

What is Arts Integration? A Comprehensive Overview for Schools

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Arts integration is an approach to teaching and learning through which content standards are taught and assessed equitably in and through the arts.

Arts Integration is the connective pathway toward reaching and teaching every child and empowers educators in their professional growth. Yet, this approach is still somewhat misunderstood by many in the educational community. This in-depth overview will help you understand the components to a successful arts integration effort.

What is Arts Integration? Defining the approach.

Arts Integration is a research-based curricular strategy and has been utilized in classrooms for more than 30 years. It is grounded in solid pedagogy and numerous studies have supported its effectiveness.

But the perils of using arts integration fall in confusing using the arts in service of another content area with true integration. Here's a set of key features to look for in authentic arts integration:

Standards-Based Foundation

One of the hallmarks of Arts Integration is that it is grounded in connected standards.

When you're creating or teaching a lesson, ask yourself: *what standards am I address in both the content and the arts area?* If you can't identify both, it's not arts integration.

Teaching in and through the Arts

When you're working in an arts integration lesson, you'll feel like the line between the content and the arts is blurred. That's a good thing! In arts integration, the arts are an avenue through which students apply and connect the previously taught content. The arts are not servicing the content. Instead, both the content area and the arts area are interconnected.

What is arts integration?

Assessing Both Areas

In an arts integration lesson, the ending assessment reflects the growth in both the content area and the arts area that was taught. Do you have to be a master in the arts area to

assess it? No, because you're looking for growth in that area, not mastery. Only the arts teachers can evaluate an arts standard for mastery, just as only the classroom/content teachers can evaluate a content standard for mastery. But anyone can measure growth in both areas.

If you'd like to dig into using this approach in your classroom and get PD hours at the same time, check out our online course, [The Creative Mindset](#). You'll get a certificate for 25 hours to use for CEUs and develop lessons you'll actually use for your assignments.

Best Practices for Arts Integration in Schools:

Content and Arts Standards are naturally aligned, taught and assessed equitably.

Students MUST have access to explicit arts instruction on a regular (at least weekly) basis, taught by arts educators.

Collaborative planning between content and arts educators is valued and scheduled intentionally.

Professional development for teachers and arts educators is provided in arts integration strategies and processes.

The entire school community (parents, organizations, businesses, etc) are partners with the school in support of the approach.

Why Integrate the Arts? Here's 5 Compelling Reasons.

As an educator, you've probably seen or been effected by one of these scenarios:

- You have students in your classroom that work incredibly hard, but still struggle every day to "perform" on their assignments.
- Your colleagues come into school looking stressed out, frustrated, and worried about how to get everything done. It's not even 9AM and already, they feel defeated.
- You've seen students who typically get labeled as "difficult" light up the minute they walk into an art room or on stage.
- As a leader, you want to support your staff and provide flexibility, but the reality is that you are being judged on test scores.

Sound familiar? This is exactly what is going on in most schools today. We know that creativity, innovative practices and flexibility is critical to meeting the needs of our students (and ourselves!). But the accountability structure that exists shoves all of that out of the way.

Let's face it. As much as we say that we want to provide an "optimal learning environment", very little is actually changing about education in the 21st century. We are bound by test scores and limited student achievement measures.

Here's why arts integration is critical: because the approach provides an opportunity to bring back creativity and increase student achievement at the same time.

Sound impossible? It's not. For schools that commit to using arts integration with integrity, the results are astounding. Schools that intentionally use arts integration find student achievement rises by 10% OR MORE across the board.

No longer can we say that creativity, innovation, and meaningful learning cannot exist in schools today. Instead, schools must be brave enough to look beyond traditional approaches (which yield very little result) for approaches like Arts Integration and STEAM that have a proven track record of working. Here's why:

1. Student Buy-In

Students become active participants in their learning when the arts are intentionally integrated. This in turn, provides an opportunity for students to own the learning and have a vested interest in their own success.

2. Builds Critical Thinking Skills

Students engage in critical thinking and construct personal meaning through their learning in arts-integrated lessons. They develop the skills to work through problem-solving and to innovate new solutions. This builds grit and perseverance capacities in all learners.

3. Empowerment for Teachers and Students

Instructors become facilitators of creative learning and are empowered in their own professional growth. Teachers feel fulfilled and able to provide a hands-on learning environment for their students.

4. Affords Equity

Yields an equitable learning environment for all learners through their own access points.

5. Provides Connective Learning

Furnishes a research-based pathway to teaching 21st century learning skills and natural avenues for differentiation.

How to Build Buy-In for Arts Integrated Instruction

When schools or teachers start out on their Arts Integration journey, so many become frustrated that other teachers or school leaders don't want to jump on the bandwagon. You may be excited. You're definitely passionate. You've got research that says that Arts Integration works. None of that matters if you don't have buy-in. And not just buy-in from your colleagues: buy-in from parents and most importantly, from students.

How to create buy-in? Push vs. Pull.

The secret to creating buy-in for Arts Integration always lies within the work that you do.

The more diligently that you plug on with what you know works for YOUR students, the better your results will be. Your students will become more confident and excited about what they are doing. You'll begin to see deeper connections and thought processes.

Students will begin to persevere in problem-solving because it's just too fun not to do the hard work. That's when others will take notice.

Too often, we try and push our passion onto others. We like to move fast – if there is something that we're doing and it's working, we want the rest of the world to do it too. But that comes across and pushy and aggressive. It's as if you're trying to make your colleagues do something when they don't even know what it looks like for themselves.

People don't like change. They are afraid of what a new approach might do *TO* them instead of what it will do *FOR* them.

Instead, go back to your work. Make a difference for each child sitting in each chair every single day. Use the arts integration approach consistently and make small changes to your own classroom over time. This will pull in your students who will begin talking to their parents and their friends about how much they are enjoying your content.

And just like a garden, you're students are going to bloom. That will get their attention and then you'll start to hear more and more people asking about that "arts integration thing" you've been doing all this time.

Here's some other tips for helping administrators, teachers and parents buy-in to arts integration:

Show them the Research

Administrators in particular have had years of training around data analysis and educational research. So, understanding how their brains works can put teachers and parents at an advantage for getting them to support the arts in their schools. They want school to be fun just as much as anyone else, but they are also obligated to ensure learning is taking place at very high levels.

Luckily, we have access to tons of research about how the arts improve learning and how arts integration benefits the whole child. Plus, we also have tons of research that show the arts can raise test scores.

Arm yourselves with some key points from the research compiled here by EducationCloset.

Speak the Language

Now, once you've seen some of the research yourself, compile those key points and have them on the tip of your tongue when you get ready to speak with a colleague or administrator. Use the same educational jargon they are used to using to talk about arts integration. Memorize and use these exact phrases:

- Arts integration improves test scores.
- Arts integration creates equity.
- Arts integration increases parental and community engagement.

Tell a Story and Ask a Question.

Each of those key phrases has a story that can be told. You've learned the educational jargon to get the attention of your colleague or leader. Now, tell the story and pose a question. Here are some examples:

Arts Integration improves test scores because student engagement goes up as they access the arts. So, if they can learn math through an art form that makes the learning fun, why wouldn't you want that for them?

Arts integration creates equity because the arts are naturally differentiated. This means students can learn in a manner that best meets their needs. When students learn this way, it doesn't matter what other personal variables they are dealing with, they will learn. Aren't we always trying to level the playing field so that all students have opportunities to thrive?

Arts integration increases parental and community engagement because the arts are exciting and fun. Communities love to donate resources and volunteer for arts programs. Parents love to come see their children perform in a play or see their work displayed at an art show. Isn't it great to think about being able to bring so many of our stakeholders into our buildings as they show us their support?

There is No Magic Wand.

Keep in mind that true buy-in doesn't happen overnight. These tips are great starting points.

Drive your points home by repeating these points as often as necessary. Take this information and make it part of your daily or weekly conversations with administrators. Share it as often as you can and as positively as you can. Change has to begin somewhere – so why not with you?

7 Key Performance Metrics for Arts Integration Initiatives

As you're building your vision, there are some key performance metrics that are helpful to keep in mind.

1. There is a Visible Vision

First, you need to have an established vision for using arts integration and it should be visible throughout the school. It's not enough to just have a great visionary statement. We need to see it. I've seen schools do this in a number of ways – from painting a wall with whiteboard paint in the lobby with the day's arts integration lessons being taught, to posting student artwork and multimedia installations out in the hallways with artist statements. Your vision should be a living component.

2. Your Why, What and How is Clear

There also has to be a clear understanding of the arts integration approach by all stakeholders – teachers, students, parents and community members. Everyone needs to know why and what this is.

3. Data is Captured Authentically and Purposefully

Another big metric is the data you keep. Are you collecting, analyzing and making adjustments to your integrated instruction based on peer reviews, reflection and formal data? If it's not measured, it doesn't get done.

4. Standards Alignment Occurs in All Lessons

Are arts integrated lessons being created and implemented which contain aligned content and arts standards and are there equitable assessments for both aligned standards?

5. Schedules Provide Time for Collaborative Planning & Direct Arts Instruction

Do you make room for regular collaborative planning intervals that include cross-teams of grade-level/content/arts area teachers? Is direct arts instruction available to all students? Both of these are critical for arts integration success.

Schedules should be reviewed and revised to provide time for arts integration during the school day within the classroom. Arts integration should be an embedded practice for how we teach – not a dedicated class without classroom or arts content connections.

6. There is Consistent Professional Development

Is professional development in arts integration strategies, standards alignments and assessment practices being provided for teachers on a consistent basis?

7. Partnerships are Established and Cultivated

And finally, do you have actively established and cultivated community and arts partnerships for sustainability? It's not enough to have a nice long list of partners and potential partners. What do you do to actively engage and respond to them so they are with you for the long-haul?

Each of these metrics will help guide your next steps. Don't take them as a judgment of the quality of your program. Instead, use these metrics to help you determine where your starting line is.

Best Low-Prep Arts Integration Strategies to Get Started.

Arts Integration often begins with simple strategies. This is great because it gives teachers and students a quick-win and encourages more in-depth lessons later on. We often recommend starting with these [15 arts integration strategies](#). They are short, effective and easily weave into any content area.

Another technique is to use the [Masterpiece](#) approach. Each week, choose a masterpiece of visual art, music, writing, dance, or theater. Each day of the week, explore it in a different way. Not only does this give students structure and routine to rely on, but it provides the teacher with a venue for integration, highlighting the connections (and blurring the lines) between subject areas, and teaching traveling vocabulary words that apply to multiple subjects.

Vocabulary tip: Dr. Isabel Beck categorized highly specialized words, such as vocabulary words from specific subject areas (i.e. octave, democracy). Academic vocabulary is not included in a tier. Instead, these words are labeled as “traveling words”, because they include terms students need in order to be successful on a test, and they also cross disciplines through common vocabulary terms. These are words such as “determine”, “analyze”, “judge”, “elements”, etc. Find more information [here](#).

These can be used in the activity portion of your morning meeting, but they can be used as a stand-alone activity or warm up each day.

A Week at a Glance:

Masterpiece Monday:

Each Monday, project a famous (or curriculum connected) piece of visual art, famous architecture, writing, music, or video clip from a famous dance or theater performance. There are so many that it can be overwhelming, so below, you'll find resources to help focus your search. Of course, your first step should be your school's art and music teacher. They may be able to provide you with everything you need to get started. Remember, you don't have to be an expert on the masterpiece, you simply need to help the students explore it.

- Theater: [Here are clips of the 2019's Tony's performances](#)
- Visual Arts: , or the [Getty's Masterpiece of the Week](#).
- Music: [10 Pieces of Classical Music Everyone Should Know](#), [Historical Eras of American Music](#), Carnegie Hall's [Musical Digital Explorers](#)

As a follow-up, share background information about the artist in the form of a thumbnail sketch. If possible, discuss how they (or their creation) made a difference in the world, and see if students can identify character traits that the artist possesses that they can connect to.

Technical Tuesday

On Tuesdays, highlight one of the technical aspects of the masterpiece. You can analyze a

specific technique that an artist, musician, writer, etc. has done through their work. If you have a specific pacing guide, strategically choose a Monday Masterpiece that demonstrates a skill, technique, or element you need to teach. This can be extended by allowing students to experiment with the technique found in the masterpiece. To help with your background information, use resources such as [MetKids](#) or [Composers for Kids](#).

World Wednesday

Wednesdays are an opportunity to reach outside the walls of the classroom. If it is important to the work, use technology and maps to explore the location where the masterpiece took place or where it was created. Google Earth is a fantastic resource for this, as well as Google Expeditions and Google 360.

Alternatively, this day could be a chance to connect to others around the world. You can do this through [Seesaw Connected Blogs](#), which are quick and easy to set up if you use [Seesaw](#). (Which is also quick and easy to set up!). Through the blog, classes can connect to an interested class of the same grade level in another state or country. Students could share what they are learning, see what the other class is learning, and interact with other students' posts by commenting. Or, students can simply communicate with one another to learn more about life in a different community or culture. This same type of outreach can be completed through an educational Skype.

Theatrical Thursday

Thursdays are a chance for your students to express themselves, in turn, interacting with the masterpiece more deeply. Students can act out the scene in a painting, or interact with it using a strategy such as [Step Into the Painting](#). Students can create a [soundscape](#). Additionally, students could role-play, create a reader's theater based on the masterpiece, or even participate in interpretive dance to enhance their interaction with the piece.

Flashback Friday

Fridays are a culmination day to help students stop, reflect, and retain new knowledge. There are many options for a cumulative review. Choose what works best for your students and the amount of time you have.

Flashback Friday Activity Choices:

1. **Quick Write:** Have students complete a quick write (10 minutes or less where you write as fast as you can) that shares everything they remember about the artwork and historical event. (Allow students to look back at notes, maps, or the painting to help jog their memory if they'd like. You're not trying to "catch them" not remembering, you're trying to see what stuck with them, and sometimes a visual sparks a memory. Remind them that the goal is not to copy directly, but to free write, kind of like a brain

dump.)

2. **Vlog it:** Have students record a video of everything they remember. They can do this on Flipgrid or Seesaw and interact with each other's posts.
3. **Draw it:** Have students draw a narrative picture, using this as a mentor piece, to depict a memorable event at school. Then, have them write a brief artist's statement to explain what aspects of this painting (similar composition, dramatic effects, etc.) they used in their own work.
4. **Carousel:** Have students sit in groups of 4 – 6. Give each person a piece of paper. Have them write one fact they remember from this week's exploration. After writing the fact, pass the paper clockwise. Next, they should write a new fact on the new paper, however, it can't be the same as the one they already wrote, and it can't be the same as the one that is already written. Continue this process until the group runs out of things to write about.
5. **"Yes, And..."** Try the "Yes, and..." strategy. Have the class sit in a circle. Have one student make a statement about something they remember. Another student should say, "Yes, and..." and add a new fact. Continue this process until the whole class runs out of ideas. Find this strategy on page 3 of [EducationCloset's Arts Integration Strategies](#).

Ready to Try It?

To get started, find the above slides with accompanying teacher directions and links here: [Sample of a week](#) of no-prep theme days. I created them based on the painting *Washington Crossing the Delaware*. The slide deck is designed for a social studies class, but depending on the activities you choose, it could be more personalized for your specific content area. In the presenter notes, I have included the mini-lesson that accompanies each day.

Ready to customize your own? Here is a [template](#) that you can customize with masterpieces that match your content. It does take a little time each week to strategically choose a masterpiece, but if you revise and save a new slide deck each week, you will soon have a library that lasts for the whole year.

Resources:

- [Free Weekly Theme Days Template](#), Editable in Google Slides
- [Free, no-prep sample of a week of theme days](#) based on *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (Related resources are linked within the slide deck)
- [Visual Thinking Strategies](#) can Visual Thinking Strategy Cards
- [Arts Integration Strategy Cards](#) to download
- [Creative Morning Meeting Routines](#)
- [Creative Morning Meeting Activities](#)

The Collaborative Planning Process: Overcoming Reality.

The purpose of collaborative planning in arts integration is to work together across content and arts areas in order to analyze student strengths and challenges. It can also help to develop arts-integrated lessons which address both areas equitably.

This means that educators from both the content-area/grade-level classroom and the arts educator(s) must be present. They must come to the planning table ready to provide insights and possible suggestions for an integrated unit or lesson. This can be a challenge when there's little to no context prior to your planning time.

Setting Up Collaborative Planning

The possibilities for how to set-up collaborative planning are endless. The most ideal situation would be dedicated planning time when both educators can work together face-to-face. But there are other options that can be used to supplement or support this model. Especially due to time-constraints, schedules and staffing, the ideal situation is not always feasible.

If this is a scenario you face, alternatives could be answering the framework questions or standard alignments through email or in an online community (such as Blackboard, Google Docs, etc). This frontloaded planning can help to save time when you are able to meet face-to-face.

We provide the Pre-Planning and Collaborative Planning Matrices to our [Accelerator Members](#). But I'll walk you through the process of how you can use these yourself.

Pre-Planning Matrix

Start by filling out the pre-planning matrix individually. That means that the content teacher and the arts teacher should complete this before coming to the actual collaborative planning meeting. Agree on a single theme, like "transformation" prior to getting started. Move from left to right to help you begin to focus on your specific topic for an arts-integrated unit/lesson. Be sure to think about each question from your content perspective. This gives you a clear understanding on what you can bring to the collaborative planning process.

Collaborative Planning

After completing the pre-planning matrix, then it's time to come together at the collaborative planning table. Now you can compare your notes with each other, as well as identify any common themes, skills or processes that emerged from your brainstorm. Use that analysis to determine what lesson/unit you will plan, what standards you will align, and the assessments you will use. If at all possible, do this face-to-face.

Lesson Design and Implementation

Now you're ready to use your collaborative planning matrix to design your lesson. Fill in each of the components, implement the lesson (either together or in the classroom) and use the assessments to drive your next pre-planning session.

This simple framework can save you significant time when it comes to creating arts integration and STEAM lessons. By making the most of the time you have together, you free yourselves up to be infinitely more creative in the process.