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Education through Collaboration: Learning the Arts while Celebrating Culture

By Robert J. Damm

The university curriculum for an elementary education degree traditionally includes a “basics of music” and a “basics of art” course. These two courses represent a nod to the importance of the arts in the elementary school, and they may be the only formal contact with music and arts pedagogy that prospective teachers receive. One way to make these courses especially dynamic and show teachers how they can use music and arts in their own classrooms is through a partnership between university and local elementary school teachers.

Music and art faculty at my university forged a partnership with the music and art teachers at one of our local elementary schools. The partnership resulted from the university music and art teachers agreeing to team-teach a class called Creative Arts (music, visual arts, dance, and drama) for the Elementary and Middle Levels. The intent was to expand an established tradition of collaboration with the local elementary school teachers and students primarily associated with local observances of Native American Day and Black History Day.

This team of two university teachers and two elementary teachers then selected a topic around which to organize an eight-week unit of study: Native American music, art, and culture. Lessons featured hands-on experiences with making music and creating art, used a multicultural approach, and integrated music and art with other subjects.

A detailed description of our Native American project follows to help you adapt this program for your community. Our university faculty has developed a similar program to study African music, art, and culture, but you could also build a program around Asian, Hispanic, or other cultures. The key to success is sharing the work and using local experts and culture bearers.

An elementary school–university partnership provides valuable multicultural music education experiences for elementary future educators.

Share the Work

Native American Day had been an annual tradition at the elementary school. The Creative Arts teachers and elementary education majors who were enrolled in the course expanded the event into an eight-week program.

Once a week for four weeks, the university music teacher taught a song and dance to different classes of elementary music students. The elementary music teacher continued to rehearse her students for the remaining four to seven weeks of the unit leading up to the celebration. The university music teacher also helped one elementary class make gourd rattles. The university art teacher taught the students how to paint some traditional Native American designs on their gourds. The university art teacher also made two visits to the elementary school to teach mask making. Likewise, the university students learned the songs and dance, made and painted gourd rattles, and created masks. The unit culminated with all university and elementary students sharing their songs, dances, and visual arts in an assembly at the elementary school (see the program in figure 1).

Research the Culture

The university participants consisted of thirty music and art methods students. The 160 elementary participants were from six general music classes and two art classes. University and elementary teachers guided the unit of study in exactly the same way for their respective students. University and elementary students began by conducting research about representative tribes and their

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")

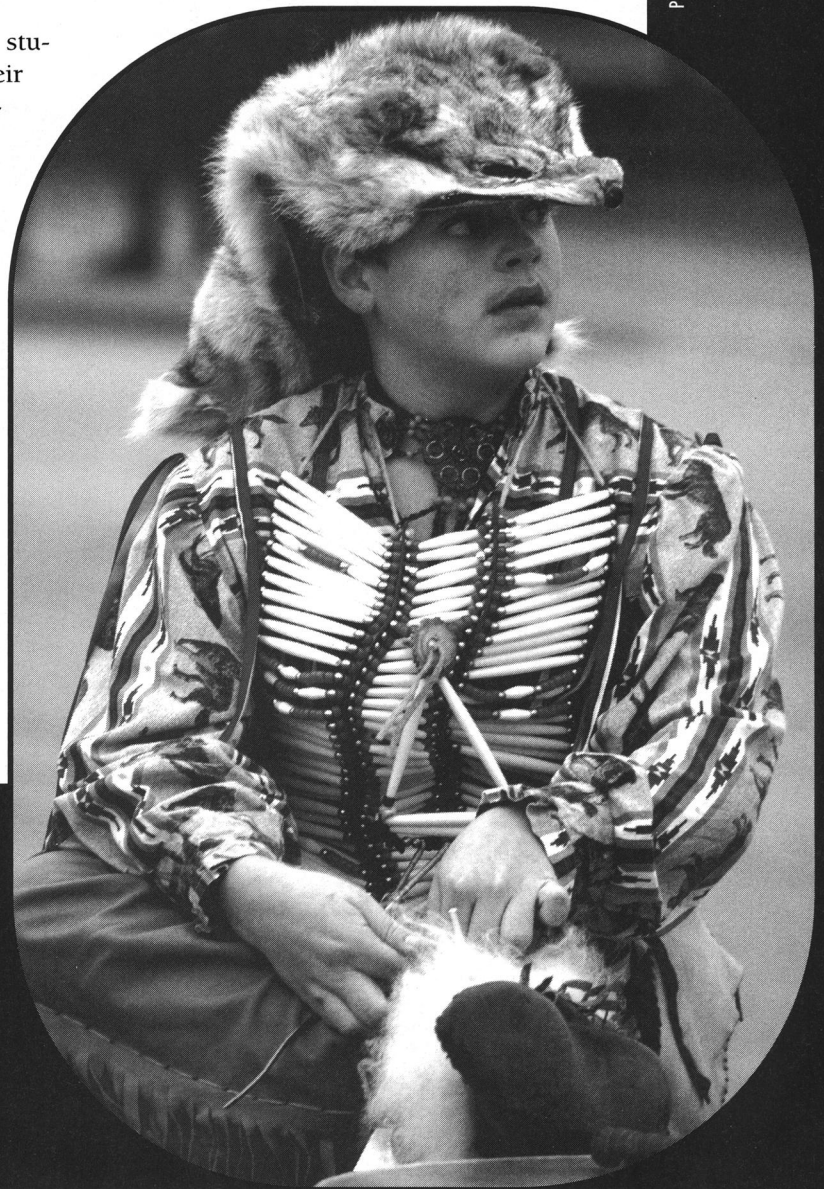


Photo by Becky Wilkes

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In the model program, elementary students worked with university education majors to learn about Native American music, art, and culture.

1. Introduction/welcome by local culture bearer
2. "I Walk in Beauty" (Navajo song) with Friendship Dance
3. Traditional story told by local culture bearer
4. "Canoe Dance Song" (Haliwa-Saponi) with Canoe Dance
5. Show-and-tell of selected three-dimensional masks
6. "Bear Dance Song" (Haliwa-Saponi) with Bear Dance
7. Poetry reading: "For the Flute Players"
8. "Call to Sunrise" (Zuni) for flute and rattles
9. Dance demonstration by local troupe
10. "Raccoon Dance Song" (Choctaw) with Raccoon Dance (taught by local Choctaw culture bearers)
11. "One-Eyed Ford" (intertribal song) with Round Dance

Figure 1. Sample Program

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

All team members agreed on the importance of presenting songs in a context consistent with their specific style of origin. For example, it was important to play the game that corresponds to a game song and learn the dance that goes with a social dance song.

Team members carefully dispelled stereotypes about Native American music. This meant avoiding the typical drumbeat used in many Hollywood films to represent "nearby Indians" and presenting authentic music with correct information about its cultural context. Because each tribe is represented by its own unique music and art, team members used authentic instruments to provide information about specific tribes and their music. Burton's book contains contact information for cultural centers, artisans, and shops that supply authentic instruments or materials.

Team members taught that Native American dances reaffirm tribal identity, values, and traditions through

connections with life cycles, agriculture, family, seasons, and animals. Students learned four dances to songs in Burton's book. Additionally, representatives of the local Choctaw community provided guidance in learning their Raccoon Dance. Although the university students were initially shy about learning dances, by the end of the unit they had gained an appreciation for dance as a powerful form of self-expression. One student commented that "although dancing is something that is usually out of my comfort zone, I really enjoyed it ... dancing was actually my favorite part of the unit."

Respect Cultural Traditions

The visual art portion of the unit included making musical instruments and masks. Creating musical instruments involves applying knowledge from the fields of art, music, and science (acoustics). Authentic instruments (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 culture in which it was created. Students made gourd rattles following the directions in Burton's book. The university music teacher provided authentic Taos drums (consisting of

hollow cottonwood logs covered with rawhide skins made by the Taos Pueblo Indians of New Mexico) and a large powwow drum.

Students studied Native American mask forms 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 (ceremonial host) masks, Cherokee gourd masks, and Iroquois wood and corn-husk false face masks used for religious ritual.

Students learned that Native American masks are used in many activities, including dances, entertainment, 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, castings, 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 subject the image of the medicine masks to ridicule or misrepresentation is a violation of the sacred functions of the masks.³

Students learned the tribe of origin, traditional use, and symbolic significance of various masks; this information then served as a blueprint for the ones 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 firsthand 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,"⁴ which expresses the importance of flutes in Native American cultures. The univer-

sity 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

GEOGRAPHICAL REGIONS	TRIBES	FOOD	CLOTHING	SHELTER	TOOLS & UTENSILS	STORIES & MYTHS	ART	MUSIC
NORTHWEST COAST								
CALIFORNIA								
PLATEAU AND BASIN								
SOUTHWEST								
HIGH PLAINS								
WESTERN FARMERS								
NORTHEAST								
SOUTHEAST								

Figure 2. Research Organizer for Study of Native Americans

cultural and musical stereotypes. One university student said, "I will be the first to admit that my perception of Native Americans consisted of tepees and the 'oo, oo, oo!' sound made by repeatedly placing your hand over your mouth. The most important thing that I learned from our class on Native Americans is that the stereotypical image we see in the media is not true."

Rethink Your Prejudices

Another university student's comment reflected a bit of surprise that the usual associations between Native Americans and Thanksgiving were not made: "I assumed that since it was close to Thanksgiving, our music and art class would pick up a Native American theme to tie into the story we all know about the Pilgrims and the Indians. I could not have been more incorrect." Presenting Native American music and culture solely in association with Thanksgiving perpetuates stereotypes.

The university students were quick to notice that the elementary children had an appropriate respect for the activities and the cultures from which they were drawn. A university student observed that "the children knew that it was important to keep the music, dancing, and singing as authentic as possible." Another university student explained, "if a teacher chooses to do a unit on Native Americans (or any group of people for that matter), she must respect the culture at all times."

Finally, university students benefited from practical experience with elementary children. University students saw that the activities they practiced in the methods class actually work. Following the program, one university student wrote,

Seeing the children participate in singing and dancing to the songs we had learned helped me realize how important it is to give children the opportunity to experience Native American culture. I saw firsthand how important it is to let children participate in activities that motivate them to learn and get them excited about learning. It helped me to remember why I am majoring in education.

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

1. Bryan Burton, *Moving within the Circle: Contemporary Native American Music and Dance* (Danbury, CT: World Music Press, 1993).

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

3. Chief Leon Shenandoah, Grand Council of the Haudenosaunee, "Haudenosaunee Confederacy Announces Policy on False Face Masks." *Akwesasne Notes*, no. 1 (Spring 1995), <http://hometown.aol.com/miketben/miktben2.htm>.

4. Edwin Schupman, "For the Flute Players" in *Share the Music, Grade 4*. (New York: Macmillan / McGraw-Hill, 1995), 131. ■



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