Integrated Curriculum: What Benefit?

THOMAS M. BREWER

The conflict between intrinsic and instrumental or integrated curricular approaches has become a dominant issue in art education that deserves attention from many perspectives. In my view, questions need to be asked about the benefits, validity, and implications of integrated teaching. In this article, I first provide a critical history and a two-part review of literature help address these questions by comparing intrinsic and instrumental values in art education and examining related research. This review is followed by an illustration of how integrated practices have had, directly or indirectly, knowingly or unknowingly, a major and not altogether positive impact on our schools and on educational policy.

First, it is important in this article to formally define some of the terms most frequently in this debate. First, Webster’s (4th edition, 2000) defines instrumental as “serving as a means for” and “being helpful in bringing something about.” Accordingly, instrumental art instruction serves as a means to, and a help in, bringing about knowledge in another academic subject. Webster’s (2000) defines integrate as “adding or bringing two things together, to mix, blend or combine”; correlate means “to mutually relate, to interact, or show the reciprocal relationship between two things.” Integrated art curriculum thus blends or combines art instruction with another subject area, and correlated art shows the mutual relationships between art and another subject such as math. More recently, the term interdisciplinary is used to connotate combining or joining two or more disciplines or branches of learning. Interdisciplinary art curriculum can thus combine more than two areas of learning either in or out of various arts disciplines.

Although integrated and correlated curricula can provide positive learning circumstances, the problem is that, in practicality these approaches often result in classes that deny visual art its value as a distinct discipline. Often the operational definitions for these curricular concepts may in fact be code words for devaluation. “Integrated” curriculum often becomes more and more “instrumental,” serving as a means to bring about greater knowledge in history or social studies. Art produced under this rubric tends to be merely illustrative or a form of untutored child art devoid of instruction in aesthetic issues. When integrated art is used in this fashion, student learning in the arts does not fulfill requirements set forth by national or state standards for visual arts. An overemphasis on integration used instrumentally may in fact subvert those standards unless art is studied as a distinct discipline.

It is important to recognize that integration is an old idea, and that as long ago as Dewey’s day correlated curricular approaches were used. The pioneer art educator Victor D’Amico (1942) said he did not mind teaching art in correlation with other subjects as long as it was not placed in a subordinate role; in his view, the art part of a lesson could even come first. In discussing art activities in the early 1930s, Eisner (1997) states that when they frequently came in the form of correlated or integrated projects. This meant that classroom teachers were urged to use art in conjunction with social studies or dramatics and so forth. The instructional example that Eisner cites was of students’ building a medieval fortress out of cardboard or clay to illustrate rather than simply to discuss the fort. Efland (1991) adds that a prominent characteristic of reconstructionist art education in the 1930s was an emphasis on integrating subject matter. The art teacher would be expected to relate art instruction to other fields or disciplines like math, science, history, and so forth. Art teachers would work with other teachers to breakdown the barriers that fragment curriculum.

After World War II, however, Efland says, integrated art curriculum was criticized because it was thought that specific art study had become a servant to other subjects rather than being valued in its own right. Shortages of well-trained teachers and of in-school plan-
ning time adversely affected the quality of integrated instruction. More recently, Elliot Eisner (1998a, 1998b) has sharpened the distinction between intrinsic and integrated philosophies by addressing what lessons students learn through their art studies and experiences and then by examining what transfer, if any, these may have to learning in other academic areas. Debate over the use and function of integrated art curriculum thus continues to be a hot topic into the twenty-first century.

The present context is, however, different than in the past and much more complex today than it was fifty years ago. There appears to be ever-growing political and administrative emphasis on integrated curricular approaches in public schools. Some of these may be good, but often others are used instrumentally and tend to diminish or devalue art instruction. Many authors have addressed this problem over the past ten years, and they consistently recommend that more research be conducted on instrumental or integrated learning in art education before it is allowed to become the norm. Nevertheless, although there are still a number of significant gaps and unanswered questions about domain-specific and intrinsic learning in art education, these concerns are overshadowed and apparently have less educational and political currency than the trendy concern with integrated approaches.

The conclusions of a study by Walker and Schaffarzick (1981) have particularly significant implications for integrated instruction in today’s high-stakes, reform-driven educational environment. They examined twenty-six studies that compared innovative and traditional curricula. They found that different curricula produce different patterns of achievement, not necessarily better overall achievement. In short, new curriculum changes the content and emphasis of what is taught, not necessarily student achievement.

**The Intrinsic Approach**

In the early 1990s Efland and Eisner stressed the importance of maintaining disciplinary distinctions. At the conclusion of *A History of Art Education*, Efland (1990) says that we often talk in terms of balance among the arts, sciences, and humanities, but he warns that their differences should be kept in mind: The arts, he says, are affective and participatory, celebrating the life of feeling and imagination; science is objective, detached, precise, and rational; and the humanities deal with the analysis of moral actions. He concludes by saying that each family of study has its own essential forms of cognition, and therefore in general education the arts have a distinct role to play. In a similar fashion, while discussing what art taught him about education, Eisner (1991) says different forms of art speak to different aspects of our nature, aesthetic experience, and our intellect. He says this lesson has direct curricular and educational policy implications when selecting what knowledge is most worth knowing.

When I first read those passages, I wondered why these two eminent scholars would take the time and make the effort to make these distinctions. Today’s persistent curricular and policy concerns about the role of visual art education in general education have made me understand why these concerns deserve more attention than ever. Without clarity about the intrinsic value of the arts, arts educators proceed at their own peril.

Although Eisner (1991) addresses distinctions among visual art, music, dance, and theater, he extends similar differentiation to arts curriculum and other academic subjects. He also makes a persuasive critical argument about the pros and cons of integrated curriculum in an article entitled “Does Experience in the Arts Boost Academic Achievement?” (1998b). In that paper, and in a special seminar for Research in Art Education at the 1998 National Art Education Association conference, Eisner examined claims about the impact of arts learning on other subject areas in the curriculum. Problems begin to arise, he says, when the values for which the arts are prized in schools are applied to a version of the educational basics that has little or nothing to do with the arts.

---

**All the talk about integrated curriculum representing “thinking outside the box” may now be putting art education in the box.**

He believes that to use the arts primarily to teach what is not truly distinctive about the arts is to undermine the justification for the arts in our schools.

Eisner identified three levels or tiers to which art education might be expected to make a contribution: The first, arts-based outcomes of art education, is specific to art. The second, arts-related outcomes of arts education, represents aesthetic features in the general education environment. The third, ancillary outcomes of art education, includes transfer skills in perception, creation, and comprehension of non-arts tasks. In examining the research basis for claims about the effects of art experiences on academic achievement, Eisner found very few studies that held up under serious academic review. He concluded that before claims can be made, especially about transfer, more and better research needs to be done. “We do the arts no service when we try to make their case by touting their contributions to other fields. When such contributions become priorities, the arts become handmaidens to ends that are not distinctly artistic and in the process undermine the value of art’s unique contribution to the education of the young” (15).
Ellen Winner of Harvard Project Zero has also examined and commented on the current state of instrumental arguments and the research supporting them. In her report for the *Reviewing Education and the Arts Project* (REAP) she declares, “Let’s stop justifying the arts instrumentally” (4). REAP conducted ten meta-analyses on 188 reports investigating the relationship of one or more arts areas to one or more academic areas. The researchers concluded that three areas had reliable causal links: temporal and spatial reasoning (music) and verbal skills (theatre). Seven areas showed no reliable causal link. The researchers concluded that these mixed findings make it clear that, even when arts programs do add value to non-arts academic outcomes, it is dangerous to justify arts education by secondary, nonarts effects. Winner uses what could be considered an existential rationale for arts education by saying that art is a time-honored way of learning, knowing, and expressing and is therefore just as important as science. She concluded by calling for more research.

I recently made an effort to take a closer and more focused look at integrated learning in visual art education (2002). I examined how integrated curriculum and the absence or presence of general art instruction affected fifth-grade students’ drawing performance, art knowledge, and aesthetic preferences. Preliminary findings show that the integrated and general art curricula produce equivalent results. The absence of art instruction appears to have a detrimental effect on fifth-grade girls’ drawing performance. Other than the gender dynamic for the “no instruction” group, the only other significant achievement factor in the study was whether students did artwork at home (85 percent did).

Several questions pertinent to today’s heavy emphasis on integrated arts approaches were also asked some fifteen years ago by Anna Kindler (1987), who conducted a review of literature examining rationales, research, and examples of unified programs that integrate the teaching of the arts with other subjects in self-contained elementary classrooms. She said that it is certainly possible to create lessons in which art and another subject can be combined with benefits to both. Nevertheless, she emphasized that there may in fact be situations when concentrating on only one art domain provides students with a more substantial and profound aesthetic experience.

None of the examples of integrated programs in Kindler’s article provided clear evidence that the integration of the arts with other subjects benefited the arts. Kindler stressed that claims that particular integrated programs have proven successful have not been confirmed by any systematic analysis and thus remain conclusions reached by those who were personally involved in the development of the programs. Kindler recommended that those concerned with integrated and unified arts curriculum planning not be satisfied with intuition-based evaluations. Rather, they should direct their efforts toward the implementation of more scientific methods for evaluation and development based on specific goals for student learning.

Like Eisner, Winner, and Kindler, Hamblen (1997) states that research in arts education does not indicate that instrumental outcomes should be the only rationale for all arts programs. Rather, linkages between learning in the arts and learning in other subjects “are perhaps strongest and instrumental instruction most justifiable when an art program exists in its own right, when there is a specific need for instrumental outcomes, and when there is a conscientious effort to facilitate transfer” (31).

There is another argument in favor of an intrinsic approach: the differences among arts disciplines themselves. Samuel Hope (1997) said we must make distinctions between the individual arts disciplines and “the arts” as a group, because each discipline has its own language, vocabulary, history, body of work, and artistic procedures. There are also differences between art at the center of the school curriculum and art as a means to other ends. If the arts are not studied for their own content and ways of knowing, if they are always studied as humanities disciplines or as supports to other disciplines, the specific knowledge and skills associated with artistic modes of thought will not be present in a student’s education. According to Hope, too many calls for integrated or interdisciplinary study ignore the crucial point that each discipline has its own core and connections. Although they may share some common principles, Hope says, one discipline does not become or substitute for another, even in combination.

The devaluation of intrinsic arts education has dangerous corollaries. Take the following curriculum-related statement that appears in the introduction to the NEA’s *Schools, Communities, and the Arts*: “Each arts discipline has a unique history, language, and body of knowledge, but school activities tend to be limited to performance or production” (NEA 1995, 2). This sentiment has echoed throughout visual arts education literature for thirty-five years and is no less puzzling now than it has ever been. What does the NEA believe is so limiting about students performing and producing? Rather than bemoaning this fact, why not acknowledge that performance and production are very important to students and teachers? However, arts education policymakers—even at the highest levels—too often offer every possible curricular recommendation, including instrumental or integrated objectives, rather than support the value of learning by producing. A related irony of the past twenty years is that while we have prominent intellectual efforts shaping research and expanding curriculum in art education, studio instruction has barely moved beyond developmental approaches to providing actual instruction—this during a time when research has taught us to expect more of our young children artistically. Research is one thing, however; genuine leadership another.

**Instrumental Approaches**

My interest in the field’s move toward integrated curriculum and its possible policy implications began seven years ago. Over this period, I have gathered educational writings and related research to conduct a complete
review of what the field has to say about integrated curriculum approaches. The 479 articles that I have found can be organized into three categories: theory or rationale, practice and programs, and research. Although this examination is fairly complete, there will inevitably be some oversights and omissions. In general throughout the articles we see a disturbing pattern: The value of art in its own right is diminished.

Approximately 16 percent of all materials on integrated arts is theoretical. Generally speaking, integration is supported by theorists from most disciplines. Bickley-Green (1995) states that “general methods of reasoning are the same in art as in math” (10). It is somewhat doubtful, however, that math and art reasoning are actually the same or that in the reality of the classroom integration equitably enhances student art learning. The attempt to represent integrated learning as holistic or as a gestalt seems misconceived.

Integrated programs and practices are the focus of most of the literature. Almost 82 percent of total literature reviewed in this section related to programming and curriculum. Three hundred eighty-three such program reports were identified through ERIC documents searches from 1988 to the present. (Astoundingly, only eleven program articles were found prior to 1988; this certainly speaks to the explosion of integrated practices over the past decade.) Altogether, there were 394 identified program reports. As mentioned earlier, Hope pointed out that most of these studies used visual art lessons as a vehicle for learning other academic disciplines. Studies primarily focused on learning objectives and content in other subjects first, rather than on art.

On the whole, research regarding basic art learning and its integration is still severely lacking. Research literature addressing visual arts and integration constitutes less than 2 percent of all literature reviewed. The 1997 NAEP study is one of the few that specifically emphasizes visual arts learning. Two of the most important NAEP findings indicated that students who had taken an art class had higher average creating scores than students who had not or were not. It was also found that in-school arts activity is often positively associated with arts achievement for both responding and creating.

Nevertheless, it is important to realize that these findings of positive association between art classes and academic achievement do not mean significant gains were found; few were. Although it is ethically acceptable to write about and discuss these positive trends, such discussions, if scholarly, should be limited and presented as purely speculative, not conclusive. More importantly, one wonders what these findings really tell us about visual arts instruction in our nation’s schools. For example, in a third NAEP finding, students who reported illustrating their work in other classes out-performed those who did not. The NAEP study says this underlines the value of integrated or interdisciplinary curriculum and concludes by saying, “this result is interesting in light of recent ideas about the possible value of cross-discipline activities for educational achievement” (112).

First, note well the word “ideas” was used rather than “research.” More importantly, another nonsignificant finding has been cited—this time to support and promote a particular curricular approach. All that this finding might really mean for student achievement is that drawing is drawing, and practice is practice, whether it is with a trained art specialist or not.

There are other aspects of the NAEP report worth noting. In the NAEP report, 59 percent of all students reported that they made artwork at home and their scores were positively associated compared to the 34 percent who did not. Moreover, those eighth grade students who worked on their own at home achieved as well as those who drew or painted once a week and those who illustrated their work in other subjects. The NAEP report did not emphasize this finding, but it appears to suggest that by the time students reach eighth grade, their inherent artistic drive may still be the most important element of their art achievement, no matter what we do with or to them educationally.

Many scholars and researchers from various disciplines have examined and have come to support integrated teaching and learning practices. Two of the most frequently associated integrated subject areas are the arts and language development and the arts and mathematics. Colbert (1984) says that the parallel of language and graphic representation has long interested developmental psychologists and art educators—although, one notes, parallel and integration are two quite different concepts. Findings from the Colbert study indicate that drawing from observation is an aid to the retention of visual information and has possible applications in improving retention of visual information in other disciplines as well. Willot (1992) said that, “based on the results of his study, the strategy of using art as a vehicle for teaching selected concepts appears to be an appropriate one to use to enhance learning” (13). Forseth (1980) further claimed that “the use of art activities that are designed to reinforce mathematical concepts seems to affect children’s attitude toward mathematics” (26).

Studies from the National Arts Education Research Center (1991) were considered as early indications of success in defining how the arts contribute to learning across the curriculum in secondary schools. Some of the preliminary findings reported were (a) that test scores in academic subjects improve when the arts are used to illuminate learning in mathematics and social studies as well as to develop communication skills; (b) that studying the arts of different cultures and periods strongly contributes to enabling students to understand and value other peoples, often while increasing student self-esteem; and (c) that studying the arts can enhance critical thinking and problem-solving, especially for students not thought capable of creating and understanding higher-level ideas and concepts.

Burton, Horowitz, and Abeles (1999) conducted a study to determine if cognitive skills developed through arts learning can be applied beneficially in other subject domains. They included not only the visual arts, but also music, the-
reported on programs, 16 percent of the literature focused on intrinsic qualities and values of art learning and the need for more support. These were interesting examples but provided no substantive credibility to the overall study.

In their study, Burton, Horowitz, and Abeles assumed that higher-order levels of thinking are used through the process of creating. They suggest that transfer is only one benefit of arts learning and that research has not been able to determine specifically how it occurs. In fact, Burton and her colleagues concluded that transfer learning, while effective and important, is not the only teaching approach necessary to maximize learning across disciplines. They suggested a constellation approach to teaching, encompassing a variety of methods to allow for student development in multiple levels of thinking.

Implications

What are the implications of this two-part review of the literature for visual arts education? The first part featured several writers emphasizing the core intrinsic qualities and values of art learning and the need for more supporting research to determine exactly what these are. The second part presented theory, practice, and research that claims that use of visual arts can illuminate learning in other subject areas. It is not at all surprising to find in the second part that 82 percent of the literature reported on programs, 16 percent advanced a theory, and less than 2 percent focused on research. We in education tend to do and promote what we feel is best without investigating results or ramifications.

Where will the current integrated emphasis take us? Consider for a moment the educational reform frenzy typified by a proposal of the Florida Department of Education to help improve teacher education in the Florida state university system (Florida Department of Education Teacher Preparation Rule Change Proposal, 2000). Although it would prescriptively have dictated core course requirements for all preservice teachers, the major arts education novelty of the proposal was a by-product of our field’s overemphasis on integration and the misinformation that has provided policymakers. The department recommendation was to combine art, music, and physical education into one course for elementary education majors. If enforced, it would have been a disaster for future elementary education teachers and their students.

First, it is important to realize that there are Florida State Sunshine Standards specifically for the visual arts, which would have been completely undermined by the provision. Moreover, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) (1998) recommends that elementary education candidates, whether they work alone, with arts specialist teachers, or with other qualified arts professionals, have the training, knowledge, and skills to communicate at a basic level in dance, music, theater, and the visual arts. This is not to say that classroom teachers equal or should replace art specialists but that the instruction that they provide should be of substance. They should be able to do this within the various art disciplines and between the arts and other areas. Within refers to first studying the arts for their intrinsic values, thereby setting the stage for authentic connections that can exist between the arts and other subjects. This is no small task. Any educational reform that does not first maintain the integrity of each art discipline, including preparation of elementary classroom teachers in focusing and developing knowledge and skills in art, will fail.

Despite the rhetoric from the National Endowment for the Arts (1995), the Kennedy Center, and various state arts organizations, there are still many educators and arts associations in thousands of teachers who believe that the integrity of domain-specific visual art learning is important. Many believe that art education can teach children to learn, think, communicate, and represent in ways not possible in other subject areas. Future art specialists and elementary classroom teachers need the educational background to teach and provide their students with a quality authentic art learning experience.

What are these authentic art experiences for elementary teachers and students? For teachers, it is discovering that their own art learning process is not very different from that of their students. For the most part, their last art experience was in elementary school, and that remains their level of knowledge. As they realize there are skills and techniques that allow everyone to progress artistically, they learn that art is not for just a talented few; it is not magic, and it can be taught. They also learn to respond, reflect, and write about historical and contemporary art, thereby expanding their appreciation of art. Eliminating such educational opportunity for future elementary classroom teachers and their students would be a disaster.

The field of art education and all levels of teacher preparation are progressively feeling the implications of an overemphasis on integrated curriculum. In the Florida teacher preparation proposal, we see an example of how political and administrative issues rather than student learning considerations become a driving force for changing the educational backgrounds of future elementary classroom teachers in one of the largest states. These same kinds of educational policies are being proposed in states, districts, and school across the country, not just in Florida.

Another major policy offshoot from this type of proposal is the potential for
replacing elementary art, music, and physical education specialists with elementary classroom teachers who receive their teacher preparation from a methods course. The loss of these teaching positions can become a reality when states and school districts face tough economic times. Fortunately, because of statewide objections from art, music, and physical education supporters, the Florida proposal for the combined elementary education methods course was abandoned. Who knows, however, what rules, mandates, or regulations the next legislative session or state board of education meeting might bring?

Conclusions

One of the main points distilled from this analysis is that—although integrated, correlated, and interdisciplinary art instruction can provide positive learning circumstances—more often these approaches result in instrumental functions for art learning. This instrumental function diminishes disciplinary and academic integrity and brings us up far short of the rigor set forth in state and national standards for visual arts. Moreover, new curriculum may often be more a matter of content selection, political interests, or administratively expedient policy than about improving student achievement. All the pervasive rhetoric from the NEA, the NAEP report, and various art advocacy consortia to the contrary, there remains a primary role for intrinsic disciplinary art study in our nation’s schools. There is also a clear need for more research on intrinsic and integrated approaches and their relationships. Like Eisner (1998b) and Winner (2000), we see that by justifying art based on support for other disciplines we may have inadvertently produced a negative policy environment for art education.

All the talk over the past ten years by educators at all levels about integrated curriculum representing “thinking outside the box” may now be putting art education in the box. Such talk has inadvertently provided policymakers and administrators with a justification for collapsing and combining three teaching or supervisory positions into one. Worse, it has provided a rationale for diminishing visual arts as a discipline in current and future educational reform.

References


Burton, Judith, Roth Horowitz, and Harold Abeles. 1999. Learning in and through the arts: The issue of transfer. Paper presented at AERA National Conference, Montreal, Canada


——. 1998a. Limits and uses of research in the teaching of art. Videotape presentation at seminar, Research in Art Education. 1998 NAEA Conference, Chicago, Ill.


Thomas M. Brewer is an associate professor in the Department of Teaching and Learning Principles at the University of Central Florida. He wishes to thank Melissa Herring, Jeffrey Goldberg, Katherine Farmer, and Sara Bhonsale-Oberbeck for assistance with this article.