

# Collaborating through Art to Enhance Learning

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## **Why Collaborate on the Arts?**

Collaboration is a time-intensive commitment for educators. It requires establishing shared goals, agreeing on a vision to reach those goals, and maintaining strong relationships to keep one another on track. The payoff is that effective collaboration can stretch funds, instructional time, and energy—often, this results in something that would not have been possible if the partners had not worked together. Collaborating with professional artists allows for students and educators to engage in a wider range of art forms than a single school could support on its own. In these instances, students, educators, and professional artists all learn from one another.

There is extensive literature on arts in education and what makes it effective (Burnaford, Brown, Doherty, and McLaughlin 2007; Gullatt 2008; Ludwig, Boyle, and Lindsay 2017; Silverstein and Layne 2010; Wan, Ludwig, and Boyle 2018). Additionally, national organizations, like the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts (a public-private partnership) and the National Art Education Association, provide professional development and practical guidance to help educators bring the arts into their teaching.

Broadly speaking, there are three main ways that the arts may be taught in schools: as arts education, as arts enrichment, and as arts integration. The Kennedy Center defines arts integration as “an approach to

teaching in which students construct and demonstrate understanding through an art form. Students engage in a creative process which connects an art form and another subject area and meets evolving objectives in both” (Silverstein and Layne, 2010, 4). Silverstein and Layne further say that the purpose of the creative process is to help students create something that is “original and of value” by taking the following nonlinear steps: imagine, examine, and perceive; explore, experiment, and develop craft; create; reflect, assess, and revise; and share. The definitions for arts integration and the creative process highlight that arts integration is rooted in constructivism. The National Art Education Association (2016) also emphasizes inquiry, arguing that arts integration helps students connect with their curriculum by focusing on a creative approach that unites disciplines through an inquiry-driven process. These constructivist-centered processes should be quite familiar to school librarians, who work across disciplines and guide students in inquiry-focused projects.

There is ample evidence that supporting the arts is worthwhile for all educators. Research has found evidence that the arts strengthen academic achievement, critical thinking, and social-emotional skills, such as empathy and tolerance (Burnaford, Brown, Doherty, and McLaughlin 2007; Gullatt 2008; Ludwig, Boyle, and Lindsay 2017; Wan, Ludwig, and Boyle 2018). Gullatt (2008) also reports that incorporating the arts helps teachers facilitate learning, enhances students’ understanding by doing and by engaging in higher-order thinking, gives students more connections to the world, and improves their communication and collaboration skills. Further, the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 includes the arts as part of a well-rounded education that should be equitably provided for all, and it allows states to use federal Title IV funds to provide access to the arts in schools (Ludwig, Boyle, and Lindsay 2017; Wan, Ludwig, and Boyle 2018). States are also developing ways to measure access to as well as the quality of arts education, hoping to add these to school accountability reports (von Zastrow 2018).

These initiatives show that a range of policy makers, educators, and researchers see the value of supporting the arts in education and are dedicated to finding ways to promote it. Thus, monitoring and implementing trends in arts education should be a priority for educators hoping to improve a range of learning and well-being outcomes for all students. School librarians can play a critical role in ensuring that their students benefit from learning through the arts; one approach is to collaborate with professional artists. The National Art Education Association (2015) encourages educators to work closely with artists, saying

that this helps the formation of community partnerships, improves professional development for the entire school faculty, exposes students and teachers to careers in the arts, and provides students in-depth experiences with the arts. By collaborating beyond the school campus, librarians help students broaden the art skills they practice, develop a deeper understanding of an issue or a topic through the arts, and share new knowledge through artistic expression with an audience beyond a classroom.

### **School Librarians' Role in Arts Education**

Before school librarians embark on a new collaboration, they would be wise to ask, What will students learn that I can't help them learn already? What arts skills do I have? What are the specific artistic strengths and interests of those in my community? Answering these questions will help school librarians determine how they personally connect with the arts, how they can leverage collaboration outside of the school, and whether the collaboration would be something that their students or school community would need and value.

Recent journal articles in *School Library Connection*, *Knowledge Quest*, and *Educational Leadership* spotlight the increasing interest in the arts and school collaborations with experts in the community. They focus on the power of the arts in supporting social-emotional learning, promoting mindfulness, dealing with trauma, and reaching students who are otherwise not engaged. The articles also provide practical ideas for school librarians to engage with the arts and collaborate beyond their schools. Colston (2018) summarizes what eight school librarians learned through collaborating with art teachers and other art experts. Boroson (2018) introduced sketch noting as a way to engage students with autism and improve their learning and literacy—librarians could easily incorporate this form of visual-note-taking into other lessons on note-taking and graphic organizers. Barnett (2019) describes a professional development program connecting school librarians and educators with community resources to develop quality arts-based or object-based learning experiences. These articles reinforce the notion that school librarians are in key positions to contribute to existing arts integration efforts or to integrate more of the arts into their library instruction. The following three examples from Hawaii spotlight school librarians connecting a range of students with community artists. I hope these examples will spur readers to consider how similar collaborations might be created in their own school settings.

## **I Get the Flying Pig: Connecting Kailua Elementary Students with Comic Book Artists**

Professional artists can create authentic, immersive experiences—especially when the educator is not personally knowledgeable or skilled in a specific art form. Darren Tanaka, Kailua Elementary School librarian, is a skilled artist known for incorporating the arts into the library. Comic books and graphic novels—not so much. How did a school librarian coordinate a mini-comic con, featuring students’ original comic characters, complete with trading cards and local comic artists? And, why?

Darren arrived at this culminating event by issuing a series of challenges to his students. He first asked them what they wanted to do, then listened to their responses—they wanted to draw—and then pushed them to create their own original characters. He was inspired to let students take charge of their learning because after thirteen years at Kailua Elementary, he realized that he no longer had a clear sense of what his students were interested in. One day in the fall, he challenged an especially directionless fifth grade class to tell him what they wanted to do during library instruction. He pointed out that the library had a wealth of resources, but none of it would be useful unless the students had things they were curious or cared about. He asked them, “What do you care about? What do you like to do?” Those who responded said “draw.” Darren took that input and ran with it, having students draw whatever they wanted to that day.

As he took a look at what the students drew, he realized they had skills but something was missing. They drew popular comic characters with high levels of accuracy but little original creativity. This awoke the librarian in Darren, and he led an impromptu discussion about how a comic character is someone else’s work as well as the importance of ethically using others’ work. To Darren, these were hallmark concepts for school librarians, but they were also part of the National Core Arts Standards and the Kennedy Center’s idea of the creative process. He wanted to get students to create—not just consume—art. So he challenged students in grades three through six to create their own original characters.

Darren created a graphic organizer to help students think about and settle on different aspects of their characters. During the ensuing sessions, he had students flesh out their characters and develop expressions, movements, and origin stories. Over time, many students had the range of artwork needed to form portfolios, and Darren realized that he could coordinate a comic con to highlight the students’ work.

Lacking extensive background knowledge on comic cons, Darren relied on the experience of comic con experts to provide an authentic

experience. He first asked students (who had been to comic cons) what they enjoyed most about the events. He incorporated these popular pieces into the Kailua event: trading cards, autographs, artist booths, and talking with artists. Realizing that the school library could not accommodate booths for all the students, he then asked his young learners how he should choose. He followed their lead and had students conduct blind reviews against a set of criteria. Darren next reached beyond his school community and asked friends on Facebook for suggestions. By reaching into his personal connections, he was soon introduced to the Hawaiian Comic Book Alliance. By getting connected with this group, Darren hit a community jackpot when several local comic artists took immediate interest in shaping the comic con experience for students.

The artists were eager to see the student artwork, share their own stories as artists, and mentor the next generation of comic artists. When Darren asked if they wanted to have their own display booths, they specifically said that the event should be about the student work and wanted the opportunity to talk with and give feedback to the student artists. Darren shared the student artwork ahead of the comic con, and the artists took it upon themselves to envision students' characters in their own style—one even called dibs on a particularly compelling pig character, saying, "I get the flying pig!" The artists took the time to draw each of the eighteen students' characters, providing students with professional feedback.

At the event, in addition to showcasing the portfolios, each of the eighteen student artists had a display booth with a 2' x 3' poster for a backdrop and trading cards to autograph. The visiting artists made sure to talk with each of the students who had booths. As students and artists engaged in conversations, Darren heard questions like "Where did that idea come from?" Artists traded their own work with the student artists, allowing students to practice sharing their work and being open to critique. An a-ha moment for the guest artists was when they recognized themselves in the students. They admitted to Darren: "I wish I had teachers that would have made this kind of opportunity" and "Imagine where we'd be if we had had this." In turn, Darren saw the importance of having the professionals connect with student artists, noting that "students need to see where they're going." This experience made Darren realize that when you surrender control, great things can happen. Taking risks enabled Darren and his students to engage in a creative process that emphasized revisions and encouraged being "messy."

## Telling Stories through Murals: Manoa Elementary Students as Artists and Art Docents

For Imelda Amano, a recently retired librarian from Manoa Elementary School, one project often leads to another. Shortly before retiring, Imelda spearheaded the creation of a reading garden for the school. Her garden consisted of a round reading bench encircling a large tree and surrounded by a grassy play area that was lined with flowers, succulents, and decorative garden statues. The idea of adding a mural came up as she was chatting one day with the school's counselor. Imelda recalled that Lori Chun, a fellow school librarian, had worked with the Estria Foundation to create a school mural (described in Harada, Chun, Louis, and Okemura 2017). She shared her idea with two teachers who had recently completed professional development on peace education. They immediately saw a connection between a peace-related unit they were working on and the creation of a mural depicting this theme. Once the teachers were on board, Imelda reached out to the Estria Foundation for support to paint a 16' × 9' wall mural.

The Estria Foundation is a nonprofit organization dedicated to using the arts to engage communities in solving issues. The Foundation has created murals worldwide, always working with local students and artists to develop landscapes that convey a *sense of place* through expressing local history and culture. For the project at Manoa Elementary, students engaged in discussions about the geography of Manoa Valley, the legend of Kahalaopuna, and how this legend connected with their peace education efforts on campus. Imelda and the teachers devised the following learning goals: first, interpret the Kahalaopuna legend by generating messages of peace, identify behaviors for conflict resolution, and develop lists of the characters' traits; second, with the help of the Estria Foundation, learn basic paint methods and produce a collaborative mural based on themes and messages derived from the legend of Kahalaopuna.

The mural project was conducted over three sessions in one month, and it involved several community partners. Malama Manoa, a neighborhood nonprofit organization, supported the project in two ways—one indirectly and one directly. In 2001, Malama Manoa commissioned author-illustrator James Rumford to create a children's version of the legend (published as *Ka-hala-o-puna, ka u'i o Mānoa: the Beauty of Mānoa*); this is the version that Imelda selected for a read-aloud. Second, Imelda applied for and received grant funding from the organization to cover the majority of the costs for creating the mural, with an additional grant from the Hawaii chapter of Alpha Delta Kappa.

In the first session, Kimo Keaulana from Honolulu Community College was a guest storyteller for the fourth grade class, while Imelda was the “guest” storyteller for first grade.

The legend of Kahalaopuna provided an origin story for the valley’s rains, winds, and rainbows, as well as the valley’s distinctive geographic formations. In particular, it described how Kahalaopuna was turned into a rainbow that forever graces Manoa Valley. The legend includes complex themes of betrayal, jealousy, anger, and death. Having an experienced librarian and a guest storyteller made it possible to scaffold this story for the students. Participating teachers also created graphic organizers for students to document what they noticed about the characters in the story using textual evidence.

Immediately following the storytelling, students discussed how the story connected to the valley’s history and geography. They also discussed what they learned from the legend’s characters, Kahalaopuna and Kauhi, noting how Kauhi allowed his jealousy to take control and lead him to violence, while Kahalaopuna showed only kindness. Students connected the legend to strategies they learned about peace and conflict resolution, such as “taking belly breaths” to process feelings of anger and “going to the source” and seeking truth instead of relying on rumors.

These rich conversations led directly into the second session, where artist Luke Pomai DeKneef and Imelda worked directly with the students in collaboratively generating symbols for the mural. They led the students in the practice of mindfulness sketching, where the students reflected on and drew symbols representing what they had learned through the story and their discussions. Students ultimately chose the symbols of *kalo* (taro, a native Hawaiian food staple once grown abundantly in Manoa Valley), rain (ever-present in Manoa), and the *pueo* (the native Hawaiian owl), which represents Kahalaopuna’s *‘aumākua* (ancestors).

In the third session, Pomai worked with half of the students in grades one and four, teaching them brush strokes and how to paint their symbols onto the wall. Imelda described the *collaborative mural* process as a strategy that involved students painting a colorful background with general shapes. Creating the background took the students and Pomai about three hours. During this time, Imelda worked with the other half of the group in painting similar symbols on rocks (called *peace pebbles*) to place in the nearby reading garden. Following this session, Pomai spent another six hours putting the finishing touches on the mural. The completed product included a colorful rainbow background, a *kalo* plant holding one large raindrop (with Kahalaopuna and a *pueo* inside), and several smaller

raindrops representing all the different people in the world, coexisting peacefully (Estria Foundation 2018).

Once the mural was unveiled, fourth-grade students wanted to provide guided tours for fellow students and campus visitors. They did a practice presentation with Imelda and followed this with tours for the school administrators and students in other grade levels. The fourth graders also planned to invite first-grade students to “shadow” them, so that these younger colleagues might also lead future tours. Like the students, Imelda continues to share what she has learned through this experience. Hoping to inspire other school librarians to consider a similar project, Imelda has partnered with Lori Chun, the first librarian with a collaborative mural, and Estria Miyashiro, cofounder of Estria Foundation, to convey the power of arts integration at a conference of the Hawaii Association of School Librarians.

### **Going Behind the Scenes: Punahou School Students as Art Curators and Preservers**

Punahou School archivist Kylee Mar makes it a regular practice to talk with faculty to find out what they are working on and how she might help them. One day, she talked with a history teacher who was preparing for a short G-Term course “The Life Behind the Art.” G-Term is a graded, four-day term held between the fall and spring sessions. It is called “G-Term” as a nod to the school’s A-F rotating schedule. G-Term is taken by all high school students, who can choose from roughly eighty hands-on, *exploration-centered* courses. Students share what they have learned at the end of the week with the campus community in a fair.

For “The Life Behind the Art,” the history teacher wanted to take students behind the scenes of art exhibits so they would learn about the work that goes into sharing and displaying—not just creating—art. After discussing the course goals, Kylee realized that for the plan to work, the teacher needed to connect his students with people who worked behind the scenes to make art exhibits a reality. She drew on her professional network and contacted Malia Van Heukelem, an archivist with the Jean Charlot Collection at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. Originally from France, artist Jean Charlot participated in the 1920s Mexican muralism renaissance and continued his work in Hawaii. The Charlot Collection holds his sketchbooks and journals as well as his correspondence and photographs with many other artists. Punahou students were already familiar with Charlot and Vladimir Ossipoff (an architect also featured in the Charlot Collection) because they both worked on the Thurston Memorial Chapel at Punahou School.

Toward the end of the fall term, Kylee, Malia, and the history teacher ironed out the details over a conference call. Importantly, they narrowed the focus from several possible topics and art museums to visiting the Charlot Collection, where Malia could provide students with background knowledge for creating an exhibit at the school fair. During the planning call, they settled on teaching students what to expect when visiting an archive, how to preserve art and artifacts, what the Charlot Collection held, who used the Collection, and how the holdings were used in exhibits. Kylee provided the teachers and students with copies of *Art Collection of Punahou School* and *Doors to Many Mansions* for context about Charlot, Ossipoff, and what they would see at the Charlot Collection.

To connect their visit with what students knew, Malia found materials related to Charlot's and Ossipoff's work on the school's chapel. During the visit, Malia highlighted the range of materials, observing that "there's so much here that you wouldn't expect." She wanted students to come away from their visit knowing that an archival collection is more than just paper and more than what you might see online. She also wanted students to learn that colleges often have unique art collections that can shed light on a variety of topics. As part of her presentation, Malia gave a short talk on how to take care of an archive and materials, describing in particular how archivists deal with Hawaii's bugs and mold issues. This gave students information about how important it was to protect and preserve materials.

Back at Punahou, students spent the second and third days creating their own exhibit using materials from the Punahou School Archives, which houses an extensive collection of artifacts representing the history of the school along with resources dealing with events, students, alumni, and constituents. One popular event is the Punahou Carnival. Each year, thousands of people from the school and the larger community attend this two-day, financial-aid fundraiser that has been held since 1932. The carnival collection of photographs, meeting minutes, and memorabilia is one of the most frequently used resources in the archives. Because of the carnival's broad appeal, Kylee had the students focus on exploring this particular collection.

Students began their work by conducting an inventory of the contents of the carnival collection before selecting items and writing exhibit descriptions for the materials. They then arranged the items by themes for display within large glass and wooden cases in the library. The themes included the popular foods sold, how the carnival evolved through the decades, and the senior class variety show held as part of the festivities. Students chose a range of artifacts, including photographs,

news clippings, brochures, clothing items, and even reproductions of malasadas (a popular, fried-dough dessert). Kylee said the display had a magnetic draw, with the school president spending time interacting with the exhibit and students.

After the event, Kylee surveyed students to assess what they had learned about archiving a collection and the importance of preserving and protecting archived resources. In their responses, students consistently used key phrases like “look through,” “select,” and “learn the history behind the pictures,” indicating that they had learned how to browse, search, research, and choose materials for an exhibit. Students were also able to accurately describe core professional values for art conservationists and archivists: being careful, being precise, and “going slow.” As with any career exposure, not all students concluded that this would be a career fit for them. Importantly, however, a short, behind-the-scenes experience like this one provided a valuable opportunity for students to test the waters before choosing a career. As Kylee put it, “we can help them practice life before they have to actually be in charge of their own.”

By drawing on a strong professional network, Kylee transformed what would otherwise have been a typical college library visit into a unique look at an artist’s archive that culminated in an authentic project for the students. This also aligned with Malia’s wish to convey the message that interesting and rich art research collections or art archives exist on many college campuses and to build an appreciation for the archivist’s work to preserve valuable resources. After the visit, the teachers and students sent Malia a letter thanking her for introducing students to the important work of archivists. Although this experience took place over just four days, it was an invaluable moment for experiential learning. Students not only learned about the behind-the-scenes tasks required in mounting an art exhibit but also actually curated a unique exhibit for their school community.

## **Getting Started**

For school librarians eager to integrate the arts in library instruction or in other learning experiences, the Kennedy Center’s Arts Integration Checklist (Silverstein and Layne 2010, 7) and the National Core Arts Standards (National Coalition for Core Arts Standards 2014) are helpful in planning and assessing arts integration. The Arts Integration Checklist is an easy-to-read, practical tool, which asks educators to consider ten questions about their learning and instructional plans. The 2014 National Core Arts Standards provides a framework that helps school librarians

plan, implement, and assess arts education for grades K through twelve. In addition, the following strategies can be great starting points for school librarians to build arts experiences:

- Attend sessions for arts professional development that are open to teachers and librarians in K–12 settings. Participation also introduces you to like-minded educators.
- Maintain an *archive of the arts*. For example, one librarian suggests archiving filmed school performances for future students to discover (Donovan 2018).
- Enhance museum field trips by leading an activity in which students look closely at works of art or artifacts, reflecting on what they see, feel, and wonder. For example, the Honolulu Biennial 2019 provides a student workbook that suggests ways to look closely at specific art pieces at seven of its installations.
- Become familiar with archival holdings and research collections in historical societies and estates of famous local residents. The archival collections at Punahou School and the special Charlot Collection at the University of Hawaii are examples of local, but lesser-known, collections.
- Consider national or state libraries and archives if the opportunity arises or if it aligns with curriculum and school resources. For example, one librarian coordinated with her school's art history teacher to research art history at the Library of Congress and several of the Smithsonian collections in Washington, DC (Foote 2018).
- Partner with art therapists, who can be a particularly valuable resource for helping students process their emotions through creative expression. For example, Klein (2017) describes how schools and libraries in Ferguson, Missouri, leveraged art to help their community heal.

## Conclusion

The examples and case scenarios discussed here highlight the different ways school librarians can engage students with the arts through creation, curation, and communication. Art can be a vibrant and creative expression of learning, with a mural, video, or artwork as the final project. It can also be a tool for learning and reflection. Arts integration emphasizes the entire process of learning, from inquiry and questioning to investigation, interpretation, and communication. The examples in this chapter also speak to the importance of leveraging resources within a school and community. By collaborating with professional artists and arts-related organizations, school librarians assume a strategic role in building capacity for the arts that benefit both students and teachers in our schools.

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# Radical Collaborations for Learning

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## School Librarians as Change Agents

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