

Using a Cross-Over Curriculum

Teaching Communication Through Art, Music, and Language Arts

BY JUNE PETER-FIORITO

Late one afternoon, I telephoned home to give my children instructions for a birthday party. I asked my 4-year-old daughter to wear a particular red dress with a smock. She wasn't quite sure which one it was, so she tried to guess. When I added, "Wear the one with a smock and frills," she asked, "The one with 'frinkles'?"

As she coined words to describe her mental image of the dress, she asked, "Is it the one with the 'shrinkles'?" Then, after a pause, "The one with the wrinkles?"

I would describe this working with words and coining of new words as *language arts*; working with word sounds as *music*; and working mentally with colored visual images as *art*.

What does this child-talk have to do with the teaching of literacy and art? Literacy is the ability to read, write, comprehend, and communicate. Similarly, the goal of music and art teachers is to teach students how to read, write, comprehend, and communicate via their respective content areas. Though the symbols used in each content area may differ, music and art have the same goal as language arts: they all seek to communicate.

Lacking the appropriate vocabulary, my daughter coined new words to describe her visual image of the dress. I would imagine that she mentally played with the rhyme patterns and images of the words *frinkle*, *shrinkle*, and *wrinkle*. This to me is how one integrates language arts, music, and art education. More importantly, it illustrates how to teach communication skills using the various subject areas. A child who can hear and see patterns in words and sounds (sound-symbol relationship) in music or in the language arts is able to interpret the message that is being communicated. Both language arts and art education can use the modalities of listening, speaking, reading, writing, viewing, and visually representing for instruction.¹ With proper teaching, *all* students will learn. This article will focus

on why and how to communicate via music, art, and language arts.

What Is the Goal of Education?

"*Effective communication* is the goal of education," said one of my college professors many years ago. This thought stimulates me to look for ways to teach effective communication through the language arts by integrating visual arts, music, drama, and movement. Teachers at all grade levels and in different disciplines can provide this type of education to their students by using a cross-over curriculum. *Integrated* or *Cross-Over Curriculum* refers to the integration into one subject area various learning skills and activities from other subject areas. This can occur in teaching art, music, and language arts.

The impetus for subject integration comes partly from incentives such as America's *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB)² and the perceived need to streamline courses to meet budget constraints in schools. The impact of these recommendations will be, or must be, felt in Seventh-day Adventist schools. Teachers and administrators may even need to rethink how to teach these subjects to meet curricular expectations of government, parents, and students.

What Are the Real Implications for Adventist Schools?

Seventh-day Adventist schools in North America normally teach



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in isolation core subjects such as the language arts, social studies, and mathematics, science, and other skills-based programs such as art, music, computer science, and drama. In schools both large and small, teachers are assigned to teach various subjects at certain grade levels in designated time slots. When schools face lower enrollments and shrinking budgets, music and art classes are often eliminated, or included only when volunteer teachers are available as time and budget permits. What can our school system do to overcome this problem?

There is an answer to this dilemma. Teachers can learn to teach thematically, integrating art and music with core subjects. One way to do this is to integrate the teaching of art and music with language arts. Students benefit when subjects are taught not in isolation but in tandem or in concert. A cross-over curriculum helps bridge the gap between the familiar and the unfamiliar in the minds of struggling students, as well as multicultural students, who need to be able to anchor their thoughts and ideas on familiar objects. Both small multigrade schools and larger schools with single or split-grade contexts can benefit from such a program.

According to Kay Cowan and Peggy Albers, “The link between the arts and literacy is commanding more attention in recent literacy research. . . . The early connections between art and reading forwarded by Eisner (1978) and Goodman (1978), respectively, precipitated further research in semiotic meaning making through transmediation, recasting meaning from written language to another sign system (e.g., music, art, math, drama), as a way to examine literacy in more complex ways.”²³

This semiotic relationship can enhance Adventist education. The idea of using a cross-over curriculum should not be new to multigrade teachers, many of whom often use such approaches to cover the content. Art, music, and the language arts are three excellent avenues to teach expression and communication skills using this semiotic relationship.

Art Education

In art, as in other subjects, teaching students to communicate is the goal. How such communication takes place and what tools are used in teaching these skills influences the approaches employed. H. L. Sundstrom puts it this way: “Art in itself is a form of communication, an extension of the person who has done the art, a way of communicating that which is within to those who are on the outside, a way of reaching inside to bring out that which is hidden to be revealed, a way to express much more in depth than with the limits of vision for written communication by using senses such as COLOR, SOUND, TOUCH, and even TASTE.”²⁴

Christine Goodheart in her article “A Case for the Arts in Education” refers to the arts as “a central part of the human experience,”²⁵ adding that art education helps develop the imagination, self-confidence, and self-discipline, and helps make schools more vibrant places for students. Elliot Eisner elaborates on this notion when he says “neither words nor numbers define the limits of our cognition; we know more than we can tell . . . we need art forms to say what literal language cannot say.”²⁶

Music Education

Music education has goals similar to those of art classes. Effective communication in the music classroom can take many forms. The teacher’s goal is to use music to teach students how to communicate through the many avenues afforded by music education. Joel Price in his article “Making a Musical Education” says, “Music is an integral part of most, if not all, groups of people. It is one of the longest lasting traditions that are passed from generation to genera-



tion.”²⁷ Schools can extend this tradition by teaching students to communicate through different forms of music.

Children exposed early in their lives to music will be able to analyze complex patterns, movement, rhythm, and beat. However, students may need to learn the basic rudiments of music, such as counting the beats and keeping to the rhythm in order to play a tune. Whether music is arranged in musical notation or is learned as a tune, the message is clear: It can be manipulated to construct complex patterns in students’ minds that are interpreted as figures and shapes in art, or through musical notation, or picturesque words in the language arts. How is this possible?

Citing a 1994 research report by the American Psychological Association, Dee Dickinson says, “music lessons, and even simply listening to music, can enhance spatial reasoning performance” and that “dramatic music stimulates the writing of poetry or short stories in a creative writing class.”²⁸ Dickinson quotes the U.S. National

Child Welfare Association's claim that "through music, a child enters a world of beauty, expresses his/her inmost self, tastes the joy of creating, widens his/her sympathies, develops the mind, soothes and refines the spirit, and adds grace to the body."⁹

Language-Arts Education

Language arts offers another mode of communication to students. The National Council of Teachers of English cites seven characteristics of competent language learners: "personal expression, aesthetic appreciation, collaborative exploration, strategic language use, creative communication, reflective interpretation, and thoughtful application."¹⁰ These are vital modes for art and music education.

Rebecca Brown cites a book, *Metro: Journeys in Creative Writing* in which Wendy Bishop, Katherine Haake, and Hans Ostrom suggest innovative ways to use a cross-over curriculum. Brown says: "the editors write about using other art forms as inspiration for creating texts." In their list of suggestions, they propose different writing prompts such as "write a poem 'about' a work of art," "write a story in which the figure in a painting 'comes alive,'" "write a collage of responses written as you go through a museum exhibit," "write a poem about a public statue."¹¹ It is up to the teacher to use creativity and imagination to present the cross-over curriculum effectively.

How can an elementary teacher meet state or provincial requirements for teaching music, art, and the language arts? The Washington State Arts Commission states: "The arts are languages that all people speak—that cut across racial, cultural, social, educational, and economic barriers. They are symbol systems as important as letters and numbers. They integrate mind, body, and spirit and provide opportunities for self-expression, making it possible for abstractions to become more understandable as they take concrete form in the visual arts, music, dance and drama."¹²

We as Adventist educators need to use the arts to make learning come alive for our students. We need to stimulate our students' brains via art, music, and the language arts. One way to do this

is through the use of Howard Gardner's research, which suggests that students learn through different styles, beyond just the logical/mathematical and the verbal approaches.¹³

Using a Cross-Over Curriculum Approach

Claudia Cornett in her article "Arts-Based Read-Alouds" describes how integration should take place:

"Arts-based literacy advocates are quick to caution that meaningful use of the arts is the goal—not superficial coloring sheets, ready-made 'piggyback' songs, mimicked dance movements, or memorized story lines. Meaningful arts integration happens in a classroom culture that values diversity, surprise, creative problem solving, risk taking, and experimentation. Also essential to meaningful use is the development of arts techniques and an arts knowledge base that facilitate the use of a wide range of materials and skills to express ideas and feelings."¹⁴

Integration of music, art, and the language arts in the elementary classroom should be carefully planned so that students acquire the critical thinking skills of application, reflection, and transfer of knowledge. These three areas are directed by specific objectives mandated by state or provincial governments. A teacher who attempts to integrate these subjects should first make a conceptual map, matching specific curricular objectives with learning activities that are both hierarchical and developmentally appropriate. Then, during assessment, students who struggle to respond to the verbal instruction and examples given by the teacher can be allowed to respond via alternate means such as art, poetry, or music. Joel Price in his article "Making a Musical Education," extends this motif further:

"Music and language arts share a similarity in language. In both we find particular structures that are used in the construction of each. An example would be a poem with A, B, A, B, A, C, A construction. A poem of this structure is very closely related to a traditional song form: chorus, verse, chorus, verse, chorus, bridge, chorus. Lyrics to songs are often considered poetry set to song. Surely there are a plentitude of ways to connect music to language arts."¹⁵

Thomas Armstrong in his article "Making the Words Roar" proposes that teachers should "turn [their] attention to developing vibrant reading programs that capitalize on what students already bring into the classroom: their capacity to move, gesture, visualize, draw, sing, chant, analyze, and celebrate nature."¹⁶ The North American Division Office of Education has taken steps to do exactly this. Elementary teachers are now being introduced to the new Seventh-day Adventist Reading Series, *Pathways*,¹⁷ which has opened up new opportunities for cross-over/thematic curricular planning.

Here's my personal experience in attempting to incorporate crossover-curricular teaching, using two new chapters in my Elementary Language Arts Methods class entitled "Viewing and Visually Represent-



ing” and “The Language Arts and the Fine Arts.”¹⁸ These chapters have specialized vocabulary and suggestions for incorporating them into the lesson. I mulled over how to give my pre-service teachers hands-on and meaningful learning experiences based on these chapters. I decided to have them read the chapters before class and note all the new vocabulary that defined the sentiments of the chapters. Next, I quickly reviewed the vocabulary and their function in the settings described. Then I introduced the students to a reader’s theatre script, *The Magic Brocade—A Chinese Tale*.¹⁹ (In our language arts class, I had already presented the techniques for performing a reader’s theatre.) I divided the class into two groups and had them incorporate the suggestions given in the chapters as they performed the reader’s theatre. The students were instructed to integrate music, art, and drama into the reader’s theatre. I provided them with the script and an actual piece of Chinese brocade, and they went off into their groups to practice for their presentation. What a joy it was to sit back and enjoy their ingenuity!

Jane²⁰ played a melodic Chinese tune on her flute as the scenes changed. She set the tone for the entire presentation. John brought out the paint brushes and began adding strokes of bright color on the flip-chart paper as he painted the backdrop for the script. Mary, the Chinese princess, dressed in regal attire, looked like a real princess! James was the prince. He strode in majestically in his royal robe as the princess waltzed onto the stage. Martha played the part of the brocade weaver. Henry was the interpreter. He carefully enunciated the words as he read from the script. The rest of the students played various parts, doubled up on parts, or performed in echoing chants/choruses. Back and forth they moved across the improvised stage, with a gleam of fulfillment in their eyes.

This is a new approach to teaching the language arts in concert with art, drama, and music: a cross-over approach with a new meaning for me. I invite you to try it, too! ✍️



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