

The Role of Design in Arts Integration

Humans are designers. Every building, car, computer, park, dance, song, curriculum, every pair of socks, everything humans have generated has been designed. Design problems are all around us and our students and design problems are inherently integrative. Firm disciplinary that is the hallmark of our educational system, however, teaches students to engage in different ways of thinking and expressing depending on the subject at hand, not the complex problems we face through our life's work.

Meredith Davis (2002) explains it this way, "Unfortunately, schools compartmentalize problem solving through their emphasis on school subjects... rather than on the holistic enterprise that constitutes professional work." Davis goes on to argue that business and industry are left with the task of re-uniting ways of thinking as employees begin to solve authentic design problems.

Proponents of design based education contend that design problems have several qualities that make them perfect for interdisciplinary study. For instance, authentic design problems exist in a multidisciplinary context that informs the process of problem solving. Davis uses the example of students tasked with creating a container to transport a goldfish while riding a bicycle with both hands. Here the students will need to consider what the goldfish needs to survive as well as how the movement of the bicycle ride will affect the fish and the container they construct. All of the contributing factors they discover must be synthesized and critically analyzed as they create a solution. This process requires collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking—skills that extend across school subject areas.

Design based learning, like the arts in general, is an inquiry-based, hands-on form of learning. It engages students because they are empowered to use what they are learning in the now. Design-based learning does not suggest that they should learn something simply because they will use it later. And yet, they will do both. As they practice design thinking and process, they are not only acquiring, retaining, and synthesizing knowledge better, they are also learning a variety of ways to solve problems, collaborate, communicate, evaluate, *and think*.

Davis, M. (1999). "Design's Inherent Interdisciplinarity: The Arts in Integrated Curricula." *Arts Education Policy Review* 101, 1, (8).