

## Visual Arts and Literacy: The Potential of Interdisciplinary Coalitions for Social Justice

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### Abstract

In this article, we explore the possibilities of creating a coalition of the visual arts with literacy to work toward meaningful integrated learning experiences with a social justice agenda. We discuss the benefits of integrated curriculum and its potential to support learning at many levels. Following that, we introduce the Hope House mural project as an example of an integrated visual arts and literacy program. Through this project, children and their incarcerated fathers grapple with significant issues in their lives and to build a bond while doing so. We argue that this coalition results in learning that is inseparably tied to the technical and the profound, thanks to the synergy of the art and literacy experience.

## Introduction

*Working at a large urban university, I (Melanie) find myself often surprised that I know so few of my colleagues in other departments. In the spring of 2010, I became involved with a new group on campus, Richmond Teachers for Social Justice. Though not an 'official' university group and certainly welcoming of a variety of people, this group predominantly consists of teacher educators at the university from a range of departments. At the first meeting, in our breakout group time, I began chatting with a faculty member in the School of Education (Bill). From our brief conversation, we realized that though we teach different subjects, our underlying theoretical beliefs have similarities and overlap. Further, as we discussed our institutionally differentiated subject areas, we came to see many ways that visual art and literacy could be used to make a coalition to further a social justice agenda.*

Our initial meeting led to discussions of collaboration possibilities, talk of interdisciplinary work, and the impetus for this article. In this article, we explore ideas of integrated curriculum possibilities in a non-traditional educational settings, and explore an example of how these are used in the Hope House summer camp program to further a social justice agenda. We believe that creating coalitions of people from multiple disciplines could lead to meaningful changes and meaningful learning at a variety of levels and in many different settings. Thus, we (Melanie – School of the Arts and Bill –School of Education) collaborated on this article to push our thinking about what we do, how we could do more together, and in what ways we might collaborate in the future. In this

article, we relate to the call of 'critical coalitions in play' through a discussion of integrated collaborative work that has implications in formal and informal learning environments.

### **Integrated/interdisciplinary curriculum**

Certainly, ideas of integrated and interdisciplinary curriculum are not new, with precedents in the U.S. educational system reaching back to at least the late 1800s with periodic reappearances of interest in integrated curriculum (Grady, 1994; Klein, 1990; Parsons, 2004). Different authors use a variety of terms including cross disciplinary, transdisciplinary, intradisciplinary, interdisciplinary, cross-curricular, integrative, or integrated to refer to curriculum that advocates teaching and learning that transcend traditional subject boundaries (Beane, 1997; Jacobs, 1989; Taylor, Carpenter, Ballengee-Morris, & Sessions, 2006). Krug and Cohen-Evron (2000) describe the need to come to an understanding of the various terms used. Thus, for the purposes of this article, we rely on Burns (1994) who wrote:

Integrated curriculum is a holistic approach to learning that stresses connections and relationships rather than delineations across the disciplines. It is a tool for building bridges instead of boundaries between specific bodies of knowledge....An integrated curriculum focuses on students' needs and interests (p. 12).

Throughout this article, we use the term 'integrated' to refer to curriculum that addresses ideas from multiple disciplines that allows for meaningful connections

to students' lives. As we discussed various ideas for collaborating on a project and what integrated curriculum might be possible, Bill mentioned his ongoing involvement with Hope House, a Washington, DC based non-profit that, among other things, runs a summer camp program for children with incarcerated fathers. Throughout this weeklong camp, students and their fathers participate in arts and literacy based learning activities culminating in a mural project. This project seemed to be a way that we could bring our disciplines together to think through issues of social justice and teacher education.

### **Higher Education and Integrated Curriculum**

At the K-12 and higher education level, there are certainly a variety of barriers to integrated learning experiences including planning time and one subject being seen as 'subservient' or the hand maiden to another (Keifer-Boyd & Smith-Shank, 2007; Stinespring, 2001). Ulbricht (2005) notes one difficulty in establishing integrated experiences is that the literature on such programs is difficult to locate considering that it resides in numerous fields. Thus, faculty members interested in starting integrated programs may struggle in finding information about successful programs.

However, as noted by both Parsons (2004) and Ulbricht (2005) there is an increasing interest in curriculum integration now at both the K-12 and higher education levels. The reasons for this interest may include the shifting notions of faculty to a more postmodern perspective (Ulbricht, 2005), student demand, social concern, administrative decisions, scientific discoveries, and vocational

and training requirements (Klein, 1990). Parsons (2004) describes the current resurgence of interest in integrated curriculum and, drawing from Beane (1997), points to several reasons for integrated curriculum including the need to educate the whole person, the relationship to democratic education, inquiry-based learning, and problem solving related to social issues. Thus, it may be advantageous for higher educators to collaborate on integrated learning projects both within the formal academic setting as well as in informal learning environments.

### **Thinking and Learning Beyond Disciplinary Borders**

Other authors argue for the importance of addressing the information beyond the traditional subject matter, often called '21<sup>st</sup> century skills.' According to the Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills, these skills include, "creativity and innovation, critical thinking and problem solving, communication and collaboration, information literacy, media literacy" (2010). This group also advocates curricular approaches that allow for applying these skills across disciplines. Further, the argument advanced by Pink (2006) about humans seeking meaning also points to this being a time in which learning information in 'chunks' may be less appropriate. The goal of this type of learning should not be having one subject in a lesser role than another, but rather to find meaningful overlaps and connections between and among various disciplines.

Additionally, Gadsen (2008) suggests that a sea change is underway within education in relationship to how the arts are viewed. She mentions studies

that promote ideas that the arts should be studied in relationship to larger human experiences and situated with regard to social and cultural groups. This can happen through the use of overarching ideas (big ideas, enduring ideas, themes, etc.), working toward social justice, and providing ways for learners to make meaningful connections between their learning and things that are important in their lives. Apple and Beane (2007) describe aspects of successful schools that overtly work to promote democratic education. They note that the curriculum at the schools that they studied is, “based on the belief that knowledge comes to life for students and teachers only when it is connected to something that is serious” (p. 151). Further, the curriculum in place at these schools tends to work from a thematic approach that encourages learners to apply their knowledge to real-world issues. Instead of knowledge being discrete facts for students to memorize, “knowledge is that which is intimately connected to the communities and biographies of real people. Students learn that knowledge makes a difference in people’s lives, including their own” (p. 151). This view of knowledge, curriculum, and the teaching and learning process suggests a different approach than the traditional segregation of subject matter into discrete units with a teacher functioning as arbiter of what is considered meaningful or important.

### **Suggestions for shaping integrated curriculum**

Ulbricht (2005) encourages art educators to cross boundaries in order to build the necessary coalitions that can lead to meaningful work. He writes, “Interdisciplinary research is about our willingness to take a risk, to discover what

we can learn, and to undertake the hard work that will expand our cognitive, aesthetic, and educational horizons” (p. 17). When working collaboratively with other faculty members, it is important to think through how to structure learning experiences so that the goals of various stakeholders are considered to build a collective understanding of the goals and terminology of the project. Gadsen (2008) delineates different perspectives of the relationship between the arts and education: the arts in education, education in the arts, or art and education. She explains the semantic nuances of these phrases:

These different ways of conceptualizing the relationship between education and the arts point to the plurality of art experiences. They remove the adjectival status of the arts (e.g. art education) in schooling, teaching, and learning and assign the arts equal status to education. (p. 31)

Gadsen further explains how the linguistic difference can set the groundwork for a situation that encourages learners to be, “co constructors of a dynamic education rather than recipients of schooling and shapers of knowledge rather than recipients of knowledge shaped primarily by forces external to them” (2008, p. 31). Her point relates to what many others raise about the need for education to move from being mostly ‘teacher-centered’ to involving ‘student-centered’ learning experiences (Cuban, 2008). As Cuban notes, the physical settings of classrooms, the content of the curriculum, and teachers’ pedagogical approaches all can relate to the power dynamics in the classroom and shape learning

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experiences in a variety of ways. To begin working toward this goal, teachers can select topics that not only meet institutionally sanctioned goals, but also overtly relate to the lives and interests of their students. Further, providing learners with the opportunity to make choices about their learning to direct it in ways that are meaningful to them is paramount. Cuban (2008) advocates this shift as part of a larger agenda toward school reform with the goal of building more democratic schools.

Jacobs advocates organizing integrated curriculum so that it relates to the larger world rather than only to the constructed world of school. She believes that schools and the knowledge they promote may be more related to the past than to the present or the future (1989, 2010). Further, Jacobs (1989) points out that students may begin to see that the way school is organized into discrete sections is not related to the world outside school in which humans encounter situations that require them to gather information, think, and act in ways that reflect multiple traditional school disciplines. Therefore, she encourages schools to utilize features of traditional disciplines as well as interdisciplinary experiences. This combination of experiences, through an organizing big idea, enduring idea, or theme gives focus to the learning and helps prevent the 'potpourri problem' in which integrated learning is merely a sampling of a variety of interesting tidbits.

### **Relationship to Social Justice**

As the 2010 NAEA conference, a recent issue of the journal *Art Education*, and the 2010 publication *Art Education for Social Justice* (Anderson, Gussak,



Hallmark, & Paul, 2010) suggest, the field of art education regularly engages with issues of social justice. According to Garber (2004), “Education for social justice is education for a society where the rights and privileges of democracy are available to all. Art education for social justice places art as a means through which these goals are achieved” (p. 16). Bastos (2010) adds to this point and furthers it by drawing on the work of Freire (2006) in mentioning how education can be a, “vehicle of social transformation” (p. 3). In her editorial of the special issue of the journal *Art Education* devoted to social justice, Bastos mentions that art may be situated in a unique manner to promote the type of discourse that can lead to action. In some cases, working from an integrated perspective enhances these perspectives (Zwirn & Libresco, 2010).

In describing the particulars of social justice art education, Dewhurst (2010) explores the similarities among the multitude of terms used to describe art that works toward social change. Dewhurst notes the similarities among these movements that they tend to involve the creation of art that brings awareness to, that creates a coalition that may become involved in, or may directly intervene in some aspect of society that is not just.

To respond to the needs of the contemporary world including the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills call for teamwork, interdisciplinary thinking, and the need to work with ideas and concepts, we need to move away from isolated thinking and move to multiple ways of knowing. When colleagues create coalitions, we can develop and build programs to work furthering a social justice agenda.

## Hope House as an example

*In 1980, as a reading teacher going to work in a federal prison, I (Bill) immediately felt the profound disconnection (or, as Melanie names it, segregation) of 'subject' from the world outside. "Youthful offenders" floated in and out of my class. They appeared one day and later disappeared—sometimes ending up in segregation (the actual term for disciplinary lock down), sometimes transferred to another prison, sometimes released to...where? The official curriculum contained a scope and sequence chart that listed, in order, every skill my students "needed" —phonics, vocabulary, comprehension— to pass the GED. The chart signified another disconnection, of subject matter with human subjects —as if the students had no life experiences, prior knowledge or personal purposes for learning, no musical or artistic talent, no biography upon which to construct new learning. Nor did the curriculum address larger social issues, such as the vast overrepresentation of minorities in prison, or the devastating effects of prison on families and communities (Hairston, 2007). It did align with the cultural landscape of prison, in which the borderland (Wright, 2006) between staff and prisoners was often a do-not-enter zone and where power relations were explicit. Prisoners were passive recipients of received wisdom, in this case as proclaimed by the American Council on Education.*

Over the 30 years since Bill began prison work, many "connected" prison projects have flourished, though perhaps more in Europe and Canada than in the US, where top-down "criminogenic" models still prevail (Warner, 1998). For Bill, the interdisciplinary nexus between parenting and literacy became increasingly

important, as low literacy and poor spelling skills sometimes precluded his students from writing letters to children and parents at home. Despite the obvious potential for parenting programs to engage learners, most prison-based parenting programs remained wedded to criminogenic methods of identifying deficits (according to a pre-set list of parenting skills) and then prescribing generic fixes.

We discuss Hope House against this rather dismal backdrop to emphasize the merits of working across disciplines—in this case literacy and art—and to describe how an integrated model afforded new ways of making connections from the personal to the disciplinary and the social. We mine data from an earlier study of the Hope House project (Muth, 2011) which were collected during two summer camps and six other prison visits in 2008 and 2009. Data gathering included four focus groups (involving 18 fathers and six children), and seven individual interviews with fathers. All interviews were audio-taped, transcribed and analyzed, in part, through a recursive grounded theory strategy (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and in part using thirdspace (Soja, 1996; Wilson, 2004) and timescape (Burgess, 2009) theory. The Hope House project involves a range of programs in eight US prisons that included: video conferencing between family members inside and out, summer camps, weekend activities for prisoners' children, writers' workshops, support groups for caregivers, and a book taping project in which incarcerated parents recorded books and mailed them home to their children. At any one prison, 80-100 fathers record story books for their children every two months. Because many children live 200 or more miles away

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and rarely have a chance to visit, recorded books and phone calls are their primary means of contact. However, each year 45 pre-adolescent boys and girls—primarily African American and Latino/a from poor, urban communities from Boston to Richmond—participate in summer camps at one of three prisons. About half are returning campers; some first timers have not seen their dads for many years and have little or no memories of them. Although there are a wide range of activities throughout the week, the heart of the camp experience is the mural project.

There are many things that distinguish Hope House from more traditional programs, but perhaps most striking are the ways it deliberately strives to humanize prison spaces, locate itself in the borderland between staff and prisoner, nurture prisoners' membership in community, privilege the personal, and position fathers and children as the experts. Thus, the programs share similarities with student-centered approaches to learning rather than teacher-centered approaches.

To describe how this happens, we focus on Hope House's main art-literacy project. Every father-child(ren) team designs and constructs a mural (approximately 6' x 12') over the course of the week. On the first day they brainstorm ideas through free-flowing discussions, sketches and reflections in interactive journals. A Hope House artist makes herself available to assist with ideas for themes and visual layouts, or to help with drawings or selecting fabrics, etc. The design and planning phase involves both visual arts and literacy based

activities designed to help children and their fathers develop their ideas for the mural.

Themes vary, from a father falling off a cliff (only to be rescued by his son and a kindly, feathery eagle) to a daughter kickboxing with her father (and, of course, winning with a KO). One father/son mural appeared mundane—the two sitting together on a sofa watching TV—until the son explained, “I just want to be alone with my dad. I don’t want any distractions.” (It was the 11 year old’s first camp and the first time seeing his father in over a year.) One father/daughter team reconstructed the earliest memory the ten year old girl had of her father—a day at the local swimming pool. She had not communicated with her father since she was five, and the mural project seemed to serve not only as visual art, but as performing art as well. i.e., the two had all week to dwell in a hybrid time/space that tapped into a far away past and brought it forward onto the canvass and into their minds and hearts. By the end of the week they had grown considerably closer, and have maintained close contacts (mostly by phone but also through book tapings) ever since.

The aesthetic, cognitive and literate aspects of mural work are inseparable. For example: One year, a daughter was angry with her father from the beginning of camp until just before their very emotional goodbye hug on Friday. In truth, most of her anger seemed to be a front, a way of relating that kept her guard up and discourse at a playful banter. Their mural depicted a glittery Eiffel Tower and Parisian skyline at sunset and was quite beautiful. The

physical acts of painting, gluing, adding glitter, and focusing outward had a

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subtle, softening effect. Over the week, within these aesthetic structures, the bantering ceased and they delved into family news such as stories about close and distant relatives who were also incarcerated in that prison. Aside from the unfortunate and pervasive role of incarceration in this family script, the two achieved a genuine warmth and closeness that they seemed keep hidden under the cover of painting and artwork.

Art literacy activities seem to open up space and time in ways that enable intimacy and reflection without forcing them. In this typical excerpt from unpublished data collected during the Hope House study (Muth, 2011)—a father relates the experience of on-the-floor mural making with his son, and the profound discussion that could never have taken place in a less intimate space or time.

[On the first day] he was...floodin' me with questions. [laughs]...“What about this!” And “OK... Um – da-da-da-da-da!” “Ah slow down! We got time...”But after he got over that – after we got over the fact that we had more than 15 minutes [the limit that the prison places on phone calls] he was able to kinda settle down, and flow with it, and enjoy it. You know, just enjoy each other. ‘Cause that’s one of the greatest things that friends, or family can have with each other, is the fact that they don’t have to talk to each other. What they don’t say to each other says as much, or sometimes more than what they do say to each other. And so we...was able to do these projects together...quietly – you know? And, of course, he’s sprinklin’ in questions he’s been meanin’ to ask me. [Laughs]

There were some profound questions too...We was talkin' right? He was askin me, during that little, one minute, moment, he asked me – he said, “Um, did you and my mother ever get married?” – No. He said, “Why didn't you and my mother get married?” Right? And it was a heavy question for me because...his mother and I were married...He's talkin' about – when he says his mother, he's speakin' about my other children's mother, the one that was raisin' him up until my dad took him...I said, “Look, um, me and Gloria – never got married because I was already married to a woman named Cherl” which was his [biological] mother. Right? And I said, “And she had some big beautiful brown eyes, just like you,” right? And so he asked me, you know, the next question. “Um, so where's she at?” So I was like, “You know, she's dead,” right? “How'd she die?” “Well, she killed herself. Suicide.” So he said, “So why'd she kill herself.” I said, “You know, because she was depressed. Some people are stronger than others when it comes to depression. Some people just couldn't take it. You know?” And he says, “I don't care how sad I get, I'll never kill myself.” I'm like, man that's beautiful. [Laughs]. I'm like, that's great 'cause that's one of my biggest concerns—that it's hereditary.

Directly or indirectly, the arts serve human needs such as rebuilding fragile relationships and empowering the voice of the silent and silenced. In the above examples we see how inextricable the various disciplinary ways of knowing become. For example, the aesthetic/creative activities opened up safe spaces for voices to be heard. In turn, this dialogue enabled the cognitive work of schema

building (e.g., the son's determined exploration of his of his custodial and biological family and his location in the extended family) as well as the emotional work of belonging (e.g., a father's chance to share family scripts with his son). The murals themselves may be considered a form of reflective and imaginative text that embodies what Langer (2009, p. 51) calls "literate thinking." They do what other genres of writing do: create narratives, bear witness, engender intimacy and detachment, support exploration and elaboration, create hope and purpose for the future, even establish criterion for judging truthfulness. At another level of literacy-art-cognition integration, the daily journaling that accompanied the mural project fueled and was fueled by the art, and helped crystallize learning (such as when the daughter drew a picture of her expanded family tree in her journal). Beyond social-cognitive learning, intergenerational literacy programs such as these benefit children academically as well. These benefits include improvements in: school achievement and motivation, school attendance, oral language development, reading achievement, social skills and self esteem (Padak & Rasinski, 2003).

Here is Bill's reflection on the current writing collaboration with Melanie:

*Until I began working on this paper with Melanie, I had not thought of interdisciplinary collaboration as coalition building. Yes, we share a strong interest in integrated curriculum such as mural projects that intersect art and literacy. And we both champion work that lends voice, dignity and hope to communities dispatched as broken and hopeless. Now I see how coalition building matters. We are not only writing in/for our academic silos. We are writing*



*for praxis, and I'm keenly aware that I can't humanize US penology on my own. And as I consider the satisfaction derived from this joint project, I realize that we are writing for each other. At a time when government research institutes find little interest in the immeasurable (yet transformative) importance of visual art—literacy integration, it just may be coalitions that sustain us in our efforts to construct 'whole' solutions to massive social injustices—such as the impact of incarceration on families.*

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Building coalitions of faculty/teachers can lead to integrated learning experiences that have profound meaning within the constructs of the lives of learners. The Hope House example demonstrates how art-and-literacy collations can help educators help students learn to navigate the complexities of their lives. Program content that is decontextualized and aligned with discrete outcomes may be measurable, but it rarely supports the immediate and urgent day-to-day issues some learners must otherwise face alone. Conversely, as coalitions come into play, the learning processes inherently become more layered and complex, and the content more connected to life outside of school. While the examples cited in this article were not school-based, they illustrate a central insight that transfers directly to the classroom i.e., with carefully integrated curricula and scaffolding, the acquisition of academic knowledge and self knowledge is synergistic. We need to raise the bar for what counts as instruction, especially for those with little opportunity for expression and so much to say. Furthermore, when we, as educators, reach out to each other to support a social justice

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agenda and find similarities in our purposes and goals, we are modeling ways of building coalitions of people around critical contemporary issues.

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