The Arts in STEM: Advancing Meaningful Integration
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Art Autobiography

Recall

I grew up in a small rural community on the Oregon/Idaho border about 70 miles from Boise. My first to twelfth grade education consisted of the three “Rs” reading, ‘riting, and ‘rithmetic. Idaho was then, and continues to be, one of lowest states in per pupil spending in the nation.

I have always loved school. I have great memories of being in my classroom reading, doing math, and taking tests. I don’t have any memories of doing art. No painting, drawing, or even coloring that I can remember.

In fourth grade my teacher decided to give us singing lessons. It was there I learned that I could not carry a tune. I honestly can’t remember if she said I couldn’t sing, or if it was my classmates. Kids can be cruel, even ones that are supposed to be your friends.

I did say that “riting was a part of the curriculum. This was not creative writing. We wrote book reports, essays, and the like.

I played in the band in seventh and eighth grade. I was second chair drum, which would have been more impressive if there hadn’t been only two of us! I learned to read music, and got a passing grade, but I did not become a musician,

In high school I took a drama elective. This was my first art education success! I never landed the lead or had any higher aspirations, but I had fun and didn’t embarrass myself. For a teenager, that was a win.

I grew up on a farm. The wood-paneled walls of my home were hung with a couple of enlarged photos and mirrors. Who needs anything else when you have wood paneling? My mom and I would do craft projects and some of them would end up on the walls, shelves, and tables.

I learned to sew when I was eight or nine and knit sometime after that. I always used a pattern, but I created a lot of one-of-a-kind fashion.

To fulfill my art requirement for my bachelor's degree, I took a ceramics class. I purposely steered clear of art history and theory. I was concerned about grades and not willing to take a risk.

Throwing pottery on the wheel was a great stress reliever. We used kick-operated wheels and natural clay. Our pieces were kiln-fired, but we weren't allowed to be a part of that process. We glazed the pieces that made it through the first firing.

One semester is not long enough to develop competency in pottery, but it gave me a taste of it and I always hoped to return to it. I'll put that on my list of things to do in retirement!

My school district began an arts initiative six or seven years ago. Itinerant art teachers were assigned to schools to help elementary multiple subject credential teachers with art instruction. I have worked with theater, music, dance, and visual arts teachers.

Working with the drama teachers in this program I have learned how to teach the basics such as the actor's tools and strategies for keeping every student engaged and active by assigning a role to everyone at the same time. I have learned to use dramatization to help students with reading comprehension. I have learned how to use tableau to enhance student understanding of history and other concepts.

Working along side of visual arts teachers I have learned concepts of color, line, and design. I have replicated art lessons that I learned through this program with subsequent classes to great success.

When it comes to dance and music, I'm squarely in the category of "Those who can do, and those who can't teach!" I teach kindergarten and my students think I'm a great dancer and singer and I never allow disparaging remarks about lack of talent.

Reflect

I didn't realize the limitations of my art experiences until I left home to go to college. It was there and later in the workplace that I met others who had knowledge of art history and theory that I was lacking. In comparison, I felt uncultured. There were many cultural references that I didn't get. My education was bound to the practical and left me feeling like the country bumpkin I was.

My initial response was to try to hide my deficits by avoiding situations that would expose me. I chose classes that I could excel in and put off ones I thought would be challenging. I chose like-minded friends and roommates. I chose to major in Business Administration which required only a single art class. I hoped that doing well in the things I was doing would make up for areas I was lacking.

This tactic can only carry you so far. Becoming an elementary school teacher immediately makes you an expert in all fields. You are responsible for all subject areas by way of your one semester methods class in said subject.

I can and do teach art. I teach it well. This does not make me an artist.

Connect

To me an artist is a person who endeavors, whether successfully or not, to make his/her art his/her life's work.

Art, on the other hand, is for the masses. We can all create art. It is the fulfillment of the imaginative process. Evidence abounds on social media that people are using their artistic ability.

Art can take on many forms. It still exists in all its classical forms—sculpture, painting, plays, music, prose, and poetry. It also exists in all the new and exciting forms that are assisted through technology.

When I engage in art with kids I try to keep in mind something I learned early in my teaching career—art is a process, not a product. Kids need plenty of time to experiment with new art media. Their early attempts will be about discovering what they can do with that particular media. While it's tempting to stop the painting before it turns into a sea of brown and gray or before the brush wears a hole in the paper, those are important art lessons!