Chapter 11

Integrating the Arts into Early Childhood Teacher Education Through Technology:
A Puppetry Arts Project

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ABSTRACT

Integrating the arts into the early childhood classroom is considered one of the effective pedagogies for children to learn different disciplines. However, most students in early childhood teacher education programs do not have experience in art, nor do they generally create art themselves. However, these future teachers and their students alike are surrounded with visual culture, immersed in technology, and grew up with television and other devices as indispensable parts of their lives, so these can provide portals for teaching them about the arts and interdisciplinary content integration. Teaching future Early Childhood Education (ECE) teachers creative pedagogies for integrating the arts into their classrooms through the use of technology is essential. The purpose is not just to help them understand the connections between the visual arts and what they see around them on television, tablet, and computer, but also, perhaps optimistically, to encourage them to be advocates for the arts in the lives of their students. In this chapter, the authors contemplate some of the challenges in building those connections for ECE students. They consider the questions: How can we build their confidence with this subject matter and guide them to integrate art forms through technology into their curricula? How can we foster in these future teachers a creative sensibility that recognizes the arts as a fundamental shared human means of expressing identity, understandings, beliefs, and ideas? How can we utilize very accessible community resources to encourage this transformation? This chapter describes a hands-on approach developed for guiding ECE majors who have little or no arts experience to understand, appreciate, and engage in

the arts through technology and the interdisciplinary possibilities of Puppetry Arts. They describe the philosophy, process, resources, and outcomes of the course and offer recommendations for integrating the arts into early childhood education coursework through technology.

INTRODUCTION

Picture a classroom bustling with creative activities as college students conduct research online, create digital presentations to share information about cultural populations, use software to write narrative lyrics and compose musical scores, and even utilize the videotape function on their cell phones to record themselves performing, as part of a 6-8 week in-depth investigation into cultural traditions, story-telling and puppetry arts. This describes our integrated art and music class designed specifically for early childhood education (ECE) majors at Georgia State University (GSU) in downtown Atlanta, in which we collaborate with an instructor from the Music Department to introduce ECE majors to the pedagogical opportunities of integrating the arts into their future teaching, especially by using various forms of technology. Over the past few years, this course has evolved into a very successful and popular offering that takes advantage of the resources available in our urban environment and engages students in intercultural as well as interdisciplinary learning.

THE PUPPETRY ARTS PROJECT

The puppetry project for the ECE majors in our collaborative course is an immersive experience, wherein they conduct research, present cultural information to each other, develop original soundtracks and design scenery, backdrops, and hand-made puppets. The theme of their puppetry art project starts with an investigation of the beliefs and practices of different language or cultural groups, such as Cajuns (an ethnic group mainly living in Louisiana), Sami (Arctic indigenous people inhabiting northern Sweden, Norway, Finland, and part of Russia), Tuvans (Turkic peoples living in southern Siberia), Amis (the indigenous people of Taiwan), Mbuti (indigenous pygmy groups in the Congo region of Africa), and Miao (the indigenous people of southwest China).

During the first phase of this project, while receiving instruction in the fundamentals of the languages of art and music, child development in art, and the interdisciplinary connections with familiar subject matter, students begin to seek out information about their selected populations. They are encouraged to seek out first-hand information *about* these populations *from* these populations to gain intercultural understanding. It astounds students when they find that the Navajo Nation has its own online publications, or that the Samis have a Facebook page. The Indigenous Geographies site of the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) is also a rich resource for learning about/from cultural groups in this hemisphere.

This initial phase of the puppetry arts project engages classmates in several ways. First, it pushes them to utilize their electronic devices for purposes other than texting, while exposing them to how cultures represent themselves through digital media, which in turn enlivens their conceptions of the content area of social studies. They utilize online resources and direct electronic communication to collect information on specific populations, tracing their histories and their present day status and struggles, and then present this information in class, using presentation software to share what they have learned so that all classmates have a better understanding of each group studied.

Working together to study others encourages these students to bond across their own cultural identity boundaries, as well. Grant and Sleeter (1993) suggested that such activities encourage future teachers "to coalesce and work together across the lines of race [culture], gender, class, and disability in order to strengthen and energize their fight against oppression [and discrimination]" (p.

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