

# Final Synthesis Paper

AAD510 - Arts Learning Policy and Practice

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My satisfaction with Arts Learning Policy and Practice this past quarter comes primarily from learning about the main issues and actors in the field. I now feel I have a map to navigate future discussions as an advocate, practitioner, and researcher.

Much of the quarter concerned the past, present, and potential future of arts learning policy (Hager, 2003; Lowell, 2004; Zakaras and Lowell, 2008). The reading gave a good overview of the history and present place of arts learning in current efforts at school reform. I think a fair evaluation of the past fifty years of policymaking since the creation of the NEA shows that policy, research, and advocacy matter. The investment in arts education through the Arts-in-Education programs in the early 1970s established the field and infrastructure for arts learning. The cutbacks later in the decade and through the Reagan administration hurt the effort. Lobbying succeeded in getting arts learning recognized as a core subject at the federal level. The focused research effort of the past twenty years has demonstrated the significant impact of arts learning on children and society. The marginal status of arts learning in U.S. society is heartbreaking. But the history shows this marginality is the result of policy decisions and is reversible.

I was impressed by the *Champions of Change* report (Fiske, 1999) and *Teaching Artists and the Future of Education* (2011) by Rabkin, Reynolds, Hedberg, and Shelby. The long-term nature of many of these studies and the large number of interviews and case studies made their conclusions convincing. Why this research hasn't been more effective

at vaulting arts education toward the top of the solution pile for school reform is puzzling. There is either something inherently self-defeating in arts learning as a policy proposition, or advocates are in desperate need of a new marketing strategy. I also appreciated that many of the reports we read envisioned arts learning as a system of supply and demand within a particular political, educational, and cultural context (Lowell, 2004; Zakara & Lowell, 2008)

I enjoyed reading about the efforts to link arts learning with school reform in six large cities (Bodily, Augustine, & Zakara, 2009). It was fascinating to read about the distinct strategies each city adopted. Even though Chicago, New York, and Boston have had minimal success, I think even holding these broad coalitions together is a real accomplishment. And sometimes the ground can shift in a positive direction. Chicago's efforts seems to have picked up a great deal of momentum with the election of Rahm Emanuel as mayor. Reading about their summer badge program was another highlight of the class. Seeing a major project-based education initiative take hold across such a large city was encouraging. Similarly, the more substantial progress in Alameda County, Los Angeles, and Dallas gave me hope that organizing broad, long-term coalitions across agencies, districts, and disciplines can succeed. The authors of this RAND study were too pessimistic in this report. Five years is not a long time for many of these efforts. I think ten years is fairer benchmark from which to evaluate such a complex endeavor. This report also provided support for my belief that coalition building is what is needed to reverse the slide of arts learning in schools.

The debate between having stand alone class in schools or focusing on arts integration forced productive debates within our team about what is the most effective pedagogically and what's most practically politically. I initially believed arts integration was the better route. After reading the Winner and Hetland (2008) article, however, I changed my mind. They convinced me that the type of learning that students can get in high quality stand alone classes is too important to give up on because of the lack of funding. Arts integration also seems to relegate arts learning to second-class status within the curriculum. The NORC report on teaching artists (Rabkin et al., 2011) convinced me we need both. This report also highlighted for me the gap when it comes to effective assessment of arts learning and suggested that because education policy depends to an unreasonable degree on measurement and quantification of results, the lack of a simple boilerplate assessment for arts learning is a primary reason that it fails to gain adequate traction in education policy.

The course raised several questions for me about pedagogy. The Winner and Hetland article, along with the research by Brice-Heath and Roach (n.d.) provided a brief glimpse into the habits of mind that the arts can encourage in young people. Beyond standing over the student asking thought-provoking questions, what constitutes best practice for an arts instructor? Rabkin et al. (2011) answered this question by saying best teaching practice is student-centered, cognitive, and social. The arts are a natural fit for this type of teaching. But these qualities occur in any project-based, collaborative classroom. Good science education has the same quality.<sup>1</sup> What is unique to teaching in the arts? And what is

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<sup>1</sup> I first learned this by reading John Dewey, and one of the nice surprises during the reading was discovering the strong link between arts learning and the settlement house movement. I did not know that

different in teaching in different mediums: visual, music, dance, theater, and new media? This was one of my objectives that was not answered by the course, though the bridge the readings provided to project-based learning leaves me feeling more confident that my prior experience with this type of education has given me a firm foundation as an arts teacher. I would like to pursue this line of inquiry further.

From the ongoing discussion about the role of new media in arts learning, I pulled that technology can be an important and effective tool in facilitating arts learning. I do not, however, view it as transformative and feel that many of the skills that Jenkins and his colleagues say new media cultivates are identical to other forms of project-based learning. I'm afraid I was a bit harsh in my assessment of the final Jenkins report (2009) because I felt he was simply being an enthusiast, catering to our natural appetite for newness and our desire for a silver bullet to make unsupported assertions. Having started my career in project-based, environmental education, the claim that new media could succeed where environmental education did not rubbed me the wrong way. Given my environmental background, I also have a knee-jerk suspicion about technology, and Jenkins lack of what I feel is convincing evidence pushed some buttons. On this note, one of my objectives was to understand linkages between arts education and environmental issues. The shared reliance on project-based learning helped in this regard. But this is a deeper conversation that I need to have, and I think it involves digging further into the psychology of art and arts education. My guess is that there are several ways that the arts can contribute to environmental education and vice versa.

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Jane Addams and John Dewey knew and influenced one another. The connection with Viola Spolin and the development of improvisational theater was also exciting (Rabkin et al., 2011)

The other primary objective that I started the quarter with was to understand how to strengthen a community's creative capacity. As a community organizer, this was a foundational exercise for me, and I enjoyed digging into the literature around this question. My research paper allowed me to put issues such as participation and cultivating demand into a context that is specific to my interests and career path. I found Steven Tepper's conclusion to *Engaging Art* (Tepper, 2008) particularly thoughtful. The essays in this volume consistently returned to issues of equity, which I think points toward community arts, which is where my own sympathies lie.

In conclusion, I leave the course satisfied and feel much more equipped to think, act, and communicate about arts learning policy and practice and have a much clearer understanding of how arts learning fits within my specific career interests.

## References

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