

DOES THE VISUAL ASPECT OF THE ARTS HELP STUDENTS LEARN VOCABULARY?

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More and more today we understand students learn by different methods. They benefit from a variety of educational approaches. The visual arts contain rich aspects that will help children achieve academic success. This is especially true as it relates to the visual facet of the fine arts and vocabulary comprehension. Many students will benefit from the element of imagery of the vocabulary they are taught. It is my goal to prove how this concept will work.

It is imperative as presented in Eisner's article, "Does Experience in the Arts Boost Academic Achievement?" to first define terms and criteria of research. The visual aspect of the arts to be examined here is the replication of imagery. Student learning will be measured by the successful retention of the meaning of given vocabulary words. In a study conducted in 2000 by Burton, Horowitz, and Abeles in "Learning In and Through the Arts: The Question of Transfer" demonstrated a thorough investigation using both quantitative and qualitative methods. That approach is applicable to my study. For the quantitative portion there will be a study control group versus non-control group. The control group uses a traditional method of learning words such as defining meaning of words, studying words through rote memorization while the experimental group learns through visual imagery and is allowed to draw meaning of words. Example: wheel barrow (students can draw the image next to the spelling and place it in a setting to illustrate its use). The qualitative segment will consist of interviewing teachers, parents, and students regarding benefits of visual representation. Data collection will take place over a few months and results of vocabulary tests will be compared.

Researchers Eisner, Broudy, Hoyt, and Burton all favor the arts and view art education as an important aspect of public school curriculum. They recognize the arts do not receive the prominent place in the educational hierarchy they deserve. Their shared viewpoint is there is more winning over public support to be done. However, they differ in the approach for future research. For example, Eisner would like to see art and its merits stand on its own in gaining a solid standing in public education. He states:

We do the arts no service when we try to make their case by touting their contributions to other fields. When such contributions become priorities the arts become handmaidens to ends that are not distinctively artistic and in the process undermine the value of art's unique contributions to the education of the young.

(p. 149)

While I agree with him, in a perfect world we should focus on art's contributions to education alone and on its own merits. Its subjective nature leads to vulnerability of survival. In other words, in times of great economic educational strain and academic accountability it is vital for it to be used to promote learning in core curriculum areas or risk becoming extinct. When tax paying citizens are given a sample of its value in a succinct and easily tangible way, we can hope interest is sparked and it climbs the educational hierarchy of importance.

In using the visual aspect of the arts as a method of learning and reinforcing vocabulary, we are giving students another way to process information. Children learn differently and can benefit from varied instructional methods. For example, children who have difficulty with written and oral language may find artistic

expression focused on a learning experience will help them to categorize thinking and practice for more traditional modes of expression. (Hoyt, 1992).

This type of practice uses the visual strength of the arts to teach vocabulary. Modern students are living in a visual culture. The storing of imagery is vital for their understanding of concepts. In tying the visual with vocabulary, we are strengthening the student's mass of imagery. This is the appropriate contribution of aesthetic education to language mastery, and if this is not basic to education, then it is difficult to imagine what would be. Aesthetic literacy is as basic as linguistic literacy (Broudy, 1979).

It is important to note there are many kinds of activities that will assist children with learning vocabulary. The visual portion is only one technique that may be coupled with auditory instruction. While these activities should not significantly reduce the amount of time spent with acts of reading and writing, they can be a powerful vehicle for learning that deserves a place in the reading program (Hoyt, 1992).

Researchers are finding a student learns best when they are able to identify with the information taught and have prior associations with the material. The student's opportunity to recreate their interpretation of the vocabulary term given will allow them to make a personal connection to the word; therefore, solidify learning. The important point is that the individual personalizes the information and internalizes a connection between what is new and what is already known. (Hoyt, 1992).

Examining student vocabulary learning through visual imagery will offer proof of its effectiveness. Student academic success is the ultimate goal. Offering a technique

that improves student knowledge while also incorporating a feature of the arts will provide students an easily accessible use of visual representation and skill.

Annotated Bibliography

Broudy, H. (1979). Arts education: Necessary or just nice? *The Phi Delta Kappan*, 60, 347-350.

Dr. Broudy recognizes the need to defend the arts in public schools in this article. He also gives an explanation for attitudes against art education in the schools. These ideas include, “art is viewed as one of the finer things in life that ordinary people can do without and that people with means can provide for themselves” (p. 347). Even though this article was written over thirty years ago, many of the same notions regarding art education still exist. The acknowledgment of its value to every child and its place of instructional delivery at the public school level is needed. Broudy also recalls the presence of imagery in our developmental cognition and recall of information. For example, when a teacher refers to a concepts and nouns, every child must have the same initial point of reference in order to understand what is being taught. For example, when learning vocabulary words and the term airplane is introduced, the image of an airplane should come to mind. Because art is filled with different images, the author hopes it will aid in building capacity for various imagery. My research will benefit from beliefs noted in this article of those who deem art education as not necessary in public schools noted in this article. I will explore further the notion of imagery and student vocabulary recall and retention.

Burton, J., Horowitz, R., & Abeles, H. (2000). Learning in and through the arts: The question of transfer. *Studies in art education*, 41, 228-257.

This article explores an art-related study conducted and its findings. The study sought to determine if cognitive skills developed through the arts had an effect on learning and thinking in general. The design of the study contained a broad sample of programs across an array of 12 different types of schools with over 2000 students in grades 4, 5, 7, and 8. Qualitative and quantitative data collection took place over five varying phases. These phases include: 1) Variable development and field study; 2) Site selection; 3) Development of the Quantitative design; 4) Quantitative investigation; and 5) Qualitative investigation. The results of the study found a relationship between learning in the arts and in other disciplines. Researchers concluded “that learning in the arts and in other subjects each contribute in their distinctive ways to a constellation of higher order cognitive capabilities and dispositions—or ways of thinking—by activating them within broad and flexible pedagogical contexts. (p. 253) They also found a pattern between school climate and types of thinking supported in the arts. Useful aspects of their study for my research purposes include evidence that the arts increases cognition and the notion that a research design using both qualitative and quantitative methods is appropriate for educationally significant data collection.

Eisner E., (1999), Does experience in the arts boost academic achievement? *The Clearing House*, 72, 143-149.

This text examines previous studies from 1986 to 1996 attempting to link student academic achievement to their experiences and exposure to the arts. Eisner defines experience as number of courses taken and defines the arts in terms of visual arts, music, theater, and dance. He concludes while the research is valuable; it is inadequate for various reasons. In the studies where researchers claim there is a positive correlation to academic scores and exposure to the arts, it is difficult to know the criteria they are basing their conclusions. Eisner also notes in studies where those who take art related courses have a higher SAT score than students who do not these students have elected to take these courses. How can we be certain there is not something about the nature of these individuals in general and not the instructor that is a factor in their success? He feels a convincing and more appropriate study will include the following: a comparison of students who have had secondary school setting art courses and those who have not; curriculum and aims of these courses would be monitored and described; instructional quality noted in study; student assessment would be in educationally valuable content; and differences if found, would need to be educationally significant. Eisner fears when research among art educators focuses on how the arts can benefit other subject areas and not the unique contributions it can make on its own merits in education; it becomes vulnerable to becoming less significant itself. Therefore he is interested in the contributions “arts education makes to both the arts and to life beyond.” (p. 148) The aspect of this article where he defines his research terminology is applicable to my research process. I will integrate this tactic as I narrow the focus of my topic. However, where he seeks to allow art education stand on its own, I will pursue linking aspects of the arts and student comprehension of vocabulary.

Eisner E., (1991), What the arts taught me about education. *Art Education*, 44, 10-19.

Eisner reflects the impact the arts have had on his general notions of education. As a professor of Education and Art at Stanford, he compares viewpoints in the article commonly shared by core curriculum instructors versus his interpretation driven by different experiences. The former have placed the arts in the last rung in the educational hierarchy of knowledge. As a painter and educator, Eisner found their views narrow and shortsighted in not recognizing art’s contribution to cognitive learning. Their views contradicted his experiences and how he views educational practice. The arts have taught him that not all educational outcomes can be measured nor predicted. This article is valuable because it helps unmask various educational ideologies and offers support for arts as a resource for building student cognition.

Hoyt, L. (1992), Many ways of knowing: Using drama, oral interactions, and the visual arts to enhance reading comprehension. *The Reading Teacher*, 45, 580-84.

In this article Hoyt explores how the arts integration into all subject areas can help all students better communicate their knowledge and retain information.

She approaches the topic from a program specialist for Chapter 1 services. She views learning driven activities centered on drama, communications, and visual arts as not a replacement for the core subject areas but as a powerful vehicle to deliver information. These avenues offer a different way to stimulate learning among children, especially those with special needs. She is examining another instruction method that will appeal to all learning styles. Also, she makes an important point that students are able to personalize their learning through the above methods. Her claim is significant in explaining why the arts benefit students for many reasons.