

EXPLORING

*Tableau
Vivant*

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an
integrated
approach
to
interpretation

One of the biggest challenges on the horizon in education is an increased emphasis on meeting the needs of exceptional students. Historically, we have done a more than adequate job of addressing the needs of students with physical and cognitive challenges, but those students who excel are often left to their own devices (Tomlinson, 1999; Winebrenner, 2000), and it is imperative that teachers develop means of meeting these advanced learners' needs.

Integration of curricular areas is one way to meet the needs of the diverse learners in your classroom more successfully. Integrating concepts from one subject to another enriches the learning environment and encourages students to think within a broader context.

Differentiated Units

Differentiation is teaching designed to be flexible in both content and presentation. This doesn't mean that you write 29 different lesson plans for 29 students in one class. What it does mean is that you are aware that your 29 students learn in different ways, have varying personal interests, and are working from diverse intellectual levels. While it will not be possible to differentiate your entire curriculum, units as a whole should be designed with these differences in mind.

A well-designed differentiated unit is fluid. Not only should it provide numerous instructional approaches and a range of basic information, but it should be flexible, as well. One mark of intelligence is an individual's ability to apply a concept learned in one context to a completely different situation in another context. Use of the arts in schools not only gives students a creative outlet, but also provides infinite opportunities for students to practice these valuable connections. Further reinforcement is facilitated through curricular integration.

Curricular Integration

While integration at the elementary level seems straightforward, moving the philosophy into a secondary school setting is more difficult. In the compartmentalized world of secondary school, teachers have to work more diligently to create opportunities for integration. Collaboration between teachers requires planning and effort. Fortunately, the payback is well worth the effort.

Collaboration and integration can be as simple or as complex as the cooperating teachers want to make it.

An early collaborative opportunity for me came when the choir teacher asked me to put together a slideshow for the spring music concert. He wanted to "jazz up" the concert with the introduction of visuals for their performance of "Prayer of the Children" by Kurt Bestor (2000). The request required little from the music teacher, but provided a rich learning opportunity for my photography students.

A short timeline meant students were unable to take their own slides. Instead, they looked for appropriate images in magazines, an approach that afforded us many new opportunities. We were able to discuss the use of appropriated and manipulated images, as well as copyright issues. Instead of being a compromise, this obstacle provided an opportune teaching moment.

While all students participated by finding images, it was a team of three students who had already completed the assignment in progress who shot the final slides. Assigning the actual photography and layout to this small group of high-ability students offered them a much-needed challenge. In addition to a firm grasp on the technical part of photography, these students understood the power of images to communicate.

The rest of the class continued with the project at hand while I worked with this small group of students to finish the slideshow. They learned to use a copy stand and camera to shoot slides of the selected images. Once the slides were processed, another small group of students ordered them to reflect the poetic lyrics and timbre of the music. Photography students were able to view the final product when the slideshow was coupled with the live performance at the dress rehearsal.

Although students completed different tasks, they all understood that visual images have great power to enrich the verbal images of music.

This project was straightforward, relatively simple, and required little interaction between teachers from different disciplines. Complex collaborations may present a multitude of obstacles, but they also provide wonderful opportunities for in-depth connections across curricular areas.

Tableau Vivant Unit

All too frequently, classroom teachers will use a form of visual art to add another dimension to a project. A history student might create a military poster designed to recruit men to fight in the Civil War, or an English class will use an illustration to demonstrate their understanding of a storyline. By including art in this way, many classroom teachers feel they have "integrated" art into their curriculum. But, true integration occurs only when equal attention is given to art objectives. *Learning* must take place in both arenas before a lesson is fully integrated.

A good example of true integration is an interdisciplinary unit for junior high students we developed using the study of *tableau vivant*. To address the challenge of making sure that all disciplinary objectives were represented within an interdisciplinary unit, teachers from our English and Art Departments created a unit called *Exploring Tableau Vivant*. The creation of this unit was the result of accident, serendipity, and focused intent. My photography classroom faces the boy's locker room at the far north end of our building. For most of the day one semester, I was the sole occupant in that end of the hall. However, for one period a day the

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drama class was my neighbor. Being physically separated from the other art teachers, I sought companionship with the drama teacher. She invited my students into her class one afternoon to photograph drama students as they participated in a reader's theater performance. Later, we reflected on how beneficial this interaction had been. My students had enjoyed shooting the captive audience with their cameras, and her students had experienced acting with the "media" in full force. Although the experience was useful, we both recognized it was not a true integration. Actors in the reader's theater never saw how the photography students interpreted their performance in the finished photographs, and the photography students didn't watch enough of the performance to internalize the essence of the characters whose images they captured.

Later that year, I had the opportunity to attend a presentation by contemporary American artist and photographer Sandy Skoglund. It occurred to me in the course of her presentation that her work represented a professional collaboration of performance art and photography. Here I was, seeing a visual artist design an artwork with a specific storyline, assemble the necessary parts of the installation, and finalize the action by documenting the event photographically. Her words and images set the stage for an educational collaboration.

The goal of our *Exploring Tableau Vivant* collaboration was for students to build their skills of artistic interpretation while developing basic skills in each of three curricular areas: drama, photography, and creative writing. Lesson objectives were designed by each curriculum specialist to meet specific district standards.

By definition, *tableau vivant* is a "living picture." It is a performance or interpretation of an event in front of an audience. The development and documentation of an original tableau was the main focus of the unit. Finding a common reference point for all students was crucial, and Sandy Skoglund was ideal for this purpose. Skoglund's work is a fine model, with equal attention given to creating an environment that tells a story, positioning performers in the environment, and documenting the event photographically. Our project was designed so that students could create their own environment to tell an original story, determine appropriate use of performers within their environment, and find their own interpretation, or viewpoint, from which to document the performance.

Defining Student Activities

All classes had the same introduction to tableau vivant. A comprehensive PowerPoint presentation was used to outline the subject and the project itself. Students from creative writing, drama, and photography classes learned that tableau vivant was an early form of performance art that served as entertainment from the Victorian era to vaudeville, as an artistic model in epic paintings, and as a venue for illustrating morality and religion.

Students enjoyed looking at and talking about several works by Sandy Skoglund. Her uniquely quirky style is especially suited for middle school and junior high students. Discussion of the artworks provided a cognitive challenge to many of our exceptional students, without excluding the more traditional students. Careful facilitation by the teacher provided guided

questions and appropriate prodding to ensure that students maintained a high level of engagement. Eighth-grade students needed little prompting to share how Skoglund's *Revenge of the Goldfish* (1981) brought to mind all the poor, dead, flushed goldfish of their childhood. They shared nightmarish visions when viewing *Squirrels at the Drive In* (1996) and pondered the idea of *Radioactive Cats* (1980) stalking the old folks during a nuclear winter.

Images and information about Sandy Skoglund were easy to access through the Getty Center for Art Education Web site (<http://www.getty.edu/artsednet>). The Getty Web site also includes interpretation questions designed to engage students in a worthwhile discussion. Questions posted at the Web site, such as the following that refer to *Revenge of the Goldfish* (Walker & Barrett, 1996), were useful in moving the discussion forward.

- Does this seem more like a good dream or a nightmare? Does the title help you answer this question?
- Would this be a good image for an ad for an aquarium company? A fish food company? A furniture store?
- Who is in control in *Revenge of the Goldfish*?

In addition to questions relating to various works by Skoglund, the Web site also includes images taken from various viewpoints of the same installation, which provides an ideal model for photography students learning the art of viewpoint and cropping. Using the online examples, students could step inside the artwork and see how a different angle into the work could change the mood.

Viewing and talking about Skoglund's work was an ideal preamble to the unit itself. Direct correlations could be made between what Skoglund did in her work and what we were asking of students. She would often design her tableau around a personal idea. All aspects of the environment were her personal interpretation—the very same goal we had for our students.

Differentiating Instructional Tasks

It was important that we familiarize all students with tasks assigned to each curricular area so they could understand the process from beginning to end. Creative writing students had to understand that their writing would be performed by drama students they may never meet. Their characters needed strong, clearly defined personalities that could be easily translated into a physical persona. Drama students had to be able to find clues in the writing that would direct their performance and then translate those clues into poses and expressions that could be easily captured by the photography students. And, finally, the photography students needed to understand how they could add another dimension to the actors' portrayal of a character through their choice of framing and lighting.

As information was presented to our students, it became obvious that we were asking them to think on a high level, and many of them needed additional instructional support. We approached the unit by defining the highest levels we wanted students to reach and then looked for strategies to help them reach those expectations. The process was fluid, and many changes were instituted to

address differentiated student needs.

Working together, the creative writing and photography teachers introduced the idea of interpretation with a demonstration. Two students were selected and placed next to a stool holding a vase of flowers. One student held a candle, the other a flashlight. Behind them was hung a flowered quilt. Hanging on an adjacent wall was a poster of John Singer Sargent's painting *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose* (1886). We were careful to mimic the positions of the girls in the painting when we posed our volunteer models. Once the scene was set, we asked the class to explain what we were doing. After just a few moments of confusion, several students at once recognized that we had replicated the painting in our own little tableau.

"But, we're not in a garden here," we challenged.

"No, but you have a quilt with flowers that represents the garden!"

Voilà! Interpretation!

Once the scene was set, creative writing and drama students selected an artwork to be used as the basis for their own tableau vivant. Central to the significance of images is their ability to convey meaning (Green, 2000), and this was the essential goal of the project. By creating an original monologue or dialogue (in response to the artwork), students would help the viewer interpret the artwork in a new way. Although most models of tableau vivant available feature a static performance, we allowed students to start in the frozen tableau vivant posture, conduct a short performance, and then end again in the frozen posture.

We modeled the process students would follow by facilitating a discussion of Sargent's *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose*. Students brainstormed story-

lines and made suggestions for a possible dialogue. We encouraged them to examine the art print carefully, directing them to find visual clues that would help build a viable scenario. One student suggested that the print illustrated two flower girls from a wedding who were in trouble because the wedding was starting and they were off playing with matches. It was the garden setting and elegant dresses that suggested the idea of a wedding for that student. Once we felt students understood the process, additional art prints were displayed and students selected one for use as their reference point.

Although we were careful to include prints representing other cultures, art works set in familiar environments were most popular. Edward Hopper was a particular favorite, perhaps because of his mysterious settings that evoke feelings of juvenile isolation, or maybe students were just drawn to the retro look of his work. The selected artworks were tacked to the walls and remained in place as a reference throughout the writing process.

In order to develop adequate dialogue for the project, characters had to be fully developed. Under the direction of the creative writing teacher, students completed worksheets that asked them to describe their characters. They needed to define the age, occupation, and station in life for each character. Research was completed to help establish timely social norms. Students tended to relate to characters from the artworks with contemporary references. The young Victorian woman in one artwork was assigned the job as a babysitter during a historical time when this was not a common practice. A difficult challenge students faced was stepping

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outside their own life and into a foreign environmental context.

It became evident early on that research into the appropriate historical period was essential. The photography teacher joined forces with the creative writing teacher to facilitate research as students used library and Internet resources to explore their art print. Information about the artist was helpful in setting the context. Students found it was necessary to understand at least a little bit about the society in which the painting was completed. At this point, it was obvious that the task we designed was highly challenging. We had indeed designed our lesson to meet the needs of our exceptional students, and now we needed to identify ways to support the traditional students throughout the process. Many students found this research cumbersome and irrelevant. We could look at the situation in two ways: as a failure of our original intent or as an ideal setting for differentiation.

Building the Scaffold for Differentiation

Students unable to make the abstract connection from the art print were directed to other sources as the visual reference. One group of students took a scene from the novel *Where the Red Fern Grows* by Wilson Rawls. By using a book with which they were familiar from English class, they were able to agree on a particular scene for interpretation. However, this didn't give them the necessary visual information. The selected scene was viewed from the film version of *Where the Red Fern Grows* (Dayton & Tokar, 1974), giving students that essential visual reference point from which to draw their personal interpretation. A sin-

gle frame in the movie was used as the opening setting, and students designed their tableau from this visual.

Another group of students needing additional instructional direction used a prewritten script for the cartoon show *Scooby-Doo*. After reading through the script, the group selected a particular scene as a starting point. This group drew on their personal visual bank for their reference (Tomlinson, 2000). Once they established this beginning reference, they used firsthand knowledge of the characters to create original dialogue. Although this group had extensive support (rewriting of a prewritten script), they were able to interpret an idea and create an original tableau. For the tableau vivant format, a simple monologue or dialogue can be as effective as a more complicated one.

Through the PowerPoint presentation, students could see how looking at the same scene from more than one angle changes one's perspective and possibly interpretation of an installation—or, in this instance, tableau vivant. Examining how a scene changes depending on the angle of the viewer directly correlates to making decisions on selecting the most appropriate angle from which to photograph an object. Photography students watched the finished performance and determined the angle that best expressed the emotion or idea they felt was presented in the tableau.

Lessons Learned

Over the course of several months, the project took on a life of its own. Lessons learned early on made differentiation easier as we moved forward. Additional activities were introduced as needed to help

guide student understanding. If students were having trouble creating a storyline, they could switch to a less complicated approach and retell someone else's idea. Some planned activities were discarded when it became apparent that they either didn't fit the overall goal of the unit or were too far removed from the student's area of interest. Keeping a storyline consistent with the time period was beyond the grasp of some students, and an easy solution was to simply overlook the original setting and move the interpretation into a contemporary context. A student's idea of costuming, for example, might be quite different than that of the teacher. The lesson was, after all, about interpretation. Assignment pacing depended on student readiness.

Obstacles cropped up that drastically altered the course of the project itself. Originally, photography students intended to embellish their interpretation of the performance with artist's statements that would accompany a culminating exhibition of student photographs. Unfortunately, this important element had to be set aside because of scheduling conflicts. Photographing the performances occurred too late in the year for students to follow through with the artist statements. Documenting the process was an ideal assignment for second-semester (Photography II) students. Unfortunately, the late performance schedule again prohibited them from being fully involved. A clear articulation of classes within the timeline would have greatly enriched the outcome.

The project was designed to complement all curricular areas. Creative writing students would experience performance art through the development of their monologue or dialogue.

Drama students would use the monologues or dialogues of creative writing students for their performance. Photography students would document the entire process using a digital camera.

However, many of the creative writing students needed a more concrete example from which to build. Students with advanced understanding of the unit's concepts could grasp the idea of using an artwork as a starting point; but, for many other students, using an artwork was too abstract. References were sought through literature, fables and even cartoons. It was necessary in this application, as in all curriculum development, to adjust assignments to address students' varying levels of readiness. Finding appropriate visual references was essential. Drama students had more interest in their performance when given the freedom to write their own monologue or dialogue, so the work produced by the creative writing students didn't get used for the tableau vivant.

Closer collaboration between the creative writing/drama teacher and the photography teacher would have greatly enhanced the process of understanding the artworks and thereby writing an appropriate monologue or dialogue. Training in art history would have streamlined the research process. The best solution would be for the photography teacher to step into the role as teacher in the creative writing class and facilitate this portion of the project. But, conflicting schedules made such collaboration cumbersome at best. Fortunately, use of the more easily accessible formats didn't dilute the basic structure of the tableau itself. Flexibility in the development of the performance simply enhanced student enthusiasm and participation.

Examination of the scene, character development, and interpretation of the performance were still firmly intact.

The Value of the Collaborative Effort

Despite numerous obstacles, the project ultimately succeeded, although not as originally designed. In studying the work of visual artists, creative writing students not only explored the images, but examined the social aspects of the time period, as well. Drama students gained a deeper understanding of character development, set design, and historical performances. Photography students learned firsthand how the camera is an appropriate tool for visual interpretation. All students were exposed to how beautifully performance and the other visual arts complement each other.

Perhaps most important, as teachers, we learned the value of collaboration. Time spent working with students in other areas only served to hone our teaching skills. Cross-curricular teaching (e.g., the photography teacher teaching in a drama class) could have great benefits. In particular, the arts can enhance learning in the core curriculum by emphasizing active engagement, persistence, and risk taking (Deasy, 2003). Schools that make the link between the arts and other curricular areas can help meet the goal of raising overall achievement. Thus, arts teachers should collaborate with classroom teachers in order to reinforce the fundamental thinking and motivational skills that are applicable in one another's subjects (Deasy). In our experience, making art a focus by creating the unit around a visual arts goal provided a rich base for all areas of the

curriculum.

In a 2001 article in *Newsweek*, Seymour Papert, mathematician and cofounder of MIT's artificial intelligence labs, wrote of the emerging face of education. Although he acknowledged the importance of contemporary technology to connect students with the world, he saw something even more important: "The real transformation will occur when we have new ways of organizing people and knowledge. Instead of fragmenting knowledge into 'subjects' and segregating children by age, we will see groups formed around common interests" (p. 64). Interpretation of tableau vivant could be viewed as a "common interest." Each curricular area looked at the problem of interpretation through a specific lens. Students were brought together for the initial introduction, worked independently on specific tasks in each area, and were brought together cognitively for the final interpretation.

Adapting an artwork for a performance required research, interpretation and creativity. A variety of instructional strategies addressed the needs of a diverse group of students. Students had the opportunity to work in several different areas. Interaction and discussion between the classes provided invaluable insight into how different people view ideas in different ways. Infusing flexibility into the tableau format gave students the support they needed to tackle the problem. The ideas introduced in this project were universal. Integrating three areas of the curriculum not only validated each, but strengthened the overall arts program with a rich infusion of differentiation and integration. [GCT](#)

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Appendix A

End-of-the-Year Public Relations Activity Evaluation Form

Name of activity: _____

Date of activity: _____

- What were the objectives of the activity in which you participated and were they met?
- What did the gifted education teacher do to facilitate the completion of the activity?
- What were your impressions of gifted education prior to participation in this activity?
- How did this activity change your opinions of gifted education?
- What could the gifted education program do to improve your opinions of gifted education?
- What suggestions do you have for another collaborative project to complete with the gifted education program?
- What will you do to help support the school's gifted education program next year?