, p. 24).

**Art and Mathematics**

I love it when I begin a lesson on geometry and I start drawing a circle on the board using a compass, then I add a radius, diameter, right angles, obtuse and acute angles, and children ask, “why are we learning math? This is art.” I tell them, “art is math, math is art.” When I talk about measurement, using a ruler, I get the same comments. This past year I gave my 4th and 5th graders a small assignment toward the end of the year. They were given a ruler and a compass and told to make a geometric design, didn’t have to be symmetrical. What they produced was remarkable! They were amazed at how cool their designs looked just by using two tools used in geometry.

There are many ways to integrate math in art. The famous artist and printmaker M.C. Escher is a prime example of someone who has mastered the art of math, or the math in art. Escher is famous for his tessellations, and when I’ve brought that up in a 4th grade art class my students say, “we learned about that in math!” Using the same vocabulary in my art room that the regular classroom teacher uses reinforces the ideas that are being taught to children. Arts give
students another perspective, where they might make a connection in my room visually that they may not make in their regular classroom.

**Art and Language Arts**

I have not had much experience with integrating Language Arts into my art program, but I know they can be meshed very easily. I plan to do an art lesson this next school year and coordinate it with a writing assignment. Writing is a lot like the arts. Authors, poets, and journalists express their ideas and feelings into their work, much like an artist. They are very much connected through their intellectual and emotional output.

My mom is an art teacher at Talawanda Middle School. For the past 7 years, their school does an all school book read with a chosen author and book. The Sandy Hormell Book Project – sponsored by the Miami University Partnership Office, Kappa Delta Pi, and Talawanda Middle School – supplies the books for the students to read over the summer and culminates with the author’s visit. Before the author’s visit, my mom, along with the student’s Language Arts teachers, go over specific parts of the book, the details, and important points, and then discuss how visual representations could portray the events and characters through illustration. This is an excellent example of integrating Art and Language Arts.

**Art and Science**

I relate to science in art, because I took a lot of environmental science classes in college. The science domain of botany was founded on making art. Early botanists would roll ink onto leaves and press them on to paper to study and keep on file. There are many art teachers all over the world that use this very lesson with
their students. Studying animals, plants, insects, space, or any other area of Science in the art room may generate more interest in the subject, therefore leading students to gain another perspective. Taking away this extra perspective hurts our students learning. Eisner (2005) explains that we can’t neglect certain areas of development and claims, “This narrowed perspective promotes a technical orientation to teaching rather than an organic or humanistic one” (p. 16).

**Art and Social Studies**

This is an area that I really like to teach. I am fascinated with American history, geography, and Social Studies as a whole. I have done a project the past few years where 5th graders learn about cartography. Their assignment is simple: to create an imaginary island using components of physical and cultural geography. Students have a lot of fun with this, creating their own “dreamland” with forests, rivers, deserts, mountains, lakes, as we go over natural features of maps, and also covering cultural features of their islands: cities, towns, highways, railroads, marinas, airports, and parks. This project also relates to the core subject standards in Social Studies.

Ceramics is another area that I can relate to Social Studies. Teaching about clay and Native Americans in the month of November is a perfect integration project of Art and Social Studies. Native Americans and other cultures around the world have been making clay for thousands of years. Clay gives students a chance to work with their hands directly with a specific medium. It’s a great example of a constructivist activity mainly because students are required to discover how the clay works. There is a lot of discovery and self- learning involved when you are
trying to make a coil pot. David E. Gullatt of Louisiana Tech University (2008) discusses Elliot Eisner, constructivism, and the role of discovery, stating that, “Through the arts, students are able to journey through the aesthetic world to discover new information. This form of learning allows students the opportunity to expand their imaginations and creativity while gaining new information” (p. 21).

Students are learning vocabulary and concepts in a visual manner in my classroom. It is encouraging to see students acquire the knowledge of a certain concept who might not understand that concept in their regular classroom.

**Why Teach Art?**

Teaching art is an essential part in the development of what Elliot Eisner describes as the “whole child.” “We are not in the business of canning beans. We are interested in helping children become who they are” (Eisner, 2005, p. 18). What he is referring to with this metaphor is our educational system has an Industrial Revolution mentality, that we are concerned with producing a certain kind of product in a systematic way. We are not made for everyone to achieve the same things on the same level. We are all different and we need to embrace different perspectives. “The arts celebrate multiple perspectives. One of their large lessons is that there are many ways to see and interpret the world” (Eisner, 2004, Chapter 4).

There are many lists out there written by art teachers, artists, and art advocates on why art is so important. But here are just three benefits taken from a list of many from Gullatt’s article (2008): arts programs enhance higher order thinking and learning, provides additional entry points for content discussion and discovery, and enhances communication skills of students (p. 24). The main reason
why art is so important for me is because it gives students an opportunity to be creative and solve problems in a different way. Art adds another domain of intelligence that can only be cultivated through artistic expression.

One of the new and beneficial components of Art Education today is a company called Artsonia. It is a website, Artsonia.com, that is used by art teachers around the world. I was introduced to it this past school year and it has made my job both easier and more fun, even though it involves more work! Artsonia is a website that lets art teachers display their student’s work online and build an online portfolio. This allows friends and family members who live far away to view the artwork of the child they know and also purchase items like coffee mugs, mouse pads, and key chains with their child’s artwork on them. Children who have an account on Artsonia can continue to add to their portfolio until the graduate high school.

It has become a very useful tool for me as an art teacher. It has allowed me to connect with parents and I’ve received many compliments from it. “Ten years ago, I read a small ad for an online student art gallery. I thought it sounded too good to be true, but definitely worth a try. Now, I can truly say Artsonia is the best thing out there for art teachers” (Staten, 2011, p. 11).

Conclusion

Art Education is needed in schools, and thankfully a lot of educators and administrators agree. But it’s the problems with testing that have pushed the arts to the edge of extinction in some schools and districts. Vasquez Heilig et al (2010) states, “We need to question the ways in which we currently measure our children’s
learning” (p. 143). I hope the subject of Art will never appear on a state standardized test. There is enough concrete information that children could learn and “fill in the bubbles” on a multiple-choice test, but most of what is really important in art is the creativity and production of artwork. “Teaching toward a test” will be a completely different approach for art teachers everywhere.

New teacher evaluation practices have included arts and other enrichment subjects to show student growth. The Ohio Department of Education just revised the state standards this past spring in 2012. There are too many people supportive of the arts in education to let the arts go away. “The benefits of creative initiative may not be as clear and measureable as core subject test scores, but we should not underestimate the value of arts education for our youth” (Vasquez Heilig et al., 2010, p. 142). We can’t take away time from the arts to “drill” the students in Math and Reading. Art needs to build on what students already know and help them grow more intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually and gain a broad education to guide them in their future.
References


