
Sequence Across Styles: Curriculum Articulation in Dance and Theater

By Jessica Nicoll

Walking the halls of Community Elementary School 53 in the South Bronx, you might come across a classroom of fourth-graders working with members of an improvisational theater company to create scenes that explore character and setting. Nearby, 22 first-grade students bring to life a collection of puppets they have created during a professional puppeteer's 10-week residency. And in a small, sunny dance studio on the second floor, a third-grade class—which has been studying the culture of China in social studies this year—learns a ribbon dance from members of the Chinese Folk Dance Company.

As the sounds and sights of art-making unfold in this New York City public school, you may wonder if all these activities, though impressive, are just a smorgasbord of disconnected experiences. Or do they actually constitute, by design, a larger web of arts learning? And if such a web indeed exists, have the artists built it so that students can develop skills that not only intersect arts styles and disciplines but also connect the arts to other subjects?

In 2001, ArtsConnection began asking these and similar questions through a curriculum-articulation initiative supported by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. Eight dance and six theater artists who taught at CES 53 in the Bronx or at one of two Brooklyn schools participated in the project. We closely studied artists' work in schools and tried to identify ways to explicitly tie children's learning in the arts across grades, cultural forms, and content. The goal of the process was to uncover and examine each artist's curriculum, clarify learning goals and objectives, and discover essential connections and basic differences between artists' approaches to dance or theater. As such, the work resulted not in a

single, replicable curriculum in dance or theater, but in a process that engaged each artist in self-reflection, careful observation of student learning, and continual inquiry.

Organizations interested in pursuing an ongoing process of curriculum design and articulation might consider the following questions:

How do you define curriculum? How do the needs of schools affect the curricula you offer?

Will artists with different backgrounds, experience, values, artistic foci, aesthetic concerns, styles, etc., articulate a single curriculum? How do their differences enrich and inform the curriculum as a whole?

- How do the students direct the focus of the curriculum?
- How do you demonstrate the impact on students of sequential study of the arts through yearly residencies in various styles, techniques, and traditions?

We began by observing the artists' classes and then meeting with them to understand their perceptions of their own and others' teaching practice. Through these sessions we recognized two factors that directed our next steps: (1) the artists, working separately from one another, were for the most part unaware of potential links across grades and styles within their art form; and (2) issues of scope and sequence reflected questions about child development.

We then brought the artists together and involved them first in a four-session child-development seminar,¹ an experience that affected the subsequent stages of curriculum articulation. Not surprisingly, as the articulation process developed and artists examined their own and others' curriculum in detail, questions that first came up in the child-development seminar resurfaced and were explored from new angles. The remainder of this chapter will describe that articulation process.

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¹ Workshops were led by Charlotte Doyle and Margery Franklin, faculty members of the psychology department at Sarah Lawrence College, and by Sarah Wilford, director of the Art of Teaching Institute at Sarah Lawrence College.

Organizations can encourage artists to participate fully in exploring and defining curriculum. The following experiences for teaching artists can lay the groundwork:

- Participating in arts classes with one another and analyzing the teaching process
- Observing children closely in arts and non-arts experiences
- Recalling their own childhood arts experiences
- Following a protocol for critical response to the art of teaching
- Participating in values clarification to identify “essentials” in the teaching of an art form
- Engaging in cross-disciplinary arts experiences
- Participating in collaborative lesson-planning focused on learner outcomes.

Building a Foundation in Discipline-based Groups

While rich discussion and learning took place when the theater and dance artists met together, examination of issues particular to each discipline required separate sessions. A key element of these discipline-based meetings was participants’ reflections on their childhood arts experiences. When calling up a childhood memory, several artists discovered with some surprise a powerful link to their current teaching practice. More than one

remarked, with only minor variation, “Oh! Now I see why I do what I do.” Artists also took part in values-clarification workshops, discussed curriculum-design literature,² and reviewed arts standards.

These conversations deepened artists’ understandings of their own and colleagues’ perspectives on teaching and the arts, but they still had not experienced each others’ teaching. So we then asked every artist to prepare and teach a 20-minute class that could serve as a brief but fair representation of the presenter’s work. After leading the sample class, the artist participated in a facilitated deconstruction of the work to examine its progression, the themes explored, their essential concepts and content, and the pedagogical methods used.

²As preparation, they studied the work of Sue Stinson (2001. “Choreographing a Life: Reflections on Curriculum Design, Consciousness, and Possibility.” *The Journal of Dance Education* 1(1): 26-33); Frances Hawkins (1986. *The Logic of Action: Young Children at Work*. Colorado: Colorado Associated University Press); Eleanor Duckworth (1996. *The Having of Wonderful Ideas” and Other Essays on Teaching and Learning*. New York: Teachers College Press); Dorothy Heathcote (1984. “Excellence in Teaching.” In L. Johnson and C. O’Neill (Eds.), *Collected Writings on Education and Drama*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press); Ben Shahn (1957. *The Shape of Content*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press); Steve Seidel (2001 (July). “Elements of a Quality Arts Learning Experience.” Workshop given at the Empire State Partnership Summer Seminar at Sarah Lawrence College, Bronxville, NY); Wanda May (1995. “Teachers as Curriculum Developers.” In R. W. Neperud (Ed.), *Context, Content, and Community in Art Education: Beyond Postmodernism*. New York: Teachers College Press); and Grant Wiggins and Jay McGtigue (2001. *Understanding By Design*. Upper Saddle River: Merrill Prentice Hall).



PHOTO BY PHIL MANSFIELD

Kim Grier models choreography for dancers at PS 38k.

THEATER ARTISTS' GOALS

Common Goals: Early Childhood (K-2nd) Children will...

- learn basic storytelling/acting skills: vocal, physical, and emotional expression
- understand the basic elements of a story
- integrate oral and narrative skills into the telling or retelling of a story
- understand that they as the artist have a variety of choices
- experience themselves as risk-takers
- develop performance skills as they move from dramatic play to presentation/show
- demonstrate an understanding of the roles of the audience and the roles of the performer
- have fun

Common Goals: Upper Elementary (3rd-5th) Children will...

- develop their physical and vocal expressive skills
- recognize structure in story
- use that structure to create their own stories
- make connections between their own stories and others
- work in collaboration as writers, actors, storytellers, audience
- give feedback and incorporate feedback into artistic work
- understand the relationship of the audience to actor/storyteller
- make the transition from oral to written language
- commit to an idea/choice and create an improv, story, or scene

One theater artist remarked on the benefits of getting to know one another's work: "We have the opportunity to approach these kids in so many different ways. We're going to find out what things we need to change, augment, or take away so that we can give them the most and they can retain as much as possible." For the upper-grade theater artists who taught improvisation and playwriting, this meant recognizing ways to build on ideas about story structure introduced by the puppetry and creative-dramatics artists working in kindergarten through second grade. Similarly, dance artists realized that the processes students had explored in the early grades—development of observation and listening skills, for example—could be reinforced more explicitly in upper-grade classrooms [See table above].

These sessions also revealed cross-cultural connections. After a lesson in which a Chinese dance artist explored imagery in her art form, a West African dance teacher began to examine deeper meanings in her own art form. She saw that although she had told her students about the costumes, the drums, and the geographic origins of the dances they learned, she had never explained their imagery—for example, that an open-palmed gesture in one West African dance meant the dancer was carrying no weapons. "I realized," the artist said, "that I can help the children understand the 'why' of the dance in the same way (that the Chinese dance artist) does."

Sometimes simply meeting with colleagues to ask questions and discuss issues led to practical teaching tips. A theater artist working in the Bronx school struggled to teach her fourth-grade

bilingual students about cause and effect. "They're developing their own stories and scripts," she explained, "and they don't seem to understand the concept of consequences. When I say, 'Because of that, this happened,' they seem lost." Her colleague, a Latino playwright, had a suggestion: "Try using '*por eso*.' There's a subtle difference between '*por que*'—meaning 'because'—and '*por eso*,' which means 'because of that.'" The artist took the playwright's suggestion and reported back to the group: "That was it! They got it."

Perhaps most important in preparing for the intensive curriculum-design work ahead of us was the deepening sense of trust among the members of this artistic community. A dance artist, speaking at the end of the project, noted that "we had taken steps that allowed us to be more comfortable, trusting, supportive, and open with one another."

These colleague-to-colleague interactions led to several discoveries that affected the continuing evolution of the curriculum-articulation process:

- Artists who work alone tend to feel vulnerable in presenting their work to peers
- Presenting lessons to peers can deepen a sense of trust and collegiality
- Even a short (e.g., 20-minute) experience can reveal layers of content and skill building
- When the artist experiences a class as a learner, this uncovers issues and questions about the purpose and age-appropriateness of activities
- Language, even among artists of the same art form and style, sometimes presents obstacles;

we need to clarify, make meaning explicit, and not assume understanding.

Lesson Study

In the second year, artists divided into early-childhood and upper-elementary subgroups within their discipline in response to a need that had emerged during cross-grade discussions of goals for students. Artists who taught primarily one age-level sometimes questioned the aims of artists working with older or younger students.

For example, one artist who taught improvisational theater to fourth-graders was baffled when a storyteller identified “fun” as a goal for kindergartners. “That’s an outcome,” the improviser maintained, “not a goal.” Meanwhile, other theater artists working with younger children—first- and second-graders—recognized both the appropriateness of the storyteller’s goal and its connection to the improviser’s work with upper-elementary students. By focusing on fun, the storyteller was introducing young children to the power and pleasure of the art form. She was also building students’ capacities for focus, listening, and task-commitment—skills that would be required of them as future fourth-graders developing more complex improvised and written stories.

In the separate early-childhood and upper-elementary subgroups, we began to look at two approaches to curriculum design, both of which emphasize what students should be able to know, do, and understand—in other words, “student learning.” The first method, called Backward Design—adapted from Grant Wiggins’ and Jay McTigue’s book *Understanding by Design*—is discussed in detail elsewhere in this volume [See Hefferen, chapter 5]. Lesson Study, the second method, is explained below.

Lesson Study is a professional-development process used extensively in Japan that brings teachers together to design and assess lessons collaboratively, encouraging them to “examine their practice in order to become more effective instructors.”³ While Lesson Study seemed in some ways ideally suited to our task of articulating curriculum, it was clear that our focus on the arts—a content area not addressed in the Lesson Study literature—demanded adaptation. Unlike math teachers who might have a common lesson for solving algebraic equations, the artists did not share specific content. Therefore, we did not select

³Clea Fernandez and Sonal Chokshi. 2002 (October). “A Practical Guide to Translating Lesson Study For a U.S. Setting,” *Phi Delta Kappan* 84 (2): 128-134.

LESSON STUDY: SAMPLE OF CHARTING A LESSON

Examples from Afro-Caribbean dance and music 10-week residency 5th Grade, 4th session (partial sample): creating rhythmic patterns.

Question for this lesson: “How do children learn to listen and observe, musically and physically, when counting phrases in music and dance?”

| Sequence: Key Questions and Tasks | Range of Student Responses (Predictions) | Artist Reactions to Response (Connect & Build On) | Methods of Evaluation (Ideas for what and how to assess) |
|---|--|---|--|
| <p>1. Students enter dance space, clapping easier to harder rhythms (no words by teacher or students). <i>Q: “What do you notice about the spacing?”</i></p> <p>2. Leaders are chosen to lead own rhythm; other students listen & respond. <i>Q: “What makes a rhythm? What do you hear?”</i></p> | <p>1. Some students clumping; boys separate with buddies; move against walls; large group moves to front or back.</p> <p>2. Some leaders clear; others are unclear or too complex.</p> | <p>1. Give 8 counts to re-arrange; change the class orientation (reverse front & back).</p> <p>2. Ask students to think of pattern as conversation; ask to clap pattern more slowly and clearly so others can understand; may need to simplify pattern.</p> | <p>1. Notice whether students become more focused and aware of spatial arrangement when re-arranged; giving students who hide in back a surprise—chance to be in front of class: do they have a different commitment?</p> <p>2. Do students demonstrate understanding of “conversation” by timing the rhythmic back & forth correctly? Are patterns clear and precise?</p> |

for study a lesson that each member of the group would teach separately, as the process was originally designed. Instead, we asked one artist to identify a question or challenge within a residency, and engaged the group in helping to plan and evaluate the lesson that dealt with this challenge.

Our adaptation followed six steps:

1. Lesson Study teams observe students in their individual classrooms and identify common needs in relation to goals for learning in the art form
2. The group develops an overarching goal based on perceived student needs [See table on p. 11 for examples]
3. One artist identifies a lesson from his or her residency that both relates to the overarching goal and presents a challenge to the artist
4. The group collaboratively designs the lesson, using a four-column chart [See example at left]
5. The artist is videotaped teaching the lesson
6. The group reviews the video and offers a response using the Critical Response Protocol described below.

Once an artist had chosen a lesson, he or she developed a preliminary plan for it that would then be submitted to the group for revision. Their common medium was a four-column chart, in which the first column lists key questions and the sequence of the lesson. In the second column, the artist predicts how students will respond to the questions and activities. In the third, the artist plans how he or she might react to the student responses predicted in the previous column. The final column lists methods for evaluating students.

In each of the six Lesson Studies conducted during this project, the groups immediately recognized flaws in the original lesson sequence when they focused on the second and third columns of the chart. A dance artist reflected: "That predicting column did it. As soon as we started imagining how students might respond to a question, I got clearer about my own questions, the sequence, and my deeper goals." Meanwhile, the question that initially drove the lead artist's choice of lesson often evolved and began to find its answer through this charting process.

We also adapted Lesson Study by videotaping lessons. Although the artists' full teaching schedules in schools and studios throughout the

city made convening to watch the actual lesson virtually impossible, videos revealed much about arts teaching. For example, one dance artist's awareness of student understanding deepened as she and her colleagues watched a video of a class she had taught. While watching the tape she exclaimed, "The class appears to be all about making a circle!" One of her fellow artists asked if she'd had a different intention. "Well," she answered, "I thought it was more about learning

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the dance. But now when I watch the children dancing, my question is: 'How can I help them make the transition from following to leading?'" The group began to brainstorm a new sequence for her lesson that might build a stronger basis for children to understand and make that critical transition.

Another video led to a similar recognition of student understanding by a theater artist. She introduced the taped lesson by saying that "these students just can't seem to collaborate." After watching the tape, the group commented that the first 10 minutes of the class—an improvisational warm-up—was in fact an extraordinary demonstration of student collaboration. "But you saw what happened when they went to their tables with their writing from the previous session. It all fell apart." A colleague offered: "Can we find something in the warm-up that can build a better transition and use the collaborative skills they *are* demonstrating?"

Finally, we adapted Lesson Study by using an arts-based procedure—choreographer Liz Lerman's Critical Response Protocol⁴—to offer feedback on individuals' teaching. Lerman's protocol, which reinforced our view that teaching is an artistic endeavor, rests on the conviction that artists must determine the intention of their own work. By asking questions about their teaching processes, artists participating in our sessions

⁴Liz Lerman. 1993 (Winter). "Toward a Process for Critical Response," *High Performance* 16 (4):46-49.

explored their teaching, developed motivation for their own and their students' learning, and became open both to giving and receiving critical responses. In addition, this procedure offered a safe and comfortable way to give and receive feedback without becoming defensive or disengaged.

The protocol has four steps:

1. Responders affirm the artist's work
2. The artist asks responders questions about the work
3. Responders ask the artist questions
4. If the artist wishes, responders share their impressions of the work.



Practicing to make it a perfect dance performance at PS 364m.

Initially, several artists—master teaching artists in particular—resisted in-depth inquiry, but they generally came around after participating in the curriculum-articulation process. One such artist, for example, began to notice students struggling with a transition in her class. A question about beginnings, endings, and transitions emerged. One of her colleagues later commented: “Because she found such a clear question, we could really explore it and respond when we watched the video of her class. Now I’m asking *myself* about beginnings, endings, and transitions.” Beyond determining the flow of a class, the questions encompass big ideas that apply to the content of any art form.

Throughout the Lesson Study process, artists refined their curricula after watching students in action, noting where they struggled, and contemplating how their struggles reflected levels of understanding. One artist later observed, “I feel like I’m cutting out all the unnecessary stuff. Now I know what really matters.”

Building Connections Across Grades

At the conclusion of the curriculum-articulation process, we reunited the discipline-based groups across all grades, K-5. The artists reviewed their original project outlines and reflected on their experiences with Backward Design and Lesson Study. “Things are moving around,” one dance artist said. “I’m discovering a better order. I’m also realizing that my curriculum isn’t carved in stone.”

After refining the project outlines, each artist gave a brief presentation to the group, highlighting the essentials in their curriculum. They prioritized and charted goals, which were posted, in grade order, across a wall [See table, p. 11]. Studying

the grades preceding and following theirs, the artists identified connections across levels and spelled out the elements that they would like to make more explicit in their work.

This collaboration among small groups of artists has reached beyond the three years of this project. In new partnerships with different children, teachers, and colleagues, these artists have continued to stretch themselves and their work.

The curriculum-articulation process has also changed the ArtsConnection organization as its program managers have adapted aspects of it in their own work with school personnel and artists. For example, Lesson Study is now used by ArtsConnection staff as a collaborative way to plan, implement, reflect on, and revise workshops and meetings they facilitate with artists and teachers who come together to enrich children’s learning in schools. ■