

Why the Visual Arts Belong in Every Classroom

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Most of us remember learning through images long after we forget specific words or facts. For example, you may not recall the exact definition of an animal cell, but you can probably picture its round shape or nucleus. You may not remember every detail from a history class, but you can likely recognize a famous historical painting that represents a significant event.

Visual elements are often the strongest and most durable memories we form in school. Because of this, the visual arts should not be limited to the art classroom. It can instead be intentionally integrated across subjects to strengthen learning, reasoning, and creativity.

What is “Art” in Education?

Art can be grouped into four broad categories:

- Visual arts (drawing, painting, sculpture, digital media)
- Musical arts (vocal and instrumental music)
- Literary arts (poetry, novels, written expression)
- Performing arts (dance, theatre, film)

*Please note that art can be grouped in various ways; this is the grouping we chose for this article to illustrate the differences in visual arts versus other categories of art. All forms of art are valid expressions of skill and creativity. When we examine the impact of art on learning, the visual arts are especially powerful because they support memory, cognition, and higher-order thinking across disciplines.

In classrooms, visual art can appear in many forms: students may draw diagrams in science, analyze paintings in history, explore patterns in math, or use images to interpret language and tone in literature. These activities allow students to represent understanding visually, not just verbally — which benefits diverse learners, including students with learning differences and gifted students alike.

How Visual Arts Support Classroom Instruction

Art and Learning

The visual arts strengthen memory and recall through a process known as **dual coding**, combining verbal information (words, lectures) with visual information (images, diagrams). This reduces cognitive load and makes it easier for the brain to store and retrieve information.

Students who sketch, draw, or visually organize ideas often remember content better and understand it more deeply than students who only take notes.

Consider this Math Class: Mr. Nguyen enjoys enhancing his geometry unit on lines, angles, and symmetry by incorporating the visual arts in his lessons. Each week during the unit, he displays a famous work of art, like Da Vinci's Vitruvian Man, or some photos of famous architecture, like the Greek Parthenon. Students are tasked with analyzing and then annotating a printout of the artwork, and then identifying geometric concepts like parallel lines, angle types, curvature, or symmetry. When applicable, he even provides a protractor for students to evaluate the angles produced within the artwork. Students engage in a whole-class discussion with Mr. Nguyen as he asks questions and points out interesting features. Over time, he notices that his students' annotations and evaluation of the artwork grow more sophisticated, and they can point out and discuss more interesting mathematical features. Later in the semester, his students create their own artwork using specific criteria he sets (utilizing symmetry; requiring a 30-degree angle using congruent angles in intersecting lines, etc.). Mr. Nguyen believes that his approach to art integration strengthens his students' spatial reasoning and helps them more deeply connect with geometry through a real-world art application.

Art and Reasoning

Visual thinking is closely tied to reasoning and critical analysis. Interpreting artwork requires judgment, comparison, evaluation, and inference, which are all key reasoning skills.

Research described in the course shows that both producing and evaluating art strengthens functional brain connectivity and activates higher-order thinking processes. Classroom examples in reading and math show how analyzing artwork or creating visual representations can improve spatial reasoning, interpretation, and academic discussion.

Consider this Reading Class: Mrs. Owen frequently integrates the visual arts into her literature lessons. While reading *Of Mice and Men*, she brought in a painting that featured some jagged shapes and muted colors. She asked students to work in small groups to

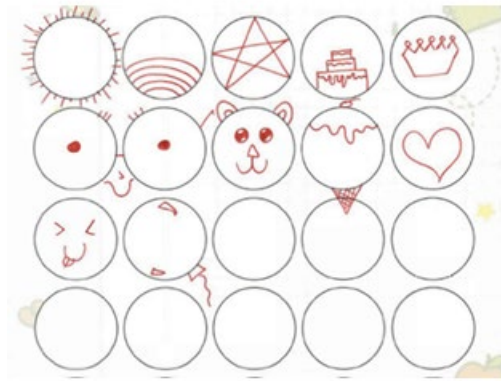
analyze the imagery of their reading and compare it to the artwork. Students began discussing how the imagery reflected tension and isolation, and used evidence from their reading to make their arguments. Later in the semester, she reversed the analysis process. Students completed their reading of the book *To Kill a Mockingbird*. As part of her lesson activities, she required students to make a sketch or painting that reflected a theme from the book. Students presented their artwork and their analysis to the class. By incorporating some visual art activities into her lessons, Ms. Owens noticed that her students' reasoning skills were improved. Their confidence also grew as they gained practice in engaging in analytical discussions through the integration of art.

Art and Creativity

Creativity is not limited to artistic talent. It is a cognitive skill that can be developed through practice. The visual arts strengthen both divergent thinking (generating multiple ideas) and convergent thinking (narrowing ideas to one solution).

These thinking processes support problem-solving, innovation, and academic reasoning. By practicing creative expression, students improve their ability to form associations and connect new information to prior knowledge.

Consider this English Class: Mr. Pederson utilizes a “circles creativity exercise” every morning as his ice breaker in the fall semester. The exercise asks students to generate images using one or more circles within a worksheet. Typically, the test involves individuals being provided with 30 circles, with the exercise completed within a time constraint. Some days, he asks students to draw a different image in each of the 30 circles he provides within the 3-minute warm-up time. Other times, he is more specific, providing a prompt on the board like “draw images that represent the character’s mood in chapter 2”. He reviews the images students have drawn and points out creative elements of different drawings as he circles the room and checks in. Mr. Pederson enjoys providing this activity to his students daily because he notices that as the semester progresses, more images within each circle are generated. At the beginning of the year, only an average of 8 circles were completed with a drawing in the 3-minute time frame. But at the end of the semester, many students had drawn 20-25 images within each circle, and students’ descriptions in their essays became more robust and creative, too. Mr. Pederson enjoys using this visual art activity to help strengthen creativity in his students and ultimately help them accelerate in their academic progress.



Benefits for Students

Integrating visual arts into instruction creates a more engaging, joyful, and inclusive learning environment. Students are more active, more motivated, and more likely to engage deeply with content when learning includes hands-on, creative elements.

Art also:

- Encourages open-mindedness by exposing students to different cultures and perspectives
- Allows students to express ideas in multiple ways
- Supports social-emotional development through self-expression and exploration
- Promotes individuality while strengthening respect for diverse viewpoints

Why Art Integration Benefits Teachers Too

Art integration not only supports students but it can benefit you as a teacher as well.

It can:

- Improve classroom culture and student engagement
- Reduce disruptive behavior by channeling energy into creative work
- Strengthen teacher-student relationships
- Enhance lesson planning through cross-curricular connections

- Increase teacher satisfaction and reduce burnout by making teaching more dynamic and fulfilling

By incorporating visual arts, teachers often find themselves more engaged in their own practice and more connected to their students.

Final Thought

Visual arts are not an “extra” or an enrichment, but they are a powerful instructional tool that strengthens memory, reasoning, creativity, engagement, and emotional connection to learning.

When integrated thoughtfully, art helps students think more deeply, remember more effectively, and express understanding more meaningfully.

To learn more about how to build a specific plan for integrating the visual arts into your classroom you can register for our course Art Across the Disciplines:

<https://www.modelteaching.com/professional-development/art-across-the-disciplines>

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