Interdisciplinary Arts Education: An Examination Through Action Research

by
Renee S. Ioffredo
Westminster Choir College of Rider University

The purpose of this research was to study a second grade class during an interdisciplinary lesson that combined music and poetry. The research examined the nature of interdisciplinary studies to determine the degree of integration that occurred. Specifically, the study examined the objectives of two teachers, each of a different subject area, who worked together placing a strong emphasis on the process by which these objectives were met. Another purpose was to illustrate the effectiveness this type of teaching has on music education.

The researcher chose the approach of action research to examine the process of interdisciplinary study. In serving as both the investigator and a primary participant, the researcher attempted to reflect upon her work in a self-critical and objective manner. The action research was conducted in both the second grade homeroom and the music room in order to provide a suitable setting for both the literary and musical elements of the project. Upon completion of the planning process, the educators employed the use of Parallel Reading Strategies for Music and Text model by Dee Hanson (2000). The chart represents seven steps in the activity including: finding the main idea, sequencing, summarizing, making predictions, using imagery, writing, and retelling. Each of the steps is accompanied by appropriate activities. The implementation was over the course of two months during music class and reading class on a weekly basis. Each music class was thirty minutes; each reading class was forty minutes. Although music class met biweekly, only one class per week was devoted to the study resulting in a total of eight sessions. The two participants met biweekly to record observations and experiences.

The first step in the implementation of this research was to meet with the reading teacher for several planning sessions. There were four planning sessions total that took place over the course of four months beginning in January. The goal of the first meeting was to present the model of steps titled Parallel Reading Strategies for Music and Text, as well as objectives for the research.

The objective of the research was: 1) to examine the objectives of two teachers, each of a different subject area, to determine the degree of integration that occurs in interdisciplinary studies and 2) to illustrate the effectiveness this type of teaching has on music education. The objectives of the reading teacher (for poetry) were as: 1) students will be able to appreciate

poetry, develop their poetic voices and experiment with poetry and 2) to respond to a poem and understand the importance of re-reading in poetry. Next, the music teacher presented the parallel strategies by Dee Hansen (2000) (see chart 1).

Chart 1.
Parallel Strategies for Music and Text

1. **Finding the Main Idea**
   In reading students: Find the critical facts and details in narrative (stories) or expository (informational) literature.
   In music students: Identify themes, melody, or motifs through repeated rhythmic and melodic patterns, tonal centers, etc.
2. **Sequencing**
   In reading students: Identify the beginning, middle, and the end of a story.
   In music students: Determine the form through repetition of cadential patterns, melodic and rhythmic structure, phrase structure, and climatic points.
3. **Summarizing**
   In reading students: Pull together information in a meaningful way through written or oral presentations.
   In music students: Analyze compositional elements, discuss historical context, create an original piece in the style of a given composer or style period.
4. **Making Predictions**
   In reading students: Reach conclusions and predict outcomes based on prior knowledge combined with new knowledge.
   In music students: Explore the effects of key changes or changes of modality, meter, style, and tempo in existing music.
5. **Using Imagery**
   In reading students: Use their imaginations to create pictures in mind about what they have read or studied and then communicate what they see.
   In music students: Imagine elements of nature (birds soaring, a thunderstorm, etc.) to transform note playing into music making.
6. **Writing**
   In reading students: Construct meaning through written expression. Write about a story or create a new story based on given story elements.
   In music students: Compose and arrange music. Reflect evaluations of performances or write about music in journals.
7. **Retelling**
   In reading students: Respond to stories by retelling, role-playing,

drawing pictures, and storyboards.
In music students: Listen to and describe music performances. Move to music, sightread and re-read for precision, improvise an existing melody/rhythm (Hansen, 2000).

Upon examining the model, both the music teacher and reading teacher decided to make some modifications to better suit the purposes of the project. The model, then, would be used as a guideline for activities. The seven steps (Finding the Main Idea through Retelling) would be followed, but some modifications would be necessary regarding the specific activities for each step (instructional priorities). The concept of themed units by Wiggins and Wiggins (1997) was also addressed at this first session. As discussed earlier, the concept of themed units provides a common link from which a relationship is established. One possibility would be to choose a word or phrase to apply the "theme" to both the music and the subject area.

As both educators examined the model, the reading teacher concluded that poetry would be a more logical alternative to prose for the following reasons: 1) due to the length of the project (of four months) short poetry would be more age-appropriate and 2) several examples of poetry for each activity within the model would be more easily accessible. Therefore, the common link between music and poetry would not necessarily be a "theme" but rather elements that lend themselves to the art of poetry as well as music. Such elements might include form, imagery, composition, movement, and improvisation.

Curricular appropriateness may be illustrated not only through the above objectives, but by the specific activities chosen by the educators to satisfy them. Though not complete, the guidelines created for the project included the following activities (poetry): reading and performing poetry; written responses to poetry; exercises to develop a poet's toolbox; creating movement to poetry; illustrating/displaying poetry. The poetry teacher chose the specific

activities that would satisfy such curricular standards as applying writing skills to their own writing pieces, building interpretation and appreciation, and identifying themes.

Similarly, in choosing specific music activities that would meet the objectives of the project and compliment the poetry activities, the foundation for all the activities involved should most definitely stem first from the music curriculum (and national standards). Such activities thus far included: rhythmic dictation, determining form, distinguishing between loud and soft, distinguishing between major and minor, and performing instrumental accompaniment. These activities met the instructional priorities of the music educator by satisfying the following standards set forth by the district music curriculum: identifying and applying rhythm patterns in songs, chants, movements, and ostinatos, identifying AB/ABA form, etc.

The lesson plan for the poetry lesson is as follows:

Objective:

Students will be able to appreciate poetry, develop their poetic voices and experiment with poetry.

Student-Based Activities:
Reading and performing poetry
Written responses to poetry
Several poetry exercises to develop a poet's toolbox
An anthology of student written poems

Procedure:
Listen to a reading of Langston Hughes' (1960) poem "My People" and respond: What does the poem make you feel? What pictures do you see in your mind? Does the poem remind you of anything in your own life?
Record student responses on chart paper. Encourage all responses. Re-read the poem and listen for new meanings. Draw a picture of the images the poem paints in their minds. Share illustrations. Create hand and arm movements to the poem. Perform the poem as a class. Bring in a response to the poem, a pot, letter, object, another poem, or a song that helps them connect to the poem. Share connections.

Evaluation:

> Student involvement
> Illustrations
> Connections
> Responses

Upon completing the first poem, the music teacher began the music lesson with this poem by inviting students to volunteer performing the poem with the hand and arm movements.

   The music teacher encouraged responses for questions such as: If there was music added to the poem, what would it sound like? The music teacher then improvised on two different xylophones and asked students to choose (vote) on the pattern that they thought sounded best for the poem. The majority chose the following pattern:

C   F   G   A   G   F

Several students practiced this pattern as accompaniment to the poem. The teacher then sang the first and third lines of the poem and the students echoed. A drum pattern was then added to the second and fourth lines:
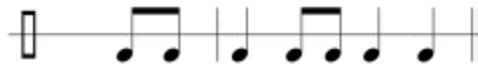
The students echo clapped, speaking the text of the poem.

   The class was then divided into two lines facing each other. One group had several students playing the xylophones, while the other group had several students playing the drums. Students who were not playing instruments performed the movements to the poem. The first four lines of the poem were performed in call-response style:

Group 1 sings: The   night   is   beau-ti-ful

(xylophone)   C   F   G   A   G   F

Group 2 speak response: So the   eyes   of   my   peo-ple

(drum)

Group 1 sings: The   stars   are   beau-ti-ful

(xylophone)   C   F   G   A   G   F

Group 2 speak response: So the   fac-es   of   my   peo-ple

(drum)

The first two thirty-minute classes with second grade covered the first two steps, Finding the Main Idea and Sequencing. Therefore, the music teacher's lesson plan for these two steps would be the following:

Objectives:

Students will accompany a poem by playing melodic and rhythmic patterns on percussion instruments
To determine AB and ABA form

Procedure:

Review reading "My People" by Langston Hughes
Ask for volunteers to perform poem with movement
Invite entire class to perform entire poem with movement
Brief discussion (question and answer)
    Q: How does this poem make you feel?
    Q: If you had to add music to this poem, what would it sound like?
    (field responses)

Play two different melodic patterns on xylophone sand ask students to choose one to match mood of poem
Echo sing lines one and three
Echo speak lines two and four; add rhythmic pattern to drum to match text of lines two and four
Divide class into two groups
Perform poem in call-response style, allowing several students to play xylophones and drums where appropriate
Determine the form of poem (AB)
Extension: (optional) experiment with form by allowing students to create the order of the part (AABA, ABA, etc.)

Evaluation:
Singing with movement
Expression in singing and speaking
Playing instrumental accompaniment
Performing in call-response style
Determining form

Upon completing step two of the Parallel Reading Strategies for Music and Text, both the poetry and music teachers met to evaluate and modify the original guideline of the strategies and also, to plan the next two steps. The lesson plan for Summarizing in poetry is presented here:

Objectives:

Students will brainstorm ideas for a four room poem about the beach.
Students will write a shared poem about the beach.

Procedure:
Set up four room chart (memories, feeling, sounds, questions)
Complete rooms with ideas
Using ideas form the chart, formulate a poem
Complete a four room chart for their own individual beach poems.
Write a beach poem.
Publish poem; illustrate and create a display of your poem.
Evaluation:
Four room charts
Written poems
Mini-share of published poems

As mentioned prior to the beginning of the project, the original set of strategies developed by Hansen were somewhat modified mainly due to the substitution of poetry for stories as well as the musical capabilities of second grade students. According to Hansen's model, at this step, students would "analyze compositional elements, discuss historical context, create an original piece in the style of a given composer or style period". For this project, the music educator chose to analyze compositional elements and also to create a piece. Creating an "original piece" however, would be modified to creating an ostinato pattern. The music lesson plan for the next step within the parallel strategies is as follows:

Objectives:

Students will create an original ostinato pattern
To perform an ostinato with written text (poetry)

Procedure:
Display "Sounds of the Beach" on large chart at board

"Sounds of the Beach"

Sssh   Sssh   Sssh

Waves   crash

Feel   the   wind   in   my   ears

Search - ing,   find - ing,

muss - el,   scall - op,   clam   shells

pick - ing   up   bunch - es,   dropp - ing

clash - ing,   clink - ing,   jingl - ing,   shells

cries   of   sea - gulls

in   the   air

kids   laugh - ing

peo - ple   talk - ing

on   the   beach

Read poem together as a class
Perform rhythmic patterns
Divide class in half: one half reads poem aloud, other half performs rhythm through body percussion; switch parts

Add drums to the group performing body percussion
Extract two of the patterns from the poem
Clap each rhythm pattern; choose line of text and speak aloud; invite students to match the text with the correct pattern; repeat for second pattern; add percussion instruments to each pattern:

1. cool foamy waves
2. shining bright sun
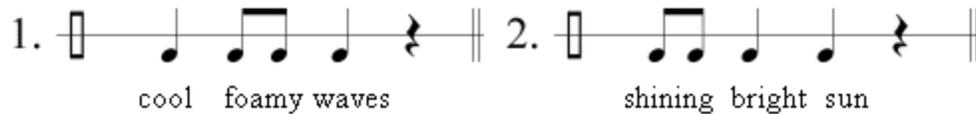
Several students will perform ostinati simultaneously while rest of class reads poem aloud
Students will work in groups to create an ostinato pattern based on a line of text from their original poems

Evaluation:
Performing ostinato patterns
Creating ostinato patterns
Working in cooperative groups

In the next thirty-minute music lesson, students brought with them original poems about the beach that they had individually written. They had worked through all the steps in the procedure, but did not complete the last step (group work). They were divided into groups of three and had one minute to decide which of the three poems would be used for the activity. It was suggested by the teacher to choose one that was neatly written. Each group was also given a small pile of rhythm cards, each card consisting of either two eighth notes, one-quarter note, one half note, or one-quarter rest. Their assignment, upon choosing a poem, was to then choose a short line of text, write it on the back of the poem, clap it out while speaking it, and finally, decide which rhythm cards were needed to match the text.

During the third thirty-minute class, the students simply chose a poem and began searching for their ostinato. The next class was devoted entirely to completing the group work. It was the fifth music lesson since the start of the project that the students gave their presentations. Each person had a designated job within the group: one would play the ostinato on an instrument, one would speak the line of text for the ostinato, whereas one student would read the poem.

Making Predictions is the next step in the project. During the last planning session, the poems for this step were chosen. The music teacher had requested poems that were examples of specific emotions or moods, such as happy, surprised, angry, sad, silly, and sleepy. The music teacher modified the activity for this step. Instead of matching major/minor melodies to poetry, students would improvise major/minor melodies on xylophones and metallophones that would be set up by the teacher. The music lesson is presented here:

Objectives:

Students will improvise a melody on barred instruments.
Students will express a variety of moods through playing instruments and creating movement

Procedure:
Invite volunteers to read poems
Upon reading each poem, students will choose an emotion or mood (displayed at board) that matches the mood of the poem
Divide class into six groups; each group is assigned a xylophone or metallophone and given an "emotion" (paper with mood written on it)
Groups will be asked to improvise on a xylophone/metallophone designated for that particular poem; while improvising, reader will re-read poem
Groups are then directed to practice a "made-up" melody or tune that would match their mood; create a movement for mood as well; ex: the "angry" group would play a melody on the xylophone as if they are angry. After ten minutes, students in each group would present their improvisation to the class; as one student reads the poem, one student improvises, and the remainder of the group performs movement

Evaluation:
Improvisation on barred instruments and creating movement to match mood
Working in cooperative groups
Perhaps the silly poem was enjoyed most:

<div align="center">

"How to Chose a Pet"

A puppy-cat or pussy-dog
Will make the nicest pet,
But if you cannot locate one,
Try not to get upset.
look for a flying hamster
Or a gerbil that can sing.
A parakeet with bunny ears
Might be the very thing.
Perhaps you'll find a gold fish
Who will bark and sit and heel.
Just avoid the sort of creature
Who might want you for a meal!

(Katz, Lee, and Eddleman, 1995)

</div>

One student played glissandos up and down the xylophone, which impressed the music teacher. The movement consisted of students performing a funny walk and making silly, crazy faces. This was by far, the most enjoyable and entertaining of all the groups.

Before continuing with the project, the music and poetry teachers met for the fourth and final planning session. As per the guidelines that were first developed, there were several components that were undecided for poetry and music activities. The poetry teacher had decided to use "Jelly on the Plate", and the music teacher needed some element of composition. It was decided by the music teacher to combine the last three steps for the completion of the research. It seemed that the "Jelly on the Plate" poem would lend itself nicely to the last three steps of the

model. More importantly, the use of imagery combined with writing (drawing) and presenting (retelling) would serve very well as one integrated lesson. The last three activities for both poetry and music were then established (see chart 2).

The incorporation of these last three steps would differ from the first half of the model in that the poem used would not be used in the music lesson. However, the concepts are very similar, as are the skills used in the activities.

Chart 2.
Parallel Strategies

Model (concept)	Poem (or suggested activity)	Music (activity)
1. Finding the Main Idea	an object or character that is described as the theme of the poem	to find the "theme" or repetitive pattern, assign a rhythmic pattern to it to be played each time pattern occurs
2. Sequencing	"A Boy's Song": students will have to describe what is taking place throughout poem	form of poem (AB, ABA, etc.); add a melodic pattern to follow form of poem
3. Summarizing	oral presentations of various poems	loud vs. soft: choose various lines of poem to speak loud/soft; use loud/soft instruments appropriately
4. Making Predictions	undecided	choosing major/minor melodic patterns to match text
5. Imagery	undecided	undecided
6. Writing	"Jelly on the Plate" students will compose additional text for poem	compose rhythmic patterns to match created text
7. Retelling	a narrative poem	undecided

Parallel Strategies

Model (step)	Poem (activity)	Music (activity)
Imagery	"Jelly on the Plate"	"Listening to Music" drawing activity
Writing	students will compose additional text for poem	"Listening to Music" writing activity
Retelling	performing student-created verses for "Jelly on the Plate"	reading aloud/dramatization

Conclusion

At the completion of this project, I have found myself to be both a supporter of

interdisciplinary teaching and a skeptical critic. The significance of this study was to illustrate

the effectiveness that this type of teaching has on music education. The project served to meet

my objectives in that it confirmed my beliefs that there is a successful method of integration - subject areas can be combined without comprising the integrity of individual educators. Educators first and foremost should examine their rationale for the inclusion of such materials to ensure that this teaching strategy is not a tool for arts/music advocacy. In addition, I do not feel that music education is necessarily improved by interaction. The use of this strategy provides a source of activities for music educators to teach musical concepts. Rather than view these activities as the basis for music education, it should represent a resource to assist educators in teaching music.

As a supporter, I do think integration has value. The students were very excited to have used something familiar from their classroom and "make it musical". Perhaps the most fun for them was using their own poems to create rhythmic patterns (extracting lines of text for ostinati). They were indeed making music. By matching rhythm to text, there did seem to be a connection made between poetry and rhythm (music). When they created movements and performed on instruments to evoke a specific emotion there definitely seemed to a connection again - this time by demonstrating expression through reading and improvising melodies.

The optimal goal, however, as stated at the beginning of the research was to study the connection of learning processes: students applying specific learning processes in one discipline and then extending those same processes to another discipline. I do feel that this occurred due to the careful planning of activities. I also feel that the instructional priorities of the educators were satisfied because the activities were molded to meet the objectives within both subject areas. The planning of these types of projects is the most essential element for integration to be successful. I do not believe that the students were aware of these connections. This is not to say that they did

not occur. The children in many cases did make the conceptual connections, but obviously at this grade level, they are not capable of acknowledging that they have made a conceptual connection!

One must question educators' rationale in choosing to use interdisciplinary projects. The very term "interdisciplinary" should not be used loosely. In examining various articles on these types of projects, I found this term was used to label anything that applied to two or more subject areas. I was most disturbed at one educators' theory of integration that involves music teachers singing songs based on a theme (such as weather) and then "extending the lesson" by teaching students how thermometers work! In planning instructional priorities, teachers should not be instructing within one another's area of expertise. Most music educators are not well suited to teach science or geography any more than most classroom teachers belong teaching music. Cross-curricula activities should be a collaborative effort where teachers share within their own area of expertise.

In closing, considerable research still needs to be conducted on this approach to teaching. As researchers continue to examine this teaching strategy, I suspect that a well-developed design for integrated curricula will result, one that will evenly meet the needs of all of the teachers involved and provide students with meaningful experiences that will extend beyond the classroom.

References

Hansen, D. (2000, March).
      "Parallel Strategies for Music and Text." Symposium conducted at the convention
      of the *New Jersey Music Educator Association*, Washington D.C.

Hughes, L. (1960).
      The DreamKeeper and Other Poems. New York: Knoff.

Katz, B., Lee, D. & Eddleman, D. (1995).
      Music Connection 1. New Jersey: Silver Burdett Ginn.

Wiggins, J., & Wiggins, R. (1997).
      "Integrating through conceptual connections." *Music Educators Journal*, 83 (4),
      38-41.