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Arts Integration as Critical Pedagogy

Elizabeth A. Sheehan

Abstract

This chapter discusses arts integration in K-12 education as a form of critical pedagogy, a way to create a “curriculum within the curriculum” that meets the demands of standardized testing while encouraging students to make meaningful connections to the material they are taught. Arts integration allows teachers to use a wide range of art forms to teach core subjects, including those emphasized by state-wide standardized tests. Focusing on an arts integration project for fourth graders at a Title I elementary school in Richmond, Virginia, the chapter describes how the study of African American history in the former capital of the Confederacy was positioned within the required yearlong Virginia History curriculum. Through field trips and with the guidance of their teachers, an architectural historian, a photographer, and a poet, the children created their personal responses to the story of black Richmond and explored their own and their families’ relationship to this story.

“How did they get the jail underground?” This was the question a fourth grader at a Richmond, Virginia, elementary school asked an architectural historian who had just presented a slide show of significant sites in the city’s history, including the notorious Lumpkin’s Slave Jail. The question was excellent in a straightforward way. How

did Lumpkin's Slave Jail, a place where thousands of people were once penned before being sold on the auction block, end up buried so far beneath today's streets? But the question was also a metaphor for how often history, especially history that is uncomfortable to think about, is obscured below the surface of official records, textbooks, and public memory.

The historian was one of a team of visiting artists and specialists who worked with two classes of fourth graders and their teachers in the 2010-2011 school year on a project called "Studying the Past to Embrace the Future." The project was funded by Partners in the Arts (PIA), a program of the University of Richmond's School of Professional & Continuing Studies that since 1994 has provided teacher training in arts integration as well as grants to support arts integration initiatives in regional schools. The Kennedy Center's *ArtsEdge* program defines arts integration as "an approach to teaching in which students construct and demonstrate understanding through an art form" (Kennedy Center ArtsEdge 2013). PIA's definition is broader and more ambitious, seeing arts integration as a cross-curricular, project-based pedagogy that may use several art forms to teach thematically linked content across two or more subjects. These definitions do not reveal the pedagogy's deeper purpose, however. PIA's goal is to help Pre-K-12 educators infuse the curricula with meaningful creative activities that spark students' interest, draw on students' diverse learning styles, and demonstrate the power of collaborative intellectual work. The benefits of arts integration are not confined to students. A study of PIA's impact on several schools in the Richmond area carried out in 2005-2006 showed that training in arts integration renewed teachers' interest in their work, making them more open to new teaching approaches, and helped non-art teachers gain confidence in using the arts to teach their subjects, whether those be math, science, or social studies (Horowitz 2007).

Each summer, PIA offers a course at the University of Richmond's Joan Oates Institute, which provides Pre-K-12 teachers with intensive, hands-on training in arts integration theory and practice. Over a thousand teachers in the greater Richmond area have attended the institute. They and other teachers are encouraged to apply for PIA grants that allow them to implement arts integration projects in their schools. These projects support required course content but also connect two or more subjects that otherwise would be taught in isolation from each other and almost certainly from art classes. "Studying the Past to Embrace the Future" was a project that brought together reading and creative writing, social studies, architectural history, and photography to give African American fourth graders the opportunity not only to create art related to black history in Richmond but also to enter into and engage with this history, from slavery to the civil rights era.

While it is commonplace to speak of the arts as enriching every child's life, PIA's mission goes beyond that. The program seeks to create sustainable change in Pre-K-12 education at a time when standardized curricula and testing have drastically altered the culture of the classroom and forced teachers to comply with policies that discourage inquiry and innovation in an effort to meet standardized criteria. Arts integration is process-oriented rather than product-oriented, relieving teachers and students of the need to create a finished product, to cross another goal line. It is more important that students share a learning journey with their teachers and the visiting artists who work with them.

Here I suggest that arts integration can be a form of critical pedagogy, an approach that education theorist Henry Giroux describes as seeking to "help students develop consciousness of freedom, recognize authoritarian tendencies, and connect knowledge to power and the ability to take constructive action" (2010, 1). In addition

to providing an on- (and beneath-) the-ground examination of an important part of Richmond's history, "Studying the Past to Embrace the Future" invited the fourth graders to understand their relationship to this history, start to think about why things are the way they are today and, perhaps, about how they might be changed.

Policy and Practice

While efforts to standardize curricula and testing in US public education began in the mid-1960s, it has greatly accelerated as a result of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 (US Department of Education 2004), signed by President George W. Bush. The stated purpose of NCLB is to give all students equal opportunity to receive a quality education, a goal no one would question. Quality will be achieved by increasing accountability for students' performance and introducing standardized assessment practices in all states by 2014. Under NCLB, teachers "must use evidence-based practices, not unproven teaching methods that waste time and resources and do not work" (Chapman 2005, 6). But as Mulcahy and Irwin have pointed out, "Federal education policy is virtually closed to scholarly debate. Policy authors rarely submit their findings and scholarship to peer-reviewed journals" (2008, 202). The main architect of NCLB, former Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, a Bush appointee, "has no formal training in education and has never worked as a classroom teacher" (Mulcahy and Irwin 2008, 202).

NCLB's focus is on meeting standards for reading and math, which are also priorities at the state level, whether the state is using its own standards to reach NCLB goals or has adopted the Common Core State Standards, an effort to create national assessment standards that correspond to NCLB but emphasize students' abilities to understand content in depth and in context rather than simply memorize facts (Common Core State Standards Initiative 2012). In 2011, the

Department of Education began to allow states to apply for a waiver that extends the deadline for meeting NCLB national benchmarks from 2014 to 2017 (US Department of Education 2013). The waiver also takes into account the greater challenge students from poorer families may have in meeting these benchmarks. Virginia received the waiver in 2012, relieving some of the time pressure of NCLB, but federal funding of public schools remains linked to the results of state-level standardized testing, a strong incentive for schools to adopt standardization in all subjects to meet national mandates and train students, and teachers, in this prevailing approach to pedagogy.

Public school teachers across the country almost literally race through the school year trying to cover detailed lists of facts and skills upon which student competency is evaluated. Indeed, the prefabricated lessons and unit plans make up what are called “pacing charts.” These charts are intended to help teachers stay on track but also discourage taking advantage of opportunities for useful reflection and deeper understanding. Teachers must teach to the test. In Virginia, these examinations cover the state’s Standards of Learning (SOLs). As with NCLB, the SOLs are meant to ensure a consistent curricula and basis for assessment. Teachers in most public schools have little time to introduce alternative teaching methods, although many try. One regional high school teacher sums up the challenges: “Teachers are too busy to collaborate, parents are too critical to become creative, and there simply are no funds to step outside the small structured world of our curriculum—which is intensely and unforgivingly assessed, with the students losing if we don’t do a good job” (Bingham 2012, 2).

Education theorist Ken Robinson has written, “Creativity depends on interactions between feeling and thinking, and across different disciplinary boundaries and fields of ideas” (2001, 200). This is hardly a revolutionary observation; all of us know the truth of it based on our own experience. However, Robinson’s statement

seems antithetical to the nationally established and enforced policies of public education in the country today. To add to the stress, severe budget cuts in the past few years have resulted in teacher layoffs and increased class size. In this setting, art classes are marginalized, despite NCLB having designated art as a core subject. Especially in struggling schools, art may be viewed as an extra, an expensive add-on to the “real” curriculum. Some full-time art teachers are forced to work in more than one school while part-time art teachers, who may lack certification but often provide the only courses in string instruments or dance, are laid off altogether.

The increased segregation of subjects and erosion of art instruction have led to what has been called a “creativity crisis.” The crisis has implications beyond limiting student opportunities for personal expression. An analysis of national scores on the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking carried out by Kyung-Hee Kim of William & Mary College shows that while IQ scores continue to rise, creativity has steadily decreased in Americans of all ages since 1990 (2011). Kim’s research suggests that students who score lower on standardized tests actually may be more creative than those who scored high. “If we neglect creativity in school because of the structure and testing movement,” says Kim, “creative students cannot breathe, they are suffocated in school—then they become underachievers” (quoted in Zagursky 2011). Ongoing research by Luke Rinne and colleagues at Johns Hopkins University demonstrates that integrating art activities into learning improves students’ long-term retention of content, evident on test scores (Rinne et al. 2011). However, the creativity crisis is also a crisis of low expectations for socioeconomically disadvantaged children and a serious deterrent to their developing skills seen as necessary to compete in the twenty-first century labor market. These skills include critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity.

In his classic 1977 book *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs*, Paul Willis described the social reproduction, generation after generation, of male high school students who rejected school and its useless knowledge, who believed they were permanently disenfranchised from middle-class society, and who could envision no other career prospect than the manual labor their fathers and grandfathers had engaged in. In the United States today, of course, most high school graduates would be lucky to get any kind of job at all. Willis's research fits within a wider stream in critical education theory that since the 1970s has addressed the hidden curriculum, the body of knowledge and rules about social identity and behavior, that is transmitted along with formal course content. As elsewhere, the hidden curriculum in American education helps shape young people's sense of their place in the world as they internalize the message that they are powerless or, less often noted, preordained to exert power over others. To help achieve this end, the hidden curriculum may devalue the history and culture of the most disadvantaged students or else depict these as subordinate to the mainstream narrative of American identity and experience. Giroux writes that a critical pedagogy must provide students "with the skills they will need to locate themselves in history, find their own voices, and provide the convictions and compassion necessary for exercising civic courage" (quoted in Scott 2008, 103). But, learning time and again that their cultural references have no bearing on what counts as knowledge, young people also may learn that there is no alternative to the circumstances of their lives and that they cannot challenge what seems to be fixed and inevitable. Rigid and culturally narrow curricula also undermine teachers' hard-won expertise and make irrelevant the insight they have gained into their students' lives. The teacher's experience and knowledge become part of the problem that standardization must overcome.

These grim circumstances have inspired some educators to call for a complete rejection of the current system, scrapping the curriculum. For most public school teachers, however, even covert discussion among peers about what is wrong with public education can be risky. Observed deviation from required content and approved methods of instruction may lead to formal reprimands and write-ups by school administrators. Consequently, teachers may opt for what seem like SAT-prep strategies for gaming the system, techniques for just passing the damn exam. “Model how to answer constructed response items”; for example, make sure students can tell you, “What are three reasons that. . .” (Tankersley 2011). This technique is certainly effective, for preparing to compete on *Jeopardy* as well, but dispiriting for both teachers and students who must approach education this way, every day, for years on end.

This is not a situation that can be resolved Hollywood movie-style by a brave teacher and his students standing up to the authorities. I recently heard a charismatic art educator, quite Hollywood-style himself, speak to a group of art education students who attended a public university. The guest speaker talked about how he would decide on occasion to take his young students out on informal field trips so they could interact with the community and understand art-making as a collective, reciprocal process. His comments were in response to a question about how public school art teachers could break away from the strictures of standardization, but they were almost useless. All I could think of was liability (Did families know that their students were wandering the streets with this man? Had the school approved these random excursions?) and the frustration such unplanned group absences would have caused other teachers waiting in the building for their next class to show up. As it turned out, the guest speaker had never taught in a public school.

“Points of resistance and alternative approaches to public schooling are difficult to unearth,” Mulcahy and Irwin write (2008, 206). This is “a testament to the effectiveness of the control mechanisms in place. Where they do exist, they often cannot announce their presence” (Mulcahy and Irwin 2008, 206). Arts integration, however, is not a subversion of what exists. It is more like a curriculum within the curriculum, a transparent demonstration of how Pre-K-12 education can be better, even in the age of standardized teaching and testing. Below, I provide examples of how an arts integration curriculum was structured and carried out in “Studying the Past to Embrace the Future.” The project did not have to be disguised within the fourth grade curriculum, which in this state includes Virginia Studies. It allowed teachers and students to trace a rich historical seam embedded in and therefore compatible with the existing curriculum, as long as the “overlying” content was also taught. Arts integration is a method, not a particular body of knowledge, and as such can be used in almost any Pre-K-12 setting where teachers and students are given the time and support to implement these projects.

The Project

The Richmond Public Schools instructional specialist who conceived “Studying the Past to Embrace the Future” had long been interested in how Richmond’s past is represented and misrepresented in statues, monuments, and architecture. At first, she thought the project would be best suited to middle school students, but an elementary school principal convinced her that it would be perfect for her school’s fourth graders, especially given the enthusiasm of that grade’s teachers. Why not insert this project into the state-mandated Virginia Studies curriculum and in doing so give students a deeper, more contextualized, and more interactive learning experience? Entirely by coincidence, the project was carried out during the

same year that Richmond was beginning its commemoration of the Civil War Sesquicentennial, lasting from 2011-2015. The commemoration has particular resonance for Richmond, the former capital of the Confederacy. The events scheduled for the first year included community-based discussions of race that were inclusive and questioning, meant to open up sensitive issues rather than assume that they had been resolved and could be incorporated into a good-to-think-with narrative.

Although a much different place now than it was in 1961, when segregation was in full force, Richmond's Jim Crow discrimination has been replaced by the discrimination of enduring poverty among many of the city's black residents, who in 2011 made up slightly more than half of the population. Poverty has increased in the past thirty years; at present, about 22 percent of the city's residents live below the poverty level, but another 44 percent try to survive just above it. More than 32 percent of school-age children live in poverty (Mooser n.d.). Richmond has the densest concentration of public housing projects south of Washington, DC, most of them clustered in one neighborhood that is only a ten- or fifteen-minute walk from the city center. However, a local highway "wraps around the entire area, successfully positioned as a moat, or wall, which isolates the concentrated urban poverty from the resources of greater Richmond" (Sarvay 2011). Inadequate public transportation makes it difficult for residents to apply for jobs in the shopping centers and chain restaurants west of the city. The city center itself is a dead zone once its workers, many of them civil servants and social service agency employees, go home in the early evening. The liveliest place in the neighborhood after dark may be the emergency room of the nearby public hospital.

The students at the south Richmond public school where "Studying the Past" was implemented are luckier than most children

who live in the projects on the north side of the James River. Their neighborhood has historical continuity and a distinct identity. Many students live in single-family homes, low bungalows with small backyards. The commercial streets are lined with shops; even so, there is no supermarket for miles. The school is a century old and is a landmark in the community, rising graciously above the surrounding houses. Yet its students are far from privileged in socioeconomic terms. More than 47 percent of local households have incomes of less than \$25,000 (DataShare Metro Richmond 2010). At the time that the PIA project was carried out, all of the school's students were eligible for free or reduced-fee lunches. As in other poor neighborhoods, the students' addresses and caretakers may change a few times throughout their years in elementary school. It can be difficult for the school to keep track of who is enrolled, where they live, and what adult is responsible for them. Many of the fourth graders who participated in the PIA project probably had never been to downtown Richmond, where the most important sites associated with the city's black history are located. In living apart from the more depressed sections of Richmond, the children lacked even passing familiarity with these sites and the stories they told.

These were the circumstances—not the culture—of the fourth graders who participated in “Studying the Past to Embrace the Future.” The PIA grant was modest, less than \$7,000, with funds used mainly to pay the visiting artists. The grant also covered the small cost of journals for each child and basic art supplies. Richmond Public Schools contributed ten digital cameras for the students to share as they recorded images of the sites they visited. The project had an exceptionally dedicated group of people collaborating to bring the project to life. First were the two fourth grade teachers, who knew their students well and were willing to do the extra work required to make this a truly meaningful experience. The architectural historian,

a man who had spent years protecting buildings and sites associated with Richmond's black history, was enthusiastic about sharing his knowledge with these children. He did not need an audience of scholars and city planners to feel he was making a difference. The creative writer on the project had been a social worker in Richmond schools, experience that added another dimension to her interactions with students. The other visiting artist was a young photographer. He understood that his role was to provide basic instruction and some onsite guidance but otherwise to encourage the students to explore what was possible with the digital cameras.

Close planning for the project began in the summer of 2010, with everyone involved at the table: the teachers, the visiting artists, the instructional specialist, and, on one occasion, me as well. I offered advice when asked but did not take the lead in any way. As with any collaborative effort, an arts integration project cannot be successful without shared understanding, goals, and commitment among those actually carrying out the project. The group created a schedule for the coming school year: what field trips would take place and when, which lessons or unit plans the visiting artists would be involved in, and what kinds of assignments would allow students to demonstrate the facts they had learned as well as their interpretation of these facts. While following one line of Richmond's history, albeit a line relevant to all of US history, the teachers also had to meet the content goals of the Virginia Studies curriculum, which included the state's role in the American Revolution, the Civil War, Reconstruction, and twentieth- and twenty-first-century Virginia. Where relevant, connections between Virginia Studies and "Studying the Past" would be made, entailing additional work for the teachers, but this addition led to the development of the students' critical thinking skills and ability to make connections across what seemed like separate lessons and topics.

A week after his presentation at the school where he was asked how the slave jail had ended up underground, the historian led the students and their teachers on a walking tour of sites in Shockoe Bottom. They had already seen images of most of these places in the slideshow. Shockoe Bottom is lowland along the north side of the James River that was the city's first commercial area and the center of one of the largest slave trading enterprises in the United States, second only to New Orleans. Enslaved Africans were brought in ships up the James to a landing and then forced to walk to the slave markets in the Bottom. After the importation of slaves was banned in 1807, Richmond's trade was based largely on the resale of slaves to plantations in the Deep South; these people were literally "sent down the river." The historian led the children into a passageway that opened into a lot where slave jails and auction houses once stood. "You are walking in the footsteps of the men, women, and children who were sold as slaves," he said. "The same sky that is over you was over them." As I stood among the students, I had the impression that they were really feeling what it would have been like to be a slave, on that very spot, with no possible escape from the passageway. They touched the crumbling brick wall of a nineteenth-century building next to them and tried to look through its small, filthy windows. Perhaps they were thinking that slaves could be someone their age, not just grown-ups. The lesson, in part, was about the reality and power of slavery in Richmond. But it was also about empathy, the capacity to understand someone else's experience, to enter into that experience and consider its possible connection to yours.

The historian led the children further on to the site of Lumpkin's Slave Jail. Archaeologists have been gradually excavating the jail since 2008, when the building's foundation was uncovered, but a large sign in front of the site has a drawing of what the building

originally looked like. Using a shallow plastic bin filled with sand and some Lego blocks, the historian demonstrated how the small hill behind the jail had been re-graded several times, with the dug-up earth thrown down the slope and covering the base of the building. Erosion had done its work as well, and as the building deteriorated, its fallen pieces had been covered by dirt. Finally, tons of land had been thrown down the hill in the 1950s to create the Richmond-Petersburg Turnpike, which later became part of Interstate 95. Nothing of the jail and its foundation could be seen at this point. The fourth graders gathered around the historian, fascinated as he demonstrated, with a few simple and inexpensive props, how “they”—generations of urban developers—had gotten the jail underground. At the same time, the students were standing in front of its foundation and could see how it was being uncovered and forced back into public consciousness.

Architectural history gave the students a sense of what had been created in the past, but photography gave them the chance to create something themselves. The professional photographer who worked with the students combined the discipline of learning how to use a camera with the freedom to move beyond technical skills. One might expect that at their age and with only simple instruction most of the fourth graders would shoot blurry, incorrectly lit and poorly framed images, but this was not the case. Many of the photos were stunning in their sophistication and technical quality. Some were of symbolic images, such as sections of a mural at the African Burial Ground depicting rows of people in coffins. Some focused on the architectural details of the Hippodrome, Richmond’s historic black theater. Photos of the recently unveiled civil rights memorial near the state capital were shot at angles that added drama to the tableau of eighteen black Virginians who had fought for equal rights. The most compelling photographs, for me, were interior scenes of the

Maggie Walker House, where the first American woman of any race to found a bank had lived and died. Some of these photos conveyed an eerie sense that Maggie Walker had just left the room, that the rocker in the foreground had just stopped rocking. In other photos, the sun filtered through curtains and cast a haze across photos and mementos on the wall, an effect that professional photographers would be happy to achieve. Of course, there also were many photos of the kids just clowning around, cramming into group shots.

In addition to photography, creative writing offered a way for students to respond to the project's lessons, building their language arts skills as they wrote poems, biographical essays, and short stories. There was no "What are three reasons that. . ." in these assignments. At the end of the school year, the visiting writer collected the pieces and put them into a stapled booklet for each child to own. Among the most moving was an essay called "You Can Leave but I'm a-Stay-ing," an imagined account of why a young girl had decided not to join other slaves in running away. The girl would miss her family; she might be caught, and the consequences would be terrible. For now she would stay. The student's essay showed a nuanced understanding of how some enslaved black people, including children, had weighed the pros and cons of escaping. This is an understanding that even now many adults might not consider when thinking about slavery. The creative writer, with her background in social work, also observed or felt something that might have been overlooked in another kind of classroom, where teachers are rushed to get through the day's lessons. She thought that some of the children had become sad as they began to understand the enormity and cruelty of slavery. She advised the teachers to emphasize even more the accomplishments of black Richmonders such as Maggie Walker and the people depicted in the civil rights memorial, some of whom had been high school students, six or seven years older than the fourth graders, who had fought for integrated schools in the 1950s.

It is difficult to measure the academic impact of the students' participation in "Studying the Past to Embrace the Future." For good reason, school systems do not release test scores for individual classes but, instead, cumulative scores for elementary, middle, and high schools. The lead teacher's assessment of the project was realistic but positive. In her report, she noted the great deal of extra work involved in carrying it out, despite the support she and the other fourth-grade teacher had received from the principal. This problem will remain as long as teachers are forced to follow their pacing charts no matter what other opportunities for reflective learning arise in the school day. But the teacher had been pleased to see that the visiting artists were also teachers, that they were at ease interacting with the students, and that they shared responsibility for the success of the project. She also observed that the students made meaningful connections between what they learned from the formal Virginia Studies curriculum and what they learned from the project's parallel curriculum. One example of this was their recognition of the difference between the slave burial ground at Thomas Jefferson's Monticello and the burial ground in Richmond, near Lumpkin's Jail. Jefferson had provided stone markers for the dead; in Richmond, the burial ground is unmarked and anonymous. In fact, at the time that the students visited it, much of the burial ground was covered by a parking lot—yet another example of how history that is uncomfortable to think about is obscured and in this case literally paved over.

Conclusion

Arts integration is not the answer to the problem of excessive faith in and enforcement of Pre-K-12 education's "drill and kill" methods. But I believe that, even in small ways for now, it can be transformational in any school where teachers are willing to work together and are given time to plan and execute a project. This pedagogy is most

needed in public schools that are financially challenged and often located in underserved neighborhoods, where students are less likely to have consistent opportunities to create art. In these schools, art integration projects can give students and teachers the opportunity to collaborate in the acquisition and interpretation of knowledge. In particular, projects that explore history and culture can empower students to claim the authority to interpret their own lives. To quote Giroux once more, “Critical pedagogy is about offering a way of thinking beyond the seemingly natural or inevitable state of things, about challenging ‘common sense.’ It is a mode of intervention” (2010). This is intervention on behalf of students but also intervention that students can bring to the world around them.

On one of their field trips, the fourth graders visited the Reconciliation Statue in Shockoe Bottom. The statue is one of three identical memorials to those who suffered under slavery, in Richmond, in Liverpool, and in Benin, three points of the triangle trade. The historian pointed out to the students the words at the base of the statue: “Acknowledge and forgive the past, embrace the present, shape a future of reconciliation and justice.” “Shaping the future,” he said, “that’s your job.”

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