

The Kwanzaa Playground Narrative: An Anchor for Integrated Curriculum in Art Education

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Abstract

Integrated curriculum, an approach to education that includes diverse perspectives, disciplinary content and contextual nuances, continues to be a challenge to both teachers and students. It is sometimes difficult to make interesting and meaningful connections between and among disciplines. The difficulty may be due to the absence of a curricular anchor, a central content source, that helps to stabilize the many directions that can characterize the integrating process. Art content can function as that anchor. In this paper, a narrative about the Kwanzaa Playground in Columbus, Ohio, which contains original works of art, is offered as an example of a concept-rich, community-based art (education) project. The Kwanzaa Playground project has been the focus of a series of university level courses. The philosophical underpinnings of this project invite reflection on life-based themes which can support inquiry, meaning-making and coherent cross-curricular content.

Key words:

Kwanzaa Playground, integrated curriculum, community-based art.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to provide an example of an approach to creating integrated curriculum that places art at the center and that values the process of creating curricular content. This example is based on a series of seven university level art education courses, viewed collectively and taught over a period of nine years. All of the courses included content about the community-based art project, *The Kwanzaa Playground*, which includes African-inspired works or art. The majority of the students enrolled in these courses were pre- and in-service teachers at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Some of the courses were electives. One course was created by students who worked on individual community-based art projects for the purpose of generating pedagogy. The premise for this paper is that integrated curriculum can be anchored by focusing on works of art. Moreover, the multifocal approach to the integrated curriculum process becomes more meaningful and manageable when the content is interesting, invites inquiry and reflects life-based concepts rather than theory alone.

Practicing What We Teach

Over the years my students have observed that there is a rift between how we talk about education and the way that we implement it. That is, as educators we talk about the interactive process of teaching and learning and the relationship that should exist between and among academic disciplines. Integrated curriculum, an approach to education that includes diverse perspectives and disciplinary content and contextual nuances, continues to be both a conceptual and practical challenge (The Ohio State University TETAC Mentors, 2002; Pate, Homestead & McGinnis, 1997; Pasedo, 2000; Bailey, 2000). The consideration, creation and use of integrated curriculum by pre-service and in-service art educators is related to school change. However, it is not only a strategy for weaving curricular content together. It is an approach that invites inquiry, reconsideration of teaching philosophies by educators and stepped-up teacher preparation. Involvement in integrated curriculum should bring focus to the layered and sometimes problematic nature of the culture of teaching and learning. One teacher-trainer who uses technology to encourage teachers to develop integrated curriculum address-

es the concerns of some teachers and students:

It has been my experience that students who are exposed to curriculum integration take on the attitude of "why are we talking about History in my Math class". Upon further reflection, however, and with some gentle prodding from their teacher, these very same students come to realize that this approach has enhanced their learning by providing a more creative approach to both learning and teaching.

Since reading, for example, is a component of all subject areas, it seems only logical that the integration of core curriculum courses is only natural. One must be able to read with comprehension to solve math problems, understand the plot of a novel, write a research paper as well as understand the significance of historical events. Since we do not live in a vacuum students should not be taught in one. Providing students with a curriculum that integrates the various subjects opens up a whole new world of learning opportunities.

The question arises as to how educators can successfully integrate curriculum subjects. One of the problems that faces educators is finding common preparation time for curriculum collaboration. Collaboration is essential in creating a successful and creative integrated curriculum. Through collaboration teachers become more familiar with the learning objectives of the other areas and in turn discover how these objectives can be integrated into other subject areas as well.

A successful integrated curriculum involves a clear plan: assessments and activities that show the relationship between different courses and opportunities for students to demonstrate what they have learned in creative but meaningful ways. Through the use of technology students can illustrate the relationship of history to a literary work with a Power Point presentation; use Word to write a commentary on a social science theory; use Excel to further deve-

lop their mathematical and graphing skills.

The concept of having a "thread" of continuity through the various core subject areas of History, English, Social Studies, Science and Math likens itself to life itself. To successfully move through life one must master in some degree a familiarity with all of the aspects that make up living and how they relate to each other. Education is not so different.

(S, Pleasant, Area Instructional Technology Coordinator, Chicago Public Schools, personal communication, August 18, 2003)

Although, the core courses (e.g., English, math, history, and science) are often the focus of curriculum teams, Pleasant comments on the contribution of an art teacher:

..there is an art teacher, who in addition to having her students create art projects, included in her assessment of their work, their knowledge of art history. They were assigned to read about a specific artist and provide a written report about the artist which they shared with the class either as a Power Point presentation or just a Word document. In addition, to accompany their projects, which were in this case, small paper mache' sculptures, they were to write a poem about what the sculpture represented. This was a wonderful case of integrating various subject areas, in this case History, English and Art.

(S, Pleasant, Area Instructional Technology Coordinator, Chicago Public Schools, personal communication, August 18, 2003)

The Kwanzaa Playground: A Community Narrative as a Source for Integrated Curriculum

This section describes the story of the Kwanzaa Playground. The narrative is intended to illustrate the conceptual foundation of The Playground, its life-based possibilities and potential sources for building an art-centered integrated curriculum. The highlighted areas connote possible disciplinary and/or

conceptual departure points.

The Kwanzaa Playground was conceived in 1993 and dedicated on May 5, 1995 after several years of development spearheaded by its creator, Shirley Bowen, artist, educator and community activist. Bowen recalls the essence of her activism:

For us, the playground project became an outdoor learning lab, where we could explore the role of play in the lives of children, the potential of African art concepts to educate, impact and reclaim the minds and hearts of our children and their families. In the process of resurrecting a neglected playground, we had to heal relationships, improve communications, educate the community about African values and concepts, and especially increase self-esteem and self-pride among children constantly threatened by crime, violence and substance abuse (Bowen, S., personal communication, 1996).

Bowen was inspired to do this work by her then nine-year old son, Calid who expressed a desire for a better place to play. Thus, The Playground was conceived (*history/political science: community activism*). The Playground is a corner lot in an area of the city characterized by many social and cultural challenges and equally as many social and cultural opportunities and strengths. When the project was being developed alcohol, drug abuse and crime were counterbalanced by a thriving arts community, social and political activism, and the rebirth of local businesses. Local architecture ranges from humble homes to splendid, rehabilitated mansions. (*sociology: local demographics, architecture*). The creation of The Playground, in a primarily African-American community (*cultural history : community development*) was a response to the children in the community who needed a space in which they could play, learn and explore their individual and collective identities. The preexisting playground on this site, English Park, was in poor condition, unsafe and aesthetically unappealing. (*city planning: neighborhood parks*). The award-winning Kwanzaa Playground is believed to be the first African-inspired didactic playground in Ohio and possibly in the United States.

Responding to the much quoted ancient African proverb that "it takes a village to raise a child" and the kindred adage that "a strong village makes a

strong child" (*anthropology: African philosophy and adages*) the parents, grandparents, artists, arts councils, community members, educators, corporate funders, city agencies, and mental health agencies formed a supportive partnership with the children. Through their collaboration the playground was physically and philosophically rebuilt. (*civics; civic involvement*). It contains original works of art from seven, well-known, local, African-American artists (*art history: African-American art and civic activity*) .

The Kwanzaa Playground has a specific African-centered focus. However, by foregrounding the notions that:

- community engagement in diverse art and prevention activities can help all children to recognize and to claim their right to be safe, to possess self-knowledge and self-esteem and
- it is valuable to become capable, wholesome citizens (*social studies/government: citizenship*)

the content expressed by The Playground is open to transfer and meaning-making across various cultural and ethnic contexts.

Taking a Closer Look at the Kwanzaa Playground as a Curricular Source

The choice was made to look closely at the Kwanzaa Playground as a source point because this community-based project is local, dynamic in its relationship to the surrounding community and rich in multidisciplinary content that can be translated into integrated curriculum. The permanently installed works of art by seven, local, African-American artists are the African Tell-A-Story Board, conceived by Shirley Bowen and created by Larry Winston Collins, *Thrones to the Earth and Sky*, by Barbara Chavous, the obelisk or Tekhen, by Pheoris West and Nommo X (in process), ceramic pedestals, by William Agnew and school children, *Baobab Tree and Adinkra Fence*, by Andrew Scott, *African Portal*, by Queen Brooks, and the forthcoming installation of seven Kwanzaa Plaques by Laverne Brown. In order to understand the essence and allegorical possibilities of The Playground and the context of the art, Bowen has been liberally quoted:

Seven artists were challenged to draw inspiration from African and African American culture. Myths of creation, traditional values, character-building proverbs, and symbols of rebirth and vital life forces guided the design and development of each component of the Kwanzaa Playground renovation.

The layout and components of the Kwanzaa Playground were designed to help children gain a sense of organic unity, an awareness of relationships, one to the other. The Kwanzaa Playground will benefit the entire extended family, individually and collectively.

The playground's wheelchair accessible walkway is shaped like a human. This anthropomorphic layout was chosen to symbolize the *First Ancestor*, our common source, our connectedness to the cosmic creator and to each other.

In many African traditions the "head " is the seat of one's character. How the head appears, reflects one's sense of self-worth, self-knowledge and self-esteem. At the *head* of the playground rests the *Baobab Tree*, a sacred, serviceable object throughout African cultures--a place where children hear stories to help them grow in harmony with each other and the world.

The obelisk is an ancient symbol of early civilization. It sits on the belly of the playground. As the stomach is considered the center of judgment, the obelisk or *TEKHEN*, is inscribed with hieroglyphs to proclaim virtues for good living so the stomach will be free of stress and dis-ease.

Our universal connectedness is reinforced by the symbols on the [forthcoming] *Kwanzaa Shelter* at the *left hand* and the *Thrones to the Earth and Sky* at the right foot. The playground fence uses the character-building messages in Adinkra proverbs to inform children's play. Developed by the Asante people in the 19th century, Adinkra proverbs tell stories of wisdom, strength and unity.

One enters the playground through *African Portals* richly decorated with animal forms. At the *African Tell-a-Story Board*, children will invent stories of their own. Ceramic pedestals and tiles created with school students' art encircle the rear entrance and adorn the *left foot* of the Kwanzaa Playground. (Bowen, 1995)

Several opportunities are offered to students who study the Kwanzaa Playground in a curriculum development course. They are able to choose one of the artworks as a research topic so that they can find a perspective for teaching about the art as narrative, object, icon and/or allegory. They may select other ways of addressing the artwork as well. Their research must include inquiry about the artwork that is based on the strategies and content from multiple disciplines. Students are also invited to prepare teaching materials based on their research. As part of the research process, they explore the relationship between and among The Playground, the artwork selected and their lives. They are encouraged to recognize life experiences as an educational variable (Daniel, 1996). Throughout the course, class members are asked to state and question their teaching and life philosophies. Questions about their philosophies encourage students (preteachers) and teachers to explore the soundness of their personal approach to teaching and to connect their beliefs to their approaches to curriculum development. In one instance, a student from Taiwan, H.D., explained that we would understand the complexities of the content of The Playground if we studied the *Si Shu (Four Books) of Confucian Literature*. H.D. cautioned us that it would take a lifetime to study and understand this literature. However, one could begin by considering the following things about Confucian philosophy:

[It is] theories about the law, life, and the government... Philosophy is a kind of a system of ideas and thoughts that talk about the human's behavior, the rules that you should follow to make a successful life, and about the government...it's about thoughts and theories that teach other people lessons about principles, or rules, about life and it also teaches you a moral (sort of like the morals that are at the end of a fable). Confucius is famous for his philosophy because he made many wise sayings in ancient China that helped many people learn about nature, the world, and the human

behavior. He also helped the government and the emperor by teaching them lessons on how the emperor should rule his kingdom successfully. The *Si Shu* (Four Books) of Confucian literature...became the textbooks of later Chinese generations (Crystal, 1995).

The recommendation from H.D. to consider the *Si Shu* was issued after the class was introduced to the *Nguzo Saba of Kwanzaa*, discussed below. The introduction of specific philosophies was intended to illustrate how art and life lessons can be connected and how the complexity of that connection can be explored through an integrated curriculum approach.

The Kwanzaa Playground project has attracted the attention of local and distant educators who have created lessons and units based on the themes suggested such as: community, family, and heritage. The theme of "community" has been very popular among educators and students. Perhaps they agree with cultural analyst Dr. Marimba Ani who offers that "The source of human morality must necessarily be in the interaction of human beings. It must be communal, which more than 'social,' implies a joining of persons" (p. 206). The various educators, who are using The Playground as a source for curriculum development, are from formal and informal educational settings. Students in my classes have been interested in exploring the life principles and African-centered philosophical positions reflected in each work of art in The Playground and in the overall positive philosophical centering of The Playground (*philosophy, art history, aesthetics and criticism: symbolism in art*). The Swahili term, *Nguzo Saba*, or *Seven Principles (of Kwanzaa)* developed by Dr. R. Karenga, is the value system that underpins The Playground. These values which are the building blocks for community are: *umoja* (unity), *kujichagulia* (self-determination), *ujima* (collective work and responsibility), *ujamaa* (cooperative economics), *nia* (purpose), *kuumba* (creativity), and *imani* (faith). Like the *Si Shu of Confucian Literature* the *Nguzo Saba* are intended to provide lessons for living.

Some of the curriculum materials created also teach about culturally and educationally transferable content such as: 1.) the historical context of works of art (*historical inquiry*); 2.) the potential for creating personal and shared meanings through interaction with a work of art (*meaning making*) ; 3.) how

art can be connected to many aspects of one's life (*life-based art*), and; 4.) how art can help to explore and define varied and coexisting realities (*issues of diversity*). As a point of departure for curriculum developers from diverse disciplines, the goals of The Playground are explored, which are to:

- use the arts to assist in beautifying the neighborhood
- function as an intergenerational space for engaging the creative activities of children, youth and adults
- provide unique resources to enhance the self-esteem of African-American children by expanding their world-view
- bond and empower youth, families and artists through shared ownership and collective input
- symbolize the community's will to resolve common problems and
- strengthen youth against crime, alcohol and drug abuse

These goals are grounded in multidisciplinary knowledge. Consequently, individual teachers, students or those working in teams, can probably find a disciplinary "hook" that attaches them to the curriculum development process.

Once curriculum developers are provided with the above narrative they can become involved in inquiry about the content for the purpose of teasing out mutually useful concepts that are relevant to their various disciplines. Then they can begin to make connections.

ReCognizing Works of Art: Using Art as the Anchor

In order to make curricular connections an anchor is needed. Art can be that anchor. The goal is to form an interrelationship between subject area content and strategies by considering specific issues, dilemmas, themes and concepts through the lenses of the various disciplines. We can refer to artworks that have addressed any of these. It is important, however, to keep this process from becoming dominated by an aimless webbing of ideas. The art anchor can provide the thread or theme that focuses the integrating process. For example, in the Kwanzaa Playground the works of art permit us to discover or be informed of thematic and conceptual content such as "community heritage" or "lessons for living". If teachers and students can address the themes through the multiple lenses of their own lives and experiences the

process of using commingled disciplinary content to address a theme might seem more reasonable. We can make the art personally meaningful (whether we like the art or not) by questioning the inspiration for, meaning of, approach to and relevance of each piece.

It is not difficult to find possibilities for curriculum integration using art as an anchor. Chanda and Daniel (2000) point out that looking at art through lenses that integrate the perspectives of both history and culture, for example, encourages the viewer to "reCognize" works of art. They refer to artwork from the Kwanzaa Playground as an example of what it means to reCognize a work of art.:

We are suggesting a way of teaching that explores the nexus between historical and cultural content in works of art using examples of African-descended art as a paradigm for **reCognizing**. This word looks very similar to recognizing, however, recognizing refers to the act of perceiving, seeing something again or recalling an image. ReCognizing refers to the act of cognitive restructuring one's thinking, getting to know a previously known thing in new ways or an unknown thing, like a work of art, in multiple ways. In order to reCognize we must: (a) go beyond the physical knowing or comprehending to gain a contextual knowing that is constructed by time and place; (b) grasp the inherent character of the work of art situated in time and space, present and past; and (c) recognize its inner force which relates to its timeless ability to address us as a collection of people.

ReCognizing, therefore, demands that we take a broad view of the historical and cultural genesis of images and icons, which link the present to the past. *ReCognizing*, consequently, entails considering the present meanings in light of the past, past motivations in light of the present, and coexisting realities or truths across time. (p. 8)

Further explanation of reCognizing as an exercise in curriculum integration is provided by considering an aspect of one of The Playground's artworks, the *African Portal*, created by Queen Brooks. It is a gateway to one

side of The Playground. Other facts about the *African Portal* are:

- it is constructed of two eight feet high cedar posts connected across the top by an 11 feet wide cedar post
- all surfaces are embellished with wood burning and painting
- the images on all sides are of real and imaginary objects and animals inspired by Queen's study of African objects, symbols and design elements
- the paintings are bright and polychromatic
- the colors and images on the *African Portal* provide contrast with the surrounding buildings in the community which are more neutral in color
- this *Portal* faces the home of a local African-American artist-plumber-activist-arts advocate who is also a Yoruba priest (i.e., participant in a belief system originated by a large West African ethnic group that extends to other continents) and a participant in the creation of The Playground
- one of the symbols on the *African Portal* is a red bird with a long beak and a large belly

From these observations we can move to the investigation of thematic content related to the *African Portal*. The artist states that the gateway entrance invites the "exploration of creative paths to self-knowledge". She considers this process to be "a lesson for living" which can occur as you enter and leave the playground. From the artist's ideas we can adopt the slightly adjusted theme of "lessons for living". But, where are the lessons for living to be found in the art and how do we find them? Source points for the search could be the symbols of animals and objects illustrated on the portal. Chanda and Daniel (1997) chose to explore the painted red bird on one of the vertical posts. Their research can be expanded to illustrate how content from multiple disciplines could lead to curricular integration. They recommend exploration of the characteristics and context of the red bird. This can be done by using a collaborative process involving teachers and students across disciplines who create questions relevant to the history and culture of the red bird. The goal of the inquiry process is to discover concepts that help learners to find personal meaning that starts with the art and moves on to the

more expansive arena of their lives. The following questions might be the result:

1. Why is this bird pictured on the *African Portal*? Does it have anything to do with a children's playground?
2. Why is the red bird at the entrance to the Playground?
3. Is this a familiar bird? If so, what do you know about it?
4. Has the artist commented on the red bird?
5. Since the art in the Kwanzaa Playground is African-inspired, could the red bird be connected to African history and culture?
6. What do you think that the red bird symbolizes?
7. How can you find out more about the red bird?

Students and teachers involved in the process of creating and responding to these questions can approach it from varying perspectives. Historical and cultural information can be extracted from other disciplines such as the sciences, arts, and literature thus moving the research across the curriculum. Students and teachers can brainstorm about the responses to their questions. Teachers should facilitate the process by helping students to see reasonable connections. Asking students the same questions in each of their classes can encourage them to think about the subject of the inquiry in more elaborate ways. However, making connections may not be possible for all subjects and should not be forced.

After brainstorming and conducting research across the curriculum, students might discover the following multidisciplinary content:

1. The large, red bird on the *Portal* is intended to attract the children and to make them curious.
2. The motif of the bird is similar to a sculpture found among the Senufo people of the Cote d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast) of west Africa. The height of the sculpture ranges from about 36 inches to six feet high. Both the sculpted bird and the red bird have a large, protruding stomach.
3. The bird represents the hornbill, a tropical bird found in Africa and Asia.
4. Given the African-inspired imagery of the Playground we can infer

that the red bird is an African ground hornbill.

5. The red bird is a two-dimensional variation of a three-dimensional Senufo bird.
6. The Senufo bird is an icon. It is called a *Porgaga* or the great mythical bird.
7. There is specific mythology attached to the Senufo bird.
8. The Senufo bird is important imagery related to the development and initiation of young boys through the lo or poro society.
9. The hornbill icon is a symbol of both male and female fertility.
10. The hornbill icon is an allegory for the continuity of the whole community.
11. Inscriptions found on the outspread wings of the hornbill sculpture (tortoise, monitor lizard, and python) relate to the required mastery of a specific body of knowledge and intellectual development for young male initiates leading to knowledge about life.
12. The Senufo sculpture is connected with ancestors, family, village unity and community acts.
13. The Senufo sculpture and the Kwanzaa Playground provide life lessons about ancestry, social customs, future generations and community awareness.
14. The Senufo sculpture guards the entrance to the sacred grove where important ritual events take place in Senufo villages
15. The red bird adorns the formal entrance to the Kwanzaa Playground where the learning that accompanies play can take place (Holas, 1985).

Using art (i.e., the red bird on the *African Portal* in the context of The Kwanzaa Playground) as the anchor to pull the various disciplinary approaches together, to explore the theme "lessons for living" (i.e., from the African hornbill sculpture, *Porgaga*) becomes a multifocal example of how we can teach and learn. Discussing, writing about, creating art about, exploring the history, geography and culture of what *Porgaga* means in the learner's context will probably include topics such as rights of passage, rituals, symbolism, oral and literary tradition, myths, and belief systems. The result of this process can create an inquiry-based method for information-gathering and

knowledge-building that is comprehensive and in concert with the way that we experience life.

Conclusions

What we teach and what students learn should be coherent. It should make sense. When we teach one subject at a time without valuing the natural inter-relationship of ideas and concepts across disciplines, we force students to learn within two incompatible modes: content isolation in school vs. content integration in life. If we share with our students the notion that education is for life it is possible that the process of learning can be empowering for both teachers and learners. Students at all levels have taught us that they may or may not be able to immediately grasp the process of curricular intermingling especially if it is only explored as a cerebral exercise. However, by creating integrated curricula that grow from concrete examples such as the Kwanzaa Playground we can develop our understanding of concepts formed through inquiry about something real. We can use art as the anchor for stabilizing ideas and concepts as we move through various disciplines to avoid the confusion that comes from lack of focus. Arguably, using art as the center of an integrated curriculum may not be the panacea for creating excellent teaching materials and strategies. However, when art works are selected that are inherently interesting, worthy of inquiry, and reflective of human dilemmas they can support meaningful, lifelong learning across the curriculum.

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