DIG IT!: Fine Arts, Language Arts, and Social Studies

Fine Arts
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Rationale

The Fine Arts have long been the center of debate as to their place in education. The validity of learning Fine Arts has always been difficult to prove without written tests. In the 21st century, the scope of education has broadened to now include the Fine Arts as an important area of study. Educators, such as Howard Gardner, have opened our eyes to the importance of teaching the Arts independently as well as using them as a teaching tool to assist in other areas of curriculum. Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligence (1983), strongly supports the teaching of the Arts because the Arts touch all different types of intelligence that a child may relate to (linguistic, musical, logical, spatial, kinesthetic, and personal). Bloom's Taxonomy, (knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, syntheses, and evaluation) happens automatically, as children are actively engaged in learning the Arts and thus higher order thinking skills are used. Music allows students to explore and express themselves internally, and provides students with a sense of beauty that is essential to all human beings (Roter, 1981). “Art education is basic because it extends our language. It enlarges the store of images we use. It makes our understanding discriminating and comprehensive” (Loyacono, 1993).

After a successful unit of study, last year, where we developed a cross-curriculum jazz unit that used the musical “We Haz Jazz” (Jacobson) as a cornerstone, we decided to try it again. This year, we used the musical “DIG IT!” by J. Jacobson and R. Emerson. The musical incorporated several areas of the fifth grade social studies SOL’s. The musical begins in Ethiopia and is about two archeologists who discover a talking skeleton named Lucy. Lucy takes the two through history, visiting places like Mesopotamia, Egypt, Asia, Greece and Rome. In those places, they meet famous people like Gilgamesh, Imhotep, Confucius, Sophocles, and the fabled Remus and Romulus. After collaborating with the fifth grade teachers, we began the production.

Goals

The goals for the music component were for students to:

1. Be able to demonstrate understanding of the elements of music (rhythm, dynamics, melody, tempo, texture, pitch, harmony and form)
2. Achieve personal enrichment through preparation and participation in the culminating performance
3. Give language minority students an opportunity to develop English proficiency in a non-threatening environment.
Approach

The music department focused on three areas of music- drama, movement and singing. First, the students listened to the prerecorded full performance musical on CD and followed along with the score as best they could. Once they heard the musical, students were given the choice of deciding what area they would like to participate in. They were given three choices. Students could choose to be a dancer, an actor or a singer only. Unfortunately, to allow the most participation, students could not choose to be both an actor and dancer. Everyone had to sing when they weren’t on stage so everyone needed to learn all the songs. The musical consisted of seven songs and approximately forty speaking lines. Five of the songs were danced and two were not. There were approximately ten dancers for each song and combined with the forty speaking lines, gave ninety students the opportunity to be on stage. Very few wanted to be singers only and after nudging a few, they decided to try a speaking part. Once divided up, rehearsals began. As we began learning the music, the students seemed a bit overwhelmed. They were not used to the level of difficulty of music, the numerous words and the names of the main characters. Some students had not started their social studies units in their classrooms yet, and their first exposure to this topic was through the music. As we continued, the students began their social studies units, and the connection was made. The dancers and actors met separately, sometimes after school. The art teacher also participated in the project and was teaching about Egyptian art, which we used as our backdrop. The students also helped develop their costumes.

Results

Despite language barriers, the students were anxious to perform their show. The second language students sang just as well as the English-speaking students. The second language students didn’t need to speak well to learn their dance, and those who chose to speak, worked hard to learn their lines. The students worked on the backdrops and props in art and on their own. They developed ideas for their character’s costumes. We couldn’t get them to go home. The results in our student changes were fascinating as well. Student’s who were shy in the beginning, had a chance to, and did, shine on stage. Student’s who would never have thought to try to be on stage, did. They were excited to come to school and excited to learn more about their social studies. One student even remarked to his teacher, “Hey, we are doing Egypt in music and Egypt in art and Egypt in here!” The students were excited to be putting together such a performance and they took complete ownership of that performance.

Reflection

Music is a universal language. Every culture uses music in some way, and children respond to music. Children learn more when they are in a non-threatening environment. Music teaches children to work together and provides an atmosphere that encourages communication. In working closely with classmates, students learn to trust one another and build friendships. Students discover who they are through the music and self-esteem increased as they are successful in their music activities. Most importantly, though, music is the beginning of communication. The Virginia Music Standards of Learning (1999) states, “the goal of music education is to empower students to experience music as a source of personal enrichment, as a vehicle for expression of emotions, an as an intellectual discipline. Students may relate music to
foreign languages through music terminology and son texts, and through musical expression, understand the history of various cultures.”
Together with the Fine Arts Department, the ESOL/HILT specialists and the Special Education Resource teacher designed a comprehensive Language Arts/ Social Studies unit that invited students to learn about ancient civilizations. Our final project was produced in the form of a “Living Museum,” an opportunity to showcase the students’ “expertise” in an interactive and fun way. Through much research, class discussion, readings, and the knowledge gained from participating in the musical “Dig It” (also about ancient civilizations), the students were able to act as “curators” of the museum and thereby engage the visitors in lively and interesting dialogue about the various cultures.

Approach and Exhibits

In order to create student experts, each Language Arts class focused on no more than two civilizations. Over the course of several weeks, these classes focused on studying the literature, history, and culture of their designated civilization.

Those ESOL students studying Mesopotamia delved into the epic of Gilgamesh, creating detailed character analyses and writing journal entries as if they were the characters from the story. Students were encouraged to empathize with all the characters, both good and bad, and try to relate some of the circumstances to their own lives. Due to a deeper understanding of the story, the students acquired a sense of ownership that allowed them to present realistic “talking statues” of the Gilgamesh characters during the museum’s presentation. In addition to the Gilgamesh component, those studying Mesopotamia also presented various court cases that might have been seen during the time of Hammurabi. Students visiting the museum were presented with a hypothetical situation and they had to choose the correct punishment from a list of crimes and their corresponding punishments. Students were also invited to create a cuneiform tablet using clay and a choice of several cuneiform letters. Finally,
students were able to sample some of the food that might have been eaten in the court of Gilgamesh, including dates, bread, grapes, and cheeses.

Context

The HILT Language Arts students focused on Ancient Egypt and China. The activities took about a month to complete and the usual hour and a half class time was used to create exhibits for the museum. Students created a vocabulary list for both of their civilizations. In addition, students who visited the Egyptian exhibits were instructed on how to write their names in hieroglyphics. While they completed these, the students were told about how the ancient Egyptians used papyrus to write on. While the visitors examined pyramids made from sugar cubes, our Language Arts students described how they were used. The Egyptian display also included a mummy wrap made from 150 yards of toilet paper. This accurately represented the amount of cloth used to make a mummy. Finally, students displayed their journals that were written during class and described what life was like for either a pharaoh or a slave.

The Chinese exhibit featured a zodiac wheel on which students could read their horoscopes. Participants found their birth year and then learned about their personality traits. The students also displayed an invention chart. The visitors to this exhibit had to match a description of a Chinese invention to the name of that invention. Students were also given the opportunity to create or copy a design using tangrams. Finally, the visitors were instructed on how to create Chinese lanterns and dragon masks. The Language Arts students were able to explain the significance of these artistic contributions to those who were working.

Method

Students who presented information on Greek and Roman life researched their topics thoroughly. They compiled final reports on family, food, sport, education, and work and presented this information to a first grade class. In addition, they read myths about Roman and Greek gods and then created their own gods based on their interests and personalities. They designed a picture of their new god to match the description. The students also studied the history of the Olympics and designed some classroom appropriate Olympic games (such as straw tossing) complete with medals for the champions. Students who visited this exhibit could examine and design pottery adorned with gods and goddesses. Finally, they could practice writing in Roman numerals.

All classes involved in the creation of the Living Museum came together to present the project during a three hour time frame. Classroom teachers were given the opportunity to sign up their classes for a visit that would last approximately 10-15 minutes. Once classes entered the museum, they were given a scavenger hunt that required them to look for certain information from the exhibits. All of the answers were posted somewhere in the room and the guests had to look carefully to find them all.
Reflection

The students who created and presented the Living Museum enjoyed the experience. They were excited to learn the information that had already been presented to them either through Social Studies or from practicing the musical “Dig It.” Some of the civilizations, such as Egypt, had only been recently introduced to them and they were eager to know more. Other civilizations, such as Greece and Rome, would not be covered in Social Studies for another month. Students seemed to enjoy learning about a subject that many of their other classmates did not know anything about yet. Most importantly, the success of this project can be measured by the fact that these students took ownership of the museum. Through their acquired expertise, they were able to successfully answer questions about the exhibits and demonstrate to other students that they clearly possessed knowledge of the ancient civilizations.

While we believe that the museum was a success, in hindsight, there are a few changes that should be made if we are to revisit this project in following years. For example, more space is crucial to the presentation of the museum. Students who visit the museum need space to move freely from exhibit to exhibit. Equally important, students need to be able to hear the information being presented. The room was so small and there were so many people that it was difficult to hear or understand everything that was being presented by the students. Finally, we may need to reconsider how much time is allotted for the Living Museum. Many of the students who created the project were exhausted by the end of the three hours, leading us to believe that this is just too long for them to be interacting on such a focused level. With these changes in mind, however, we believe that there is a future for the Living Museum at Randolph Elementary.

**DIG IT!**

*Cross-curriculum Social Studies unit*

- Collaborated with the music department, art department, fifth grade classroom teachers, and ESOL/HILT and Special Education Resource teachers to discuss goals for the unit.

- Students listened to the musical “DIG IT!” and chose parts

- Music department rehearsed with dancers, actors and singers
  - Rehearsals met in small groups for dancers and actors, sometimes after school.
  - Singers met in large groups to learn the music.

- Art department studied Egyptian artwork.

- Students worked on their costumes, props and backdrops during art class. Several students, who are in the “Art Club” (and after school group), also worked to make mummies and pyramids.
• Performed the musical, “DIG IT!”

• At the same time as the musical went under production, the Language Arts students were divided into 3 groups to focus their study into the following areas:
  1) Mesopotamia 2) Greece & Rome, 3) Egypt & Asia

Mesopotamia-
• the epic tale of Gilgamesh, Cunnieform writing, code of Hammurabi, and food

Greece & Rome-
• Olympics, gods and goddesses, the fabled story of Remus and Romulus, origin of vocabulary, and Roman numerals

Egypt & Asia-
• Hieroglyphics, pyramids, mummy wrapping, journals of a pharaoh and slave, zodiac wheel, Confucius, dynasties, invention chart, tangrams, and dragon masks

• Produced as a culminating project- the “Living Museum”
ESOL/HILT and Special Education Resource Language Arts groups showcased an all day interactive exhibit of the above Ancient civilizations. Grades K-5 where invited to sign up and walk through the museum. Audience members were invited to participate in multi-sensory activities such as; games, food tasting, judging ancient court cases, and writing their names in Cunnieform on tablets and in hieroglyphics. The audience was invited to participate in a scavenger hunt. Language Arts students took ownership of the museum by answering questions about their exhibits and demonstrating the activities.