Center stage: Arts-based read-alouds

Arts-based literacy instruction can qualitatively change teaching and learning. Arts-based literacy helps students become more different, not more alike. When the arts are used meaningfully unusual ideas and novel products become the norm—no cotton-ball beard Santa faces or handprint turkey art that relies more on following directions than using the arts to convey honest ideas and feelings. Arts-based literacy uses multiple bodies of research—academic, cognitive, motivation, and social—to inform and increase the strategy repertoire of teachers. Executed within a framework that places artful teaching at the forefront, arts-based teaching can change an off-the-rack lesson into a designer one. Consider the following two snapshots from regular classrooms in which the arts are integral to meaning making.

Classroom vignette 1: Drama-based read-aloud

The lights are out in Judy Trotter’s room. Music plays softly in the background. She is just finishing a read-aloud of *Barefoot* (Edwards, 1997) to her first graders. “Find your personal space,” Judy says, and the students stand up and hurry to spots where they can stretch out their arms without touching one another. “OK, show me walking in place—barefoot.” Seventeen children tiptoe, slide, or shuffle, without moving out of their personal spaces. A steady beat from background percussion guides movement.

Judy coaches with comments like “Good job of concentrating. I see people being very careful. Some of you are really showing how you feel with your faces.” When Judy stops the CD, she continues with a contrasting mime of “boots.” Children stomp and squat, peering and glaring as they take the role of slave hunters.

This follow-up to the read-aloud lasts about 10 minutes. It culminates with Judy using narrative pantomime (Heinig, 1993) during which students mime the major events in this story set during the U.S. Civil War. The pantomime includes no props except for the use of flashlights at one point to suggest how stars were used as guideposts for escaping slaves.

Classroom vignette 2: Music- and art-based read-aloud

Down the hall, Bernadette Chilcote is working with another group of first graders studying the same social studies unit. Yesterday she read to the class the picture book *Follow the Drinking Gourd* (Winter, 1997). Today they are sitting in a carpeted area doing a “close listening.” The literacy material includes a CD of a man and woman singing “Follow the Drinking Gourd” and playing a guitar (Harris & Harris, 1998). “What do you notice about their voices?” Bernadette asks. “What musical instruments do you hear? How do these voices and instruments make you feel?” After each question, Bernadette waits until most hands are up before calling on anyone. The students’ answers are thoughtful:

“The man’s voice is deeper.”

“Her voice is beautiful. Like an angel.”

“I think I hear a guitar because there is strumming.”

“I heard strings plucking.”

“It feels like they are afraid. It feels like it has to be a secret or they’ll die.”

Bernadette responds with other questions like “What makes you think that?” and “Why do you think so?”
After this close listening, students are asked to connect the meanings of the lyrics to this book and others they’ve read in the unit. They talk about how the books had similar information and different facts. Some students bring up the “sadness” of the time, while others talk about “how the world is better.”

Eventually, Bernadette passes out the lyrics and they do two more close listenings with the words in front of them. Children follow with their fingers and sing along, especially the refrain, “Follow the drinking gourd! Follow the drinking gourd. For the old man is a waiting for to carry you to freedom, if you follow the drinking gourd” (Winter, 1997, p. 45).

The day ends with Bernadette forecasting the art-making options students have for the verses of the song. Students cut apart the lyrics and Bernadette shows them ways they might place them on large paper. She reminds them about the chart on the wall that shows “art elements” they can use, including different kinds of lines, shapes, textures, and color mixing.

Why arts-based literacy?

Judy and Bernadette teach at a creative-arts elementary school in Charleston, South Carolina, USA. They are two teachers among thousands who have undergone whole-school reform using arts-based models. While the approach goes by many names—arts integration, arts immersion, and arts infusion—they all share the same philosophy. Teachers believe drama, dance, music, and visual art should be integral to literacy instruction because they are essential means of constructing meaning.

Literacy is the arts

The role of the arts throughout human history documents their importance and implies that they should occupy a central place in literacy. Long before the first human uttered a word, our ancestors mimed, danced, carved bone flutes, beat rhythms on drums, and painted images on cave walls to express their thoughts and emotions. These creative nonverbal arts are innate “languages” children use from birth on. From the musical babbling of an infant to the spontaneous dancing of a toddler, children show the propensity to communicate through the arts. Every preschooler that pretends to be a dog or picks up a lipstick to explore drawing on the bathroom wall should remind us of the primacy of the arts in communication.

Without the arts, learners are limited to reading, writing, speaking, and listening to process ideas. Such a truncated literacy curriculum leaves many students mute—especially those who struggle. As Eisner (2002) reminds us, classrooms that are not intentionally “aesthetic” may become “anaesthetic.” Indeed, if literacy is the effective communication of thoughts and feelings, how can any program be considered humane or balanced if the focus is only on the language arts.

Research

Arts integration is supported by a large research base (Deasy, 2002; Fiske, 1999), as well as testimonials from educators, parents, and students (Upitis & Smirthim, 2003). Studies connect the arts with academic gains, including strong support for using drama, as Judy does, to increase comprehension. In particular, the arts have shown powerful results for engaging diverse learners in high-poverty schools. Most important are the unique cognitive, affective, and social contributions the arts make to learning. Educators are realizing that the special nature of the arts adds essential missing ingredients to the literacy curriculum.

No Child Left Behind and the arts

In a 2004 letter to all U.S. school superintendents, former Secretary of Education Rod Paige wrote, “the arts are a core academic subject under the No Child Left Behind Act.” He touted the significant roles the arts can play in academic achievement while acknowledging their inherent value. He lamented the “disturbing and just plain wrong” notion that No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002) should be used to shrink the role of the arts in schools. The letter ends with reference to the National Longitudinal Study of 25,000 students (Deasy, 2002), in which a strong correlation was found between the arts and better test scores. What’s more, arts students “performed more community service, watched fewer hours of television, reported less boredom in school and were less likely to drop out of school” (Paige).

Paige (2004) emphasized that these findings were true even for students from the lowest socioeconomic quartile, “belying the assumption...
that socioeconomic status, rather than arts engagement, contributes to such gains in academic achievement and social involvement.” Compelling support for arts-based education does come from striking successes with disadvantaged populations, especially at-risk youth. The arts have been shown to contribute to lower recidivism rates, increased self-esteem, and the development of creative problem-solving and communication skills (Deasy, 2002; Fiske, 1999).

**Why use arts-based read-alouds?**

Arts-based literacy instruction gives equity to all the communication arts, both verbal and nonverbal. And while the daily read-aloud is not the only arts-based literacy event at Judy and Bernadette’s school, it does take center stage. Through the read-aloud, important content teaching happens for the science and social studies units—to which most literacy instruction is connected. What’s more, it is through the read-aloud that the main support pillars of reading instruction are addressed.

Twenty years ago the Commission on Reading concluded that reading aloud to children had singular importance “for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading” (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985, p. 23). The daily teacher read-aloud has since earned a permanent place in the literacy block (Cooper, 2003; Tompkins, 2003). A fund of professional experience gives testimony to its virtues. Artful read-alouds model fluency, promote standard English, allow students to hear literary language from books above their levels, boost comprehension, and make student writing richer (Martin, 2003; Morrow, 2003; Pinnell & Jaggar, 2003; Sipe, 2000). In addition, the motivational power of read-alouds cannot be underestimated. According to Trelease (1995), “Every time we read aloud to a child or class we’re giving a commercial for the pleasure of reading” (p. 45). The power of a shared story emotionally bonds listeners as they vicariously solve problems that propel fictional plots. Not to be ignored are the “ah ha” moments that are possible when informational books are read aloud and students are invited into “secrets of the universe” from social studies and science.

The daily read-aloud may be a fixture in American literacy routines, but its effectiveness rests in the implementation (Fisher, Flood, Lapp, & Frey, 2004). As with any other teaching tool, the artistry of the teacher determines its impact. It isn’t a matter of just doing a read-aloud, but how it is done. The meaning-focused nature of the arts can combine with their instructional and motivational power to magnify the effects of daily read-alouds.

**The goal: Creating meaning**

All art forms demand the personal creation of meaning, just as reading and writing do. What drama, visual art, music, and dance strategies add are unique avenues for expression and reception of ideas and feelings. As Eisner (2000) put it, “the limits of our language do not define the limits of our cognition” (p. 8). This is not to suggest that the language arts should be removed from the heart of learning but to point out that we know more than we can say with words; instruction in reading, writing, speaking, and listening is amplified by adding the special communication capacities the arts provide.

**Parallel processes.** Meaning is created through the arts using a process parallel to reading and writing. This creative problem-solving process has the same “before–during–after” stages as the writing process, the reading process, and the scientific method. The symbol systems and materials are different but otherwise the processes are basically the same: purposeful problem solving through data gathering, experimentation, drafting, revising, editing, and publication or “public sharing” of ideas in a variety of forms.

All communication processes are image based because it is nearly impossible to think without images. Eisner (2000) explained succinctly the role of visual images in reading and writing: “The writer starts with vision and ends with words. The reader starts with the writer’s words and ends with vision” (p. 9). In arts-based lessons, instead of using words, students may be drawing lines or shapes and using color or texture to express thoughts and emotions. Students learn the vocabulary of drama and dance that calls for use of body, space, energy, and time in imaginative ways—imaginative in the sense that students are creating images that express thoughts and feelings. Images are the workhorses of creative problem solving in the arts, just as they are keys to the composition and comprehension processes of fluent writers and readers.
Meaningful integration. Arts-based literacy advocates are quick to caution that meaningful use of the arts is the goal—not superficial coloring sheets, ready-made “piggy-back” songs, mimicked dance movements, or memorized story lines. Meaningful arts integration happens in a classroom culture that values diversity, surprise, creative problem solving, risk taking, and experimentation. Also essential to meaningful use is the development of arts techniques and an arts knowledge base that facilitate the use of a wide range of materials and skills to express ideas and feelings.

Imagine a classroom where there are no right answers but a range of possible responses. Imagine a classroom where praise is replaced by coaching in the form of descriptive feedback offered by peers as often as teachers. Imagine a classroom where engagement is not manipulated through the use of points or coupons but happens because the arts hold natural appeal. These are not imaginary classrooms but classrooms that are driven by a passion for helping students realize their own full meaning-making capacities—possible only when the arts are central teaching and learning tools.

Preplanning for arts-based read-alouds

Robyn Lane (pseudonym) is a third-grade teacher whose department team decided to use the chapter book Because of Winn-Dixie (DiCamillo, 2000) during a science unit because many of the book’s topics and themes dovetail with the scientific method: noticing details and patterns, delight in surprise, respect for diversity, taking new perspectives, and unique problem solving. The teachers reread the book to find “enduring ideas” to anchor lessons (McTighe & Wiggins, 2004). They noted important topics or “big ideas” that answered the question, What was this really about? This same question was repeatedly posed to students to invite them to construct personal meanings after each read-aloud session.

The team expanded the topics into theme statements using full sentences to encourage complete thoughts. They continued this process with students as the story progressed by adding to an ongoing chart entitled “What are we learning about people and the world from this book?” The following are examples of chapter topics followed by theme statements for Because of Winn-Dixie (DiCamillo, 2000).

Chapter 1: Names—Names often derive from meaningful connections.
Chapter 2: Surprises—Lives are changed by unplanned events.
Chapter 4: Details—Facts and details are needed for complete understanding.
Chapter 7: Perspective—Looking at the ideas of friends differently opens up increased possibilities for relationships.

Collaborative planning with arts specialists

At Robyn’s school, classroom teachers have monthly planning time with arts specialists. In addition, Robyn consults informally with specialists before and after school or at lunch. Arts specialists are one source of music, art, drama, and dance strategies. Other sources include local artists, visits to arts-based schools, and websites like the Kennedy Center’s www.artsedge.org and www.arts4learning.org. Collections of strategies are included in books such as Multiple Forms of Literacy (Piazza, 1999), Creating Meaning Through Literature and the Arts (Cornett, 2007), Weaving Through Words (Mantione & Smead, 2003), and Multiple Intelligences in the Classroom (Armstrong, 2000).

During collaborative planning with arts specialists teachers try to find natural and meaningful connections to big ideas and themes. The question “What is the best way to cause students to make sense?” is central. Doing a pig jig dance would hardly lead students to enduring ideas that underlie The Three Little Pigs. On the other hand, dance or movement could be meaningfully used to reinforce the concept of a sturdy foundation. The goal is to increase understanding using the engagement potential of the arts.

Robyn’s team planned arts strategies to use before, during, and after the read-aloud, with an eye to particular arts concepts and techniques that also needed to be taught. The team ordered multiple copies of the book for students to use as they planned arts responses and for those who wished to read along during read-alouds. Classroom arts responses were shared on a daily and weekly basis during performances and exhibitions in which students learned to take roles as both audience members and performers. Usually, these were within classes and grade lev-
els, but sometimes sharing was schoolwide. These “publications” became main assessment pieces to document students’ literacy progress. Additional assessment for the read-aloud happened through a literature log—a composition book in which students recorded (a) what was learned (plot events, big ideas or themes, important words, and information about characters) in each chapter, (b) connections to their own lives (feelings, events), and (c) reflections on arts activities.

**Example arts strategies**

The arts strategies chosen to develop the themes for *Because of Winn-Dixie* (DiCamillo, 2000) were actually presented to students as problems with a range of valid solutions. They were not one-shot activities. Solid arts strategies can be repeated over and over with adaptations. At integrated arts schools, students expect to be engaged through the arts and understand that the arts expand their abilities to construct meaning. Arts integration is process oriented, but products are created in the process and are used for assessment.

The following are arts strategies used repeatedly by Robyn’s team to increase concentration; focus; creative problem solving; vocabulary; and understanding of point of view, mood, characterization, and more.

**Visual art**

To encourage students to look closely at art, teachers can ask, What do you see? How does it make you feel? It is useful to have available a reference chart of art elements (e.g., color, line, shape, texture) and design principles (e.g., balance, unity, perspective) to help students construct their comments. This strategy can be used with any picture book and was used with *Because of Winn-Dixie* (DiCamillo, 2000) in several chapters.

Students are taught how to make mental pictures using art concepts like color, shape, line, and texture. These prompts stretch the visual imagination that strong comprehension relies upon. Students are asked to describe their mental pictures during and after read-alouds and may also make art from them.

Students also are taught to use a variety of art materials, tools, and techniques. Robyn’s students were given the task of inventing a new candy and could choose papier mâché, oil pastels, or construction paper for their artwork. Experimentation with materials and techniques was encouraged, and a rubric was used to evaluate their finished products.

**Drama**

Robyn used short pantomimes about emotions or actions, called Quick Mime, to introduce parts of *Because of Winn-Dixie* (DiCamillo, 2000). She asked students to show happiness with their faces, arms, fingers, and then whole bodies. As students walked around the classroom expressing happiness, Robyn used a tambourine to cue them to freeze. Half of the class was then asked to comment, using descriptive feedback, not just praise, on body shapes and facial expressions. Other times, Robyn used Quick Mime for fear and unusual verbs found in the book.

In another activity called BME Pantomime, Robyn asked students to list actions from the beginning, middle, and end of a chapter or book. She reviewed the plot by calling out actions for students to show with their faces and bodies.

Tableau is another activity in which small groups of students use their bodies to create poses that reflect a scene from a book. Tableau is an excellent way for students to synthesize meanings and show literal or implied information. Robyn’s students worked in small groups to plan tableaux around topics, themes, and plot events.

In the Teacher as Interviewer strategy, students each picked a role from the story, and Robyn used a plastic microphone to interview them. She asked students to explain what happened in their scenes, and they answered in character. This teacher-led interview is an effective strategy to review chapters and introduce new ones. Students are coached to stay in character using their faces, bodies, and voices.

In One-liners, each student chooses or writes a sentence a character said or might say. Students then perform their lines expressively. Everyone listens and signals when they think they know the character.

**Music**

Background music can enhance any read-aloud. Before reading a chapter in *Because of Winn-Dixie* (DiCamillo, 2000), Robyn invited a guest artist to play several classical guitar pieces while she read. The students were mesmerized. Nothing substitutes...
for live performance, but CDs are more readily available to achieve the purpose of setting mood through music. Close listening should be followed with reflections using questions like What do you notice? How does it make you feel? Why? Robyn used a CD to play background guitar music during the reading of a chapter the next day. The class then discussed how the music affected the read-aloud. Later, they viewed the movie version of the book and discussed the role of background music in the film. They also brainstormed books that had been turned into films using visual art and drama with background music.

In an activity called Word Choirs, Robyn had students keep an ongoing list of important and special words from their reading. Before a new chapter, Robyn often invited duets, trios, and quartets to perform their words from the previous chapter. One student would conduct, and the “word singers” would say their words according to directions from the conductor: louder, softer, faster, slower, and so on. Actual music vocabulary was used to make this more authentic (e.g., piano for soft and forte for loud).

Robyn also had her students write songs or raps to summarize themes and events in several chapters. They used both familiar and original melodies and improvised from a variety of poetry forms including lunes (3-5-3 pattern of numbers of words) and clerihew (four-line biographical poems with an a-b-a-b structure). In another activity, Robyn had students listen for and write down words they enjoyed hearing. Then, each student said their words aloud to demonstrate their “music,” and the class echoed differences in volume, rate, emphasis, and pause. They connected these prosodic vocal elements to the musical elements of dynamics, pitch, and tempo.

Dance

Using Transformation Dances, Robyn had her students plan with a small group how to show a change from one emotional state to another. One group of students chose a “fear” shape to start, and on the count of eight they transformed into a “safe” shape. All groups had a chance to share their dances that followed a freeze-move-freeze sequence. Afterward, they reflected on how the shapes felt and how they were different.

Other times, both before and after reading, Robyn had her students use Dance In. The class formed a large circle, and Robyn asked students to perform certain dance elements if they knew the answers to questions she asked about a story. She referred to a dance elements chart, and, after a brief time, turned the chart over to individual students, who then called out the dance criteria classmates were to use to show literary elements from the book and other important story information.

**Arts integration is building momentum**

Worldwide, integrated-arts teachers like Robyn, Judy, and Bernadette are reporting increased focus and energy for learning—and not just among the students. The results are encouraging. One principal of an arts-based school in Chicago, Illinois, said that it was the “embrace of the arts” that propelled school achievement from the bottom 10% in the district to the top 10% in the first year of arts integration (Rabkin & Redmond, 2005). The momentum for arts-based education is mounting. Sizable support now exists in the form of dozens of studies that show correlations between the arts and growth in cognitive, affective, and social areas. U.S. networks like the Arts Education Partnership (www.aeparts.org) and the Kennedy Center’s Partners in Education are active in advancing meaningful integration of the arts into daily classroom practice. The Annenberg Foundation recently gave US$20 million to school projects designed to “transform education through the arts.” In 2004, the Education Commission of the States announced that Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee chose to lead a first-of-its-kind initiative on arts in education. In 2005, the Dana Foundation earmarked US$2 million to examine the impact of the arts on the brain after years of press about the Mozart effect and other arts influences on learning. Corporate foundations such as Ford, Hewlett-Packard, General Electric, and MetLife are increasingly underwriting substantial arts-based education projects, citing the contributions of the arts to critical workplace skills. Business leaders are calling for “higher-order thinking skills in the 21st century—specifically, critical thinking and nimbleness in judgment, creativity and imagination, cooperative decision making, leadership, high-level literacy and communication, and the capacity for problem posing and problem solving.”
These are exactly the skills the arts help develop.

Literacy—especially reading—has a place of privilege in our schools. The public trusts literacy leaders to consider promising possibilities as they structure communication curricula for children of the 21st century. A long view of literacy suggests revising the concept to include the first tools humans used to receive and express thoughts and feelings: the nonlanguage arts. It behooves us to make the arts integral to literacy instruction. Arts-based read-alouds are but one example of a way the arts can qualitatively change teaching and learning. The arts give life to life and can give life to learning—especially literacy learning.

Cornett is a professor emerita at Wittenberg University in Springfield, OH, USA. E-mail ccornett@wittenberg.edu.

References