"Roots and Wings: A Look at How Performing Arts Integration Can Help Students Soar into the 21st Century"

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ABSTRACT

American writer and politician, William Hodding Carter once said, "There are only two lasting bequests we can hope to give our children. One of these is roots; the other, wings." With the recent implementation of Common Core State Standards, educators are increasingly concentrating on core academic subjects, a process designed to provide students with the deep roots of content mastery. But educators know that content mastery alone will not guarantee success in the 21st Century skills in creativity, collaboration, communication, and critical thinking can provide the wings students need to soar in life (Heath, 2010; McCoy, 2007).

This study describes how the integration of a 6-week performing arts activity into a 5th grade social studies unit enhanced the development of students' 21st Century Learning Skills, such as communication, collaboration, critical thinking and creativity (the "4 Cs"), which are essential for college and career readiness. Student growth was assessed using an original teacher-constructed rubric, student journal reflections, as well as the teacher's informal observations.

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BACKGROUND

Recently, there has been increasing interest in innovative ways to embed the arts into academic curricula (Adams & Hiett, 2012; Irwin & O'Donoghue, 2012). For example, some researchers have proposed merging the STEM subjects of science, technology engineering, and math, with the arts, creating a pedagogy known as STEAM, integrating content knowledge and career development skills. Amorino (2008) reported on a three-year study in which teachers explored ways to infuse the arts into classroom activities to develop creative thinking in students. At the end of the study, teachers reported significant growth in students' ability to form original ideas.

Clearly the connection between arts integration and 21st Century skill development may be the most powerful argument for integration of the arts into educational programs. As Dean et al. (2010) suggest, "the arts are among society's most compelling and effective paths for developing 21st Century skills" (p. 2). If this is true, then continued exploration of effective ways to integrate the arts into academic curricula in order to emphasize skills in creativity, collaboration, communication and critical thinking is strongly needed.

CONCLUSIONS

This study illustrated that performing arts integration is an effective tool for building competence in 21st Century skills of communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity.

Currently the education paradigm is moving toward national Common Core standards with focus on rooting students in core content areas for college and career readiness. As schools and districts transition to these new standards, there is a parallel call to return performing arts to their place in the spotlight. Arts integration might prove a most effective way to provide students with wings.

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METHODOLOGY

Participants: 34 fifth grade students (18 boys and 16 girls), 20 of which were GATE-identified (11 boys and 9 girls)

Setting: 6-week performing arts and social studies integration unit in a multiple-subject classroom in Santa Ana USD

Materials: Bad Wolf Press' musical production of *American Revolution* (Fink & Heath, 2003) that included a script, teacher's guide, and an audio CD with songs recorded in two formats—with vocals and instrumental only

Activities:

Week 1: Teacher introduced to the "4 Cs" of 21st Century Learning by providing a definition of each learning skills (Reynolds et al., 2011) and be giving students the opportunity to engage in improvisational acting activities.

Communication: "Sharing thoughts, questions, ideas, and solutions"
✓ *Roll an Emotion*
✓ *Verb Charades*
✓ *Yes/No*

Collaboration: "Working together to reach a goal—putting talent, expertise, and smarts to work"
✓ *Sound Effects*
✓ *Human Machine*

Critical Thinking: "Looking at problems in a new way, linking learning across subjects & disciplines"
✓ *Mirror, Mirror*
✓ *Walk this Way*

Creativity: "Trying new approaches to get things done"
✓ *Hats*
✓ *Hitchhiker*

Week 2: Students focused on the ten songs in the production and worked to create choreography that would enhance the lyrics and communicate meaning to the audience.

Week 3 through Week 5: Students focused on mastering dialogue for the 12 scenes in the play. Classroom seating was rearranged so that students could collaborate with their scene-based performance partners. They also worked on their own costume design by researching historic figures and using critical thinking skills to transform own clothes into colonial attire.

Week 6: Students created staging backdrop and other scenery, participated in dress rehearsals, and performed in two final productions for parents, teachers, and 4th and 5th grade classes.

Data Collection: Student growth was assessed using an original teacher-constructed rubric, student journal reflections, and teacher's informal observations.

RESULTS

Communication:
• **Rubric scores:**
  - Average pre-score: 1.9 (near-amateur level)
  - Average post-score: 3.4 (mid-intern level)
  - Average skill level growth: 1.5 points
• **Student reflections:**
  "I used to think that communication was just talking, but now I see it's other things, too, like faces you make and how you move your body."
• **Teacher observations:**
  - Student actors learned how to use facial expressions and body movements as a communication tool.

Collaboration:
• **Rubric scores:**
  - Average pre-score: 2.1 (amateur level)
  - Average post-score: 3.4 (mid-intern level)
  - Average skill level growth: 1.3 points
• **Student reflections:**
  "We all need to put in our best effort. If one of us doesn't know the lines, then it will mess everybody else who has been working so hard."
• **Teacher observations:**
  - Enthusiastic students collaborated during lunchtime in an impromptu choreography session.

Critical Thinking:
• **Rubric scores:**
  - Average pre-score: 2.1 (amateur level)
  - Average post-score: 3.4 (mid-intern level)
  - Average skill level growth: 1.3 points
• **Student reflections:**
  "I used to think of problem-solving as something we did in math. Now I see we can solve problems everywhere."
• **Teacher observations:**
  - Students designed sets on a budget of $0, using only school supplies, as a result of critical thinking.

Creativity:
• **Rubric scores:**
  - Average pre-score: 2.4 (mid-amateur level)
  - Average post-score: 3.3 (intern level)
  - Average skill level growth: 1.2 points
• **Student reflections:**
  "Well, I guess I've learned that if you can imagine something in your head, then you can usually do it on stage."
• **Teacher observations:**
  - Students used outside of the box thinking to create costumes that reflected the comic relief of their scene.