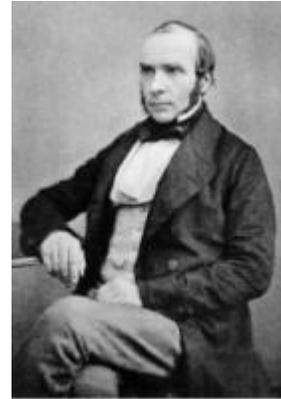


From the Arts Education Director: Thoughts on Arts Integration



John Snow

A long habit of not thinking a thing wrong gives it a superficial appearance of being right.

If you have heard me present on arts integration in the last couple of months, then you have heard me tell the story of John Snow that I refer to in this space. If you have not heard the story from me and you would like to read it, then follow this link: <http://missouriarts.weebly.com/the-story-of-john-snow.html> He is generally thought of as being the “Father of Epidemiology”, but that is not necessarily why his story piqued my interest. He was an inhabitant of mid nineteenth century London, England, a physician, a free thinker, an innovator who was not afraid to question prevailing wisdom. He was one of the few people of his time, at least as far as epidemiology is concerned who could see the forest, in spite of the trees. I am drawn to historical stories like his. He is in good company. More than likely you are reading this account on a computer; think of Alan Turing and his Turing Machine invention from World War II. He was another forest for the trees kind of thinker. Many, if not all of the tools we use each day, and even our general patterns of thinking, originate from individuals who in the past, were creative and imaginative enough to look beyond prescribed thinking about the way things are done.

Teachers, when they even have time to sit still for a while are always on the lookout for the next big thing, the teaching method, best practice, philosophy or just way of thinking about things that will all of a sudden make it clear and easier for themselves and for students. I am in a position to offer some help by introducing educators in our state to arts integration. I have discovered that there are already like-minded experts or almost experts on the philosophy of arts integration and teaching practices within our state. However, as it stands right now, compared to some states around us who have either experimentally or whole-heartedly embraced the arts integration concept and started arts integrated schools, Missouri appears to just now be getting started. I intend to nudge progress along if I can, and it appears as though we are making progress. We must make sure though that we realistically understand what we are getting ourselves into, what we are trying to accomplish, and what our expectations are. What follows is an attempt to clarify just one aspect of the thinking that has gone into answering the question: why should we be seriously thinking about arts integration in our schools? What are the anticipated outcomes that are leading us towards arts integration? Is it a radical change from what we are doing now? How does it help us to see the forest in spite of the trees?

Think about this: are you able to honestly say as an adult that you love the world we live in? I know, I know, it's full of difficulties, pain and unhappiness. Yes, I recognize that, but it is balanced with experiences that counter its shortcomings. Stop for a moment and think about very young children and their cheerfulness. For the most part,

they have an unwavering, innocent enthusiasm for life, for learning, for school, for very simple things like standing in line, or being chosen as line leader. Elementary school teachers fall in love with the idea that one of the key aspects of their teaching is to help children continue to fall in love with the world of experiences. As an adult who is a life-long learner, no matter how old you are, you can probably recall a specific moment, or moments in your development that you can point to and say, that's when I fell in love with learning. Hopefully you can, and you will agree that you do indeed have an emotional connection to learning. Remember, it was a teacher who brought you to that place. Effective teachers understand that creating meaningful, engaging emotional experiences for their students allows them to construct an individual framework for learning that is durable and lasts a lifetime.

But what if you do not have a positive emotional connection to learning? What if, for whatever reason you missed school the day those other kids were developing the connections? That is a gross over-simplification about emotional development and its connection to learning, but the unfortunate reality of today's society and the climate in our schools is that over time many children will not hold on to their enthusiasm for school and learning. Certain key stages of emotional development may be left wanting in our students by the time they become school age, and the situation continues to be exacerbated as they move through the grades.

You may have heard educators say, "meet the child where they are" or "teach the whole child." What do these mean and how do these maxims relate to arts integration? Think about the personal qualities, we all have in varying degrees that combined, made you want to become a teacher, and that you naturally want to nurture in your students and in your own children: initiative, independence, integrity, imagination, creativity, curiosity, self-knowledge, social skills and as referenced earlier in this essay, the inquiry skills and self-confidence necessary to continue on the life-long process of finding the forest among the trees. An arts integration approach allows teachers the flexibility to "integrate" the preceding teachable qualities into all lessons as an equal partner with the cognitive tasks that need to be accomplished to understand and learn in the academic disciplines. We "meet" children where they are when we recognize that there is a variety of readiness states, both emotional and cognitive in any given group and we teach to the "whole child" when we recognize that their emotional, intuitive state is just as important as their cognitive state. Arts engagement connected and integrated with academic learning tasks helps construct a bridge to understanding. In a nutshell, that is the fundamental formula for arts integration.

If this is the first time you have heard about arts integration and you want to discover more, if you are concerned that you "see the trees" but you are not sure you can see the whole forest then I invite you to learn more. I would like to share resources with you and perhaps collaborate with your school as we use an arts integration approach to teaching as we move through the trees in search of the forest.

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