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HELPING STUDENTS LEARN: A BIG IDEA (THEMATIC) AND PROJECT- BASED APPROACH TO DEVELOPING RIGOROUS ART INSTRUCTION

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Abstract:

This paper discusses a methodology and a philosophical approach to arts integration that uses visual art as a catalyst for teaching across the curriculum through creative inquiry (big-idea-based) and project-based (problem-based) teaching and learning. The course will provide examples of studio projects that use the big idea method for art lesson planning to motivate and inspire students writing, thinking and making art. Questions to help facilitate discussion include: How does one create an art lesson using the big idea approach? How does one help students learn by using inquiry and concept-mapping techniques? How does one develop art projects around student interests and needs through artist integration? How does one help students find artists who inspire them to explore their own imaginations?

Why Art Integration?

Art integration is not about teaching the visual arts as separate subjects or sporadic studio projects that are connected to other curricular subjects. It is about a methodology and a philosophical approach to teaching art that creates a level of personal connection drawn from each child's life as it is being lived and experienced. The life world provides contexts for meanings, interests, experiences, and development, and adds to classroom knowledge, while the study of art provides contexts for cognitive inquisition and the development of interpretive forms of inquiry through a creative inquiry-based process of teaching and learning (Efland, 2002).

Like Efland, Parsons (1998, 2000, 2005) and Walker (2005; 1997, 2001, 2003, 2004, 2006) argued that learning in the arts should draw upon knowledge that is relevant to everyday life, and should better reflect the self, social interests and other kinds of knowledge that promote understandings of a broader spectrum of society than do conventional school subjects. One way to facilitate such inquiry-based or "whole learning" is through the use of big ideas—a thematic approach—rather than relying on multi-subject area integration.

The Big Idea Approach to Artmaking

Eisner (2002) stressed the unique contributions art could make to children's development in critical and problem-solving skills if it were to become a more content-oriented discipline. Art has more to offer education; the key is to encourage teachers to make connections and to conceptualize curriculum instruction within artmaking. Stewart and Walker (2001, 2005) suggest in this regard that the development of the art curriculum should begin with a central theme that develops knowledge. This type of conceptual framework is known as the "big idea" approach. Walker defines big ideas as enduring concepts—umbrella themes based on relationships to the meanings and values of people's daily lives. Big ideas may be thought of as themes, topics, or issues that investigate human existence:

[Big ideas]—broad, important human issues—are characterized by complexity, ambiguity, contradiction, and multiplicity. Whether stated as single terms, phrases, or complete statements, big ideas do not completely explicate an idea, but represent a host of concepts that form the idea. For example, the term *conflict* may represent a number of concepts, such as power, personal and social values, justice and injustice, and winners and losers (Walker, 2001, p. 1).

Walker (2001) argued that when applied to art instruction the big ideas approach (involving such topics as identity, power, relationships, life cycles, change, ritual, humans and nature, etc.) can foster conceptual thinking and meaningful artmaking relevant to students' lives, far better than trying to force artistic growth and creative endeavors. McFee, an art educator, addressed the importance of teaching art within cultural contexts (McFee & Degge, 1980; Neperud, 1995); Brent Wilson (1974, 1979, 2004) goes further to argue that the art curriculum should also include the interests of students, reflecting their cultures and connecting to their real-world experiences.

As Walker pointed out, art should be taught and assessed in meaningfully connected contexts, allowing students to identify themes/ideas that will provide many opportunities for them to connect their life experiences by transferring knowledge across curriculum areas (Stewart & Walker, 2005; Walker, 2004, 2006).

Methods and Instructions for Art Lesson Planning:

When adapting a big idea in curriculum planning, Daniel and Stuhr (2006) stated that the idea should be considered at two levels—both generally and as to its significance and relevance to the needs and interests of the students. The lesson should use the big idea and its key concepts and essential questions to promote integrated thinking and to provide an understanding of the curriculum that the students can relate to, both in terms of the artist’s conceptual thinking and his or her technical artmaking strategies. It is important to seek out a visual artist who will help teach your big idea by identifying and connecting key artworks, key ideas, and key artmaking strategies with selected big ideas. For example,

- Selected Artist: *Grant Wood, American Born, 1891-1942*
- Artist Background (Bio): *An American painter whose work was much invested in the figurative painting of rural American Midwest themes, often took his subjects from his neighborhood, hometown, farmers, memories of his childhood, and people he knew. His paintings became known as American Regionalism—depicted the strength, ethic, and hardworking people of the Midwest, particular the everyday life and the richness of the farmland.*
- Key Artwork: *Young Corn, 1931*
- Key Ideas: *Community values.*
- Key Artmaking Strategies: *Drawn upon personal memories, individual observations, created a personal style of painting using the basic geometric shapes (i.e., Broccoli-like trees), and bright colors.*

To allow for meaningful art activities, curriculum goals should aim for an understanding that relates the art to the world. One way to integrate the community theme with art is to incorporate artists whose work has the community theme as its subject. For example, Grant Wood, an American painter whose work was much invested in the figurative painting of rural American themes, often took his subjects from his neighborhood, hometown, farmers, memories of his childhood, and people he knew. His well-known paintings include *American Gothic*. By learning about such an artist, students learn about the work and the community he painted, as well as his artmaking strategies and the concept of the community as an inspiration for artmaking. Certain methods can be used to encourage students to generate key concepts and essential questions related to the big idea, including brainstorming and concept mapping. For example, if community is the big idea, then key concepts would be topics that underlie this theme: personal and community values and beliefs, personal and group identity, the relationship of town/city, boundaries and power. Essential questions might be: What is community? How is community defined? How does your community (town or city) influence your values? (Also See Appendix A: Examples of Studio Worksheet for Exploring Community as a Big Idea).

Use a Concept Map to Map Out Your Big Idea and Key Concepts:

Concept mapping is a graphical diagram for visualizing relationships among different concepts as a way of organizing or representing knowledge students need to learn. Using boxes or circles, connect ideas by linking concepts or phrases to show their relationship. Please map out your big idea and key concepts for how to teach the big idea.

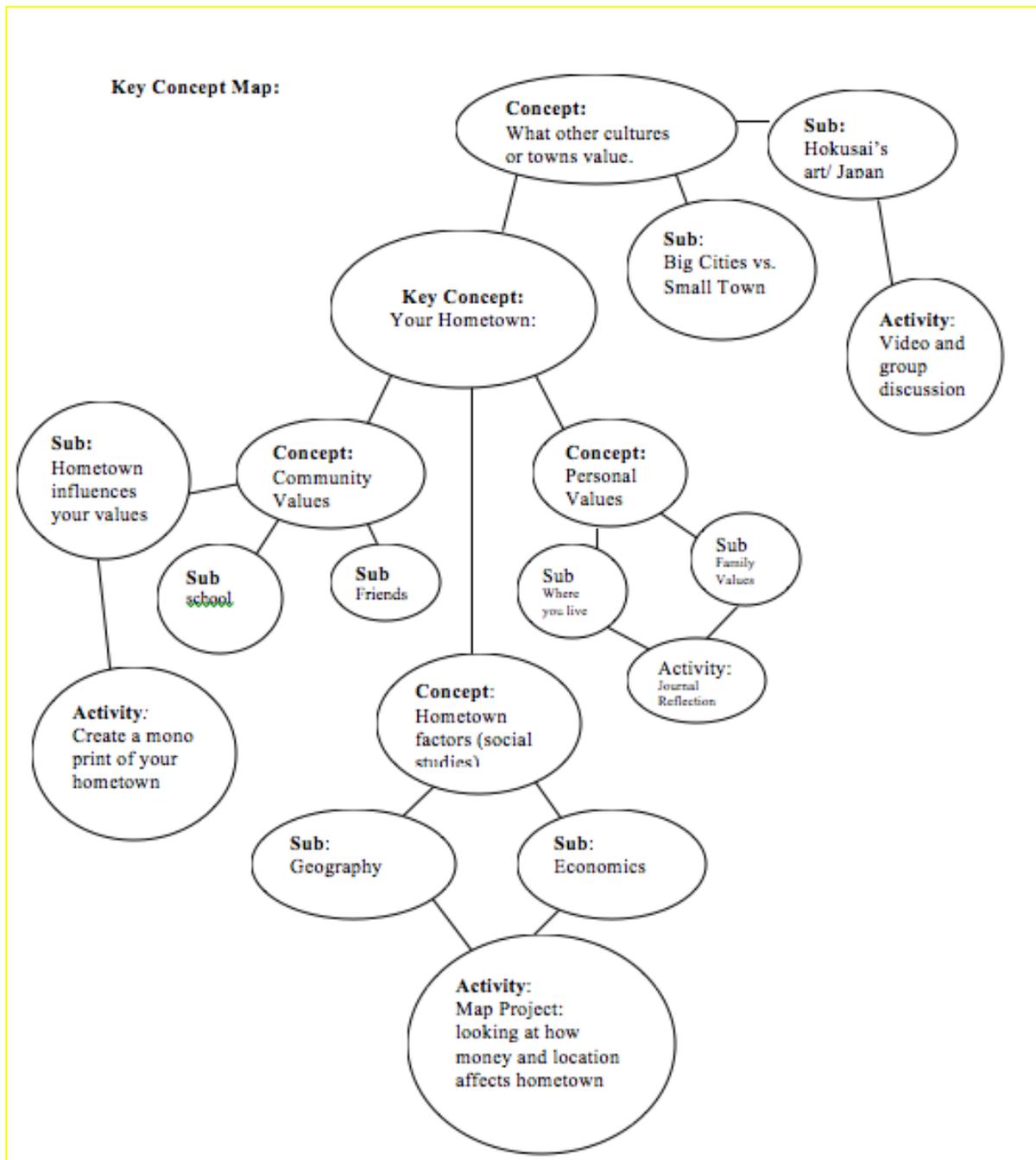


Figure 1. Concept mapping for exploring the concept of hometown as a community

Choosing the Big Idea for Art Activity and Art Lesson Planning

*Recommended themes (big ideas) for planning art activity and engaging conceptual practice are:

<u>Identity</u>	<u>Relationships</u>	<u>Dreams and fantasy</u>	<u>Ritual/celebration</u>
<u>Life cycles</u>	<u>Conflict</u>	<u>Change</u>	<u>Reality</u> <u>Diversity</u>

Selected big

idea: _____

Define this big idea in a statement:

What is a Big Idea?

A big idea represents a concept or theme related to large, complex, broad, and essential humanistic ideals (or which has significance related to human existence). State your big idea in a statement expressing the concept or theme, using carefully chosen words or phrases. For example:

Big Idea: Community

Statement: A community is formed by a group of people who work together to achieve a common goal or who share similar values

Key concept(s): Community values, beliefs, group identity

Essential question: How does your community (town or city) influence your values?

Purpose: This lesson introduces the definition of community, and challenges students to explore the characteristics of their own community and the importance of community values.

Key Concepts: Generate a list of key concepts derived from your big idea:

- _____
- _____
- _____

Essential Questions: Identify your key concepts from the breakdown of your big idea and phrase them as questions to encourage exploration and critical thinking through inquiry.

- _____
- _____
- _____

Review your key concepts and essential questions, choose one key concept related to the essential questions, and develop an in-depth lesson plan for that concept:

Big idea: _____

Key Concept for the Intended Lesson: _____

Essential Question(s): _____

State your lesson purpose (What this *lesson is intended to teach*):

Visual Artists Integration: Research a visual artist to allow for arts integration and identify key artwork, key ideas, and key artmaking strategies of this artist to help you teach your big idea.

Selected Artist: _____
Artist Background (Bio): _____

Key Artwork: _____

Key Ideas: _____

Key Artmaking Strategies: _____

Brainstorming for Studio Activity:

Brainstorm studio activities to develop student’s art-making based on the artist researched above. Please provide worksheets for guiding students’ development of their ideas through creative expression, delving into questions requiring conceptual understanding through exploring, questioning, and problematizing the big idea (issues, ideas, concepts) *through artmaking*. You should consider such questions as

- What is the conceptual focus (issues/concepts) for engaging students in artmaking based on the study of the artist? What is the subject for artmaking (Self-portrait, community building, me in an ideal place, etc.)? What art medium will students learn about and use to create their art (Drawing, watercolors, crayons, clay, etc.)?
- What are some of the artist’s artmaking strategies that will help students work out their ideas through personal expression? What is the technical problem for engaging students in artmaking?
- What are some methods for integrating art with other subject areas? For example, writing skills can be practiced through having students describe, interpret, judge, and analyze a piece of artwork; mathematical skills can be reinforced by having students count, add or subtract shapes; social studies can be taught by having students investigate context; history can be engaged by studying artistic inventions that have shaped history; science can be incorporated, such as by having students depict the animal kingdom food web and food chain.

Appendix A:

Example of Studio Worksheet for Exploring Community as a Big Idea—What is your community like?

Theme: Exploring history and culture of your community

Medium: Colored construction paper, white glue, and scissors.

Objectives: Students will think about their communities to learn about where they live as a community. Student will describe their favorite place to go to in their community, and will then create a visual representation of that place.

Artist Integration: Grant Wood, Key Artwork: *Young Corn, 1931*

Social Studies Integration: May also draw upon other disciplines such as anthropology, economics, geography, history, philosophy, political science, and sociology.

1. What does community mean? How is a community defined?

2. What is your community like? How do you like your community (the town or city) you currently live in?

3. What kinds of places/organizations can be found in your community?

4. Who is a famous person from your community?

5. What holidays, celebrations and ceremonies do you participate in your community?

6. What values does your community reflect? What cultures/ heritages does your community represent?

Please make a web of ideas about different kinds of places in your own community and the town or city nearby.



Art Activity: What is your favorite place to go to in your community? Write a sentence that describes your favorite place in your community. Give examples of things you see, hear, and smell.

I see _____,

I hear _____, **and**

I smell _____.

Draw your favorite place to go to in your community:



3 ways to make your community a better place to live:

The Integration of Art and Language Arts: Create your own picture of your community where you live—Name the places in the community. Identify and draw the buildings and green spaces, and any places you think are important in your local community or neighborhood. For example, a park or other natural place, a place of religious worship, a museum or arts performance, a sports park or amusement park, an airport or bus station, a shopping mall.

One thing you learned about arts integration methods was:

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