Education through collaboration: Learning the arts while celebrating culture

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Education through Collaboration: Learning the Arts while Celebrating Culture

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Published by: Sage Publications, Inc. on behalf of MENC: The National Association for Music Education

Stable URL: http://www.jstor.com/stable/3878472
An elementary school–university partnership provides valuable multicultural music education experiences for elementary future educators.
traditional foods, clothing, shelter, tools, utensils, stories, art, and music. They used a research organizer (figure 2) to keep track of the information they gathered.

The study of Native American cultures was divided into geographical regions among students within each class. Students (university and elementary) learned about and applied their knowledge of United States geography to their research of Native American life. For instance, by noting that much of the eastern United States was once forested, students could infer that native peoples living in that area made houses of wood. The day before the final celebration, each university student presented a thirty-minute lesson on his or her assigned region to a classroom of elementary children.

Dividing the content into sections and having students work in teams allowed them to concentrate their research on a limited area and then share information to learn about the larger picture. An added benefit of this research component is the opportunity for building lifelong learning skills, such as doing research, writing reports, and giving oral presentations.

Use High-Quality Resources

The music teachers used Bryan Burton’s *Moving within the Circle*¹ as a resource for the music portion of our project. This book includes thirteen songs with dances, five flute songs, six lesson plans for guided listening, and a chapter devoted to making instruments. Lessons encouraged active learning through guided listening, singing, playing instruments, and dancing.

The most authentic performance of traditional music is singing in the original Native American language or vocables. Vocables (e.g., “hey ya hi yo”)

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wanted to sing them all day, and we
not have a direct translation. Students
istic sounds of a tribal language but do
are syllables that match the character-
songs got stuck in our heads—we
expressed surprise that, after singing
songs out of class.2

Native American songs in class, “the
importance of presenting songs in a
sponds to a game song and learn the
context consistent with their specific
music. This meant avoiding the typi-
stereotypes about Native American
indians” and presenting authentic
music with correct information about
specific tribes and
information about the cul-
function of the masks.3

Respect Cultural Traditions
The visual art portion of the unit
included making musical instruments
and masks. Creating musical instru-
ments involves applying knowledge
from the fields of art, music, and sci-
ence (acoustics). Authentic instru-
ments (drums, rattles, and flutes) offer a true aural representation of the
traditional music. The material from
which an instrument is made, its
design, and its decoration all provide
important information about the cul-
ture in which it was created. Students
made gourd rattles following the
directions in Burton’s book. The uni-
ersity music teacher provided
authentic Taos drums (consisting of
hollow cottonwood logs made by the Taos
Pueblo Indians of New Mexico) and a
large powwow drum.

Students studied Native American
masks in reference books and on
the Internet. Well-known examples of
Native American masks include the
cedar dance masks of the Northwest
Coast Indians, Hopi kachina dance
masks, Inuit wooden dance masks,
Navajo and Apache leather dance
masks, Yaqui wooden pascola (cer-
monial host) masks, Cherokee gourd
masks, and Iroquois wood and corn-
husk false face masks used for reli-
gious ritual.

Students learned that Native
American masks are used in many
activities, including dances, entertain-
ment, culture dramas, craft sales, and
religious ceremonies; and furthermore,
that not all mask styles are
appropriate for students to use as
inspiration. For example, the official
policy of the Grand Council of the
Haudenosaunee, Six Nations Iroquois
Confederacy regarding false face
masks is that

all wooden and corn husk masks
of the Haudenosaunee are sacred.
The image of the mask is sacred
and is only to be used for its
intended purpose. Masks should
not be made unless they are to be
used by members of the medicine
society, according to established
tradition. Reproductions, cast-
ings, photographs, or illustrations
of medicine masks should not be
used in exhibition as the image of
the medicine masks should not
be used in these fashions. To sub-
ject the image of the medicine
masks to ridicule or misrepresen-
tation is a violation of the sacred
functions of the masks.3

Students learned the tribe of origin,
traditional use, and symbolic signifi-
cance of various masks; this informa-
tion then served as a blueprint for the
tones they created. They painted two-
dimensional paper masks and three-
dimensional papier-mâché masks.
Students shared information about
their masks through a show-and-tell
presentation in class, and a few were
selected for the final assembly.
Storytelling makes an excellent contribution to a program by capturing the imagination of the students and conveying history, wisdom, and truth from a unique cultural perspective. When the university students shared information in class, most opened their presentations by reading a story from a specific Native American tribe. The story offered a window into the daily life, customs, and beliefs of the culture in which it originated. Stories often included information about foods, clothing, shelter, tools, utensils, art, and music that supplemented students' findings in reference materials. Many stories have universal appeal and teach valuable lessons about life.

It can be especially exciting to have a culture bearer participate in the celebration by telling a story from his or her own tribe. Storytelling creates a sense of community and adds to the power of the celebration. The guest can also interpret the story and comment on its meaning. Parents or students often have had relevant first-hand experiences (e.g., attending a powwow or tribal fair) that can enrich class discussions. Local culture bearers are expert resources who provide accurate cultural information.

Celebrate Learning
After concluding eight weeks of lessons, university and elementary students gathered in the elementary school gymnasium for the cultural celebration. University students practiced songs and dances for an hour together with the selected elementary classes. The combined groups presented two one-hour celebrations for assemblies of elementary students, teachers, and parents.

The program began with a procession of elementary students who carried their masks through the gym and then hung them from a wooden stand that served as a backdrop for the celebration. Selected elementary students introduced each song with a spoken narration about its tribe of origin and its cultural significance. The narrators provided important information to all in attendance and received valuable public speaking experience. All partnership students (university and selected elementary classes) sang and danced the Friendship Dance, Canoe Dance, Raccoon Dance, Bear Dance, and Round Dance. Four selected students recited one stanza each of the poem "For the Flute Players," which expresses the importance of flutes in Native American cultures. The university music teacher played the flute, accompanied by elementary and university students with rattles. A dance troupe from a nearby community wearing traditional regalia demonstrated several Plains-style powwow dances.

The cultural celebration was valuable for many reasons. First, it provided closure and shared knowledge with a wider audience.

Second, it demonstrated the power of the fine arts to unite people through creativity, cooperation, and self-expression. Music and art provided a bridge to understanding aspects of the Native American worldview and some of the realities of Native American life. The university students gained a deeper understanding of the relationship of music, art, and culture. Through this understanding, they developed a greater respect for diversity and an appreciation for the value of a multicultural approach to teaching. For future teachers who have been urged to promote multicultural environments in their classrooms, the eight-week partnership culminating in a cultural celebration provides a model experience that they can subsequently adapt to their teaching.

Third, the celebration dispelled
For university students who had not had a lot of experience with children in the school environment, the partnership provided a positive opportunity to work with children through the arts. When asked to reflect upon and evaluate the collaboration, the university students offered the following comments: “I felt honored to have the chance to be able to work with the children and share our experiences and newfound knowledge.” “We had an impact on the elementary students, and I know they enjoyed it just as much as we did. I really liked that they were a part of the celebration too, and it was not just us performing a routine for them.” “Through this experience, I have realized that I do have a love for music and for children.” “The Native American celebration was the culmination of everything we had talked about in class. It made all the projects and activities and practicing we did in class meaningful and worthwhile.”

The teacher education partnership model represents a contrast to the face-painting, grocery-sack vests, and construction paper headdresses that continue to perpetuate stereotypes about Native American cultures. This model for learning arts through cultural celebration demonstrates how prospective elementary teachers can be taught to integrate the authentic music and art of any culture into the elementary curriculum.

Notes
2. University student comment. Written reflections from university students are included throughout this article.