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BOOK REVIEW

A Symphony of Possibilities: A Handbook for Arts Integration in Secondary English Language Arts

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If you're looking for a resource that has the potential to engage students, deepen learning, and energize your classroom, pick up *A Symphony of Possibilities: A Handbook for Arts Integration in Secondary English Language Arts*, an NCTE publication developed by the Commission on Arts and Literacies (COAL). In their Introduction, Katherine Macro and Michelle Zoss (2019) assert that "we need these opportunities in classrooms across the country today, perhaps now more than ever before" (p. xii). They penned this before a global pandemic upended classrooms and impacted learning. I would argue that students need the kind of learning experiences explored in *A Symphony of Possibilities* especially now.

As we emerge from the pandemic, we will be processing what we learned about teaching and learning during this time. Engagement will be one area needing a close look. In light of where we currently are, this edited collection of arts-integrated resources is inspiring. Drawing on strategies and approaches that are grounded in theory and have proven successful in secondary classrooms, teachers share concrete ways that drama, music, drawing, visual arts, and poetry have been instrumental for authentic learning in their classrooms. That students are engaged is palpable in reading each of the chapters.

Integrating the Arts Deepens Learning

What particularly stands out in *A Symphony of Possibilities* is the philosophy underpinning each of the chapters. The arts can and should be an integral part of the ELA classroom, rather than added as extension activities or dismissed because of time constraints. Macro and Zoss articulate the demands over test prep and standardized test score accountability that have increasingly taken precedence in classrooms, and several of the subsequent chapters confirm the challenge and what it has meant for curricular planning. Demands on time in class have grown but those expectations don't necessarily foster student learning.

A Symphony of Possibilities asserts the theoretical and pedagogical rationale that grounds the teaching and learning described throughout its pages. Each chapter lays out the research and supporting evidence for integrating the arts in classrooms and its impact on student learning. Throughout the book, teachers/researchers make the argument for the ways arts-integrated activities provide opportunities for meaning making, critical thinking, and agency in student learning. Students meet state standards as they engage in authentic learning. The arts-related activities described in each chapter have proven successful in classrooms. For those who may be hesitant about reactions from school

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administrators or parents to arts integration in the ELA classroom, the theoretical foundation clearly provides multiple arguments for the validity of the work students create.

Timothy Duggan (2019) frames a useful distinction between arts integration and arts enhancement, making the case for students' opportunity to create music as a part of their learning process. While incorporating music thematically into a lesson or introducing a song as a motivational hook can be beneficial as an enhancement, Duggan advocates for the value of students actually creating music themselves (p. 2).

That premise is clear throughout the book. Rather than utilizing the arts to reinforce students' interaction with literature or sharpen their writing, facilitating students' ability to produce their own artistic responses gives them agency. Throughout the collection, the arts-integration model goes beyond enhancing their learning through the arts. Students become engaged practitioners, creating, embodying, producing, and publishing art in the ELA classroom and beyond, which deepens learning.

Students Actively Create

A Symphony of Possibilities walks us through students in multiple modes actively engaging with texts, writing, speaking, and listening, collaboratively and individually. In the first two chapters, students write songs. Students create and perform spoken word poetry in Chapter 3 and respond to textual ideas through original found poetry in Chapter 4. In Chapters 5 and 6, students physically explore ideas through drama, which informs their writing or understanding of a text such as a Shakespeare play or a novel. In Chapters 7-10, students generate visual responses--drawings, artifacts, murals--that illustrate their understanding of complexities in literary themes, characters, or foster identity in relation to texts.

When students create these artistic responses, they are engaging in a multimodal

experience. The significance of that shouldn't be downplayed. Referring to Miles Myers' (1996) work on literacy, Toby Emert (2019) explains, "[The] ability to transpose information into new forms exhibits mastery of the information" (p. 53). Whether shaping a found poem based on a play, creating a rap song in response to a vignette in a novel, drawing a character mirror to reflect their sense of the character's inner thoughts, or role-playing to explore themes or character perspective, these multimodal activities push students' exploration of course material as they shift between modes and transform the ideas into their own creation, marking a deeper, richer learning experience.

Reflection Reinforces Learning

Along with highlighting the theory behind the effectiveness of the arts-integrated work and describing classroom-tested specific activities, lessons, and units, the teachers emphasize the importance of reflection as they recount the work with their students. Reflection is often built into the arts-based work during the process and definitely becomes part of the wrap-up. As students dialogue together, they synthesize their understanding of what they've learned. While reflecting, students see commonalities and differences in their artistic responses. Whether reflecting in discussion or individually on paper, the metacognitive process of articulating reasons behind their choices also furthers their critical thinking about the text or their writing.

Addressing Hesitations about Arts Integration

Each chapter includes a conversation about assessment. Assessing creative arts-based projects can be a challenge and the teachers in this collection are open about ways they approach it. Some share sample rubrics that they've developed or created with their students for summative assessments; others include questionnaires and

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feedback forms which support student reflection on the process. In Chapter 2, Christian Goering and Amy Matthews (2019) comment on the effect of the formative assessment during their social activism unit. Students performed their protest songs as they were developing them and received verbal feedback from peers as well as written feedback. They noted that feedback during the songwriting process ended up raising the bar as students saw other groups' level of accomplishment and then rose to meet the challenge (p. 26).

Questions about assessing creative work aren't the only hesitations some may have about arts integration in their classrooms. In *A Symphony of Possibilities*, the teachers/researchers don't sidestep the issues raised by those with reservations about arts integration. Alisha White (2019) frankly shares her own reflection on the issues in Chapter 7 "Exploring the Possibilities and Tensions of Visual Responses to Literature." When confronted with the "fun" students are having and doubts about the rigor that the work involves, White counters with research that she's drawn on over the years. Research supports what she knows to be true firsthand about image-making in her classroom; the level of inquiry and critical analysis required to shape a visual response is rigorous (p. 105).

Some chapters address questions about students who doubt their artistic ability or balk at participating in drama activities. Teachers describe creating safe spaces for students to explore and select from a range of options which promote creativity. Flexibility opens space for students to tackle projects in ways that work for them. Visual arts responses can involve artistic drawing but also geometric shapes, stick figures, abstract designs or media-generated images to convey complex understandings of texts. Practices that respect the concerns but also don't preclude arts-integrated classrooms are inclusive.

In Chapter 3, students share their spoken word poetry in small groups. They aren't required to perform for the whole class. However, once

students have received the positive peer feedback in their small groups, Wendy Williams (2019) describes students surprising themselves by wanting to perform for the whole group in an open mic. Scaffolding the process gives students the tools to participate (p. 44). While questions about arts integration are valid, the theoretical and pedagogical evidence supports the value and effectiveness of these practices in secondary classrooms, all while meeting state standards and curricular expectations.

As someone who has integrated drama approaches into my classroom, I can echo the teachers and researchers in the collection on the significant impact for student learning. I've observed the power of that engagement. The collection serves as a wonderful resource of specific classroom arts-integrated lessons with a foundation in scholarship that supports why this is effective pedagogy. One can incorporate the visual image-making, songwriting, or drama exercises framed in the chapters or use them as a springboard for the creative integration of arts in the classroom. *A Symphony of Possibilities* isn't a newly released NCTE publication; it came out in the summer of 2019, but if you missed it, it's worth checking out. The possibilities are inspiring.

References

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