

The Arts as a Bridge to

Literacy

Arts-centric instruction can bolster student reading and writing.



Hamilton, Ohio's Ridgeway Elementary School is more than 9,000 miles from the Great Barrier Reef. But, with clay, bubble wrap, and some imagination, first-graders there created their own underwater scene.

Inspired by the book *Over in the Ocean: In a Coral Reef*, students crafted clay reef dwellers, adorning recycled-material "trees" dressed in bubble wrap and orange paper to look like coral with their puffer fish and octopuses. This project is just one example of the school's efforts to leverage learning at the nexus of reading and art. Art, says Ridgeway Elementary art teacher Terry Toney, allows students of all ages to take ownership of knowledge, whether it's science, math, or literature. "It gives them a bridge to that information," she says.

A growing body of research supports the notion that art isn't just helpful for learning, but is an essential component to it—specifically for reading. With planning, strong

partnerships, and a little creativity, schools can use the arts to transform the ways students learn to read, write, and think.

Brain-Based Research

Most educators know the general benefits of arts-integrated classrooms, but recent studies are solidifying the ties between literacy and the arts. Work released in 2008 by the Dana Arts and Cognition Consortium uncovered links between music and reading fluency, and visual arts and phonological awareness. Further, research has revealed that literacy requires communication between the vision, hearing, and language centers of the mind. According to a study published in October, 2012 in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, strong student readers have more growth in the bundles of nerves connecting these areas of the brain. And arts activities activate these different brain regions.

Put simply, the arts offer a doorway into the world of a text, says Kurt

Wootton of Brown University's Arts Literacy Project, which has examined links between literacy and the arts since 1998. "[For] a kid that can't see text visually in their mind, that can't feel the text in an emotional way, combining the arts with reading and writing provides the bridge that that kid needs to be able to read fluently," he says.

Deeper Connections

Further, once a student connects with a text, the arts offer a deeper path for that child to demonstrate understanding of it. Merryl Goldberg, artistic director of the DREAM (Developing Reading Education with Arts Methods) Project, says teachers shouldn't be afraid to use arts for assessment. Students who don't perform well on tests, or those struggling to learn English, may have trouble expressing what a character's motivations are. "But if they can act it out, teachers can see that they really understood it," says Goldberg. "The arts end up being this phenomenal tool for assessing kids' understanding."

Goldberg has seen the success of art-immersed literacy instruction first-hand. The grant-funded DREAM initiative trains California third- and fourth-grade teachers in arts/literacy practices, and after its first two years of implementation, language arts test scores of students in these teachers' classrooms increased by 87 points.

The Arts and Two C's

Integrating arts and literacy enriches students' learning beyond test scores. It also boosts students' confidence as writers, discovered Ben Tilley, former principal of Columbia, Missouri's Ridgeway Elementary School. Four years ago, Tilley started boys' writing clubs, where he and educators from the University of Missouri brought such topics as sea monsters and samurai to life through art. They



employed a method called visual thinking strategies to help students visualize a subject before writing about it.

"Our teachers were seeing the carry-over into the classrooms," says Tilley. "The boys who were hesitant writers were so much more confident in their ability to get started, sustain a test, and do a quality job."

In addition, arts activities can deepen students' critical thinking abilities. The arts help children comprehend relationships, nuance, and how problems can have multiple solutions. To prepare students to devise solutions to the complex challenges of the future, Wootton says, we have to teach differently. "The old way of teaching reading isn't going to work anymore," he adds. "Combining print texts with the visual and the performative is the way we're going to learn in the future."



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Ridgeway Elementary, Columbia, Missouri; Ridgeway Elementary, Hamilton, Ohio; Public School 174 – William Sidney Mount, Rego Park, New York; **OPPOSITE PAGE:** Jane Phillips Elementary, Bartlesville, Oklahoma

Art-Smart Solutions

Like the process of creating art itself, activating change in your school—such as shifting to a more arts-centric approach—can be messy. Counter the all-too-familiar challenges (strapped budgets and limitations on teachers' time and energy) with these arts and literacy integration tips from other educators.

Examine your data and devote the time.

Tilley crafted his arts-literacy solution after thoroughly examining his school's data, looking specifically at boys' reading and writing achievement scores. The boys' writing groups would fill that need, and at first, Tilley ran them himself.

"I made the commitment of an hour



Cherry Valley School, Polson, Montana

for each group each week, and some weeks that was difficult. But I said this was important and I made the time for it," he explains.

Guide teachers with mentoring and professional development. "One of the challenges—and it's easily overcome—is that teachers might feel like they're not good at the arts themselves," says Goldberg.

Remind teachers that they don't have to be Picassos to challenge students to paint a scene, and provide teachers with professional development opportunities to explore creativity and the arts. Tilley, for instance, supported teachers who took inservice classes on visual thinking strategies, and then found ways for teachers to share the information with one another.

Wootton, who travels across the country conducting arts professional development for teachers, says educators tell him this kind of workshop is "like a breath of fresh air." Teachers are "frustrated right now," he explains. "Their creativity or their input isn't valued. ... Teachers want spaces where they can talk to each other."

Another option is to seek out artists as mentors. In the DREAM Project, for example, professional artists work

with teachers one-on-one. Goldberg recommends organizing mentoring or coaching for teachers on creativity—in the classroom, if possible.

Set aside planning time. Don't overlook the vital role your art teacher can play. Toney's school has taken on its myriad projects that marry arts and literacy (and science and math, for that matter), because she works in tandem with teachers. Toney keeps track of what students are learning about—from ancient Egypt to Dr. Seuss—and creates complementary projects (sarcophagi and Truffula Trees, respectively) with teachers.

"Offering just a little bit of time for art teachers to talk with classroom teachers is invaluable," she says. "Once teachers get that connection, they'll come to the art teacher asking, 'How can I integrate this?' or 'My students really aren't getting this—how can you help me?'"

Activate your partnerships. Partnerships are a vital tool to counter stretched budgets and schedules. One approach to involve your entire community is to organize a schoolwide reading night. At its family literacy nights, Ohio's Ridgeway Elementary invites its community for art, reading, and science activities with motifs

such as "Read S'more" (camping-themed). "These [events] will pull teachers and community people together to make it happen," says Toney.

Look to local businesses, banks, or community centers for resources, or national initiatives such as Crayola's Champion Creatively Alive Children program for backing. (Both Tilley's and Toney's schools supported their projects

through this grant.)

Tap your community for creative assets, as well. For instance, Ridgeway Elementary in Ohio invites authors, storytellers, and artists to participate in family literacy nights. Local universities, too, can provide an arts framework or training.

At Missouri's Ridgeway Elementary, Tilley looked to the University of Missouri for help once he felt his imagination ran dry. A professor and doctoral student from the school helped him incorporate visual thinking, and graduate students assisted with the clubs.

Arts-Focused Leadership

The most important way a principal can build bridges between arts and literacy is to consistently encourage teachers to keep the arts where they belong: in every lesson they teach. As the experiences of principals like Tilley and art teachers like Toney can attest, creativity is essential to the classroom. Discovery—whether through painting, puppeteering, or molding a menagerie of sea life—primes the canvas for students' reading and writing to take shape. **■**

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