The Co-Construction of a Music/Arts/Language Learning Model

Anne Lowe
Université de Moncton

Abstract
The purpose of this study was to understand the process of integrating music and the arts into the language curriculum in order to develop a model which underlies the music/arts/language learning experience. Grade 1 French students and their classroom teacher participated in the study. Eighteen 45 minute music/arts/language interdisciplinary lessons were taught by the classroom teacher and me three times a week for a period of six weeks. Specific learning outcomes were determined for music and French. A collaborative qualitative research design was chosen where both the classroom teacher and researcher are reflective partners in the co-construction of knowledge pertaining to educational practice. Data were collected through video-tapes, semi-structured and informal interviews, written materials, and my personal journal, and analysed through several coding procedures, constant comparison, and triangulation methods. Data analysis procedures resulted in the co-construction of a music/arts/language model which consisted of four major categories: teaching, learning, professional development, and environmental conditions. The constant interaction of all four categories seemed to have a positive impact on students’ learning, teaching practices, and on undergraduate pre-service training.

Introduction
Constant changes in education incite our policy makers, curriculum developers, and educators to often ask questions related to the essential skills students should acquire to succeed in the 21st century. Posner (2002) advances that; “What our 21st century citizens need are trained minds and a passion for creative endeavour” (p. 317). However, very often educational policies, implemented at various levels of the education system, tend to regiment teaching and restrict the teacher’s ability to address the needs of his or her diverse students and to give them the tools required to become creative critical thinkers. Posner thus suggests that in our world of rapid change, educational design makers must enhance a teaching/learning paradigm that encourages flexible teaching strategies which enhance every learner’s desire for and habit of thinking.
Teaching strategies that incorporate artistic experiences to the teaching/learning environment seem to provide the self confidence and inspiration needed to learn and to become critical thinkers (Hotvedt, 2001). In fact, there is now a strong body of evidence which establishes positive significant associations between music and spatial-temporal reasoning (Hetland, 2000 a & b), achievement in math (Vaughn, 2000), achievement in reading (Butzlaff, 2000; Lowe, 2005) and the reinforcement of social-emotional or behavioral objectives (Standley, 1996). These authors stress the extensive presence of strong associations between music and other subject areas and caution against claims of causal relationships between music and academic achievement in language or in math.

Brain research tells us that emotion plays an important role in learning. According to Gardner (1983) and Jensen (1998), most significant learning occurs when emotions are integrated with teaching and learning. Thus, the arts, which call upon our emotional being, should enhance the student’s ability and desire to learn. In fact, Hotvedt (2001) found that by integrating the arts into her second grade curriculum, students seemed to master mathematical and linguistic concepts that she thought were beyond their abilities. She also found that integrating the arts in academics was one of the best ways to reach each child. Weinberger (1995) adds that strong arts foundation builds creativity, concentration, problem solving, self-efficacy, coordination, attention, and self-discipline. Moreover, Calogero (2002) suggests that "Combining music and literature helps children learn some of the different ways that ideas and emotions can be expressed“ (p. 23). She adds that integrated art/language approaches bring new ideas, art forms, sounds, and cultures into the students’ lives and that through these approaches students seem to be making sense of their world and their own place in it. Eisner (1988) goes a step further and suggests that "Children who have not learned how to see and mentally explore the various forms of art and science will not be able to write, not because they cannot spell, but because they have nothing to say, nothing to reconstruct from sensory exploration of the environment” (p. 467). Eisner therefore concludes that “the arts make three things possible. First, they develop the mind by giving it opportunities to learn to think in special ways. Second, they make communication possible on matters that will not take the impress of logically constructed language. Third, the arts are places and spaces where one can enrich one’s life” (p.10). He adds that “the arts have much to teach educators: they could provide the models needed to create schools that genuinely educate” (p. 10).

Although the more recent literature has supported the benefits of the integration of the arts into the curriculum, more research based studies where models are developed, need to be undertaken in order to convince educational decision makers that an art integrated approach to learning is worth implementing as a possible venue to explore in order to reach every child. This approach seems to open the door to the development of skills and abilities that can be applied to every day lives.

Thus, the purpose of this study was to understand the process of integrating music and the arts into the language curriculum in order to develop a model which underlies the music/arts/language interdisciplinary experience.
Methodology

Participants

The participants of this study were a class of Grade 1 French students from New Brunswick, Canada, and their classroom teacher. The classroom teacher had about five years of public school teaching experience and did not have any formal artistic training. I, the researcher, who team-taught with the classroom teacher and helped in the development of all lesson plans, am a university professor and music education specialist with approximately 15 years of public school teaching experience (K-12) and 15 years of University teaching/research experience. In addition, an undergraduate music education student participated in the collection of the data.

Integrated music/arts/language curriculum

Eighteen 45 minute music/arts/language interdisciplinary lessons were developed by me in collaboration with the first grade French classroom teacher. All interdisciplinary lessons were taught by the classroom teacher and me three times a week for a period of six weeks. Specific learning outcomes were identified for both French and music. Although learning outcomes for the other art forms such as dramatic arts, visual arts, and dance were not stipulated, activities related to all art forms were incorporated throughout the interdisciplinary learning experience. French language curriculum learning outcomes addressed oral comprehension, reading, writing, vocabulary, literacy genres, grammar, and oral and written composition during the intervention. Also, musical concepts such as timbre, style, rhythm, and melody were emphasized in the interdisciplinary lessons. Moreover, common elements between language and the arts such as ways of communication and metacognition skills needed to compose music or a literacy text were critically discussed. Pantomine, acting, chanting, singing, playing instrumental accompaniments or sound effects, dancing, active and critical listening, drawing, painting, and musical/language compositions were the activities chosen to reinforce concepts in both French and in the arts.

Research design

This study was developed as a collaborative effort between public school and university/research environments. In order to meet the needs of both educational cultures, a qualitative collaborative research design was chosen where both the classroom teacher and the researcher are reflective partners in the co-construction of knowledge pertaining to educational practice (Cole & Knowles, 1993; Davidson/Wasser, & Bresler, 1996; Desgagné, 1997; Schöhn, 1983, 1987, 1994). This type of research values the competency of the actor-practionner as a key informant of the investigation (Giddens, 1987). This collaborative research design was also selected because of its dual outcomes, that is, it is beneficial to both research and practice communities. In fact, it unites both research goals (production of empirically based knowledge) and educational goals (professional development and reflexive opportunities for the teacher to improve his/her practice). In this study, it was anticipated that while attempting to understand the phenomenon through
research data, the interdisciplinary art/language experience in a classroom setting would give the classroom teacher in-service training in ways to incorporate the arts to her French language curriculum.

Data collection and analysis

Qualitative methods of data collection and analysis were used to understand the phenomenon under investigation (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Eisenhart & Howe, 1992; Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; Robson, 1993; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). To ensure triangulation (Bresler & Stake, 1992) of the data, a variety of data were collected through the following sources:

1. video tapes of all classroom interventions;
2. photos of events taking place during the intervention;
3. audio tapes of in depth semi-structured interviews with the classroom teacher, students, teacher assistant, and research assistant;
4. informal interviews held with the teachers, school principal, and children;
5. written materials including lesson plans, copies of songs, and language art books;
6. personal journal kept by me.

Data were analysed through techniques and procedures in order to develop a music/arts/language model (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Paillé, 1994; Paillé & Mucchielli, 2003). Coding procedures included an analysis through microscopic examination of the data, identification of codes, themes, and categories, classification of themes and categories using computer software, and identification of emerging concepts that bring together the diverse elements of the phenomenon under investigation. During the entire process, techniques of constant comparison (Glasser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987) and triangulation (Bresler & Stake, 1992; Mathison, 1988) were applied to all sources of the data.

Results

Four major categories, that is, teaching, learning, professional development and environmental conditions, emerged from the multiple data analysis procedures. Moreover, the data indicated that a constant interaction between these categories was instrumental to the success of the interdisciplinary experience. In fact, the categories interact upon one another producing a spiral effect surrounding the music/arts/language interdisciplinary learning experience (Fig. 1). The results also indicate that constant interaction between all four categories had a direct impact on students’ learning, teaching practices, and undergraduate pre-service training. The four categories that make up the model illustrated in Figure 1 will be discussed in the following sections.
1. Teaching

Data indicate that the teaching strategies and activities chosen to enhance learning in music, the arts, and language contributed to the success of the interdisciplinary study. Lesson plans were developed based on a child centered approach where students are totally involved in the learning process. In fact, students were engaged in active participation while singing, playing musical instruments, dancing, drawing, acting, and in collective writing activities. Creative activities were also encouraged. For example, students were invited to compose a poem based on a story read in class, to create sound effects to accompany a theatrical rendition of a story, to compose a song with the words of a poem created by them, or to invent movements or a dance or to produce a drawing to express their understanding of a story read in class. Students were thus encouraged to show their understanding of a literary text through all art forms and, most of the time, were given the opportunity to choose the art form based on personal interest or ability.

Music /arts/ language learning experience model

Figure 1
Data also indicated that the specific learning outcomes of the French curriculum were respected throughout the interdisciplinary lessons. In addition, teaching strengths of both teachers were respected. The classroom teacher took the leadership in teaching the activities that involved French and visual arts while I directed primarily the musical and theatrical events.

To summarize, teaching strategies involving active participation and creative artistic endeavours where ideas were initiated by the learner seemed to have been integral to the strength of this music/arts/language interdisciplinary experience. In addition, learning outcomes in music and language and teachers’ subject area expertise were respected throughout the teaching of the interdisciplinary lessons.

2. Learning

The analysis of interviews held with the classroom teacher, research assistant, and my research personal journal suggests that learning occurred in French and in music. Students improved in their ability to read, write, comprehend, and speak the French language and to distinguish between narrative and poetic literary tests. Also, they seemed to have developed a stronger cultural identity and motivation to speak and to function in French. On the other hand, it was observed that students improved rhythmic and melodic skills, and were able to name, manipulate, and distinguish the different timbres of classroom Orff type instruments. In addition, students, throughout the intervention, felt more and more comfortable to express their understanding of music heard or a poem or a story read with body movements. In fact, some mentally and physically challenged students showed their comprehension of a story read in class through movement in ways that they could not have done through words. This form of expression revealed that these students had evidently understood the story but were not able to verbalise their ideas either in written or in oral forms. Actually, Olson (1992) states that children who struggle in school often have language problems. He adds that they process information through images instead of through words; therefore, they seem to think and learn visually.

Throughout the interdisciplinary lessons, the data also suggest that students developed critical thinking skills. For example, students were encouraged, after the performance of a music/arts/language activity, to reflect upon what they liked, disliked, and on elements they could add or change to improve their performance. Furthermore, they were invited to share the process or problem solving skills needed to reach the final product and to make connections between arts and language. During the last week of the intervention, students were able to determine the strategies needed to compose a story or a song and to make connections between both compositional processes. The classroom teacher and I agreed that time to reflect and analyse the learning experience must be allowed if we want students to be able to develop critical thinking skills.

In summary, the data indicate that learning occurred in French and in music, and that students developed critical thinking skills and the ability to transfer music/arts/language problem solving techniques. Moreover, students were more engaged in French class and, thus, felt more comfortable to speak the language at school and at home, to read French books, and to choose French media for entertainment.
3. Professional Development

One of the main goals of the collaborative research design chosen for this study, where the classroom teacher and researcher co-construct knowledge while seeking understanding of the phenomenon taking place during the music/arts/language interdisciplinary intervention, was to provide professional development for the classroom teacher. Fullan (1982), in a classic work in educational change, makes a number of recommendations for successful professional development. He indicates that the work with teachers should include demonstration, practice and feedback and that several sessions are important to ensure a continuous learning experience. In fact, during the interdisciplinary experience, the classroom teacher participated fully in the development, delivery and evaluation of the interdisciplinary experience and expected to learn how to incorporate music and the arts into her French classroom. This preoccupation was very evident throughout the study. The classroom teacher revealed, very early in the process, that she was learning about ways to incorporate music and the arts into her language curriculum. While teaching and participating actively with the children during the interdisciplinary lessons, she pointed out that being able to see and experience the interdisciplinary music/arts/language interventions from the development of the lessons to the delivery of the final product was much more beneficial to her than short workshops often given by educators of her school district.

The classroom teacher added that very soon in the process, she felt more apt and more confident to suggest activities and teaching strategies for the lesson plans and to try them out with her students. Furthermore, because she observed that her students were meeting the learning objectives in French and were motivated and engaged in the interdisciplinary activities, she was very enthusiastic about the project. And, above all, she told me recently that she had incorporated, without my help, some of the interdisciplinary activities to her teaching.

Even though one of the main concerns of the collaborative research design was to provide professional development for the teachers, the results reveal that I and my research assistant (undergraduate music education student) learned more about teaching and learning and became better educators as a result of the interdisciplinary experience. As a university professor/researcher, this study gave me an opportunity to get totally involved in teaching 1st grade students and working with their classroom teacher. I was completely immersed in the «here and now» of the school day and, was awakened to the reality of the public school system.

The role of the artist–educator, which I played in this study, was also addressed by Upitis (2005) in a study related to experiences of artists and artist–teachers involved in teacher development programs. She found similarly to the results of this study, that successful artists involved in professional development programs need to be willing to take on the role of an artist-educator, to understand their art form well enough to be able to share it with teachers and children, and, above all, need to build relationships with teachers and students. This experience was as much of a professional development experience for me as it was for the classroom teacher and the undergraduate research assistant.

On the other hand, my research assistant, who participated in the developing of teaching materials and who observed the whole teaching/learning experience while video-
taping the lessons, learned about ways students learn and react in different situations, about teaching strategies that work or do not work with students of this particular age group, about activities that stimulate learning in both subject areas, and about team-teaching techniques that are successful in this type of environment. She revealed that this research experience was as beneficial to her as the field experience she had received as part of her undergraduate program.

To summarize, the data reveal that professional development received by the classroom teacher, undergrad research assistant, and myself seems to have been a critical component to the success of this music/arts/language interdisciplinary experience.

4. Environmental conditions

Data of this study indicate that certain conditions need to be met in order to ensure the success of the music/arts/language interdisciplinary learning experience. These conditions are listed below and are not necessarily placed in order of importance.

- Curriculum learning outcomes in both subject areas must be emphasized;
- Benefits from the interdisciplinary approach need to be observed by the classroom teacher early in the process;
- Total collaboration between the researcher music specialist and the classroom teacher must be present during the entire interdisciplinary experience;
- Teaching talents of both teachers must be respected in the development and delivery of the lesson plans;
- Both the researcher music specialist and the classroom teacher must be willing to put in the time needed to prepare and deliver the interdisciplinary lessons, and to reflect upon and discuss the phenomenon in order to seek its full understanding;
- Effective classroom management must be in place prior to the team teaching experience;
- The researcher music specialist and classroom teacher must share a similar philosophy of education;
- The classroom teacher needs to have an affinity for the arts;
- Both teachers must be open to change and be flexible in their approaches to teaching and to learning;
- School and community support are necessary.

The data also indicated that in order to continue similar partnerships between music or arts specialists and classroom teachers, planning time during the school day must be allowed to discuss and plan interdisciplinary activities that are beneficial for both subject areas. In addition, in a "perfect" world, it is suggested that music or arts specialist be given time to teach in collaboration with, for example, one classroom teacher a month, in order to ensure the quality and efficacy of the music/arts interventions. This would consequently require the hiring of more music and arts specialists in our public schools.
Conclusion

The results of this study seem to indicate that the constant interaction of teaching, learning, professional development and environmental conditions is essential to the success of the arts/language interdisciplinary experience (Fig. 1). If the model is respected and used in a school environment similar to the one described in this study, the results should have a positive impact on the students, the teacher, and the field experience training of undergraduate music specialists.

First of all, students participating in this study seemed more motivated to learn and developed self esteem, cultural pride and identity, critical thinking skills, and creative forms of artistic and linguistic expression. Moreover, the interdisciplinary experience seemed to have reached the students at all levels of development.

Secondly, the classroom teacher gained confidence in trying new teaching strategies, became more creative, and saw the importance of reaching out to each student while engaging them in creative activities. She also observed the benefits of the incorporation of the arts in the language classroom and learned how to work in collaboration with the arts specialist in developing interdisciplinary teaching strategies that can enhance the learning of language and the arts.

Finally, undergraduate students, who have the opportunity to work with a researcher and a classroom teacher that are developing an arts/language intervention and to be part of the team who is seeking to understand the phenomenon under study, will actively experience innovative interdisciplinary teaching/learning strategies, reflective critical thinking process techniques, and important elements of the research design. They will also be able to observe and experience theory and practice connections often missing in undergraduate education programs.

The model surrounding the music/arts/language interdisciplinary learning experience (Fig. 1) was collaboratively co-constructed by the researcher and the classroom teacher based on data collected and analysed throughout this study. Even though this model seems to indicate that, if the interactions of all four categories are respected the experience will be positive for all participants of the learning environment, more research needs to be undertaken to further test the model before encouraging its implementation in today’s school system. In addition, this music/arts/language learning model may contribute to the education of responsible citizens that, as mentioned in the introduction of this paper, have “trained minds and a passion for creative endeavour” (Posner, 2002; p. 314).
References


