Curricula as Bridges:
A Learner-based Integrating Arts Framework

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Abstract

The practice of arts integration has a long history of applying hierarchical methods where arts are supplemental to the core learning subjects. While this approach has been commonly adopted by teachers in the field, the author argues that the quality of education may be in jeopardy and questions whether the learning subjects are strongly connected. Facing the rapid changes of our daily surroundings, the author recognizes that arts integrations should pursue a coherent, sequential, and holistic approach that makes meaningful and long-term impacts on students' learning. To do so, a new model is needed to address the dynamic nature of how knowledge can be obtained in relation to arts and life experiences.

In this article, the author: 1) applies metaphors to analyze and examine existing art lesson plans and their pedagogical implications in learning; 2) gives an overview on why arts are essential in curricula design; 3) examines the relationship between teachers, learners, and learning subjects; 4) suggests Curricula as Bridges as a new model for effective integrating arts into curricula; and 5) provides an example to conclude with the implications that such a curriculum design model is fundamental to the field of arts education and general education.

Key words: Arts Integration, Learner-Centered, Metaphors, Curriculum Design, Holistic Education

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Integrating arts into curricula is an important and powerful means to broaden learning. However, while teachers generally recognize the benefits of implementing arts, they often are frustrated by the lack of successful models to design integrating curricula effectively (Strand, 2006). In addition, their limited experience in art and their definition of art may negatively influence the quality of learning experience and affect their confidence level in teaching arts integration. Thus, it is important to understand the characteristics of arts integration in mapping out a conceptual framework to assist teachers across curricula and to highlight arts embedded in *all* subjects.

Arts and Other Subjects: The Fundamental Differences

The differences between other subjects and arts integration, in my opinion, are the teaching goals, content, pedagogies, and assessment methods. The former immerses learners in cognitive development, specifically logical and analytical skills. *Tests* are the main assessment method, expecting definite *right* or *wrong* answers. In arts, the teaching goal is to develop a sense of appreciation with *skill-driven* experiences. Its assessment methods vary and may be ambiguous. I believe two fundamental concepts separating arts from other subjects are: (1) Creativity as the core of learning; (2) Mistakes as opportunities. In fact, these two concepts support each other. By placing creativity in the center of a curriculum design, the content can be adapted to each student's learning capabilities. By viewing mistakes as part of the learning process, educators can help students understand that real life knowledge involves trials and errors. Thus, an effective integrating arts curriculum not only relies on advancing art skills, but requires coherent, consistent implementation for deep understanding across subjects.

It is hard for educators to change their perspectives on subjects such as math, science, and languages as keys for personal gain in society. However, according to Robinson (2011), the fall of education happens when "talents got buried in the system, where linearity, conformity, and standardization are emphasized. Yet, real life is organic, adaptable, and diverse" (p. 8). He further warns "Education…is about cultivating the talents and sensibilities through which we can live our best lives in the present and create the best future for us all" (p. 9 -10). The new focus for education should be "entrepreneurship, innovation, and creativity" (p. 11). The challenge that educators face today is to transform educational systems to address the needs of the 21st century. To do so, educators must recognize that "at the heart of this transformation, there has to be a radically different view of human intelligence and of creativity" (p. 14).

The Misconceptions of Integrating Arts Curricula

However, the definition and application of integrated curricula remain ambiguous and uncertain. A common practice to integrate the arts is either using arts activities to supplement a core subject or making tenuous connections across subjects. The former, arts are a peripheral part of the curricula. This approach underlies a hierarchical order between subjects: What is important (the core subjects) and unimportant (arts subjects). The later method, poses further questions about if arts have been misused or misinterpreted in this forceful insubstantial relationship. For example, when it comes to integrating arts with math, Escher's tessellation comes to mind; when talking about Dynamics, we use Calder's Mobile; when teaching history and culture, making masks and totems is often done by teachers. To some extent, these curricula and art projects do link with other disciplines. Yet, we need to ponder the purpose of making such art projects. Why create such artworks? What are their meanings, values, and implications in relation to these learning subjects and learners? Unfortunately, this practice has become the norm and the danger of misrepresentation is often overlooked.

Types of Art Curricula Design: Their Metaphors and Implications

To search for a successful integrating arts framework, it is crucial to understand some fundamental structures and their implications of arts curricula. In the United States, many art teachers use resources such as *School Art*, *Arts and Activities, and Art Education* to brainstorm lesson ideas. I am curious about the projected teaching goals, pedagogies, and contents in these published materials. To understand the correlations between planning and outcomes, I sought to find a common thread among these resources. I loosely applied the concept of content analysis (Borg & Gail, 1989) to map out reoccurring characteristics and synthesize them into different categories with metaphors. From the mentioned arts education resources published from 1995 to 2010, I selected articles related to interdisciplinary instructional resources (*Art Education*) and successful integrating art lesson plans (*Arts & Activities* and *School Art*). Based on the descriptions of the lessons, strategies used, and students' artworks, I looked into the implications of the instructional methods, associated learning theories, and the relation between the learning subjects and the learners' learning outcome. I first grouped articles into three categories: skill-based, artist-centered, and cultural-based. However, I realized these categories are limited in providing substance to the whole scope of the curricula design. In addition, the categories are too specific to represent the existing lesson plans, which are usually overlapping many instructional methods and theories. I then chose metaphors to *describe*, *understand, associate*, *and connect* with selected resources, focusing on the content of integrating arts teaching. The purpose of such approach, rather than aiming for quantitative results, is to gain a broad understanding of the underlying phenomenon in curricula frameworks. What I am trying to do is not determine how the arts apply to specific lesson plans and what it means to me personally, but what they mean and imply to integrated arts curriculum and learners as a whole.

Why metaphors? In the field of sociology, the use of metaphors strengthens communications between individuals as well as encourages

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individuals to develop a sense of self-awareness (Lyddon et al. 2001; O'Brien, 2009). Lakoff & Johnson (1980) emphasize that metaphors are not limited within linguistics. Our daily activities such as mind, body, and perception are all shaped by metaphors. Metaphors are a non-traditional means of communication to sort, guide, and clarify complex ideas and emotions. In visual arts, Parsons (2012) believes the structures of metaphors can provide deep understanding for contemporary arts. These studies affirm that metaphors are effective alternative interpretations to deepen cognitive comprehension.

Focusing on the structure and its implication, gradually four reoccurring metaphors emerged. I chose metaphors whose literal meanings many people are familiar with, also provide open-interpretations that can link with certain learning theories and are relevant to the field of art and education. They are: time machines, cabinets of curiosities, theme parks, and play grounds. In the following sections, I will explain and discuss what each metaphor means and its implications to the art curricula design.

Art curricula as Time Machines

Art Curricula as Time Machines promotes *frozen-in-time* learning experiences. The strategies are expository and didactic. It is informative, filled with facts to address a particular *subject*. Similar to traveling through time, the content is well defined and focused to a certain period, place, people, and culture. Art activities serve as extensions where students are encouraged to role-play and mimic particular styles. This approach appears frequently in many artists-focused lesson plans. In one lesson plan, found in *School Art*, the teacher introduced Van Gogh and his art, immersing the students in Van Gogh's life story and having them apply Van Gogh's techniques to create their rendition of Van Gogh's artworks (Bellet, 2009).

Art curricula as Cabinets of Curiosities

Cabinets of Curiosities is a term used in the field of natural science and anthropology to describe a certain display method for culturally embedded collections. A showcase containing wonders from around the world,

Cabinets of Curiosities anticipates rising sensations of surprises and curiosities toward these *rare* treasures. Their existences are not about representing cultures or social values (Greenblatt, 1991); rather, they signify wealth, power, and political status. Art curricula as *Cabinets of Curiosities* are often associated with teaching non-western arts. Didactic in nature, teachers tend to apply formalist's points of view to describe and analyze culturally significant artifacts. Thus, artifacts are viewed as a vehicle, an object creating connections across cultures. It nevertheless projects the phenomenon of one-culture-fits-all. For instance, when teaching African masks, teachers have the tendency to neglect each mask's unique meaning and function. In truth, the design, style, color, materials, symbols all denote certain social cultural traditions. However, most of the time, the learning content is to apply elements of design found on the masks (Hubbert, 2008). Even though scholars have been urging teachers to consider anthropological approaches to address culturally significant works of art, many art teachers still place making cultural-related products as priority over authentic meanings. Much like pictures found in catalogs, masks, wax dye, totems...etc. have become references for students to create. The outcome from *Art curricula as Cabinets of Curiosities* is nothing but an oversimplification of the arts and culture which may result in misrepresenting the culture, giving students a very naive view of other cultures. It is like judging a book by its cover, or worse claiming to have read and understood the book without opening it.

Art curricula as Theme Parks

Much like a theme park experience, theme-based art curricula aim to connect all components to reflect a broader concept. It is coherent and balanced in hope to provide a deeper understanding for all learners. Utilizing students' prior knowledge, its teaching strategies are spiral and sequential. Although theme-park curricula are more defined when compared to previously addressed curricula, it also has its own weakness and danger. For example, an art lesson grouping four artworks from various cultures to

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discuss motherly love (Schneider, 1995). In this specific case, the danger arises when educators use analogous approaches to cap these diverse artworks under the umbrella of human emotion or experiences. This notion of *family of man* only intensifies "the beauty in art and harmony in human relations" (Price, 1989, p. 37). Educators do not realize such a method actually promotes a false sense of closeness for it assumes *everyone must understand motherly love* and *everyone must experience such emotion.* Unfortunately, lesson plans such as this are abundant. Although, to some extent, students gain art appreciation through these art pieces, art educators are blindfolded by the notion of *we are the world,* where unique individuality and characteristics are often lost.

Art curricula as Playgrounds

A playground art curriculum is theme-based. However, games are used explicitly. It often follows formats similar to "*I Spy*!" or "*Where is Waldo?"* where educators purposely pinpoint works of art to *fit* in a specific game plan. For example, *animals in art* is a popular theme, where teachers introducing a variety of artists who use different media and styles to depict animals (Roland, 2010). This type of curriculum is interactive, discovery-based, and full of problem-solving. Yet, upon critical examination, one has to wonder, besides testing our eye sight and observation skills, do we really encourage students to apply critical thinking skills to analyze and understand the representing animals? In this integration approach, arts and other subjects have been fragmented for convenience to create a fun experience. In the meantime, the integration is being washed out without any substances.

The Essences of Arts Education

These resources also reflect the evolution of art educations in practices in the past two decades: multiculturalism addresses the relationship between *self* and *other*, opposing the limitations of western cannons for open and inclusive perspectives; interdisciplinary seeks integration between arts and other subjects; visual culture stresses cultivating arts appreciations via

everyday lives; social justice encourages educators be more attentive to social dynamics and political undertones; globalization views art education as "the principal arena in which to carry out that scrutiny of tradition and the sharing of knowledge and ideas" (Steers, 2012, p. 7); holistic art education cultivates students as contributors or supporters of "the creative class" (Darras, 2012, p. 23). These conversations have expanded the content and direction of arts education and have provided opportunities for students to reflect on art as well as social cultural phenomena.

The rapid changes of arts education have made us become more aware of the interpretation of images. An image consists of virtual, material, and symbolic elements. It refers to the entire situation in which the image was made (Duncum, 2010; Mitchell, 2006). In response, the content of art teaching has become more dynamic, symbolic, vast, global, and fast changing, much like our modern day experiences (Villeneuve & Sheppard, 2009; Chung & Kirby, 2009; Shin, 2010; Lai, 2009). In addition, art not only represents an artist's craftsmanship and expression but also reflects upon his belief, values, and philosophy of the culture or society where the artist lives. From a cultural standpoint, we cannot deny the fact that art is a direct response of vivid life experiences. Besides providing beauty, art also provides a window into a human behavior. Educators need to recognize the functional aspect of the artworks and how they may only be significant in relation to the people and their lives (Dissanayke 1982, Dissanayke, 1998; Anderson, 1995). It is important to consider using *personalhood* to decode certain cultural behavior or cultural ritual (Marcus & Fisher, 1999). From ethnographic and psychological perspectives, one needs to understand that, "text is the display of discourse— self-reflective on commentaries on experience, emotion, and self; on dreams, remembrances, associations, metaphors, distortions —all of which reveal a behaviorally and conceptually significant level for reflecting, contrasting with, or, obscured by public cultural forms" (p. 54).

As Dewey stated, "art is the extension of the power of rites and ceremonies to unite [people], through a shared celebration, to all incidents

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and scenes of life" (p. 271). Images of art represent and function as documents to commemorate, to celebrate, to present, to criticize, and to reflect the uniqueness of human experiences. Zakia (1997) pointed out that the interpretations of images cannot depart from the connection between memory and associations, which are embedded in our daily experience. A simple example can be found when a person's cultural background affects the meaning of certain colors, which would further alter the interpretation of an image. The association is in fact *equivalent*; meaning, we usually are able to associate an image to some distinctive memories which arouse our ability to *synesthesia*, where senses are triggered other than visual stimulation.

Indeed, the interpretations of images are diverse and complex, often triggering senses from one's experience. Noticing the images' strong ties with their messages, implicitly or explicitly, a question came to mind, "what do these images/artworks mean to me *now*?" It is the word, *now*, that leads my conceptual curricula design framework to a dramatic turn; a turn that goes beyond a fragmental, frozen-in-time experience towards the development of an interdisciplinary curriculum that connects to learners' present life. That is, the idea of *Curricula as Bridges*.

Curricula as Bridges and Its Conceptual Framework

I use bridges as an analogy for a learner-centered interdisciplinary lesson framework. Bridges in reality play a vital role that is more than just connecting point A to point B. In addition to spanning the physical distance, it acts as an agent or stimuli, which immediately brings groups of people together. It provides opportunities to create dialogues, communications, associations and dynamic interactions between people, gradually building relationships. However, we need to be aware that when two cultures collide conflicts may occur; adjustments and compromises follow. Inevitably, the evolution of cultural assimilation is always in the making; new meanings arise from old, new cultures contain hidden values/bias, comforts/conflicts, beliefs/myths. The transformation never ends. The establishment and existence of a bridge impacts its social, cultural, economic, and political

surroundings. Bridges in truth broaden life experiences, bringing resolutions to dissonances, at the same time, establishing new values.

It is this unique characteristic of constantly evolving meanings in *Curricula as Bridges* that places learners in the epicenter. It is constructivist, life-centered, and interdisciplinary in nature. The subject matter, as Cavicchi, et al. (2009) stated, "can be known in various ways and depths… While the teacher knows "It" more fully, in this triangular relationship, the teacher is not there to pass that knowledge to the student. Instead, the teacher seeks to bring about a relationship between the learner and the "It," by which the learner develops both in understanding "It," and in capacity to carry on in relationship with it after the teacher's participation with that learner ends" (p. 198).

Learners themselves are complex entities. Their learning outcome is influenced by their self-values and their learning environments. These two factors also shape how they receive and comprehend the knowledge. Thus, when designing curricula, teachers should take into consideration that the core of a learner-centered curricula is learners are multifaceted, ever changing subjects (See Figure 1).
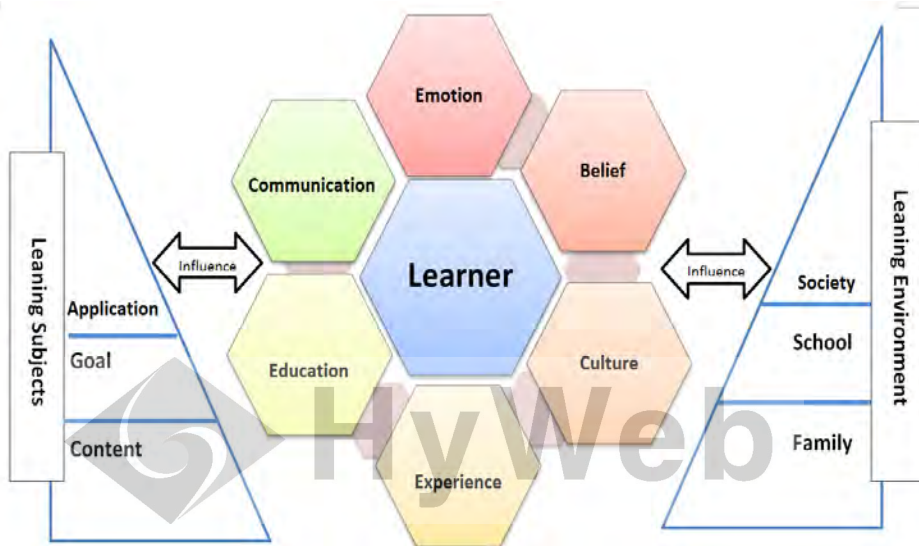

Figure 1   Learner-centered model.

Teachers strive to provide critical explorations and experiences to the subject matter, allowing students to be curious, to try, to discover, to construct, to define, and to redefine meanings that are valued by the learners. Teachers search for life experiences to broaden their knowledge beyond textbooks. It stresses interactions between learning content and the learners. In short, a bridge framework for integrating curricula not only strengthens the learning process via inspirational strategies, but aims to establish effective long-term learning outcomes.
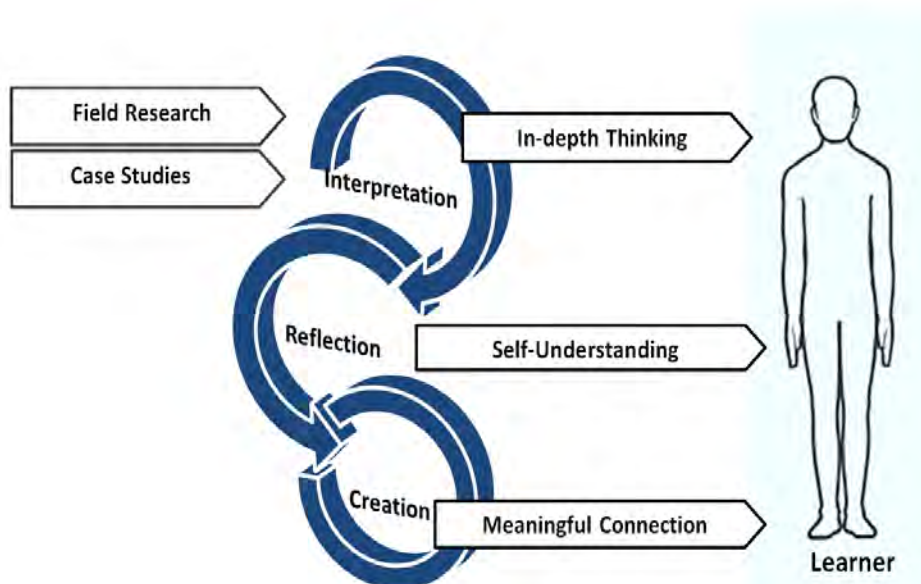

Figure 2   A diagram showing the three stages of Curricula as Bridges.

There are three stages to achieve *Curricula as Bridges*: interpretation, reflection, and creation (See Figure 2). These stages are necessary steps to assist instructors and learners to establish learning goals, values, and form a solid basis for new knowledge. Each stage needs to consider the learners' prior knowledge, life experiences, cognitive developments, beliefs and values to construct and reconstruct meanings. Even though interpretation, reflection, and creation appears to be a linear process, it is in fact an evolving spiral development cycle. Particularly, the strong ties between

in-depth thinking, self-understanding, and meaningful connections all result in positive long-term effects on the learners' cognitive developments.

While art making still remains important in this model, the studio segments need to be relevant; connecting and reflecting the students' unique characteristics. Activities other than studio projects are critical components to deepen and reinforce students' interests. To succeed, utilizing proper activities such as word games, journals, research, field work and case studies is essential to ensure and evaluate how or why this new knowledge matters to students' lives.

Examples and Application of Art Curricula as Bridges

To better illustrate how *Curricula as Bridges* is an effective framework for integrating arts, I provide the following example that I have implemented for my in-service classroom teachers at Washington State University, Tri-Cities.

Defining Shopping Mall Culture and Consumerism

Investigation of a shopping mall culture: Interpretation

Recognizing visual experiences are embedded with our everyday life, my pre-service students started their weekend fieldwork at shopping malls. Their assignment was to pay attention, from the perspective of a potential consumer, to art elements inside the shopping mall: posters, displays, shopping bags, store layouts and anything that attracts their eyes. During the follow-up discussions, students commented on the store window design of *Express* (See Image 3). Although the design is unpretentious, using the store name *Express* as the major focus, it shows a sense of style, uniqueness, and sophistication— which happens to be the characteristics that most shoppers associated with the store's products. The students mentioned the poster at *Eddie Bauer Eyewear* portraying a picture-perfect couple, dressed comfortably in soothing colors and matching glasses. Students agreed the cheerful couple adds unity and harmony to the design,

and delivers a message of enjoying each other's company. Scenic backdrops in window displays (See Image 4) were attractive focal points for shoppers because not only do nature sceneries stand out among the clothing, products, and crowds, they acted as shelters for people to escape from the state of current American society: never ending wars, a shrinking economy, and an uncertain future. The design successfully caught onto what regular American people desire, hope and tranquility in life.
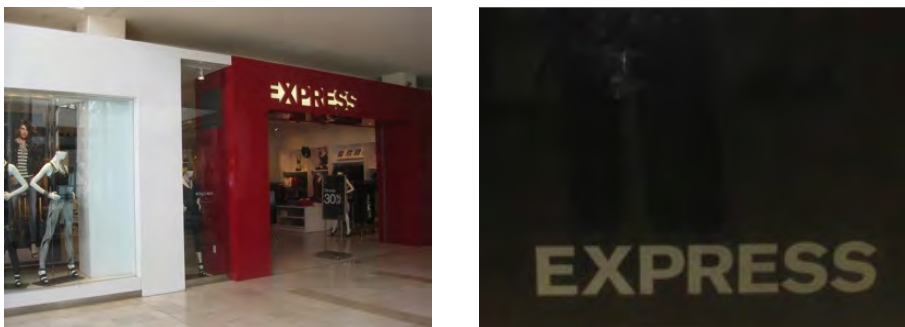
Figure 3   Express Store. Text as the major design element.

Figure 4   Students' Journal Examples.

Left: Analyzing Color arrangements at a Hallmark Store.

Middle: Analyzing Eddie Bauer Scenic Backdrop for its window display.

Right: Candy Machines, locations, and their social functions.

Understanding shopping mall culture: Reflection

Further examination of shopping mall culture through the lenses of social-economical, psychological, and cultural dynamics concluded that the function of shopping malls served several purposes.

a) Everyone's shopping center: The mall transcends social classes and ethnicities, making everyone feel they are part of the mainstream population. Shop owners strategically display diverse manikins to represent various ethnic and age groups. This approach demonstrated a sense of harmony and brotherhood for all people, a rare phenomenon in reality.

b) The mall mirrors human behaviors: Shopping malls are driven by the notion of "desire" and "ownership" to satisfy the urge of "desire".

c) The mall is a social network: Shopping malls play different roles from morning to evening: a gym, a chat room, a free childcare center. Before the opening hour, the mall becomes a place to exercise and socialize. As store hours begin, it transforms into gathering places for stay-home-moms; in the evening to night, it changes to a safe haven for youths.

In conclusion, students provided pros-and-cons for a shopping mall. The positive aspects of a shopping mall is that it creates a place for all to enjoy; it brings convenience in life and a safe environment to shop; economically, it provides opportunities for communication and jobs. The disadvantages of having a shopping mall are the disappearance of traditional mom-and-pop shops and an increase in alienation between communities. In addition, "sex sells" and overpriced overseas products reveal the nature of human greed, and also hinting at degenerating moral values.

Making connection between consumerism and arts: Creation

Using "My store" as a theme, students wrote and created arts to reflect what they have discovered after the field investigation at the shopping mall. Students state the purpose of their store and pinpointed unique characteristics to target customers. Then, students apply Escher's tessellation technique to design their logos, highlighting the store's identity.

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In this project, students did not make tessellation for the sake of making tessellation. Instead, we use tessellation as a form, a means, a bridge to give it a deeper meaning and to illustrate a certain phenomenon in real life. It is a project that goes beyond fragile connections between math and tessellation. Besides arts and math, this lesson plan successfully integrated social studies and communication. The mall experience gives the project a purpose with a backdrop for students to reflect, rethink, and connect to the things they saw and the issues we discussed. Pretending to small business owners in the mall, students drafted and wrote down their design ideas and business plans targeting certain clienteles. They then used visual representation (i.e. tessellation) to design their own "store" logo, applying what they have learned from the mall culture. In the past, I tended to treat tessellation projects merely as a mathematical "shape game", eager to guide students to transform without forming meanings associated with the students' life experience. The *Bridge* approach has shed a different light on this project. I also noticed students were more particular with their design, with a specific purpose and a strong voice. The artworks (See Image 5-7) revealed more than learned skills and art concepts; they also projected students' compassion toward the current state of economy and the hidden message of a mall culture. *Bridge Curricula* provided stronger personal connections to a particular theme (in this case, the mall culture). A curriculum such as this one certainly extends the students' capability in holistic learning.
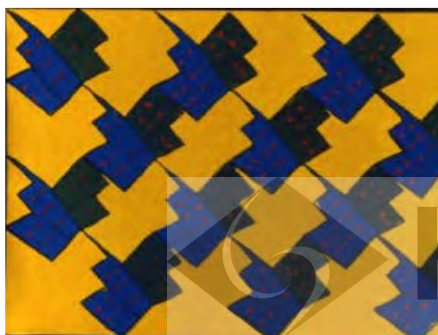

Figure 5   Pre-service Teacher's Shopping Mall Tessellation Project Example: "*City Light Bookstore*".
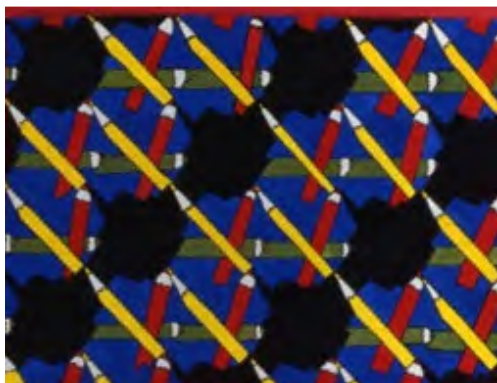
Figure 6   Pre-service Teacher's Shopping Mall Tessellation Project Example: *"Stationary World"*.

Figure 7   Pre-service Teacher's Shopping Mall Tessellation Project Example: *"Movie Time: DVD Trading Store"*.

Conclusion

The conceptual framework of *Curricula as Bridges* echoes contemporary issues in arts education, where learners can reach out and search within to respond to global changes in pursuit of holistic education. This approach puts the learner in the center. Every subject has equal standing in contributing knowledge. There is no hierarchical order, no linear perspective, but ever-evolving collaboration and cooperation. Interpretation,

reflection, and creation enable students to explore and expand their knowledge beyond literal meanings. *Curricula as Bridges* connect to life experience and everyday aesthetics. It is interdisciplinary in nature, applying multiple sensory to critically examine the content of learning. Instructors, knowledge, and learners generate dynamic relationships, forming an evolving spiral development to efficiently reflect life experiences.

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