Connecting with the Arts: Making Collaborations Work

Feature

by Katie McKinley, November 2019

I am the only art teacher in my building. As such, I'm pretty self-sufficient and when I need to learn something, well, I teach myself how to do it. That doesn't mean I don't collaborate with people, it just means that it happens on rare occasions because our schedules do not often mesh enough to sit down and plan lessons. In many schools, with art teachers, music teachers, and other fine arts teachers, this is the case.

So, how can a school librarian reach out to those teachers who are often islands? What are some things that can encourage fine arts teachers to pair up with you? Full disclosure: I am a visual arts teacher. As I give suggestions, I'll share visual arts resources. If you are looking for music materials talk with your choir, music or band specialist, same for drama and any other fine arts areas. (We all have our own stockpiles of resources.)

An Elegant Collaboration

"I have something to show you," my school librarian, Ida Mae Craddock, says. She then proceeds to show me a YouTube video of *Pu Gong Ying Tu (Dandelion Painting)* by Jie Qi. This is a beautiful painting that merges traditional Asian brush painting with the delicate beauty of interactive LEDs. "What do you think?" she asks. I'm up for just about anything, but in all honesty I had never used paper circuits before, and the anxiety that comes with that did make me hesitate. She knew she had me, though, when she showed me the video, AND I had recently taken a PD session on Asian brush painting at the state art conference, so even with the anxiety, I knew we had to do it. We sat down and talked about it. She taught me how to do the circuits and together we experimented with how it would work with the supplies we had. What proceeded was a unit that combined the makerspace technology of the school library and the instructional techniques of the art room.

Students began with inspiration from the Jie Qi video and learned basic brush painting techniques and composition in the art room. As they created they had to remember to incorporate the idea of lighting into their composition. When I say lighting, I mean LED lighting, not highlight/shadow creation, which is a different consideration for my art students. Following our exploration of Asian brush painting, we made our way to the library where they reviewed paper circuits with Ms. Craddock, and they began creating their final project, an Asian brush painting that lit up with LEDs. Together, Ms. Craddock and I assisted and helped with troubleshooting problems as students assembled the circuits and artwork to create a simple, yet highly aesthetic piece.

The Takeaways

As I reflected on this story, I considered what made the project work, and came to the following conclusions:

Relationships

I cannot encourage building relationships enough. These kinds of projects can be uncomfortable, uncertain, and just plain messy. The idea is to stretch yourself and try new things, but if you don't have a partner who's willing to struggle in the trenches with you it can be overwhelming. Get to know the specialists in your building and find the one who doesn't mind trying new things. Engage them and others will follow.

What might this look like? Lunch, sit next to them at staff meetings, whatever you would normally do to KNOW who they are. If you don't know who they are, you don't know what they are willing to take a chance on or are capable of doing, which means a proposal to collaborate would be taking chances on a shot in the dark.

Start with an idea

Is there a new app or website you found that you know the art teacher would flip over? Show them how it works. Have you found a video that is so amazing and inspiring that you have to share it? Share it. Don't have a specific idea? Check out fine art sites that have fine art lessons. Websites such as Blick Art Materials (https://www.dickblick.com/lesson-plans) or the Art of Education University (https://theartofeducation.edu/) have lesson plans and ideas that are good inspiration. Sometimes just using maker ideas found in a book, online, or through other resources is enough, but the teacher needs to be able to make a quick connection to their content. If the teacher is interested and the idea can connect with what they are doing, they'll be able to make it work.

It might feel strange, but it's like all the lesson plans we create for the students. You need the attention grabber that is going to stimulate the fine arts teacher to start looking at the possibilities out there and realize that they need YOU to help them in that endeavor.

Divide and conquer or battle together

Let's face reality. Especially in elementary and middle school, fine arts time is limited. Lessons need to be succinct, integrated masterpieces that keep the students engaged but hit on the standards required. The idea is to create a collaborative piece that entwines the knowledge and capabilities of both parties in an efficient yet entertaining way which produces a final product (whether it be of process recording or final physical projects) that wows students, parents, and administrators.

To do this you layout a game plan of how this looks. You and your collaborator need to decide what pieces are needed and how those pieces are presented to the students. There are many formats this could take, as with the lighted brush painting, we each had our expertise areas and took the lead at different times. You could also team teach, where you present the information together and train *each other* on the different steps ahead of time so you work as a team. This method is great for larger classes or classes with mixed capabilities and students are more self-directed through the steps. Two teachers with shared knowledge can roam the room helping with all the parts.

Resources

Fine arts teachers have their own resources they have built up for years, so you need to offer resources the teacher may not have. This may include not only books, websites, or other reference sources, but also the makerspace resources. As the art teacher, I had on hand ink, paint brushes, and appropriate paper for the project, but I did not have copper tape, LED lights, or batteries to make it all work. If you can offer what the other teacher does not have, you will have an immediate in.

Share

When you are done with a project, share it with the world: Twitter, Instagram, other social media, sure. But more importantly, if you want more classroom teachers to work with you, find a way to share the process or product with your school. Displays in and around the library to share the actual products with students, teachers, and visitors to the building. School webpages, or even an email shout out with a picture of you and your partner's success can inspire other teachers to reach out to you for your expertise. Have live streamed morning announcements? Share videos of the work and process the students are being involved in. The main key is share it where it WILL be seen by who you need to see it.

When I did my first collaboration with my school librarian, she approached me with ideas outside of my comfort zone, but I knew if I took the steps with her we could create something amazing for and with our students. She had a wealth of untapped resources that integrated extremely well with many of my projects. We have continued to collaborate over the years, but it has now become a back and forth proposal of ideas. We share videos, passages from books, apps, and look to each other for advice on how to integrate these things into projects. Since this project we have created student-curated galleries driven by Twitter's #askacurator day, moving wire sculptures (with coding and servo motors), identity sculptures with heredity background research, clay sound amplifiers, and so many others. It didn't happen overnight, but it happened. And it has been an amazing experience that I know many other fine arts teachers are looking for but do not know where to start…which can be with you!

MLA CITATION

McKinley, Katie. "Connecting with the Arts: Making Collaborations Work." *School Library Connection*, November 2019, schoollibraryconnection.com/Content/Article/2211576.

https://schoollibraryconnection.com/Content/Article/2211576?topicCenterId=2252405

Entry ID: 2211576

COPYRIGHT 2026 ABC-CLIO, LLC