

WHAT WORKS?

Research into Practice

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Research Monograph #53

How can teachers engage their students by fusing together fundamental concepts from visual arts, music and literacy?

Cultivating Student Engagement Through Interactive Art Strategies

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Research Tells Us

- Exposure to and learning through the arts foster creative risk-taking and the growth of imagination.
- Engagement with the arts helps students improve perception, concentration, problem-solving ability and confidence.
- While links between literacy and visual art continue to be debated, there is a robust relationship between literacy and music and numeracy and music.
- Focused instruction and interactive art strategies can help students connect the two art forms and reap the benefits of both.

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Music is heard and art is seen. Or is it? If a photograph were a symphony, what would it sound like? If a song were a painting, what would it look like? Focused exercises that provide students with the opportunities to *hear art* and *see music* can heighten observation skills, facilitate creative risk-taking and greater attentiveness and prepare learners to be more open to learning, thus leading to greater student engagement, achievement and success.

While we know that engaged students are more invested in their learning, the arts remain an underutilized strategy for student engagement. The reality is that many teachers lack confidence teaching both visual arts and music.¹ We feel strongly that the generalist teacher can develop a repertoire of strategies – such as those discussed here – to increase their confidence and provide authentic and sincere arts-based experiences for learners. Such activities also tap into what we know from theories such as multiliteracies and multiple intelligences, which emphasize diverse ways of knowing. To expand upon multiple ways of knowing we offer the concept of “audiation,” or musical ways of knowing, such as thinking in melody and rhythm, rather than in words.²

Research Synopsis of Learning Through the Arts

The literature on arts education suggests exposure to and learning through the arts foster creative risk-taking and the growth of imagination.^{3,4,5} Further, it suggests engagement with the arts helps students improve perception, awareness, concentration, problem-solving ability, confidence, motivation and uniqueness of thought style.⁶

Educators are familiar with this relationship between the arts and imagination. Eisner notes a similar relationship between imagination

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and language: “We cannot know through language what we cannot imagine. The image – visual, tactile, auditory – plays a crucial role in the construction of meaning through the text. Those who cannot imagine cannot read.”⁷ (p. 15) While links between visual art and literacy continue to be debated,⁸ current research suggests that there is a robust relationship between music and literacy.^{9,10,11} In fact, the research suggests that the skills learned in playing an instrument may mirror effective reading, such as chunking, reading for meaning and looking for syntactic cues. That is, students come to understand how pitches converge to form a musical line in much the same way as they come to understand how sounds come together to form words. Studies by Boldue and others into the effects of music on the development of literacy skills “indicate an impact not only from the standpoint of phonological awareness but also from the standpoint of word recognition, word decoding and writing strategies.”¹² (p. 2) Learning to perform music also has long-term, memory-enhancing effects, as the act of memorization is a key aspect of performance.

Visual art and music have much in common in terms of form, colour, content, texture and balance. When a person hears a piece of music, many visual images, memories and recollections may come to mind. The converse, however, is rarely true, perhaps because there are few opportunities to develop either auditory responses to the visual or visual strategies for learning music in schools. Focused instruction and interactive strategies, however, can help students generate an auditory response when looking at an image by teaching the similarities that connect the two art forms.

Application: See with Your Ears, Hear with Your Eyes

The following activity, framed using the Ministry of Education’s *Critical Analysis Process*,¹³ (pp. 24–28) is one that we have used with success in elementary classrooms. It serves to build both teachers’ and learners’ confidence to take creative risks and provides opportunities to explore and use concepts and terminology specific to visual arts and music.

Classroom Arrangement

Select five to six colour reproductions of visual images. Use hard copies (old calendars are great sources) or upload digital copies onto monitors or iPads. The images may share a common medium, era or theme, or they may have nothing in common. To get started, we recommend the following Canadian examples: Tom Tomson’s *Snow Shadows*, Norval Morrisseau’s *Little Bird*, Paul-Émile Borduas’s *Froissement Multicolore*, Mary Pratt’s *Red Currant Jelly* and Betty Goodwin’s *Untitled: Nerves, No. 1*.

Select a piece of music. As with the images, there are no restrictions; the music may be randomly selected, or it may share a common characteristic with the visual selections. This activity is designed to invite personal connections with endless interpretations, so take creative risks in your choices – there are no right or wrong selections! For example, to complement the artworks suggested, you might choose music by a Canadian composer, such as Glenn Gould, R. Murray Schafer or Alexina Louie. We, however, have paired Yanni’s *Rainmaker* with these artworks, to great success.

Create your classroom carousel. Arrange the visual images around the classroom and place chart paper (or other recording device) near each image.

Pedagogical benefits ...

Although the arts are worthy of learning for their own sake, we contend that they are also an exceptional pedagogical tool for fostering student engagement and success across the curriculum.

Implications for Classroom Practice

Do you see what I hear?

While the selected music plays, introduce some of the following activities:

Invite the students to visit each image and determine which piece they feel most strongly connects with the music.

Integrate an examination of relevant music and visual arts terminology into the activity, in order to further extend students' connections as they visit each piece.

- Select grade-specific terms from the Arts curriculum.¹³ (pp. 187–207) For example, introduce visual arts principles of design for each grade level: Grade 1, contrast; Grade 2, repetition and rhythm; Grade 3, variety; Grade 4, emphasis; Grade 5, proportion; and Grade 6, balance.
- From the music curriculum, explore the following elements (applicable to all grade levels): duration, pitch, dynamics and other expressive controls, timbre (tone colour), texture/harmony, and form.
- Give students a terminology handout appropriate to their age and experience. At the beginning of the exercise, read through the definitions and ask students to look and listen for two or three of the elements.

Invite students to record and share their thoughts. Once the music is completed (you may need to play the music more than once), ask students to stand beside the image they felt most strongly connected with the music. Give them time to discuss their opinion with others who connected with the same image, and have them record their responses:

- Peer-to-peer discussion provides both important affirmation (when similar thoughts are shared) and new and critically diverse perspectives (when divergent thoughts are shared). Further, this exercise differentiates the learning environment and empowers students to take responsibility for their own learning.

Debrief the experience. Use this wonderful opportunity to explore and construct meaning of the relevant terminology together as a class.

- As students share their responses to the experience, listen for visual references that can be explored in musical terms. For example, if a student remarks on the texture in a specific painting, ask the class, "Is there texture in the music? How are these textures similar or different?"
- This is the most critical step in the entire process, as literacy and numeracy skills are acquired and expanded during the exploration, discovery, and appreciation of the symbols and terminology specific to both visual art and music.

Continuing the Experience

Visual artists sometimes create artworks inspired by music. Show students Whistler's painting *Nocturne in Blue and Gold*, while playing the music that inspired the work (Chopin's *Opus Nocturnes*); begin a discussion about the relationship between art and music from the artist's perspective.

Likewise, some musical compositions are inspired by works of art. Examples include Don McLean's *Vincent* and Paul Hindemith's *Mathis der Maler*, inspired, respectively, by Van Gogh's *The Starry Night* and Grünewald's *Altarpiece at Isenheim*. To get started, consult the Jackson Symphony's unit plan for classroom teachers.¹⁴

Invite students to select their own music and create a visual work of art to accompany it.

Human benefits ...

Moreover, we believe that the arts provide students with many intangible benefits outside of the curriculum that help to shape and positively influence society. In sum, the arts allow us to cultivate aesthetic experiences that lie at the very heart of who we are as individuals and what we are as a society.

Where we started from?

“Music is heard and art is seen. Or is it? If a photograph were a symphony, what would it sound like? If a song were a painting, what would it look like?”

Seeing Music and Hearing Art Daily

Developing skills and expertise in music and visual art should be an ongoing aspect of classroom life. We encourage teachers to provide daily five-minute visual/auditory exercises, such as those listed below, which could be done as morning arrival seatwork:

- Start each day with a different piece of music playing. Have students draw what they hear. Ask students to close their eyes while they draw.
- Provide a different visual image each day and ask students to consider what the image sounds like. The students may record these thoughts in a journal or discuss them with a partner.
- When musical instruments are available, invite students to make and arrange sounds to match a visual image.
- Challenge students to extend their thinking about existing songs: What would *Yesterday* sound like if it were sung by Usher or played instrumentally by a jazz quartet? Listen to some of the many variations of *Yesterday* and discuss the similarities and differences.
- Play music and have students physically march in time with it. This activity establishes a kinaesthetic link with the music and teaches the concept of tempo.
- Have students watch silent moving images. Encourage students to silently audiate during the screening. Ask students what music they heard in their minds and why? Discuss the relationships between visual stimulus and musical sounds.
- Play a short, moving image sequence multiple times, employing a different musical soundtrack each time (examples are available on YouTube, such as <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8mdmXFGbqfM>). Discuss why and how the changing soundtrack affects the meaning of the visual stimulus.
- Consult visual art (e.g., the National Gallery of Canada; <http://www.gallery.ca/en/>) and music (e.g., the Canadian Music Centre; <http://www.musiccentre.ca/>) websites for inspiration and examples.

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