



The arts educator's critical role in Total Learning

In an ideal educational setting, every teacher would be an artist¹. In the elementary classroom, there would be

- Intentional and developmentally appropriate teaching IN the arts to build music, visual art, dance and drama skills and understandings;
- Application of the above arts skills and understandings as a delivery system for other curricular concepts and skills, such as language/literacy, math/logic, science/problem-solving, and social studies/geography/history.
- Intentional development of social-emotional skills, classroom community and school community through child-centered, responsive routines/procedures and the artistic processes.

Each teacher would have all the requisite skills and understanding to deliver learning in this way, hence the approach's name: Total Learning.

While the above is our goal, the average teacher today has not been prepared with this goal in mind. The prevailing theory for many years has been to teach each discipline in isolation. Educational goals have been narrowed and pared down to a finite sub-set of lower-order skills that has not encouraged (sometimes not even permitted) teacher creativity, nor teaching for student imagination. While many have paid lip service to differentiated learning based on learning styles, there are few who have developed the strategies and skills to integrate across the curriculum in this way.

Total Literacy/Total Learning trainers are providing embedded professional development to build teacher skills more appropriate to the needs of the 21st century student and future citizen. We are also leading an effort to rethink teacher preparation and support at the undergraduate and graduate levels.

We are moving slowly, collecting data to demonstrate effectiveness, and building relationships.

Where does the arts educator fit into this picture? I propose two different ways.

1. Parallel and in-depth expertise.

The arts strategies that the classroom teacher can and should deliver are only the tip of the iceberg. For each skill the classroom teacher delivers, a trained arts teacher can develop it in more depth, and guide students to independent use through creating,

¹ "Artist" is broadly defined as one who engages in the arts: a musician, composer, conductor, visual artist, painter, sculptor, curator, dancer, choreographer, costume designer, actor, playwright, director, graphic designer, cartoonist, soundtrack engineer or any person who has skill and practices in one or more art form.

performing and responding. When a strategy is experienced in only one way, the result is often a stereotype or a narrow and limited use of the skill. While this is better than nothing, it can lead to inflexible rather than fluent and imaginative use. The arts specialist, if providing a sequential and concept-based approach, will find that the TL strategies presented by the classroom teacher are directly related and parallel to their arts curriculum. With a minimum of communication, the two can work together to build deeper student learning in the arts, and therefore more strategies for other curriculum delivery.

2. Arts educator as professional development provider.

Arts educators often bemoan the perception that they are the “prep” for the classroom teacher, rather than being valued for the skills and understandings they deliver to students. In Total Learning their discipline is not only valued, it is essential. The arts educators could become the professional development trainers for Total Literacy/Total Learning. This is not suggested in place of their currently scheduled classes, but either in addition to, or by having the teachers required to attend and participate in the arts classes with their students for a full year. In this case, teacher prep time would be provided in some other way – perhaps by a cadre of highly skilled, rotating paraprofessionals or substitutes. For a year with each teacher, the arts specialist’s classes would not only provide student learning, but also professional development for the teacher.

These two possibilities take into account the very different skills amongst arts educators. Variables include the level of arts expertise, classroom skills including management, planning, delivery, and reflection; ability to communicate with peers, and so on.

The administrators (arts supervisors, principals and district educational leaders) understand and agree that arts classes are not preparation times for concerts and art shows, although the products of these classes could most likely result in some product such as a performance or display. Arts classes are for teaching and learning in the arts, and follow a curriculum that is determined and guided by district, state and/or national standards. Time allocations for each of the arts may be determined by district or state guidelines. Research provides evidence that students who have strong, sequential arts instruction are higher achieving than their arts-poor peers.

Imagine what this could mean for arts education! Imagine how the arts could find their way to the center of all school learning, as the hub from which all learning grows outward. With capable arts educators in leadership positions in each school, the arts will be less likely to be marginalized. This may require special training for arts educators, either within the school PD already established, or in a separate set of PD experiences.

This is an idea we should explore.

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