



Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education

203 North Wabash, Suite 1720  
Chicago, IL 60601-2417  
312-870-6140  
312-870-6147 fax  
[www.capeweb.org](http://www.capeweb.org)

## Myths and Realities about Arts Integration

-Arnold Aprill, Summer 2004

### **A Profound Central Paradox:**

The development of the arts in education occurs in the context of a profound contradiction: the arts are marginalized in our schools in almost direct proportion to the centrality of the arts to our lives. This paradox encourages us to live in two worlds- the world as it is, and the world as we know it should be. We try to bridge the gap between these two worlds by creating a series of myths- optimistic and pessimistic lies we tell ourselves to resolve our cognitive dissonance. Our contradictory experience generates contradictory beliefs that we internalize as we try to advance our work in a paradoxical environment. Some of these polarized myths are listed below. One of the values of arts integration is its potential for moving beyond the myths of rigid positions into the realities of complex practice.

### **The DOING vs. TEACHING myths:**

**Myth:** *Those Who Can, Do.*

**Counter-Myth:** *Those Who Can't, Teach.*

**The More Complex Reality:** Those who learn to teach can and do. Joyfully. Those who don't learn to teach end up teaching anyway and hating it. The artist has always been a teacher. The social isolation of the artist has undermined this essential function. Arts integration re-integrates the artist into the social fabric as a learner, a medium and a mentor of cultural knowledge.

### **The SPAM vs. CAVIAR myths:**

**Myth:** *Any Art is Better than No Art*

**Counter-Myth:** *Only the Very Best Will Do*

**The More Complex Reality:** Good teaching is good teaching. Weak teaching is weak teaching. We always end up doing some of both. We tend to swing between being so desperate for the arts that we accept any half-baked program on the one hand, or on the other, being so perfectionist about the arts that we lose patience with the flawed nature of all programs. A culture of collective reflective practice in schools and arts organizations turns program flaws into opportunities for continuous learning and improvement. This requires organizational structures that allow educators, artists, students, and parents to continually critique programs and to collaborate on on-going program design.

### **The PURE MYSTERY and PURE SCIENCE myths:**

**Myth:** *The Muse Does Not Like Light or Art is All Feeling and Intuition*

This myth has its origin in 19<sup>th</sup> century romantic notions of the artist as a mysterious exemplary sufferer with intuitive knowledge beyond words. Of course the artist has knowledge beyond words, as we all do, but that doesn't mean that using language to describe the process kills the process.

**Counter-Myth:** *We Have it All Figured Out or Art Can be Totally Systematized*

Just because we can put language to art processes doesn't mean that the language IS the process, any more than art education standards ARE arts instruction.

**The More Complex Reality:** Making and experiencing art requires a complex interplay of experimenting with materials, responding to models, sharing vocabulary, learning to discriminate between subtle artistic choices, making intuitive decisions, and processing those decisions through language AND through the senses.

### **The “ART FOR ART’S SAKE” vs. ARTS INTEGRATION myths:**

**Myth:** *The only way to teach the arts with integrity is to teach the arts for their own sake, uncompromised by association with other academic areas.*

**Counter-Myth:** *The only way to teach the arts with integrity is to teach the arts as they connect to other domains of knowledge, uncompromised by isolation.*

**The More Complex Reality:** Our eye needs to stay on the prize of quality instruction- and on learners developing increasing capacity to direct their own learning. As in all subjects, this sometimes requires isolated instruction in the content area, and sometimes requires integrated instruction. It is the dynamic between these two modes that gives a content area its vitality. Arts educator Eric Booth has identified the need to move from a focus on artistic materials to a focus on aesthetic thinking. It’s not about playing violins; it’s about making music. Having classroom teachers incorporate art activities into their instruction is not sufficient for high quality arts education. Visiting artists and arts specialists, whether they provide direct or integrated instruction, can model high levels of authentic engagement with the art forms. Arts instruction needs to provide high levels of aesthetic challenge in order to stimulate student learning. This is especially true for “at-risk” learners. As the arts education researcher Shirley Brice Heath has commented, we need “at-risk art for at-risk kids”.

### **The HIGH ART vs. POPULAR ART myths:**

**Myth:** *High Art is the Only Real Art or These Kids Ain’t Got No Culture* (Also known as the “*Let Them Eat Cake*” myth)

This myth assumes that students need to be “lifted up” to high culture- that culture is something that only occurs as curated by various official culture palaces. If the kids don’t choose to be lifted up, well then, the school has the wrong kids or the kids have the wrong parents. There are contradictions in the high art world as well, with the prejudice in arts education being toward modernist high arts practice produced by honored and deceased individual artists rather than toward contemporary or post-modern or pre-modern practice.

**Counter-Myth:** *Popular Art is the Only Real Art or The Kids Already Know Everything They Need to Know*

This myth proposes that adults need to “get down” with the students in order for learners to relate to adult instruction. This patronizing myth depends upon the assumption that popular art is “low art” without complexity and sophistication, and that no authentic dialogue can be established across differences of age, taste, experience, or culture.

**The More Complex Reality:** Students need access to a wide range of aesthetic languages, including their own languages and a full range of diverse adult aesthetic and cultural languages. They need opportunities to perceive, create, present, compare, and question a wide variety of genres and forms. Access to real expertise and understanding of cultural context about any form- popular or “high” art, culturally diverse or Eurocentric art, pre-modern or modern or post-modern art - are necessary to create authentic dialogue about artistic meaning.

### **The CERTIFIED ARTS SPECIALIST vs. the VISTING ARTIST myths:**

**Myth:** *Only certified in-school arts specialists are properly prepared to teach the arts.*

**Counter-Myth:** *Only practicing visiting artists are properly prepared to teach the arts.*

**The More Complex Reality:** These two polarizing myths have been especially hurtful and divisive - pitting people against each other who should be advocating for each other. We actually need all the good thinkers about high quality arts learning to work together across their differences in approach, rather than competing over limited resources. In-school arts specialists are a bridge to school culture. Visiting artists are a bridge to the practicing arts world. Both are needed. In France, where in-school arts specialists remain firmly in place, national policy has added visiting artists working on integrated units as an element necessary for effective education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Visiting artists need better preparation in teaching methods, the scope and sequence of curriculum design, and developmentally appropriate instruction. In-school specialists need better preparation and support in collaborating with other academic colleagues, and in moving from a focus on presenting products and talent (contests, assemblies, “art nights”) to developing products through on-going critical thought and dialogue. Both need to advocate for theater, dance, literary arts, and media arts instruction in schools. The widespread myth that visiting artists are a wedge for eliminating certified arts specialists’ positions has been contradicted by CAPE’s experience: Those CAPE schools that have engaged the most visiting artists have INCREASED their in-school art specialist positions.