



Rubrics and an Arts Integration Community of Practice

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- What skills do young people cultivate while they engage in the art-making process?
- Why are these art-focused experiences a critical component of the educational experience?
- In what ways is student learning a function of sustained arts exposure?
- Do the arts seem to have a purpose and a place in educating students with disabilities, particularly with the impact of No Child Left Behind and its focus on academics in this standard-based era?

In the project described in this article, researchers at VSA arts attempted to determine the value of embedded arts education (sometimes called *arts integration*) for students with disabilities (see box, “What Is VSA arts?”).

Many have argued that the intrinsic value of the arts (music, dance, visual arts, drama, and creative writing) in and of themselves should be a sufficient rea-

son to teach these subjects in schools, and many arts educators agree with that rationale. However, when schools are facing cuts in their arts programs and teachers must focus on preparing students to pass state assessments (von Zastrow, 2004), knowledge about how and when the arts affect learning can be useful. For these reasons, VSA arts, as part of its mandate to encourage the use of the arts in teaching students with disabilities, decided to investigate the impact of arts integration (see box, “What Are the Goals of Arts Integration?”).

Almost no information is available to help teachers evaluate either the quality of art and artistic experiences of students with disabilities or the effects of artistic experiences and arts integration on social, cognitive, academic, or artis-

tic skills (see box, “What Does the Literature Say About Evaluating the Artistic Experiences of Students With Disabilities?”). Instead of simply assessing the contribution of instruction in the arts, we wanted to evaluate the effects of incorporating arts-based instruction in teaching specific content and skills.

Because teachers often use rubrics as tools for organizing criteria for judging or scoring students’ work, the authors decided to investigate the potential of rubrics as measures of the results of an integrated arts approach. One of the values of rubrics is their flexibility as an authentic assessment measure. Educators can adapt rubrics to many situations to help them evaluate the quality of students’ work (Taggart, Phifer, Nixon, & Wood, 1998). In addition to the flexibility of rubrics, the previously

What Is VSA Arts?

VSA arts is an international nonprofit organization founded in 1974 by Ambassador Jean Kennedy Smith to create a society where all people with disabilities learn through, participate in, and enjoy the arts. VSA arts provides educators, parents, and artists with resources and the tools to support arts programming in schools and communities. VSA arts showcases the accomplishments of artists with disabilities and promotes increased access to the arts for people with disabilities. Each year, millions of people participate in VSA arts programs through a nationwide network of affiliates and in more than 60 countries around the world. VSA arts is an affiliate of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. (VSA arts, 2003–2006)

What Are the Goals of Arts Integration?

According to Corbett, Wilson, & Morse (2002, p. 17), "Arts integration enables students to be active, to experience things directly, and to express themselves in ways best suited to the students." A goal of arts integration is to use the arts so that students can have direct experience, can become involved in making decisions about their learning, and can become engaged in lessons that motivate them.

mentioned lack of research on evaluating the artistic experiences of students with disabilities also drove us to use rubrics.

We focused on developing a framework that could enable us to better understand student learning in and through the arts, as well as help us distill specific teaching skills and competencies that lead to successful arts integration. We created a basic evaluation framework by surveying existing evaluation literature, generating an evaluation framework, and exploring the implementation of the basic framework in classrooms. We then used this framework as a tool in our research to enable teachers and teaching artists to translate the often intuitive and ephemeral understanding of learning in and through the arts into something more tangible and concrete.

Developing Rubrics for Measuring Learning in and Through the Arts

To prepare a background guide for teachers and artists that would help them devise and use rubrics, we wanted to find or develop a model for using rubrics that measure the quality of artistic products or performance and measure the effects of art activities on learning. When we conducted research on the possibility of using rubrics, we found that many state standards of learning include standards for demonstrating proficiency in the arts and for measuring the influence of arts integration (Pistone & Lowther, 2004).

VSA arts was interested in presenting several examples of rubrics to teachers and asking them to use the examples to build rubrics that met their specific needs and circumstances. By borrowing from these existing rubrics, we designed a module that teachers could use to design their own rubrics that measure the influence of arts integration.

... we wanted to evaluate the effects of incorporating arts-based instruction in teaching specific content and skills ...

We based our model on both Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom, 1956) and the outcomes-based model for special education developed by the National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO; Ysseldyke, Thurlow, & Erickson, 1994). We reviewed specific outcomes and indicators from the NCEO materials for kindergarten through third grade, fifth grade, eighth grade, school completion, and postschool. Indicators for the academic and functional literacy domain for Grade 4, for example, include statements of the percentage of students who

- Use and comprehend language that effectively accomplishes the purpose of communication.
- Demonstrate problem-solving and critical-thinking skills.
- Have enough competence in math, reading, writing, and other academic domains (including science, language, and social studies) to function at home, at school, and in the community.
- Have enough competence in cultural domains—that is, in the fine and performing arts—to function at home, at school, and in the community.

We decided to focus on four general categories from the NCEO materials that we thought were most relevant to the arts: communication, problem-solving,

What Does the Literature Say About Evaluating the Artistic Experiences of Students With Disabilities?

Because educators often discuss arts integration in theoretical terms rather than by using systematic research, we were unable to rely on a well-defined and well-articulated body of previous knowledge (Eisner, 2002). The existing research has included limited investigations of what students learn when they are engaged in arts activities, and we know even less about the value of the arts for students with disabilities. Far more information describes teachers' attitudes about the value and impact of the arts in education than discusses empirical measures of this impact. In fact, teachers whom VSA arts has recently interviewed have expressed some reticence to consider such an evaluation (Mason, Steedly, & Thormann, in press; Mason, Thormann, & Steedly, 2004a).

In summarizing the attitudes of teachers, Mason et al. (2004a) indicated, "In some cases it seemed that teachers were tired of testing and looked to the arts to provide a respite from rigorous measurement" (p. 13). In the 2 years of focus groups and interview research that VSA arts recently conducted, teachers were quick to tell anecdotal stories about how the arts improved self-esteem and confidence; and some even indicated that students with disabilities were able to focus better, add more details to their writing, and increase their vocabulary (Mason et al., in press). However, these same teachers only rarely supported these assertions with systematically gathered evidence of improvements. research by others, such as Deasy (2002), echoes these more general findings, with only a handful of studies providing empirical evidence of the importance of visual art, music, dance, creative writing, and drama to academic and cognitive learning.

Table 1. Rubric for Integrating Arts With English and Writing

	Needs Improvement	Followed Directions With Few Errors	Followed Directions; No Mistakes	Some Interpretation; Advanced Knowledge; Original Thought	Showed Appreciation of Topic; Thoughtful Reflection; Built on Other Work	Evaluated Impact of Actions and Words
Demonstrated adequate planning						
Quality of draft writing						
Showed originality, imagination, and problem-solving						
Demonstrated comprehension						
Demonstrated knowledge of contextual factors (economics, social, political, psychological, and cultural concerns)						
Showed completeness and thoroughness						
Elaborated and added interesting detail						
Used art to enhance or complement meaning						
Technical aspects of writing or art						
Quality of final product						

academic and functional literacy, and cultural domains. As the NCEO materials indicated, possible data sources for each domain include

- Performance on language tests.
- Student contracts.
- Portfolios or performance records.
- Teacher observation of students in academic environments.
- Surveys of parents, teachers, and students.
- School district results on statewide assessments.
- Rubrics.
- Comparison of performance on tasks with rubrics.
- Analysis of teaching plans for domains.

By Grade 8, the performance indicators also include the percentage of students who need remediation in specific areas.

We used this general background information to develop an overarching conceptual rubric and numerous examples to help teachers develop their own rubrics for measuring how they can use the arts to demonstrate learning, as well as for measuring the quality of the students' artistic performance or product. Table 1 displays one of the rubrics that we shared with teachers.

Studying How Teachers Develop and Use Rubrics With the Arts

After we had developed a prototype, our research on using rubrics to measure gains in the arts occurred in two phases. The first phase involved informal dis-

semination and feedback over several months with various state member affiliates of VSA arts, as well as a telephone conference with a subset of seven teachers who agreed to review the guide that we were developing and provide informal feedback. During the second phase, we implemented rubrics with another sample of seven teachers located in three states.

Phase 1

During the first year, we sent a draft of the VSA rubric module (Mason, Thormann, & Steedly, 2004b) to affiliates of VSA arts and to arts educators. The seven teachers participated in a conference call that addressed strategies for evaluating the influence of the arts, particularly the use of rubrics to measure academic and artistic progress. We also

provided these teachers with important information for discussing the implications of the findings. These teachers clarified that although state assessments use rubrics, they do not require assessment of art ability or skill nor do the assessments specify the arts curriculum. Most of these teachers were not currently using rubrics to measure the effect of arts instruction and arts integration; they viewed the use of rubrics as a worthwhile approach and were interested in being involved in this research.

Phase 2

After making slight modifications to the guide on the basis of the feedback that we received in Phase 1, we designed a plan for implementing a rubrics program with the seven teachers selected for this phase of the research. The components of the program included the following:

- Distributing a condensed version of the rubric module with fewer examples.
- Selecting program participants who would represent a stratified sample of urban, suburban, and rural areas in various regions of the country and whose students were at various grade levels, had various disabilities, and represented a range of ethnic, cultural, racial, and socioeconomic groups.
- Establishing a VSA arts community of practice (CoP) that included an e-mail listserv, conference calls, and expectations for using rubrics to complete projects with students.

We decided to pursue a CoP methodology because we believed that providing an arena in which the project's participants could share their personal and professional knowledge of the project would give the results greater meaning and relevance for teachers and teaching artists who struggled with arts integration and evaluation. Tapping into the classroom experiences and individual understanding of teachers seemed to be the most direct route in developing a successful response to our evaluation question: How do we better understand

and evaluate the use of the arts for students with disabilities? The CoP method furnished a technological solution to the challenge of information sharing. Part of the VSA CoP involved using technology to allow teachers and educators to communicate and create knowledge together. The ability to upload attachments that included examples of lesson plans and rubrics benefited the shared enterprise that we were developing. This approach also allowed for the possibility of future replication with a larger group of participants (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002).

Participants. Six teachers and one resident artist participated in the VSA CoP. The three male and four female participants were from the southeastern, midwestern, and western United States. These teachers taught prekindergarten through eighth grade; one taught special education, one taught theatre arts, one taught music, and one taught visual arts. One of the teachers taught in a resource room, and another taught deaf and hard-of-hearing students in a public middle school. The participants signed a contract agreeing to the requirements of the project. After they submitted their final documentation, they received a stipend of \$1,000 for their involvement in this project.

The level of support for this project within schools and districts, as well as the degree of collaboration, varied. One participant worked in isolation in her school throughout the project, whereas many of the participants experienced considerable collaboration by sharing their planning with general educators, music and art teachers, and teachers of special education.

Procedures. We held three conference calls with participants over a period of 8 weeks. In the first call, we described our expectations for their involvement, the second was a progress check midway through the project, and the third focused on completing the requirements. Within 6 weeks after the end of the CoP, we expected participants to submit their final surveys, examples of rubrics that they had used with students, samples of student work, and permission forms signed by stu-

dents or their parents or guardians allowing VSA arts to display their art work.

Findings. All participants agreed that their participation in this CoP was a valuable activity. When we asked them to use a scale of 1 to 5 to rate whether they learned new information (with 5 being the highest rating), the mean rating was 3.8. Participants agreed that the most useful part of the experience was developing and using the rubrics. They indicated that they were eager to recommend this approach and experience to colleagues. Table 2 includes comments from participants. These comments highlight how much they valued this experience.

Implementation of the Community of Practice

Participant involvement in the online listserv occurred in several stages. This section presents the stages, as well as examples of dialogue from the CoP listserv.

Getting to Know One Another

We asked participants to begin by telling something about their teaching experience, including the subject matter and grade level that they taught and the types of disabilities that their students had, as well as where they were teaching and what they hoped to gain from this experience.

I hope to come up with better ways to include ESE [Exceptional Students Education, that is, students with special needs] students in activities that involve regular education students. I want these activities to be legitimately aesthetic for all participants.

To break the ice, we also asked the teachers to give an example of an arts integration lesson that went particularly well.

One of my students' favorite lessons is a simple idea that was presented to me by some teachers who had attended a conference together. You need plain transparencies, an overhead projector, CD player and appropriate music; a screen is optional. . . . The students draw and color on the

Table 2. Evaluation Comments

Area of Evaluation	Comments
Student learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• I found students learned quickly and retained more if I continuously quizzed and drilled each student as [he or she] worked, lined up, and as I passed out materials.
Rubrics	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Just being involved in this made me look at rubrics with a more critical eye and made me develop rubrics for projects for which I had not previously used them.• I will use this to create portfolios within my class in the future.• I am becoming more comfortable with the language and development of rubrics—this can only improve my contribution to other educational projects.• I believe that the cognitive development rubric will be very useful in the future. It's a great way of assessing student growth. It's easy to use, read, and share with parents.
Community of practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• I used the community of educators' responses to see whether I was on track with what I was doing. I compared their rubric development with mine as well.• The conference call helped to clarify things that I was unsure of.• The group e-mails were useful; plus I picked up ideas from other participants.
What participants learned	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• I got better at putting together a rubric and being more cognizant of goals, methods, and special-education adaptations within my lesson. I improved my working relationship with homeroom teachers.• I learned the importance of modifying rubrics for students with varying levels and abilities.• Students really benefit from seeing the rubric they will be graded on at the very outset of the project or assignment. It focuses them on what they actually have to accomplish.• Creating rubrics helps me hone in on exactly what I want the students to pick up on in a given unit.• The project put me personally back on track with the big picture in education. I have always integrated my curriculum but never tracked actual cognitive growth.• I found through this project that the teacher also learns and grows, as well as the students. It is similar to growth I experienced through the National Board of Professional Teaching Process several years ago.

transparency. You could ask students to draw a favorite place or season of the year . . . the more of the transparency that they cover, the better. When the drawings are

finished, dim the lights and start the music and overhead, place the transparencies on the overhead, and ask students to identify their own work. The artist then

can stand in front of the screen and move to the music. . . . [A sheet placed between the students and the projector reduces glare, and students can move the sheet to make their artwork dance too.]

My students . . . love working with clay, and we have been making bowls to donate to Empty Bowls for several years. I also enjoy working with draped clay because it allows us to be creative and efficient. In one class period of 45 minutes, students can create a vessel that is very creative. . . . I always have students drape their clay inside the bowl so that when the clay dries and shrinks, it will not crack. . . . One great activity my students are always successful with is creating free-form clay slab bowls in the likeness of Dale Chihuly's work. . . . This is a no-fail project. All students succeed because the shapes they cut out are free-form and organic.

Initial Discussion of Rubrics

Teachers' comments during the initial discussion of rubrics included the following:

I am trying to hone in on defining evidence better. In this description . . . in some of the objectives, evidence of success is self-explanatory—raises hand, etc., but other objectives (respectful, appropriate, good working relationship, etc.) could be described according to the IEP goals of each student and evidenced by teacher observation of student behaviors and actions. If anyone can help me, I'd appreciate that.

Researcher Clarification

The researchers' clarifications included the following:

To an Individual

In terms of the rubrics you presented, I . . . ask that you attempt a couple of modifications. I can see where, from the teacher's perspective, the items in your rubric are important, particularly if you are working with students who can be disruptive. . . . I . . . ask that you consider how to better

Table 3. Rubric Used for Fourth-Grade Lesson on Fossils

	Unsatisfactory; No Evidence of Understanding	Improvement Needed; Many Errors	Satisfactory Progress; Some Technical Errors	Student Demonstrated Skills and Knowledge With Few Errors	Advanced Ability, Understanding, Creativity
Technical aspects of art craftsmanship.					
Information recall: Can the student correctly answer questions pertaining to factual knowledge presented in the lesson?					
Use of art to display understanding of lesson.					
Process comprehension: Can the student explain and recreate the project without the teacher's assistance?					
Evaluation: Student's ability to critique own work.					

define evidence. . . . Please compare your rubric again with the examples that we provided and note that when we did refer to social skills such as cooperation, we put it in the context of a higher-level cognitive behavior (creating and problem-solving).

I also request that you submit one rubric that focuses on the impact of music on academic or cognitive skills. Examples might be instances where you collaborate to teach a unit on Native American drumming as part of a history and social studies lesson or drumming and rhythm in relationship to a unit on fractions.

To the Group

To clarify, our research objective is to work with you on how what you do through arts integration—tying art to academic work—impacts academic learning or cognition—including possibly student ability to generalize, conceptualize, analyze, synthesize, etc.

- The tool that we want you to use for your research is rubrics. . . . You can measure very small, discrete behaviors or larger behaviors with

rubrics. The scope of what you do is up to you. I find your information on what you are doing to be very exciting, so stay with what you are doing, go with your strengths, and . . . we should end up with an array of examples.

- You may want to use rubrics with an entire class or only with a few students—so you can modify the rubrics to meet the needs of individual students.
- You can redesign the rubrics so that students understand the words and can evaluate their own growth.

Let's all start with one project where rubrics will be used and share them. . . . [We] will look them over and give you some immediate feedback.

Deciding What to Teach and How to Use Rubrics

The following sample indicates how participants refined their concepts of what they would teach and how they planned to use rubrics:

This is a short outline of the lessons that I plan on using. . . . The

rubrics measure both art and academic knowledge gained.

Lesson 1: Art and Science

This lesson integrates art and the study of birds in a colorful drawing depicting the stages of a bird's life in springtime. Students also learn the importance of leaving nature alone by not disrupting the habitat of birds.

Lesson 2: Fossil Plates/Relief Pendants

Students learn about . . . fossils while they create clay plates impressed with fossil designs. After the plates are fired, the students . . . create a clay pendant with the relief of their fossil design.

As part of their participation in the CoP, educators and artists submitted rubrics, lesson plans, and examples of student work. Table 3 shows a rubric that a teacher used with the fossil-plate project for fourth-grade students. The teacher built that lesson around a science video on dinosaurs and began the lesson with an introduction to fossils. Students brainstormed words that described fossils and examined real fossils while they discussed how fossils

Figure 1. Fossil Project Result



originated. Figure 1 shows an art product from that lesson on fossils.

As a part of evaluating the students' understanding of fossils, the teacher asked students three questions:

- What are fossils?
- How do fossils develop?
- How did you make your fossil look old?

Students answered the first question with such statements as, "Fossils are like pieces of bone from dinosaurs—that is what fossils are," and "A fossil is something that died millions of years ago." Two students' responses to the second question were "You made them by nature from the dinosaur bones drying and made fossils," and "with rocks." Students' responses to the third question included "With clay and fake bugs and paints" and "You make it look old by shaping it."

Final Thoughts

Teachers benefited from the collaborative nature of the CoP process. Although

classrooms can be isolated places, the CoP allowed teachers to reach out and learn from one another. The results of this preliminary work indicate that educators were engaged in the CoP, that they valued both the CoP and learning to use rubrics, and that they planned to expand their use of rubrics.

Focusing the CoP discussion on rubrics and lesson plans allowed teachers to become more comfortable with evaluation. They began to view rubrics as an instructional option that helped them more thoroughly understand what students were learning. Their comfort was evident, since participants modified the approach that we recommended in several ways, including modifications that enabled students to use the rubrics to evaluate their own work.

The CoP focused attention on the need for further research in several key areas and revealed the need for developing arts-focused, inclusive rubrics. The limited time and scope of the work did not allow in-depth analysis of the rubrics. In addition, the implications of

the CoP process for professional development need further attention. More research and analysis may also help researchers understand the influence that in-service and professional development activities can have on developing and using rubrics, as well as clarifying the relationship between using rubrics in a professional development activity and enabling researchers to learn how teachers assess the impact of arts integration.

The VSA arts CoP facilitated connections between the classroom practice of teachers and efforts to develop strategies for understanding the value of using the arts for teaching students with disabilities. Learning in and through the arts is an activity that is intimately intertwined with social, academic, and cognitive growth. Efforts to evaluate the degree to which learning occurs need to reflect that complexity.

Learning in and through the arts is an activity that is intimately intertwined with social, academic, and cognitive growth.

The lesson plans and rubrics that the researchers collected throughout this project show much creativity and substance reflective of arts-based learning. As exemplified in the fossil lesson, the teachers examined science through an artistic lens; and the evaluation of that unit assessed what students learned in both science and arts-related knowledge. A rubric that examines the arts must consider the creative alongside the cognitive and must draw directly from the knowledge of educators as it seeks to articulate what students learn.

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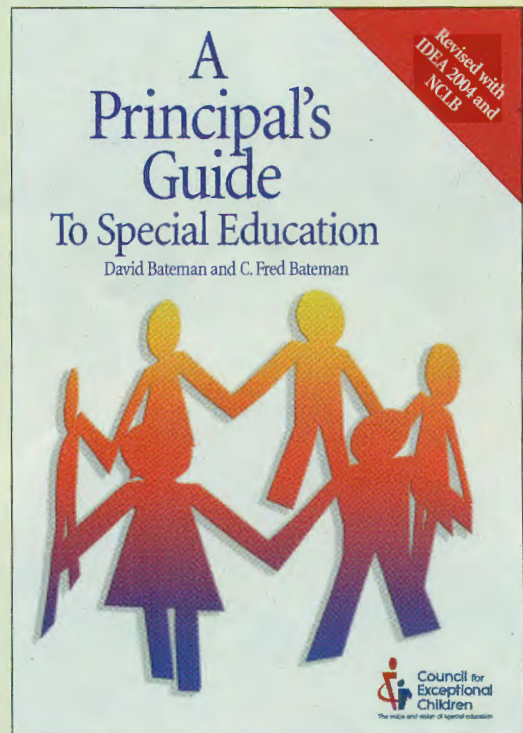
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