Creating Connections: Integrating the Visual Arts with Social Studies

Joyce H. Burstein and Greg Knotts

Integrating the visual and performing arts is one clear and concrete strategy to engage students in learning social studies content and concepts while making them interactive and relevant to their daily lives. In this article, we offer a rationale for teaching integrated arts with social studies, provide a framework for planning, and illustrate specific classroom examples in two different grade levels. These strategies and lessons were taught in real classrooms and provide a sample of possibilities that elementary teachers can implement with their own students.

Why Integrate the Arts in Social Studies?
One of the ten major themes in the social studies standards is culture. Societies around the world express culture—their identity—through the arts with dance, music, drama, and visual products. Making art is a way to express cultural norms and perspectives. Using cultural anthropology as one lens, teachers can show how different societies live and evolve through their art. As a consequence, elementary children can learn about how cultures develop and the various attributes of culture—either in the past or the present. The visual and performing arts help children reach content understanding while being immersed in the creation of an art form. Students have the opportunity to express their understanding of social studies content by acting, singing, dancing, or creating visual representations. Ultimately, children learn about other cultures and develop a deeper understanding of their own.

The use of the arts as an alternative pathway to content also helps better develop student understanding of the disconnected concepts, vocabulary, and content in social studies. Using the arts extends student understanding by providing a context, often a tangible product, which then connects them to the content in real, explicit, and relevant ways. Students can use the arts as an alternative pathway to demonstrate how they make sense of concepts, vocabulary, and content in social studies. By integrating the arts with social studies, students also tap into other forms of intelligence, such as visual-spatial, musical, kinesthetic, and interpersonal. While many students who have language needs tend to have difficulty expressing themselves using reading and writing as traditional forms of assessment, the arts offer another way to demonstrate their understanding and knowledge. In addition, students also practice their interpersonal skills by working with each other and using multiple forms of expression. They learn to communicate more effectively, take turns, and provide constructive feedback to their peers.

Coequal Status
In order for social studies and arts to be truly integrated, teachers need to be aware of five elements in planning for both content areas. Although your primary objectives or goals will initially focus on social studies, the arts must also have equal importance to validate its inclusion. It is considered an “activity or project” that does not teach a skill or concept in the arts. We propose the following five steps in planning in order to create a truly integrated use of the arts while teaching social studies content.

1. Choose a social studies content standard that will be reflected in your unit. It is important to have clear goals in lesson plans for the social studies concepts, vocabulary, and skills you want to cover. For example, if the unit is on the American Revolution, a theme from the national curriculum standards for social studies could be POWER, AUTHORITY AND GOVERNANCE, “Identify and describe factors that contribute to cooperation and cause disputes within and among groups and nations.” A complementary National History Standard is the study of “Era 3: Revolution and the New Nation (1754-1820s).”

2. Choose a visual or performing arts content standard that complements the concepts and skills you want to teach in social studies. An example is the California Content standard in music (3.4): “Describe the influence of various cultures and historical events on musical forms and styles.”
These standards examine period music, songs, and lyrics that exemplify that time period and support the context for the revolution.

3. Create learning objectives in the social studies and visual-performing arts for your unit of study. The initial social studies objectives will guide how you choose the content and objectives in the arts. Then choose substantive arts goals that either teach content, a skill, or a combination of both so the arts have equal status with the social studies.

4. Teach academic content vocabulary in both subject areas. Students need to learn the vocabulary that defines the history-social science content, as well as vocabulary in the visual-performing arts. Students will benefit from treating both as forms of content area vocabulary that conceptually support each other.

5. Create a performance-based assessment with clear criteria in the social studies and the arts—one that measures both social studies and arts concepts with real life tasks. Students who perform what they understand will use several skill sets across social studies and the arts. They have opportunities to express their understanding through multiple pathways; oral and written language, dramatizations, dances or movements, or the creation of a visual arts piece. Teachers must create clear criteria to measure both the social studies understandings in addition to how students use the arts concepts or skills to understand that content.

Using this process, we were successful in creating several units of study that emphasized major themes, content, and skills in social studies while also providing visual arts content and skills. In the following examples, art and social studies are equal in the development of concepts in both subject areas.

A Fifth Grade Example:
Migration Patterns and Rauschenberg’s Art

As a teacher educator, I (J. H. B.) try to teach in real classrooms as often as possible. In 2009, I volunteered to mentor fifth grade teachers at a local, urban elementary school in Southern California for the entire school year. Part of my role was to demonstrate effective social studies and arts lessons while the new teachers observed each week.

Geography, History, and Migration

The first social studies unit I planned and taught was based on themes in geography to provide context for future studies in the historical, political, economic, and cultural context of the United States. I chose to focus on the National Geography Standards: “the characteristics, distribution, and migration of human population on the Earth’s surface” (5.1) and “the processes, patterns, and functions of human settlement” (5.2). Once I chose these social studies standards as a foundation, I analyzed the California Visual Arts Content Standards and found one fit perfectly with the geography content: “Students learn to assemble a found object/sculpture or a mixed media 2D composition that reflects unity and harmony and communicates a theme” (5.2.5).

Since I wanted to make the unit directly related to students’ lives to provide motivation and context to the geography concepts, I started with the students’ families. The first lesson was an activity that connected family origins with locating those places on a map. Then students created questions to ask during an interview with parents or grandparents about their immigration or migration story. I told my mother’s immigration story from China. Students brainstormed questions we could ask her and then they used those questions to start a list to use with their own families.

The next day, we practiced interview techniques in class. I role-played what types of questions and interview techniques were acceptable. Students interviewed family members and brought the data to analyze patterns and reasons for immigration/migration. We created a chart with the data to visually represent all reasons for moving. Students made comments like “we all moved for the same reasons- to get a better life.” Another child stated, “I did not realize a lot of us come from similar places with the same history. That is weird we didn’t know this.”

The lesson was extended into language arts by using the data to write a family immigration/migration story. Each student’s story was recorded on audiotape to be used later as part of the art installation.

An Artist’s Interpretation

The students now had a firm foundation of concepts about movement and settlement within the discipline of geography. It was time to introduce the artist, Robert Rauschenberg, and his mixed media art in a PowerPoint slideshow that I had made. We analyzed the use of various media in his artwork and, over the next few days, students collected artifacts, photos, and writing about their own family’s history, focusing on any examples of immigration or migration within the United States. In addition, students found pictures and phrases in magazines and newspapers to express the visual story for their art piece. We then took a field trip to the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) in Los Angeles to view Rauschenberg’s media pieces. Students started their mixed media piece using collected primary sources and found art, employing techniques similar to Rauschenberg’s. From the early 1950s on, Rauschenberg broke down traditional boundaries between painting and sculpture and forged new ground in a multitude of media to invent an artistic expression uniquely his own. MOCA has the largest collection of these “combines.”

September/October 2010 21
The final part of the integrated unit was a gallery walk. Students had the opportunity to show their piece and view their classmates’ family immigration/migration story with audio taped narrative of their written story playing. This simulated art installations in local art museums. Students had the opportunity to critique their art, along with providing commentary on the themes of immigration/migration from the geography standards.

A Second Grade Example: Critical Consumers

Part of my own professional development as a teacher educator is to ensure that I am teaching in a public school classroom at some point every year. In 2009, I asked a former teacher credential candidate, now gainfully employed in a local, urban elementary school in Southern California, if I could model and videotape some lessons to use as instructional tools for my own university students. This lesson comes from a segment of lessons I did with 2nd graders on the Production Cycle (as a foundation to the Houghton Mifflin Unit 1 series, “Depending on Others”).

Advertisements in the Marketplace

The social studies lessons I planned and taught were based on themes in economics. I chose to focus on the California History/Social Science Standard 2.4.2: “Students understand basic economic concepts and their individual roles in the economy and demonstrate basic economic reasoning skills by understanding the role and interdependence of buyers (consumers) and sellers (producers) of goods and services.”

Once I chose these social studies standards as a foundation, I analyzed the California Visual Arts Content Standards and found two that would allow me to connect to students personally, while instructing with art concepts and vocabulary: “Identify and discuss how art is used in events and celebrations in various cultures, past and present, including the use in their own lives” (2.3.3) and “Identify the elements of art in objects in nature, the environment, and works of art, emphasizing line, color, shape/form, texture, and space” (2.1.3).

I wanted to make the lessons relate to the students’ lives and be as relevant as possible, so I started with what they knew about production: toys. I began with a constructivist activity by posting posters, newspaper and magazine advertisements, and brochures on the front board, enough for more than one for every student. I asked for students to choose an ad and write down how they felt about it and why the ad made them feel that way. In this way, they were required to use evidence to describe their feelings. In small groups the class shared their reflections, followed by the whole class sharing, in order to describe some common feelings the advertisements made them feel. I then conducted a teacher-directed lesson on advertising and the roles of consumers and producers. In teams of two, students then met to design a product that they would eventually advertise to others.

Putting Knowledge to Use

The next day I began by posting the same advertisements, posters, and brochures on the board. I also posted the lists generated from the students’ small group and whole class sharing about how the ads made them feel. We analyzed one advertisement to see what producers (advertisers) were doing to highlight the product. This discussion focused on the language of the standard highlighting the use of academic language, “line, color, shape/form, texture, and space” in the advertisement. This kind of arts vocabulary can be introduced at this point or reinforced from previous lessons, depending on how much you have done in terms of arts instruction. There is no need to highlight all the vocabulary from the standard at one time or in one lesson. In fact, I highlighted ‘space’ and ‘color’ as two concepts to address in the next activity.

Students, in small groups, were randomly assigned an advertisement from the board and asked to describe how space and color were used to influence potential buyers. For instance one student said, “Dark colors or patchy colors make me feel dark or, like, mean.” Another student said, “Bright colors make it easy to show my mom because it makes you feel happy. Like it’s a good toy.” This also led to a robust discussion of which colors were targeted to girls and which colors were targeted to boys. They ended by writing three sentences about their understanding of how space and color are used in advertising to influence a consumer.

On the third day, students met back in their partnerships to discuss their product and to design an advertisement (brochure)
in order to persuade others to buy their product. In addition to Social Studies and Arts, this mini-unit had far-reaching cross-disciplinary assessable outcomes in Language Arts (persuasive writing) and mathematics (measurement of ‘space’). The students were engaged throughout all components of the lessons as toys interested them greatly. They developed a raised consciousness about being or becoming a critical consumer, and also how art can be used in the lives to manipulate their perspectives and thinking.

**Benefits of Arts Integration**

Elementary social studies content and concepts are often presented as disconnected, detached, and with little context for students who commonly find little or no relevance for their daily, lived experience. A co-equal use of the arts and social studies instruction extends student understanding by providing a context, often in the form of a tangible product, which then connects students to the content in concrete, real, and relevant ways. Rather than simply studying facts as necessary to understanding “history,” having students engage with the arts allows them to find relevance in that history by linking their knowledge to a present, tangible context. Students can make an art installation about their own family’s immigration story, or create an advertisement that concretizes and acknowledges their role as a critical consumer in the economy.

This link between social studies and the arts is an easy one to make, as the integration allows a teacher to demonstrate how different cultural groups evolve through their art—either long ago (think immigration patterns over time) or today (consciously embedding a second grader into today’s global economic culture). The use of the arts as an assessable outcome allows native and non-native English speakers alike to demonstrate their understanding in an innovative way beyond a standard written product.

The examples offered here are real and have worked with children in elementary school. It might, however, be easy to find fault with all or part of a given example. For instance, does creating a mixed media piece about immigration accomplish the ‘unity and harmony’ aspect of the cited VPA standard? Is it legitimate to use advertising as ‘art’ in the first place? These and other questions could (and should) be asked about any lesson. What we have attempted to do in this discussion is to provide a pathway that allows today’s teachers to consider how to integrate art and social studies as co-equal disciplines in their classrooms. This begins to allow teachers to confront the issue of the lack of time, as well as the myriad issues regarding engagement and relevance for students.

Elementary social studies teachers are constantly searching for ways to make their curriculum relevant and meaningful to their students. Integrating the arts into instruction is an easy way to help students find relevance and provide a real context. Instead of a disconnected list of dates, names, events, and timelines, coequally using the arts in instruction provides students with a real context in which to apply social studies content. Having students engage with, use, and create art (in any form) provides a concrete way for students to connect to social studies content and concepts in innovative, creative, and purposive ways. This integration creates context when there was none, generates relevance when students could not find any, and constructs connections out of the disconnected.

**Notes**


**Joyce H. Burstein** is an associate professor of Social Studies Education in the Department of Elementary Education at California State University in Northridge, California.

**Greg Knotts** is an assistant professor in the Department of Elementary Education at California State University in Northridge, California.